### L'EDgendary

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**by** Dobanochi

### Summary

A few years since we last saw any of them, the Peach Creek Boys and the Merry Men run
into one another at just the right time, working together to undermine an oppressive city
government as well as their burgeoning insecurities. An action-comedy-drama character
study about friendship, leadership, self-esteem, and the divide between who we're born as
and who we choose to be. And it's set in a neutral-ground third universe.

A common criticism of Ed, Edd 'n' Eddy is that all the characters are irredeemably
unlikable in some way, while even the animators of Robin Hood called their film a really
cutesy piece with "no soul." I intend to remedy both of those things.

Fair warning for profane and sometimes offensive language, but I can give you the
Dobanochi 100% No-Gratuitous-Explicit-Scenes-That-Don't-Advance-the-Plot-or-
Develop-the-Characters-in-Any-Way Guarantee.

Reviews, even negative, are welcomed and encouraged. I want to see if my writing style
can fly with normal people. :P
The Three Stooges

Chapter Summary

Three friends engage introspectively to attempt to engage in a plan.

Chapter Notes

*Author’s Note* Hi everybody. Long time reader, first time writer. Nobody else was gonna make this, so I went and made it myself. I’ll see you all again at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1: “The Three Stooges”

With each passing day bringing closer the Summer Equinox, the sun rose earlier and earlier each morning; but if it had any way of knowing it, the sun may have been surprised to discover that it wasn’t the first one up in Peach Creek that first day of summer vacation.

The mischievous little red fox was first of the three to see the sun rising over the jagged eastern horizon formed by peaks and valleys of junkyard trash. He rather found it to be a nuisance, blinding him for a second as he stepped out of the brand-new shadow and into the fresh light; he had an objective to accomplish, and this unexpected obstacle was something he could seriously do without.

But while he was vexed by the instantaneous optical assault, he didn’t much mind the whole “being awake and active well before dawn” thing. He’d much prefer to still be asleep, of course, and he was very much planning on sleeping like a baby as soon as it was socially acceptable to go back to bed. But today was different. Yesterday had been the last day of middle school, which made this officially The First Day of the Rest of His Life. And there was much work to be done. This was going to be the day that he put himself on the path to the promised land. He was sure of it.

He was plenty familiar with busting his ass to get stuff done and get even a little bit more ahead in the world -- or, more accurately, he was familiar with busting someone’s ass to get stuff done, usually those of his friends. But if he were to be rigged to a lie detector, one would find that he honestly thought that being the passive leader of the trio constituted a hard life’s work. After all, it’s not easy being so commandingly cold to your closest confidantes.

But all those times in the past, he had always made the foolhardy decision to focus on short-term gain in the name of instant gratification. But he had been young. He was allowed to make mistakes then. Soon he wouldn’t be so young, and he wouldn’t be afforded so many chances to learn a lesson. And one lesson he had already learned was that he needed to start looking at the big picture. It was already tempting him to cash in immediately when this new scheme inevitably paid off -- he didn’t think he would ever completely outgrow his affinity for jawbreakers, and heaven knows that with the early-morning fatigue he was presently fighting off, he could seriously go for a sugar rush. But he knew that he needed to start building a future that was more than a few hours ahead of
In the past, he called his little operations “scams.” He had no regret for using a word that so widely associated with worthlessness, with thievery, with something deceitful and duplicitous and devious and dirty and dastardly and damnable and devious and diabolical and despicable and downright dickish -- quite frankly, the use of that word made him fancy himself a kind of badass, a sort of lovable rogue if he would say so himself. But this current project? A scam? Oh, nonononono. Scams were the province of children. This? This was a plan. And the endgame was to be comfortably and independently rich. All he had to do was execute each individual step perfectly on the first try and often with no prior practice. Simple enough. He thought that this sort of scam -- no, plan -- was perfect, brilliant, and foolproof, and he patted himself on the back for making such a mature decision as setting himself up for long-term success.

He did have other motives for what he was doing in that junkyard that Saturday morning, but he was trying not to think about them. For one thing, the two friends and cronies with whom he had shared so much success and failure were starting to become… unreliable? Was that the right word? All he knew for sure was that this same passage of time that compelled him to put his plan into motion as soon as possible also saw his buds start to lose steam. It was becoming apparent that their hearts weren’t fully in the game anymore… were they ever? Were they just playing along because the three of them were the involuntary members of the cul-de-sac’s band of misfits, so they just just went with it so they wouldn’t be alone?

That was the other thing: he wasn’t bashful about the fact that he wanted to succeed so people would like him more, so they would like him so much that he wouldn’t have to try socially because everybody would be coming to him. Small-time neighborhood success certainly worked for his brother, whom all the kids in the cul-de-sac loved back in his heyday, in no small part because his enterprises were actually pretty high-caliber -- he managed to whip together things people would genuinely enjoy while keeping expenditures insanely low and profit margins astronomically high. By the time his brother was his age, he had enough money to pay some older high-schoolers to disassemble, transport, and more-or-less reassemble a car in his room, which he wanted to have just for the hell of it. Just for figurative shits and self-impressed giggles. To impress nobody other than himself. And the older kids were more than happy to do the work because they were downright platonically smitten with the guy. His older brother bled charisma and held a business prowess that he himself had always struggled to find, and along with the height thing and the place of his species in greater society, it was one of the chief sources of his deep-seated insecurities as a budding young fox. The legendary older brother, who already had a major head start on him chronologically, left home early to seek his fortune, but since he was trying to find a locale where his business could really thrive -- and where the law would stop breathing down his back -- he kept bouncing around the country: he had been to the Big Apple and the Big Easy, South Beach and the North Shore, the Windy City and the Mile-High City and about half a dozen Queen Cities, and the last anybody had heard, he was headed to Z-Town all the way on the west coast. This made him extremely hard to keep in touch with; if either of the brothers really wanted to, they could probably find some contact information on one another, but both would probably agree that they were busy attending to business.

Oh, and there was also an added bitterness stemming from how he was convinced his brother had stolen an idea from one of his more successful scams, which had involved some very rudimentary summertime sweets made en masse in repurposed refrigerators (granted, the idea originally was the brainchild of that annoying little twerp Jimmy Victim-Complex, but any fox worth his tail wouldn’t allow a stupid bunny to have all the glory). But he was trying to force himself to forgive his brother for his plagiarism and to remain cool-headed so that he could better keep his eye on the prize; this he too believed was a mature decision and he couldn’t wait for someone to realize that and give him glowing praise for it.
He remembered that his brother had never used the words “scam” or “scheme” to describe his craft, but rather some other word that the younger brother thought was too gaudy even for his own taste. Suffice it to say that there was a period where he debated discarding some of his precious stash of magazines, the ones that were emblazoned with an extremely similar word to the one that his brother used, and this association killed any mood the younger brother felt when perusing them; but luckily his family soon after upgraded their internet to broadband, and all the magazines were now relegated to a quirky relic of past times.

“Son of a--!” he began under his breath upon the moment the sun decided to disrespect him, but he decided that finishing his thought would be a waste of energy. Instead, a pressing question for his colleagues: “How hard can it be to find an ironing board in a junkyard!?"

“Well, Eddy,” offered the a slender gray wolf, “in my experience, ironing boards are not typically prone to deteriorate so severely as to justify being disposed of outright.” He likewise shielded his eyes from the star in the morning sky; he knew that his assertion would probably go unheeded but felt compelled to say it anyway. This was a familiar feeling to him, as was being awake in the early hours, because for as long as he could remember he had been torn between two worlds: one that bred him into being a prim and proper young intellectual who did things like wake at dawn on Benjamin Franklin’s recommendation, and one that had no room for such a person and relegated him to the bottom of the totem pole specifically because of his intellect. Many a time he had lamented being surrounded by idiots, and if anybody had bothered to take notice of his gripes, they may have understood that he wasn’t joking.

Was the wolf even more of a narcissist than his fox friend? Perhaps a better question would be whether the wolf had any way to exercise his self-righteousness beyond some passive boasting and bragging. When his friend wanted to prove his greatness, it manifested itself in some grand venture to put himself on top of the world; but he himself had a high self-opinion specifically because of his passivity and obedience to authority. Much in line with the old archetype of the nerd who’s all book-smarts and no street-smarts, it had never even once crossed his mind that this might not be a sustainable life-model to carry into adulthood; everybody else in his life was either similarly oblivious to this fact and therefore couldn’t warn him, or didn’t care to tell him because they assumed that he would have a complete breakdown on the spot, his entire life crashing down around him in real time, the poor naive wolf-boy crying and howling in a public setting as he processed the revelation that his 

[215x316]modus operandi
[296x316]was functionally obsolete and he was now a soul set adrift on an unfamiliar sea without a compass, and it would just be an awkward situation for everyone involved and everybody would rather avoid it. Or maybe he would just disregard their warning altogether as the opinion of a low-intellect individual. Either one really was a plausible outcome.

None of this was to say that he was without initiative or drive to do his own thing; indeed, when left alone, he was liable to pull a technological undertaking or science experiment out of thin air and make some profound discovery that could make the professionals blush for never having thought of it themselves. But this was when he was very much left to his own, and only his own, devices. In a crowd, he would never be the loudest voice: he would either be in the presence of superiors who he dare not try to give the impression that he was insubordinate, or he would be in the presence of inferiors whose respect he could not garner and who would never listen to a word he would have to say. That’s why the fox found him so valuable: he was bred to be loyal and obedient for a world that would have nothing to do with him, so when he brought the wolf into his personal fold, he knew that he wouldn’t have anywhere else to go, nor would he want to. The wolf wanted to be included, and the fox wanted an industrious lackey who could pull knowledge of the STEM subjects out of his ass on command. So they stuck together all these years, despite the fact that all they had in common was being on the neighborhood’s shitlist and a shared affinity for sphere-shaped sugar. Therefore here was the wolf, collaborating in a scam -- no, plan -- that he had
no emotional investment in and furthermore hadn’t bothered to have clarified what they were actually doing, simply because it was the way the winds of his life were blowing his ship at the moment.

And the wolf’s therapist wasn’t helping any of this. Bless his heart, he wasn’t observing the fact that this kid was taking a crippling passive role in his own life because he was more focused on solving his general anxiety issues. This was all well and good, but it may have had the unintended side effect of reinforcing the wolf’s pseudo-narcissistic tendencies: “Oh, no, Eddward, if you were really severely phobic of germs, you wouldn’t be running through the junkyard with your friends, or you would wrap your tail in plastic wrap! If you were really severely OCD, you wouldn’t be able to wear that -- what is it, a ski cap? -- you wouldn’t be able to wear that if it weren’t perfectly symmetrical on your head. You’re already doing better than you think you are, Eddward.” Many people respond to praise by using it as motivation to keep getting better, but some revel in it to the point of addiction and wind up stagnating if not getting worse; the poor doc had no idea that his subject Eddward would prove to be the second one.

Eddward. The idea of unpacking all the impact that that name had on his life was already on his mental shortlist of topics for college-application essays for when the time for those came. He was strictly Eddward to authority and Double-D to peers and there was nobody who belonged to both camps. His names highlighted the dichotomy of the two worlds he inhabited. They also spoke to the subtle strangeness of an otherwise traditional name: that extra D. It was a family name from his mother’s side, and it betrayed that his forebears had not always been the classiest bunch, so to speak. Despite his usually endless vocabulary, the only word that he could think of to describe his maternal roots would be trashy. The genesis of the Eddward title had begun with an illiterate ancestor and just kept spilling onto newer generations; in the last generation, it was bestowed upon Double-D’s uncle Ward, but by the time that Sammantha Woodland had gone to college, gotten into an excellent line of work, married the equally-successful Vincent Lupo and tried her best to wash her hands of her small-town Virginia upbringing, Gran’Ma and Gran’Pa Woodland decided that their eldest son was too much of a loser (“even by their standards!” Double-D might remark to himself) to ever find a nice lady and have a son to be the next Eddward, and Sammie and Vince found themselves under enormous pressure to name their child Eddward should their child be born of the male persuasion. The pup was indeed a boy, and luckily for Gran’Ma and Gran’Pa, Sammie and Vince were too busy with their jobs as always to ever sit down and brainstorm a better name. The little wolf also got tagged with another family name -- one of those unisex-but-usually-female names that seems to be seen on males disproportionately in rural America -- for his middle name, but ever since he shared the factoid with his friends and they never completely stopped mocking him for it, he knew better than to let it slip again.

The thought had occurred to him that maybe he was being unfair to the culture that his mom had come from; perhaps his mother’s side of the family was riddled with embarrassing stereotypes of American Southerners, but they didn’t consist entirely bad and ignorant people, and he’d met plenty of other kind and smart people who just incidentally had distinct drawls -- after all, he had always lived right about where the South began, so he was bound to meet such trend-buckers eventually. But dammit, he just couldn’t disassociate all of the negative qualities one associates with a blue-collar caricature from the specific individuals to whom he was related, nor from the life he was afraid he would have had if things had been different. This knowledge that he could almost have been like that was the reason he was unapologetically proud of his intellect: he was convinced that he nearly wouldn’t have had it. Maybe the people who thought warning him that his overly-studious lifestyle needed some variety and entropy would fall on deaf ears were correct. Not to mention that his uncle Ward, easily the least-pleasant of his mother’s kin, was also the family member he saw the most often since he had also made his way to the same metropolitan area in Southern Delaware to see if someone there would be desperate enough to hire him. With an object
of comparison like that a quick drive away for one’s whole life, perhaps anybody would have
turned out as haughty and overeducated and unwittingly condescending and unconsciously biased
against rural-dwelling people across the country and around the entire world as Double-D did. But
he was still a good soul; he just didn’t know he was bound for a personal crisis if he ever fully
embraced adolescence and started wanting to make bad decisions.

Eddy and Double-D scavenged for an ironing board because it was the only thing they needed that
they couldn’t get elsewhere for free but also didn’t feel comfortable buying from a store; that is to
say, Eddy didn’t feel comfortable buying certain things, and the others weren’t comfortable with
questioning him in the middle of one of his strokes of self-described genius. The electric generators
he had nabbed from his dad’s work and the extension cords were courtesy of his unknowing
parents; the sheets of plastic and laminate he would have rather not bought online so as not to leave
a virtual paper trail, but he couldn’t find out where else to acquire them, and he thought that as long
as he didn’t also buy an ironing board, the Law could never definitively put the pieces together, so
he had the plastic and laminate sent to Double-D’s house since that guy’s parents would invariably
be away from home and therefore could not intercept the package. If he could just find a damn
ironing board in this literal wasteland, everything would fall into place. The only other thing they
would need was gasoline for the generators, but Eddy had that covered. He just sent Ed to find
some.

The last one to see the sun that morning was the hulking brown bear standing in the shadow of a
trash-mound even taller than himself as he siphoned fuel from the latest abandoned car he had
come across. Ed didn’t much mind the brief taste of gasoline in his mouth as he sucked to get the
siphon working, nor did he mind that Eddy was exploiting the old joke that bears would consume
any old thing besides healthy foodstuffs, but Ed didn’t much mind a lot of things. Really, there
wasn’t much that he disliked besides the opposite of things he did like. He didn’t like not being
able to watch monster movies or read comic books or eat jawbreakers. He didn’t like people not
being nice to him or his little sister, and he didn’t like when his little sister wasn’t nice to him, and
he didn’t like disappointing his friends and family. He did have dislikes that weren’t just opposites
of his likes, but they were typical things like school and broccoli and grapefruit and being impaled
on the heel of your foot with a pebble. All those who knew him would probably agree that Ed was
not complex. Some people felt bad for him for this reason, thinking that a simpleton like him
would just breeze through life and never be able to make anything of himself, if for no other reason
because they thought he lacked the wherewithal to apply himself in the first place. But Ed was
happier than they were, and he was happiest almost swallowing the gasoline he was harvesting
because he knew that he was helping his two favorite people in the whole wide world. In that
moment, nobody could take that away from him.

And as he did with Double-D, Eddy appreciated Ed’s loyalty as well. But he was convinced that
the clock was ticking on how long they’d be in business together, so he wanted to get his big,
grown-up idea rolling while he still had a crew to operate with. But first he needed a goddamn
ironing board.

“Really?” he griped, “Nobody in the history of this town’s ever thrown away an ironing board? Or
did somebody else clean this place out already?”

“‘Clean’ is hardly a word I would ever use while speaking of this place, Eddy.” Double-D might
have been able to see what Eddy was building up to if he had known about the plastic sheets and
laminates, but all he knew about them was that Eddy insisted upon using the Lupo house as the
shipping address for a mysterious package. Eddy had been using the school computers to track the
shipment on the weekdays when he couldn’t be there himself (and to prevent confusion after he
had accidentally opened a box without checking the return address and discovered it was just an
industrial-sized order of sticky notes intended for Mr. and Mrs. Lupo, after which Eddy half-
heartedly helped Double-D forge a “Package opened by mistake. Love, the Post Office” note), and when the mysterious package finally arrived, Eddy had run home from school, snagged the package off the doorstep and hid it away where neither Double-D nor anybody else would find it. Double-D -- who imagined that he surely would have run out of breath if he bothered trying to keep up -- had debated trying to send Ed after Eddy to get the package first, just to send Eddy a message that he couldn’t have something sent to his house and still keep it a secret from him; if the package had had any of the Lupo’s names on it instead of Eddy’s, and there was therefore any chance that someone in his family could be implicated if stupid Eddy had somehow bought contraband on the internet and had it sent to the Lupo house, or if in any way it wasn’t guaranteed that they would have the standard several hours before his parents got home to erase any evidence of the package like maybe a “Your package was delivered!” note stuck in the mailbox or something that his parents could find, then he would have made certain that Ed got there first. But he thought better of it, thinking that Ed had been the crew’s workhorse for long enough and deserved a break, and that whatever kick Eddy was getting out of saving this for a big reveal was something he must have needed for self-esteem purposes. Not that Double-D thought Eddy needed any more self-esteem, but he felt like it was the right thing to let him have a meaningless little victory so he could feel better about himself. There was that passive narcissism again.

Ed would very much have liked to have seen the contents of the package, and it wasn’t far back in the past when Ed would have went ahead and got the package first with or without Double-D’s insistence, ripping it open there on the front lawn for the whole world to see and probably moderately to severely damaging whatever was inside. But he knew that Eddy would smack him if he did that. Eddy would have smacked him for that in the olden days, too, but it seemed that at a certain point, around the time that Eddy seemed to him to get even smaller than before, that Eddy started smacking him even harder. It wasn’t even that it physically hurt him; he just didn’t like making Eddy so angry. It made him feel bad to make him feel bad.

Ed kept on making unpleasant gurgley sounds as he siphoned gas out of the next car he saw, and Eddy and Double-D kept strolling aimlessly through the junkyard hoping they’d happen upon the treasure they sought. Double-D emotionally prepared himself for Eddy loudly cursing in frustration while Eddy frustratedly cursed quietly about the sunrise messing with the lighting of the scene around him: everything was either shrouded in darkness or bathed in a weird orangey haze. He was kind of afraid that there could be an ironing board right in front of him and he wouldn’t even recognize it because his eyes were discombobulated -- or whatever a fitting big word would be; he’d ask Double-D but he didn’t care that much. Double-D decided to take his mind off of Eddy’s impending outburst by thinking of other things that could serve the purpose of an ironing board, while Eddy tried to ignore the tricks of the light by pondering why anybody else would want to ransack the junkyard of all of its ironing boards.

“Hm,” he muttered under his breath, “Double-D, remind me as a back-up plan to buy a bunch of ironing boards and sell them to hospitals as, like, those bed-tray-table thingies. If we need to. Which we won’t. But if we need to.”

“Enlighten me, Eddy: what exactly are the scandalous details behind this sca--”

“Plan, Sock-Head, plan.”

“... explain to me please why we can’t just buy an ironing board? We’re not young children anymore, Eddy; we may not be wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but we do have some capital to work with. Or at least those of us who save our allowances do.”

Eddy just scoffed. “All’ll be revealed in its due time, Double-D.”
Double-D made sure that Eddy wasn’t looking before he rolled his eyes.

Ed’s eyes, meanwhile, were focused, and he was arguably putting more effort into his current task than Eddy was. He was scanning for any cars he may have missed from which he could procure every last drop of gasoline. There was only one vehicle in the lot that was exempt from having its fuel salvaged, and even Ed was smart enough to know not to touch it, although in his mind, the vehicle in question didn’t register as a vehicle anymore.

But there was another object that Ed’s mind did recognize as having been a car in a past life, despite the fact that the little part of it that was visible from under the trash pile looked nothing as it once did. If Edd or Eddy had been around, they would have told Ed to let that car off the hook, but even for a guy his size, his heart was disproportionately larger still, and he wanted to make his friends proud.

He acted slowly so that nothing he could conceive of could go wrong: he put the generators and siphon tubes down gently to the side away from the trajectory he expected the car to take when he yanked it out; he’d grab the car by its exposed rear-end and pull it out and up so that the trash on top of it would slide into the hole it made in the hill; and he eyed a big open spot away from the generators and siphon tube where he could put the car down without crushing anything. By the rules of his mind, it really was a flawless plan.

He grabbed the rear end and slid his hands as far forward into the mountain as he could to get all the leverage he could muster, and he planted his feet under its bumper to pull with his legs. He closed his eyes, braced for resistance, and gave it a yank. Then he heard a pop and saw that the bumper had popped off in his hands.

But no matter! Try and try again, he’d always been told. Focus. Reposition. Grab. Prepare. Yank. Pop! And now he looked down and saw that the old buried sedan’s trunk lid had been ripped out of its hinges. He looked back at the growing hole. Some pieces of trash broke out of their sediment and fell into the trunk and at his feet. There was now very little of the car left to grab to pull it out. Okay, now he was pissed.

He backed up a few steps and screwed up all the nerves in his body. He recalled when he was a young cub taking swimming lessons and they tried to teach him how to dive, not just belly-flop or cannonball but properly *dive* -- he was gonna do that, except he was going to tweak it and go horizontally instead of vertically. He was not going to let that crushed-up old beater make a fool out of Ed.

It was the sound of the crashing and crunching that finally broke Double-D’s apprehension and Eddy’s grumbling.

“What the hell was that?”

“Oh, dear! Ed!”

Finding the source of the cacophony was no struggle at all, as it helpfully grew louder and more ominous. The two boys zigzagged through the maze of debris and detritus; fortunately, all the hours spent here gave them a mental map of the place not unlike the ones they had of their own homes.

“Ed, are you alright!? Have you been injured!”

“Ed, don’t hurt yourself, you’re no good to me dead!”
It was a bit curious how they managed to find him without actually seeing him; they knew they had their man when they saw a huge cavity in the side of the trash heap, about big enough for a teenage grizzly between his third and fourth growth spurts, and producing a racket of scraping and scratching and mammalian seething that told a heavily illustrated story without a single word. The only thing that they could see in the hole was what they vaguely recognized to be a carelessly-compactcd compact car. That and some trash that was starting to fill the hole as it tumbled down the hillside.

“Ed, what in God’s name are you doing!?” shrieked the friend who had a long history of shrieking.

“I’m just digging up the car so we can get gas, guys! Don’t worry, I’m almost done!”

Perhaps the other two were stupefied by their friend’s blind determination, or maybe their brains weren’t firing on all cylinders due to the early-morning fatigue. But in any case, they were both painfully oblivious to the fact that the trash precipitating from atop the mountain was starting to rain down harder.

*Thunk*.

“Double-D?” Eddy would usually be ecstatic at the prospect of having to look down to see the wolf’s face for once, but he couldn’t get much joy out of his power trip when his friend wasn’t conscious enough to meet his gaze. The last thing he thought before the avalanche came down upon him was whether he recognized the old gadget that had thwomped Double-D on the head; despite his impressive vinyl record collection; he was not familiar with the look of an 8-track player.

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Double-D half-sat on the bumper of the old van, rubbing his head, grateful that the impact hadn’t brushed his hat off for Eddy to see; yes, Eddy as well as Ed had seen the scene before, several times in fact, but while he stopped being embarrassed by such moments, he had started feeling annoyed instead, and that was still a feeling that he’d rather not feel. He felt light-headed, but his feeling of cogency was slowly returning to him. He kept feeling around the edge of his hat to see if there were any residue to suggest he were bleeding under there; he knew very well that he could just take the blasted thing off and ask Eddy if it looked like he needed to go to the hospital, but he really just would rather not. Death before dishonor, if you will.

“Hurry up, Lumpy, you’re wasting our head-start!” Eddy hollered at the bear who was cheerfully fishing for and retrieving the generators that had been lost in the great avalanche; Ed usually wouldn’t be happy about making Eddy angry, but he was too happy about his friends being alright after being buried alive to let any negative emotions kill the joy. And besides, without causing the avalanche, they would never have discovered the ratty old ironing board, sliced open and oozing cotton and foam left and right, that had been right in the base of the mountain. But when it was discovered, Eddy had been in no mood for celebration, thinking that the serendipity was really the least the universe could do for him right about now, and didn’t even say a word when Ed presented it.

Ed waded out of the spill zone carrying another generator, which he carefully bestowed at Eddy’s feet. “That’s the last of ‘em, Eddy!” he bellowed.

“Hmm, let’s see. One, two, three, six, five, eight…” Eddy counted off and ended with a perky snap of his fingers. “The gang’s all here! Alright, now we can finally start making some headway!”

“Oh, is the grand reveal finally upon us?” quipped Double-D; he would have liked to make a more
elaborate display of sarcasm, but he just wasn’t feeling it at the moment.

“You wanna know what we’re doing so bad? Fine. Step aside, Moondog.”

Double-D rolled his eyes again, this time in plain sight, as he stood up from the van’s bumper, though that display of incredulity might not have been a good idea with the condition his head was in, as it was enough to make him dreadfully dizzy when he rose. But as always, the dutiful living tower was right there to grab him and hold him up.

“I’m here for you, Double-D!”

“Thank you, Ed.” He need not say more.

Eddy stepped up to the rear doors to the bed of the van, and positioned himself in such a way that corroborated Double-D’s theory that this was going to be played off as a grand gesture.

“Gentlemen… Ed … answer me this: what was yesterday?”

Double-D was slightly taken aback by the obtuseness of the question.

“Th-- it was the last day of school, Eddy.”

“ Which school?”

Double-D couldn’t hide his face of disbelief, while Ed hung on every word of their exchange, itching to know where this was all going.

“We… graduated from middle school, Eddy. Middle school, Eddy, if you didn’t know, is also known as ‘junior high,’ and is one echelon of the public-schooling system in the United States. It typically includes students from grades six through eight, although some districts do elect to also serve fifth-grade pupils, while others are restricted to seventh- and eighth-grade youths.”

Eddy was so bored by Double-D’s answer that he almost forgot to respond.

“Yeah, well, uh… Yeah! What comes after middle school, genius?”

“We would be entering the ninth grade, which in our school district would be sanctioned at Forest High Schoo--”

“ High school! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about! And starting high school means…?”

“It means--”

“I’M A BIG KID NOW!” boomed Ed, proud of himself for being able to contribute to the call-and-response game they were playing.

“Attaboy, Ed!” Eddy picked up, “And what do big kids like? Wait! Before you bore us all to tears with an answer, Sock-Head, let me give you a hint…”

The door was opened ever so slightly so that Eddy could squeeze in and the others couldn’t see much of anything inside. He came back to the door holding the extension cords.

“So we have some power cords,” he said as he dropped them on the ground, “a power supply… and courtesy of our lovable ol’ pal Ed causing a man-made natural disaster--” (Double-D again rolled his eyes at such an abomination of language; rolling his eyes was proving to be most of his day’s exercise) “--an ironing board. Oh! But what are we missing?” Eddy disappeared back into
the van and returned with the large package that had arrived at the Lupo residence a few weeks back, and which he had been waiting for an equal number of weeks to open. He used one of his claws to slice it between the gaps of the box-flaps, and gently opened it for his friends’ viewing pleasure. “Lo and behold.”

Double-D leaned over, and Ed leaned over on top of him, and they saw the reams of laminate sheets, each one making the next more opaque, but just enough light got through to the bottom to show at least one rectangle of thin plastic, close enough to the top to suggest that there were many more beneath it.

“We’re making fake IDs, boys.”

Silence.

“Cool!” remarked Ed.

Silence.

“Are you out of your incapacitated mind!? We’re out on summer vacation for, what, fifteen hours, and you already want to become a professional criminal!?”

“Shhh!” urged Eddy, “Do ya want the whole country to hear ya?”

“Perhaps I do, Eddy; maybe if I had a populace of hundreds of millions on my side, you would feel compelled to abandon this-- this felonious folly!”

“Chill out, will ya? I say…” Eddy counted on his fingers for a quick second, “…four--! No…five words to you, and you bite my freaking head off! Hows-about you hear me out for once?”

“Fine,” Double-D crossed his arms indignantly, “humor me, Eddy.”

“So. Double-D. Old buddy, old pal. All any of the three of us have ever wanted in the cul-de-sac is to fit in. Feel accepted. Be adored.”

Double-D raised a finger and opened his mouth as he began to protest, but Eddy reached up and snapped his snout shut.

“No, shh-shh-shh-shh-shh! Don’t say a word yet. Eddy’s talking. So. High school. It’s a lot of things. But most importantly, it’s two things: a place for a fresh start, and the place where you become an adult. At Forest, there won’t just be people from Peach Creek; there’ll be kids from Lemon Brook. And Apple River, and Cherry Stream! We don’t have to be the kids we always have been. We can reinvent ourselves! We can be people who people want to be around! And when an entire building is full of kids becoming adults, who are they going to want to be around more than the people who can help them trade in their juice boxes…”

He gestured very deliberately toward the box.

“…for adult beverages? We can be popular, make money, and it can set us up for life. So with all that on the table… whaddaya say?”

A self-assured smirk locked eyes with a death-glare.

“Oh, is it my turn to speak?”

“Go tell it on the mountain, Lupo.”
“Well, then, ignoring the fact that you completely misappropriated the original usage of that idiom, I must remark that a life of crime is not simply undesirable, but also infamously unsustainable—”

“You know what, Double-D? Aren’t you in therapy right about now? For all of those little anxieties that hold you back in life? Wouldn’t the old doc be so proud to see that you finally let go of all your cares and started doing something fun and daring for once in your life?”

“Oh, you will not use my psychiatric problems and progress against me! I say—”

“Actually, come to think of it, wasn’t this all your idea in the first place?” Eddy’s grin was consuming him and slightly hindering his ability to speak and annunciate. “That one time that we found a camera, and without even having to say it to one another -- we were on the same wavelength, it was beautiful -- without even having to say ‘How can we use this to make money?’ you come up with ‘Hm! We can make ID cards!’ and I never told you this, Double-D, but if I didn’t think there was more money in the calendar market, I would have fallen head-over-heels for an idea like that! You see, Sock-Head? This idea is yours! It took a few years to come out of the oven, but it’s nice and toasty and all ready to go! You were the leader of this operation for once! Aren’t you proud of yourself, Double-Dipshit?”

A smirk and a glare.

“Silence,” pronounced Ed.

Except Ed, who was sleepy and had recently received blunt-force trauma to the head and other parts of his body, was giving Eddy a run for his money in terms of having trouble annunciating. What he meant to say was:

“Sirens!” Double-D couldn’t help but exclaim. “Eddy, you fool, the authorities know that you’ve roped us in to a highly illegal ring of activities! This is conspiracy to make fraudulent facsimiles of government documents!” His sentence structure was uncharacteristically not of the highest possible caliber; Eddy didn’t care to notice, but Ed could hardly bear to watch his friend go through what was clearly the deepest fear he’d ever experienced in his life. “No! No! I’ve worked too hard to maintain a perfect record -- I can’t surrender that now! Oh dear God, my life is over!”

“Oh, hush, will you? We haven’t done anything yet. Besides, there’s no way that they could have heard me say that just now,” Eddy insisted. But then he thought about it. “Unless…”

Double-D was shaken out of his stupor by Eddy grabbing his chest and trying to rip his shirt off.

“Are you seriously wearing a wire? Did your uncle put you up to this!”

Double-D found the breath to gasp. “You know my family does not associate with that man!”

“Bullshit! Everybody knows that wolves stick to their packs!”

“Eddy, that is a harmful, antiquated stereotype! And furthermore, nobody in my family maintains more than passing contact with him! We don’t even know if he has the authority to do such things as you suggest! I don’t even know if we’re in his jurisdiction!”

Ed, who couldn’t keep watching his friends go to pieces, looked to the sky to get away from it. But he couldn’t escape it. “Eddy, look! Helicopters!”

“They brought air units!?” Double-D remarked as the trio observed a couple of choppers looming over the woods beyond the creek. Now Eddy was starting to believe the hype.
“Okay, then, Sock-Head,” Eddy spat out, “Logically -- be the smart guy here for a second -- if you aren’t wearing a wire, then how would they know we’re here?”

Without missing a beat, Double-D had his logical explanation ready to go: “My educated guess is that someone reported loud noises coming from the junkyard when the mound of waste fell and now they’ve come to investigate the cause of the ruckus!”

Eddy’s eyes were stuck all the way open; the sun didn’t make him squint anymore. “Okay, boys, well, uhm… While I’m totally sure that they’re not coming for us, I, uh… wait, are they coming over here or not?”

Looking at the helicopters again, they seemed to just be encircling the forest. But then again, the forest wasn’t that far away. Eddy was simply confused by this situation, and he wanted out.

“Let’s uh, let’s appease our friend Goodie-Two-Shoes over here and, uh, let’s lay low for awhile. As practice, yeah! In case, God forbid, someday we do get into trouble with the law! Let’s play pretend, boys. While we’re still young. May I recommend the trusty old van? We haven’t hung out in her for awhi--”

Ed didn’t see any need to let that Eddy finish that sentence. He grabbed the little fox and the medium-sized wolf and piled his large self into the back of the van with them.

“Wait! Ed, the evidence! Get the goods!”

Ed slumped back out and wrangled up all of the generators and spools of wire and the ironing board and shoved them all into the van, and squeezed himself in right behind it. But in his haste, he forgot something in a box that, to be fair, was a color that very much blended in with the sand-dirty ground.

“Close the doors!” cried a voice, and thus began the waiting until the coast was clear.

“Heh. I’m hungry.” Ed had a penchant for acting as though stressful situations had not just happened, nor were happening concurrent to the present. It was a gift, really.

“Of course you are,” said the wolf, who could barely think of eating. “Do we still have that cache of snacks in the glove compartment?”

“Eh, I’ll look, but keep an eye on the windows and tell me if I have to get down,” Eddy crawled over the seats to the front of the vehicle, deciding that taking the chance of being seen through the windshield would put him in less jeopardy than being stuck in a confined space with a hungry, growing grizzly bear. “By the way, as long as we’re in here, we might as well get to work. Um… did anybody remember to bring an iron?”

Outside, sirens. Inside, silence.

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* I wanted to get this done by the 4th to coincide with EEnE’s 20th, but I just had too much to write and not a lot of time to do it. Speaking of time, I still have other things to juggle this with, so while I really want to pull this whole thing off, that might
take awhile, to say the least. But you know what? If someone out there sees this, enjoys this and wants more, then that will give me the drive to make more. Otherwise, I might take Danny Antonucci’s advice to EEnE’s adult fans: “Get a life.” (Buddy, I’m trying…) And notice some major characters haven’t shown up yet? Don’t worry, they’re just on the other side of the page… -D
If on a summer’s night a traveler

Chapter Summary

Wherein you meet two very curious characters indeed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2 “If on a summer’s night a traveler”

One of the last things you’re certain you remember is checking your watch; a small part of you did indeed want to know what time it was, but you were mostly trying to take your mind off your father grumbling about how long the valet was taking.

It is 11:43 p.m. You have been awake for over eighteen consecutive hours, and you are exhausted. You would have preferred that your father chose a different night to go to the theatre, but you know that when your father makes room in his schedule for you, that that is the only time he’s willing and able to share with you, and to dispute this would be asking to be removed from his timetable altogether. Besides, you are still grateful that you’re only a short drive from the big city, where you can witness such fine displays of live performance in person, and grateful that you were born to parents who were well-off enough to take you and cultured enough to want to -- even if your father did occasionally indulge in cathartic behaviors below his dignity, but you ignore him by checking your watch as he embarrasses himself with public profanity.

The vehicle is delivered to your feet and the valet exits the driver’s door. He wears a tired smile, one of someone who either believes or wants to believe that faking a positive attitude will eventually beget genuine happiness. He nods at your father and tries to win him over with a warm, soft smile.

“You didn’t turn the engine off?” your father asks. “Is that your way of telling us to hurry up and get the hell out of here? Or are you just trying to waste my gas?”

“It’s for your convenience, sir. Why turn the engine off and give you the keys when you’d just put them right back in and start her up again?”

“It’s a car, buddy, not a woman. I paid you upfront, correct?”

“Yessir,” the valet responds with a flourish that ends with a hand extended just a bit, palm to the sky. Perhaps he’s asking for a tip, or maybe it’s just the gesture people make when they mean to say of course.

“Very well, then.” Your father scoots right past him and takes his place at the driver’s seat and closes the door. The valet takes his leave without looking at any of you, so you don’t get to see whether the smile is still on his face. Your mother has already walked to the opposite side of the SUV and taken her seat in the time it took for your father to make his point. “Get in the car, son,” he chides.

You open the rear driver’s side door and clamber in, trying to be quick about it so you can pose a
question before your father drives off. “Sir, I’m really tired. Is it okay if I take a nap in the back seat?”

“You are in the back seat.”

“He means the third row,” your mother interjects.

“What, do you want to lay down? We’ll be home in half an hour.”

“The highway’s under construction,” your mother reminds him. She also seems tired, but not quite fatigued.

Your father makes some gestures of his own to make clear to everybody his newfound frustration. “Of course. How could I forget? We’re paying for it!” He makes eye contact at you via the rear-view mirror. “Do what you want. But if I tell you to sit up straight and put your seatbelt on, you’d better do it.”

You nod and climb back into the back row, jolted a bit as the SUV jerks forward, but if anything it helps you get over the ridge. You recline in the back seat and close your eyes. You think about the splendid performance you just witnessed, but after a few minutes it strikes you as painfully ironic that you had to fight through such a strong wave of fatigue during the show, and now you couldn’t sleep when you wanted to because the thoughts of the show were just too entertaining. You instead try to think of all the ways that you’ll enjoy the rest of your newly-inaugurated summer vacation, and before too long you are lulled off to sleep by the peaceful thoughts. The last thing you overhear through your closed eyes is more grumbling from your father, something about how much he detests taking surface streets out of the city, but he wouldn’t be caught dead paying to drive on a toll road. That’s the last thing that you’re certain wasn’t a dream.

***

You think you’re aroused from your nap by the cool summer night’s air breezing in through the open windows. You didn’t remember whether they were open when you left the parking lot. But before you even fully open your eyes, you know that they’re open now, with the unmistakable sound of the breeze not having any competition from your silent parents, the extinguished radio, and the absence of the engines of other cars on the road. The only tires you can hear strumming along the asphalt are your own, and you see no lights out the windows. This strikes you as odd, but you’re not yet ready to investigate. You first consult your watch again.

If you did check your watch, you checked it at 12:02 a.m. It is now officially Saturday morning, and therefore the first calendar date of summer vacation. This realization stirs you, so you certainly won’t be getting back to sleep. You think about how you’re going to make this summer count, because you weren’t sure what the future would bring. Today -- yesterday, now, rather -- was the last day of school for the year for all the public elementary and middle schools in the suburbs; that much you knew for certain. But if your parents had anything to say about it, you would not start Lemon Brook Middle School in the fall. You would be part of the first class of sixth-graders to attend the newly-expanded Sherwood Forest College Preparatory School. Once again, you were conflicted. You were grateful to have such an opportunity to better your long-term future, you were a bit hesitant to gamble your short-term happiness. You already didn’t care for having to wake up at 5:30 each weekday morning for before-school piano lessons and leadership classes, but you weren’t certain if you were being immature for wanting a carefree childhood at the expense of your adulthood. But you didn’t want to wrestle with this much longer, so you sat up a bit in your seat and tried to get a feel for where exactly your father was driving.

In three directions, all that could be seen out the windows was darkness. Looking toward the front
of the car, your parents are both staring straight ahead through the windshield. Your mother seems almost as enthralled by the strange environment as you are; your father just looks annoyed. He doesn’t see you sit up in your seat; he has a bad habit of never checking his rear-view mirror if he doesn’t have a pressing reason to do so. You don’t tell either of them that you’re awake now because you doubt that they’ll find that information to be useful or interesting.

The headlights do little better at interpreting the world around you; they show the road ahead and not much else. You do note that your father is turning the steering wheel every so often. Perhaps the motion jostled you awake? Where would he be driving that’s so winding?

*The highway’s under construction*, you recall your mother saying. And you faintly remember Sir bitching and moaning about surface streets being a lesser evil than a toll road. Could he have…? No, he would never allow himself… would he? He’d think it beneath his dignity!

Sherwood Forest Road meanders through the eponymous wildwood that separated Nottingham, Delaware from its northern and northwestern suburbs. The quintessential Road Less Traveled, almost everybody in the Delmarva Peninsula knows it as a great shortcut to circumvent the oft-congested northbound highways, but few ever exercise that ability, as its reputation of being an underserved thoroughfare is a secondary product of its primary label of a dangerous piece of pavement.

You’ve lost count of all the reasons why people say Sherwood Forest Road is not a safe one to travel. Some have cynical rationales about it being a place where teenagers drive like jackasses to impress one another, or where swerving drunkards think they can avoid the cops patrolling the major highways. Others have grounded, mundane explanations, saying its curviness makes it prone to accidents, or its lack of streetlights making it a difficult drive even in the daytime when the trees form a canopy of shadow, or even its sheer isolation making it a bad place to have any sort of breakdown. But you personally were always fascinated by the ones who said that unsavory types prowled these wicked woods.

The stories don’t quite go back as far as you can remember, but you do know the first time you heard them dated back closer to the beginning of your short life so far. They say that on this road, you need not fear being victimized by inner-city gangbangers or methed-out rednecks, nor the mafia nor some bored psychopaths, nor some cryptozoological creature or any such entities. The tales are always specific about a finite number of recurring characters -- usually two, sometimes three, infrequently as many as five -- preying on passerby in cars that are a little too opulent for their tastes. What exactly their M.O. is remains a mystery, but different versions of the story insist on filling in the blank in different ways. They’re madmen living off the grid. Or they’re militant anarchists. Or they’re cultists in need of supplies. Or maybe some combination of the above. Some even say it’s a grand scheme to give back to the poor of the city.

The part of all of this that worries you the most as you sit in the backseat of a luxury SUV that would seem ripe for the picking, is that the mythos of all of this checks out on its own logic. Whether one believed the story or not, one could not deny that every base was covered. The purported modern-day highwaymen only started their operations when the first Mayor Norman resigned to accept an elected seat in Congress and, through the dark magic of big-city politics, his unfathomably less-popular brother ascended to the former’s position and held a firm grasp on the city ever since, all the while gaining a reputation of cozying up with the rich at the expense of the city’s lower-class (and of the middle-class, for that matter); whoever these people were wandering the woods must have thought that tormenting the rich would be the best way to give John Norman the middle finger by proxy. And if that were the case, Sherwood Forest Road would be an excellent place to set up shop. The Delaware D.o.T. doesn’t want to give up on the road that lost much of its traffic thanks to a whirlwind of rumors adding up over the decades, so despite its near-
abandonment, the road is far from neglected -- in fact, some say that the road is taken care of far too much per its volume of traffic carried, and cite this as another piece of evidence of corruption on the part of the John Norman mayorship. The strange product of all of this is that the road is used disproportionately by the upper class, who largely do not buy the stories of vigilantes nor any of the other rumors. To the wealthy, this road is a quaint, peaceful alternative to the highway, a smooth and well-maintained thoroughfare through the wilderness, one that they can cruise slowly while they take in nature, arriving late to their jobs where they’re too powerful to be reprimanded, assuming they don’t own the company altogether. Most others either heed the myriad of reasons not to take Sherwood Forest Road or simply think it’s too remote or impractical to use regardless, though many overlap into both camps. The road is by no means exclusively frequented by the rich, but if somebody wants to go car-watching for something fancy, it would not be a bad idea to pull over on this road and set up a canvas chair, watching the oddly-high number of widely-unaffordable cars go by, driven by people who would not hesitate to call the rumors of class-conscious highwaymen -- to put it politely -- “poppycock.”

Your parents are among that set. You’ve asked them before about whether they think the legends are real, and they’ve always told you that they’re just that: legends. They cited the young age of the stories as proof that it must be something spread by children barely older than the legends themselves, and believed only by the same adults who are too gullible to really get ahead in life. Besides, if there have been outlaws lingering in the woods down the street from your house for the better part of a decade now, wouldn’t they have been caught? How long can somebody really hide in plain sight this modern world? Oh, they’re just that good? Your parents don’t buy it. This world now has radio and forensics and the internet for Christ’s sakes; nobody can escape the powers of technology for that long. Oh, so they’re so good that they’ve also been doing things other than highway robbery concurrent to all of this and haven’t been caught doing those things either because they’re escape artists and masters of disguise? Well like what? What other acts have they done, son? What have they done? Give me specific examples, son. What have these shitstains done? What? Stop being so stupid, son; it’s unbecoming of you. This is all another reason you keep quiet as you squirm in the back seat.

As you look out the open window, your eyes adjusting to the scarce ambient moonlight seeping through the trees to finally be able to make out leaves and branches, you think about the one base-covering detail of the story that you never knew whether you believed or not. It concerned the fact that there were no high-profile cases of robbery if they’ve happened so consistently over the years. The explanation posits that it boils down to embarrassment: either the embarrassment of law enforcement for not being able to find these guys over the course of multiple years, and-or the embarrassment of the rich people who don’t want to publicly admit that they’d been taken advantage of by what was supposed to be a fictional band of misfits. You’re certain that if that happened to your dad, he would be as publicly angry as he’d ever been. Surely he would raise holy hell to high heaven, demanding justice for somebody of his stature. But then again, you can totally see such image-obsessed people not unlike your parents not wanting to reveal anything that might even slightly make their lives seem less than perfect, especially if it comes at the hands of a living legend. Social stigma has a funny way of working like that.

So you lay back down in the third-row bench seats, trying not to make a noise, because while you’re sure that your parents will want nothing to do with you at this hour, you don’t want to take the chance that they might, and that your quivering voice will betray the burgeoning sense of horror that is growing within your heart. Or would it be a burgeoning sense of terror? Oh, such verbal confusion would be a second thing your father would ridicule you for, exploding feverishly from the driver’s seat as your mother plays the part of the disinterested referee.

Would it be even worse than what the bandits would do to you?
You close your eyes. You don’t expect sleep to come. But you need to try.

You imagine things that give you comfort. You’re at home. You’re lying in your own bed. The room is as dark as it can be, but you can still perceive everything by the light of the moon, which sits patiently outside your window, keeping guard. Four walls around you swear to protect you from anybody who may wish to intrude, and the ceiling is too prideful to let your world crash down upon you. The only sound you can hear is your own breathing, the rustling of air hitting the surfaces right below your nose. The only thing you can feel are the blanket and bedsheets that sandwich your body. The only thing you can think is of what wonderful dreams you’ve had in that bed before, and what amazing sights you will see in all the nights coming forward. Nothing here can hurt you.

“Oh, Jesus, what are these bums doing in the road?”

Well that certainly gets your attention.

“Mark, slow down, they don’t look like bums, they’re too well-dressed.”

You start to sit up, but you restrain yourself just a bit, lest the sound of fur swishing against the vinyl seats gives away your wakefulness.

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

You peek gently over the seats in front of you and out the windshield. You’ve found yourself on one of the few straight stretches along Sherwood Forest Road, running parallel to a small river to your left.

“Sometimes you need what you didn’t ask for.”

Ahead, you can vaguely see that the river hangs a right and goes under the road, disappearing in the darkness beyond.

“Give me one good reason to pull over.”

And right at the other end of the bridge appears to be a figure, right where the cone of light from the SUV surrenders to the darkness. But it’s only one figure.

“If they were actually bums, they’d probably be passed out drunk somewhere at this hour.”

You’re several feet behind your parents, so your eyes are running on delay of what they’re seeing, but as you draw closer you can start to better make the figure out. You can see what your parents were talking about now: there are two people standing on the road’s shoulder. But one is much smaller than the other, and both are dressed rather garishly, and you realize that at first the smaller one in front blended in with the one behind him. The larger one is holding up two large objects.

“That’s not a good answer.”

One of the objects is now clearly a gas can. The other just looks like a sort of box.

“Tell Steven you did some charity work and he can probably get you a tax write-off.”

Is the other thing just a suitcase? Why would he be carrying a suitcase? But of course you could ask why are either of these creatures doing anything in that spot at this time of night, but your mind is not exactly operating at peak productivity at the moment.
“I refuse to believe that’ll work, but -- apparently -- you have a vested interest in me giving these people what they want. Whatever it is they want.”

The larger one is waving his occupied arms. The smaller one seems to be waving a cane, but he’s facing off toward the woods.

“You wouldn’t tip the valet. Time to make up for your karma.”

The smaller one -- a pig, maybe? -- is wearing sunglasses. Why would he be wearing sunglasses at night? Oh. Oh. That explains the cane. And the direction he’s facing. You can never let your father know how long it took you to piece that together. He’s be ashamed.

“Wait, is that one guy in front blind or something?”

Then again, maybe he’s just be projecting his own embarrassment. The character up front is certainly a pig, although a strangely-shaped one, and the one in the back is some sort of brown bear. You better understand your parents’ confusion: their clothes convey the fashion sense of a beggar but the spending power of a baron. On the hand, the pig has a straw hat that clashes with his smart outfit and the bear in the back is sporting one of those tacky moustache-and-wig combos that fell out of style with the elite decades ago, but on the other hand, the both of them seem to be wearing white gloves. You realize you really are close when you can make out even these fine details.

“If you’re not going to pull over, at least slow down at let me talk to them from inside the car.”

Something goes off in your brain and you start actually feeling glad that you’re drawing closer -- with every passing millisecond your father has less and less of an opportunity to stop the car at a reasonable distance, and eventually that chance will be zero percent, and then these strange figures will literally and figuratively be in your past.

“No, no, I’m not gonna do that…” your father grumbles. “...Is he still asleep?”

Your heart jumps at this, and you drop back down onto the bench seat, out of their line of sight. You even close your eyes, just for good measure. In a moment of silence, you can feel your mother turning her head around to look at you, and you wonder if she can just sort of sense that you’re awake with the magical, superhero-like Mom-powers that in your youth you genuinely believed she had.

“Yeah.”

Your mother is fallible after all, but so is your father’s sense of judgment. You can feel the car lose speed and sway right, and it gives a little as the brakes are applied. The sound of tires on the road changes to the distinct baritone squeal of a car on a small concrete bridge, and this soon gives way to the melody of rubber running over rumble strips at the edge of the driving surface.

“If he was awake, then we’d keep driving because he’d probably freak out and think they were the Forest Bandits or… whatever the hell.” You curse that this is the one time your father listens to your mother. “I’m doing this for you. And your conscious.”

“Thank you. You’ll probably feel better about yourself after this, too.”

The tire rub slows to nothing, and you lurch a little on the seat as the car loses all of its momentum.

“You stay here.”
“I can take care of myself, Mark. I know where to aim if things get bad.”

Seatbelts click and slurp themselves back into their holders. Two consecutive sounds of car doors opening, and then two consecutive sounds of car doors being shut, with some faint rustling of bodies in between. A set of footsteps on gravel on one side, and a set of footsteps on asphalt on the other. You’re alone in the vehicle. The only thing you didn’t hear was the doors being locked.

“How’s it going?” Your father’s voice is the first of many things you hear through the open windows. You wish that the voice’s proximity would give you comfort, but knowing that it only draws the entities nearer, you also wish it was coming from farther away.

“Oh, Reginald, have some good samaritans finally stopped to help us in our plight?” The first of the two unfamiliar voices has a couple of strange elements to it, and while neither of the elements alone would be enough to amplify your fear, the two strange details combined simply confuse you. It seems that the existence of such a voice in nature would be somehow incongruous, and this only adds to your confusion in discerning whether or not this is all a dream.

The first thing you note is that this entity clearly speaks with a British accent -- but what would a Brit be doing in this part of the country? Nottingham, Delaware might be metropolitan, but it isn’t quite cosmopolitan, and it would never have struck you that an Anglo expatriate would choose to come here; surely the name being shared with a medium-large city in England wouldn’t have been enough of a reason for any Englishman to decide to relocate here when New York and Philadelphia and Washington were a short jaunt away. But a few instantaneous moments later, your brain also registers that this voice almost sounds… inauthentic. In the passing nanoseconds, you arrive at the deduction that this voice -- whether this is the case or not -- certainly sounds like a man with a lower voice trying to put on a higher voice. This could all have been wrong, of course, and maybe his natural voice just did have a timbre to it that seemed to resonate high after coming from a low place, but the peculiar scratchy, breathiness to it was like no voice you’d heard recently. Which of the figures could have been the bearer of this voice? It couldn’t have been the bear, trying to sound less threatening, could it have been?

“Why, I do believe that they may be, Mister G.” Oh, no. No, no, no, that was the bear’s voice this time. If the vocabulary didn’t give it away, the auditory quality of the voice sure did. It wasn’t the most aggressive voice in the world, but it certainly wouldn’t have come from a pig. Jeez, if all dads yell at their kids, you would hate to be this guy’s son. But there is a bit of calmness that the voice gives you, in that it sounds much more real. This character either wasn’t putting on (or couldn’t put on) a fake voice. This one is distinctly American, and you think you detect hints of the slightest of Southern twangs.

“We can be if you don’t give me any reason to regret this,” your father asserts himself. “If I start to get the feeling that you’re going to screw us over in any capacity, I’m--” A moment of pensive thought to get the right words out. “I’m not going to spoil what I have in mind.” You cannot decide if your father’s decision to outright tell them that he has a hand he’s waiting to show them is brave or foolish, but you think a better expenditure of your thoughts would be trying to figure out what defense mechanism he was referring to. If he’s hiding a weapon somewhere in the car, it would certainly be news to you.

“Oh, you’ll have to forgive my husband,” your mother interjects, refusing to take a back seat in this affair, “He has a little too much of a healthy distrust of strangers.”

Some polite laughter that must be from the two new faces is followed by a bit of a monologue from the pig: “Oh, it’s quite understandable, madam; I’d not be certain I’d trust some fellows like ourselves either, stumbling along the roadside in the dead of night. But I assure you, we pose no
threat to you nor your well-being; there is little we would gain from it. I can swear an oath on my family name that my intentions are noble -- or at least as noble as one’s can be when one finds oneself a beggar in a moment of desperation.”

“And what family name would that be?”

“Glutton, sir. Glenjamin Glutton.” A brief moment of near-silence with some faint rustling suggests your father hesitantly accepted a handshake.

“Mark,” your father spits, and then, “von Bartonschmeer.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Gretchen,” your mother adds.

“Miz Gretchen, how dearly I wish my eyes could help me confirm it, but you do sound like a lovely lady.” This confirms to you that the blind pig is the Englishman; but as you start to gather more of a sample size of this man’s speaking habits, you start to consider that perhaps his accent is not as strong as you previously thought, certainly still distinguishable but also fading in and out just a slight bit, as though he’d been in the States for awhile and started to pick up some of the local verbal traits. “And this is the gentleman who I once called my servant but now struggle to call anything but a friend.”

“Reginald Chutney, but you can call me Reggie. Nice to meet ya.”

“Chutney? What, are you from India?”

An awkward silence. You imagine your mother rolling her eyes, the pig looking confused, the bear looking down upon your father with a face that clearly is trying its hardest to remain classy, and your father not feeling an ounce of shame. If anything, the outburst may have been specifically designed to take his and everybody else’s minds off of his shame for not having a servant of his own.

“Oh, you know how it goes, similar etymologies,” the pig clarifies, not sounding the least bit thrown-off by your father’s comment. “Surely someone as educated as yourself may recall how all but the most far-Eastern languages of the Eurasian continent derived from the original Proto-Indo-European. Or at least… Reginald did note that you drive a vehicle of someone quite well-read. Did you say your surname was van or von Bartonschmeer?”

“Von,” your father sounds like he’s boasting. “In Germany, you’re not even allowed to have the von in your last name unless you can prove you’re from a noble lineage.”

“My thoughts exactly! Tell me, was my friend’s assessment correct?”

“Oh, absolutely,” your father brags. “The von Bartonschmeer line is top-of-the-line.”

“I beg your pardon,” your mother chimes in, “but how can we be of help to you two?” You’re surprised your father hasn’t asked this before just this moment.

“Gretch, mellow out, they’re curious about the family history.” You know that your mother will not protest this, as she knows as well as you do that your father loves having his ego stroked.

“Oh, and I do apologize for being inefficient with the time you’ve been gracious enough to share with me, but I must concede I find your lineage fascinating.”
“Yeah, well, you must be pretty well-off yourself with duds like those. I wouldn’t have stopped if I thought you were just some more bums crawling out of the woods, drunk off your rockers.”

“Oh, do you like my outfit? I thank you. Without the aid of vision, I still feel assured that you are similarly dressed to kill.” -- Dressed to kill? Do Brits even say that? -- “I suppose it is in our great fortune that Reginald and myself did run into a couple of similar status; after all, us wealthy folk need to stick together, these days especially! It seems that everybody wants to hold us responsible for their problems nowadays.”

“Heh, you got that right,” your father quips. “Hell, come to think of it -- I don’t remember if it’s this road or somewhere else -- but I know the kids these days -- and, you know, the lazy adults who don’t bother giving it critical thought -- they say that there’s place around here somewhere where some lowlifes go robbing rich people who pass through, and that they have been for years but somehow nobody’s caught them yet, and they even say that they, like, give all their spoils to poor people, as if they’d know what to do with it.”

“Huh. Is that so?” the pig sounds like it’s his turn to feign politeness.

“Oh, you know how every place needs its own local legend. But -- heh -- if I wanted to walk into a trap, get my ass robbed and have my money wasted on poor people who won’t help themselves, I -- heh -- I’d just vote Democrat! Heh, you with me?”

“Ah.” He sounds like he would give your father an unimpressed look if he were able to make eye contact with him. “Well, I’ve always been of the opinion that those most fit to do so could become comfortably wealthy no matter what policies the administration may implement.”

You think you hear a faint muttering from your father, as if he’s trying to say “oh.”

“But variety is the spice of life, as they say,” the pig remarks, trying to fill the bitter silence, but it’s no match for the crunching of gravel as your father is surely shifting awkwardly in place, trying and failing to contain his own embarrassment. You can just about feel him blush. But this pig proves himself to be merciful to your father and offers him a way out: “But tell me, Baron von Bartonschmeer, from whence have you made your fortune? My curiosity is piqued!” Honestly, it almost sounds like the pig is embarrassed that he embarrassed your father. But would such a character feel such a way?

“Oh, I, um, I’m a high-ranking executive in a company founded by my great-grandfather. Bioengineering and chemicals and such.” And just like that, your father sounds like he’s brimming with vanity all over again. Just a slight compliment and he’s already put past this moment of being put in his place. You think that it must be frightening to be like him, and you’re terrified by the idea that perhaps it’s your destiny that you one day will be.

“Ah, a man of science, I see! Not too dissimilar from the path I’ve chosen.”

“And what would that be, Mister Uh-er… um…”

“He already toldja, his name’s Glenjamin Glutton,” the bear interrupts with an air of annoyance so commonly associated with his kind.

“Oh, Reginald, you need not be so defensive of my honour,” -- you swear you can hear the pig use the letter u in honour -- “It is, after all, an admittedly unusual name. But to answer your question, Baron, I deal in optical aids. Glasses and contact lenses and all that.”

You share in the stunned silence. Are you certain that this quasi-posh English accent was coming
from the blind guy?

“Really?” your mother can’t help but ask. At the very least, she confirms your skepticism is valid. You wonder what she’s been doing this whole time. You imagine she’s been trying to politely look at whichever of the two chatterboxes was talking at a given moment, maybe occasionally glancing at the bear to grant him the dignity your father wouldn’t give him, before eventually getting bored and looking at the ground and the woods, switching gazes in irregular intervals so as to seem like a real person but not switching so regularly as to seem mechanical. Your mother may be much less harsh than your father, but she’s no doubt at least as self-conscious of how others view her.

“And how does that work?” asks your father.

“Oh, I could tell a grand tale about how every little thing fell perfectly in place. But that would be a story for another time. Let me say at least this much: ever since I was very young and I found out that other people could see, I was enthralled by the idea. That these people all around me had an extra sense that gave them another way to take in the world. And I will confess: for a time, for a long time, I was bitter. I wanted what they had. I didn’t just want to see -- I wanted to be normal. But then two things went off in my head at about the same time soon after my adolescence. Firstly, that there was little that they could do that I could not do. Perhaps it was easier for them, but I could still do it. I could still sense the exact dimensions of something; just give me a moment to feel it. I could still understand the distance something was from me; just be quiet so I can hear it. I could still perceive the beauty in the world; just let me have a chance to feel it, or hear it, or taste it, or smell it, or just let me linger by it and take it in with the senses that we all know we have but which they don’t teach in primary school. If anything, over the years I’ve gathered that in some ways this is a blessing, for it has let me see the beauty in the world in ways that you seeing types -- you normal types -- have often overlooked.

“And that’s about the time that I started to pity not only the seeing, but especially the ones who couldn’t see well. Here they were with this gift, and yet they weren’t even permitted to use it in its full functionality? What a cruel world! So I took it upon myself to help assuage the plight of these poor souls. If they wanted to see, I should want to let them see. So I started to do my research, and the rest, I suppose you can say, is history. Yes, I had my hiccoughs along the way -- I’m sure you can imagine how difficult it is to find a textbook on optometry written in Braille -- and I did need help on many occasions, and I did benefit from some lucky breaks. But I feel like I’ve used my one life on this Earth to make it a better place than I found it. And yes -- heh -- I did make a pretty penny along the way.”

“You’re a good man, Mister G.” insists the possible Southerner.

“Oh, Reginald, that’s not for you or I to decide; that’s the place of the Lord to judge.”

You can’t get any sense of what your father is doing after hearing this. You can imagine him reacting in a few different and opposite ways. Maybe he’s embarrassed again by this pig’s casual recounting of how he turned an improbable good deed into an improbable good fortune. Maybe he’s genuinely confused why somebody would want to be so helpful to complete strangers who would never and could never personally appreciate him back -- and, by that token, maybe he’s regretting pulling over still. Or maybe he’s fuming that this stranger just went on a self-righteous monologue knowing full well that it’s extremely unlikely that any given stranger he encounters would be brazen enough to punch a blind braggart in the face. All of this is assuming that your father even believed a word of it, which you know you shouldn’t assume. If your father were to ask you if you believed it, you would try your best to decipher what his version of a correct answer would be, and tell that back to him. But you were sold. Then again, he could just have been a really good actor. The production from earlier certainly could have used a talent like him.
It was so moving, in fact, that you temporarily forget your fear that both of these figures are indeed just acting their part.

“I’m so sorry, Mister Glutton, but it’s getting uncomfortably muggy out here,” your mother says. You half-believe that she’s half-sorry. “Is that a gas can I see?”

“Oh, yes, this has been such a riveting bit of banter that I for one have completely forgotten the task at hand! A thousand apologies; ah, er -- Reginald! Why didn’t you warn me that we were wasting these fine people’s time?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt, sir.”

“Oh, Reginald, need I remind you? Always interrupt me if I need to be interrupted; I am but a man. And don’t call me ‘sir’ in front of friends; it makes me feel like such a tyrant.”

“Sure thing, Glenji.”

“Now that’s more like it! Ah, but, um, yes yes yes, the matter of our current predicament. It appears that old Reginald here, silly old bear, he forgot to refill the limousine with petr-- forgot to refill the tank, as it were,” -- you wonder if your father picked up on the fact that the Englishman clearly just switched to more transatlantic vocabulary to dumb it down for him, but you would never say a word to him about it -- “and now we’re walking against traffic to try to garner the attention of someone who might be so kind as to assist us.”

“The limo’s further up the road; we’ve been walking for about a half an hour.”

“Farther, Reginald, farther. Yet another reason I wish I had known you as a schoolmate. I could have used the companionship, and you could have used the education!”

There’s a lull in the conversation as the pig and the bear exchange hushed oh, you chuckles that certainly match the narrative that they’re not-quite-equal friends.

“Well as nice as it was to meet you, I’m afraid I’m gonna have to disappoint you, because we don’t have any siphon tubes or anything like that.” Your father seems genuinely conflicted about helping them now, or about whether he even can.

“And, um, with all the due respect, Mister, uh, Reginald, I don’t think we can give the both of you a ride to a gas station. Or… anywhere, for that matter. If you catch my drift...”

“Oh, ma’am, among my people, that’s a compliment, I assure you.” Reginald really doesn’t sound like he’s hiding even an ounce of offense; he still has not given you one iota of doubt about his genuinity. Unfortunately that makes his dynamic with the pig all the more confusing.

“Oh, we’re well aware that the logistics of this dilemma are not the most convenient,” -- something about the pig’s sentence structure there makes you wonder if that’s quite right -- “but we were hoping more along the lines of you folks taking me with the can and meeting me back at the limo with the, er, gasoline, while Reginald can walk back. Heaven knows he could use the exercise.”

“Now that’s something only he can say to me.” Really, the only thing close to a red flag you’re getting from the bear is that he seems far too comfortable in his subservient role. Even this is more of a yellow flag than a red one; you’ve heard of such people before, but have you actually ever met one?

“In fact, we’ll even repay you upfront for your kindness. Reginald, would you please?”
“Sir, yes, sir.” This comes with a sarcastic sneer that sounds more like he’s playing with the concept of subordination, like a smartass in the army might say to piss off his drill sergeant even though both parties know the soldier is using all the right words. Perhaps the one called Reginald has some reservations about his position after all, but he swallows them and tells himself that he’s working for a pretty nice guy and things could be much worse for him. You can’t quite put it into words, but this is the first time he breaks his immersion with you.

“Reggie, what did the man say about using that word?” your father interrogates a little too aggressively; it’s still clearly playful ribbing, but it couldn’t be called a successful delivery of a joke. But before he can feel embarrassed: “Oh, what is that?”

“I ask that you indulge me in partaking some of this fine Grecian wine; I would feel so incomplete if I were not to see you happy before you saw me on my way.”

“Oh, it’s Greek?” Your mother cannot resist. “I’ve heard great things about Greek wine, but I’ve never gotten around to trying it.”

“Well, there was one time when we had dinner in Athens, but the restaurant had a French bottle she really loved, and she couldn’t pass up on one of her favorites.”

“Oh, shush. Besides, you can’t have any, you have to drive.”

“Oh, but one glass surely won’t hurt!” the pig insists. “If I must beg for help, I might as well beg for companionship while I’m at it!”

“Yes, Gretch, it can’t hurt too much.”

“I only wish we had a table to enjoy it at on this fine summer’s night.”

“I don’t think it’s quite summer yet, Glenji. Calendar-wise.” The bear is correct.

“Ah, Reggie, that’s the smarts I knew you had in you!”

You hear the suitcase the bear carried being set down and glassware clinking as it’s being taken out. You hear a cork pop and the beginning of merrymaking.

“Wait, Mister Glutton, aren’t you going to have some?”

“Who, me? Oh, no. I’ll be the designated driver!”

Three voices laugh at varying degrees of heartiness.

You really aren’t sure this isn’t a dream. You thought your mother would put up more of a fight than this instead of allowing your father to drink with strangers at the side of the road in the dead of night. Is her judgment still maligned from the drinks she had hours ago at the show? Or is her love of wine more severe than you knew? Your father would absolutely be the kind of person to have a glass of alcohol in public, proceed to drive a motor vehicle, and all the while not care what law enforcement might think… but would he be the kind of person who is so easily won over by (admittedly charismatic) strangers? Actually, back up: would he ever have pulled over in the first place? Perhaps your parents just act differently when they don’t think you’re awake and listening; perhaps that takes the form of embracing being a lush and revelling in phony compliments when they think you’re none the wiser.

And these strangers: can these guys be real? Do such people exist? The fear makes you want to stay alert, hanging on every little minute detail you can pick up for any signs of foul play. But the
confusion exhausts your mind and makes you want to go back to sleep. Therefore your body forces an inconvenient compromise and you’re just laying there in a sort of coma: your brain is practically overheating from vigilance, but your body is too beat to move a muscle. The only part of your body you can control just a little bit would be your eyelids, which you can manipulate to open or close when you see fit, but which are drifting open and shut on their own accord anyway, and you let them bungee you in and out of a state of rest. Your eyes aren’t helping too much, because all they can see is the fuzziest details of the inside of the SUV as illuminated by the scant light originating from the moon and then reflecting ever so slightly off of not-very-reflective surfaces outside to enter the cabin. You pick up the discussion outside the window, but your brain records it only in fragments as you fade in and out. Fragments such as this:

“So what play were you seeing?”

“Honey, what was it called?”

“As You Like It.”

“Oh, Shakespeare! Marvellous! I’m sorry, but I need to ask: were they speaking with English accents?”

“Uh… not really, no.”

“Oh, damn them! What lazy actors, making a mockery of the craft! I would be their personal vocal coach if they would let me!”

“But wait, Glenji, didn’t you tell me something-something about how the modern English accent didn’t exist before, like, two-three hundred years ago? I specifically remember you saying that some, I dunno, linguistic experts even said that Shakespeare sounds better with an American accent.”

“Oh, Reginald, don’t give away my people’s deepest, darkest secret!”

“Actually, yeah, I think I remember hearing that somewhere, too.”

“Oh, now the secret’s out!”

“Sorry, Glenji, but you told me to interrupt you.”

“That I did. Yes. But it really is a struggle, being a man of art and a man of history, and being a man of two homelands that I love dearly, when these conflicting worlds that I inhabit don’t always see eye-to-eye.”

It actually does sound like a nice conversation to take part in, but surely your father would never allow it; if anything, you showing up would end the conversation immediately as your embarrassed father shoves you into the car and abandons the two strange gentlemen at the side of the road for fear of facing their judgment. You still can’t decide if you fear your father’s wrath more than you fear the mystery of these strangers. But if he were to be so embarrassed by you, then fuck it, let these people show their true colors and betray him. As long as they leave you and your mom out of it, you could be fine with such a turn of events. As long as you don’t wind up like him.

You find your fear subsiding as time keeps ticking by, and as suspicious as you find it that these people are keeping your parents at the side of your car for no immediately-constructive reason, you can’t reconcile that anxiety with the fact that it seems like it’s been well over an hour and these strangers haven’t done anything yet. As your nerve backs down, the voices outside quieten, and thus ends the first act of the dream.
“They just left the doors unlocked?” asks a newly-familiar voice. “Okay, works for me.”

The cabin lights have come on, and the open-door ding is dinging. You turn your head to the right, and despite two rows of seats obscuring your view, you can still make out a very large figure placing somebody in the passenger seat. The carrier is being strangely gentle with their subject. You even hear the zipping and clicking of the seatbelt. “There ya go, nice and snug.” Between the voice and the size, you feel you can reasonably deduce that this is the bear putting one of your parents in the seat.

He walks away from the door without closing it at first, then comes back to shut it. The dinging ceases.

“I know we’re coming back to there, Rob, I just wanted that noise to stop.” You have no idea who this Rob person is, but if they’re doing what you think they’re doing, he has a very fitting name. “You need help with that?” you hear through the open window, and it brings your attention to a faint struggling sound.

“Nmgyeh,” gasps a voice that doesn’t seem quite as familiar, but is still not completely alien. The struggling had now ended. “Now I get why pigs are fat; if I had to breathe through a nose like that, I wouldn’t be able to do any cardio exercise, either.” Except he says it more like eitheh; is this a different Brit or the same one? How many could there be in Southern Delaware at once?

“Or here’s a crazy thought: maybe that’s just a genetic thing that some species have?” There’s a shuffle and a faint grunt, as though the bear is picking something off the ground and finding it to be just the faintest of physical burdens. Meanwhile, you don’t dare move a muscle; you hardly dare to breathe lest they hear you through the open windows. “Survival traits from their primitive ancestors and such?”

“Oh, Johnny,” says the Brit playfully, “I can’t imagine what you could be talking about.”

“Well then, I guess you aren’t as smart of a fox as I thought you were.” The voice is similarly layered with friendly vitriol, and it sounds like it’s making his way around the back of the vehicle - - wait, he might be able to see you! But then again, the lights aren’t on right now. But then again, they will be when he opens another door. But then again, he has no reason to look into the back seat. But then again, he had no reason to be so gentle with your parents, either. But then again...

And what was this about a fox? Was this the third voice? And what happened to the pig? Now I get why pigs are fat, if I had to breathe through a nose like that... The fox wouldn’t have, what, shown up out of nowhere and knocked the pig out with his bear friend standing right there, assumed his spot in the dynamic duo, and then made a witty remark about pig noses apropos of nothing, would he have? If not, the next logical option would be...

“Well, I’m not exactly using my education, now am I?” You knew that pig looked unnaturally lumpy. But it didn’t click that such characters would have that level of dedication. That was one hell of a ruse. Whoever made that for him should be employed by the Nottingham Shakespeare Theatre Company; they could seriously use that person’s talents.

You’re so distracted by trying to put the pieces together that you run out of time to decide if you should risk making a noise in order to move yourself to a better hiding spot. The driver’s side door opens and the cabin is bathed with light. You can see just over the ridge of the bench seat in front of you that the bear is putting your father behind the wheel and buckling him up.
“I gotta say,” the bear grunts as he sets your father up, “for a first try, that worked quite well.”

“Oh, I agree wholeheartedly,” says the one called Rob. “It took a little longer than I would have liked, but all’s well that ends well.”

“And props to this guy here for just straight-up telling us that he wouldn’t have stopped if we weren’t rich people. Perfect. Take away any regrets I might have about this right off the bat.” The door shuts and it is dark again. “I can’t believe people like that actually exist.”

You take your chance and slide off the seats and down to the narrow strip of foot-space between the rows. Neither of them notice your shape shifting amid the darkness. You pray you don’t come to regret it, but you somehow feel that it doesn’t matter.

“I told you to believe me: rich people only trust other rich people.” The voices sound more distant and a bit muffled now that you’re on the floor, but you can still make out every syllable and sentence. “They don’t always trust other rich people, because they know themselves well, and they know they’d gladly screw another rich person to get richer. But the only people they would ever trust…”

“...Are filthy goddamn rich. And before I forget: that whole bit about being a blind guy who made eye contacts… Rob, I’m telling ya, you shoulda taken up acting, too.”

“Well something much more important was calling me, now, wouldn’t you agree, Johnny?”

“Yeah, I’d say so!”

“But it really is a shame he won’t remember any of it. He really could do with being taken down a peg. Do you think he even caught the subtle little jabs I threw at him?”

“Oh, well like you said, it doesn’t matter now. I kind of feel bad for the lady, though.”

“I’m mostly with you on that; she definitely seems like she’s trapped in a loveless marriage to some arsehole, but then again… it’s not our parents’ time. She could divorce him if she wanted.” A gasp. “Oh, but what if she couldn’t!? This man may be more evil than we could ever know, Little John!”

Did the Brit just call the American Little John? The American was the bear, right? And you’re certain there’s only two people here, right? You’re confused again. You just want to wake up.

“Hey, Robin, should we head out before... I dunno... before too long?” The Brit’s full name is Robin? Not Robert, but Robin? As in robbing? This just keeps getting more fantastic; surely you’re dreaming all of this. “I just feel like we’re pushing our luck standing here out in the open without our weapons.” Did he just say weapons? Yeah, you’re pretty sure you’re awake now.

“I’m going to say yes to that, mostly because I don’t want any reason to put that blasted mask back on. You get the trunk; I’ll take the dashboard. Then we can get out of here.”

Oh. Oh, shit.

You try to think of all the ways the bear can see you wherever you might be. From his high vantage point, he can probably see you over the seat, no problem, even if you are on the floor and not on the bench. You want to squeeze yourself under the seat, but if he’s going to do a really thorough job of looting, he’ll probably see right under the bench and find you in the gap. You think your best option is to squeeze under the second-row seats; that might minimize the chances of contact. He’d have to look at exactly the right angle to see you there. But can you fit?
The trunk pops open, and the passenger’s side door soon after. The cabin is bright and the bell is ringing. You hear the glove compartment pop open and a paw leafing through vehicle documents to find something good. In the other direction, you hear someone effortlessly lift anything of even slight value from the cargo bed and place it on the ground.

“You want a bicycle?”

“Can you carry it?”

“Is this even a question?”

More rustling.

“Interesting. They had a can of pepper spray up here, but they didn’t take it with them.”

“How about an empty cooler and, uh… one of those air pumps you plug into a car’s power slot?”

“I’m sure somebody can use it.”

“Sounds good to me… hey, I can carry a bunch of this shit in the cooler!”

“Now you’re using your head, Johnny!”

You hear a pop from the rear.

“What’s that sound?”

“I’m trying to get the spare-tire compartment open. Maybe they have an emergency cash-stash in here.”

“What, and they would trust that it wouldn’t get stolen by a mechanic or someone like that?”

You hear the lid slide off. “You know what? Hold that thought. A friend of my dad’s planted money in his car specifically as a trap for mechanics and people like that to run off with it. To sue them. The son of a bitch took pictures before he put it in the shop so he could prove it was there. Nobody ever fell for it, but he couldn’t have been the only one to try that. He couldn’t have been…”

The bear is now trying to wiggle out the spare tire. “And it also doubled as emergency cash.”

“Boy, it must be one strong hunch if you’re willing to bring up your fa--”

“Jackpot!”

The rustling in the front stops. The door shuts and the fox runs to the back.

“This I’ve got to see.” And shortly thereafter, from the back: “Johnny, my boy, you are on a roll tonight!”

“I mean, it ain’t that much, but I’ll take a solid stack of hundreds any day of the week.”

You knew nothing of money hiding in the spare tire compartment. That seems like something your parents would have told you. You just want to wake up.

“And it even has the little paper binding! Did they steal this from a bank?”

“Maybe we aren’t the only robbers out tonight, now are we?”
“Oh, Johnny, please don’t kill the mood by using that word.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir.” They share a chuckle. The bear continues, “So would you say that this was a successful operation?”

“Oh, yes, I’d say we can start packing up now.” The fox seems to be walking off as he says this.

The bear is humming some folksy tune to himself as he puts the tire back in and shoves the lid shut. The next thing you hear is a loud bump and a shout that borders on a growl. You don’t even notice when you slip up and let out the faintest of squeals.

“SON OF A FUCKING-- Wait, what was…?”

You feel a presence get closer. Your face is stuffed under the seat, facing the front, and all you can see as far as your periphery will go is dust, carpet, metal fasteners and shadows, but you can still somehow feel that there is an entity above and behind you.

“Ah-ha, well what have we here?” Nobody in their right mind could blame you for your poor judgment in this tense, unusual situation, wherein you completely forgot your tail was sticking out from under the bench and into the open light between the rows of seats.

“John! What’s wrong? What was that noise?”

“I hit my head on the roof…” You feel a paw reach down under the second row of seats, grabbing you around the waist and ever so gently pulling back and extracting you into the light. You’re paralyzed in both mind and body. “...and I think I scared the little one.”

The only thing you think you can do is shut your eyes. It’s not to shield them from any sudden light, as the bear is blocking most of it out anyway; it’s mostly in hopes that it will make these monsters go away.

“Really. This whole time…”

“An hour of shooting the shit with the guy, and he doesn’t mention once that he has a kid in the car. Did he even mention he had a kid? Did I miss something?”

“If you did, it slipped by me, too. Now that I think about it, the wife may have suggested they had a son, but I guess I thought she meant he was at home.”

“Shows how important their son is to them that they wouldn’t even--”

“Little John, I think you’re just scaring him more.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to.” He grabs you by the waist again and picks you up, placing you on the seat. He lets go and you feel one of them start to stroke your head, but you can’t tell which one is doing it. They’re only gently touching the edge of your fur and you can’t get a feel for how big their paw is. The stroking does not make you feel comforted, but it doesn’t make you feel discomforted either; you’re just sort of numb to it. “Don’t worry, buddy. I’m a bear that cares.”

“He’s likely thinking, oh, sure, you want me to believe that!”

“Well I’ll prove it to him!”

“Sh-sh-shh!” As earlier, the pig-fox pitches up his voice just a tinge, trying to seem more welcoming. “Hello there, young man. You needn’t be afraid of us. We didn’t hurt your parents, and
“Your father was a good man,” You don’t know whether you can believe them. But in a spot of desperation, you wish you could. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“‘Needn’t?’ You’re not in the old country anymore, Rob.”

“Johnny!” comes a stern whisper. The stroking stops.

“I’m just trying to do my part to make him feel more comfortable; I wouldn’t listen to a strange adult who talked funny. Can I give it another try?”

“How about we take turns?”

“Sounds fair.” The bear takes a deep breath, and then he makes his own attempt at sweetening his voice: “Hey, little guy. We’re sorry we had to do what we did. But we promise we didn’t hurt them. Not too bad.” You feel a thick finger with a blunt claw tickle your cheek a few times.

“What my friend here means is that they’ll be awake and fine in just a few hours.” He seems a bit frustrated with his associate’s choice of words, but you can respect the effort he’s taking to hide it. “What we did was something we had to do. The law might not say so, but we know in our hearts that we needed to.”

“And I know that sometimes I don’t feel too good about what we do, but…”

“...sometimes, you have to make a tough decision.”

“Be glad you’re still a kid, kid. Being a grown-up means you have to make a lot of tough decisions.”

“And while I am a bit afraid that the grown-ups in your life don’t have the courtesy to tell you that, I… well, I…” the Brit trails off. “I’m sorry, young sir, but… could you open your eyes? We just want to make sure you’re hearing us.”

“We want to meet you!”

“Very well-put, John.”

Thus begins a long series of mental curses. You curse your father for taking Sherwood Forest Road because he was too proud to take a toll road and too impatient to drive through construction. You curse the adults in your life who refused to believe the legends of the Forest were true. You curse the Delaware Department of Transportation for maintaining this road and not just swallowing their damned losses. You curse linear time itself for making it a statistical improbability that anybody’s going to come along that road at that precise nocturnal minute and see these two characters harassing you, let alone stop and save you. But you decide that this whole thing might end sooner if you just do what they say. Or with any luck, you might wake up.

You open your eyes to a sideways view of the seat in front of you. You can see two figures in your periphery to your left, but you aren’t ready to meet their gaze. You just keep looking forward.

“You see?” asks the fox. “Everything will be alright.”

“And as long as you’re a good guy, you’re safe with us.”

“You’re a good guy, aren’t you?”

“Rob, are we talking down to this kid?” the bear asks, quieter but you can still hear it clearly.
“You’re never too old to be comforted, Johnny.”

“I just mean -- what species is this kid exactly? -- for his size, how old would he be?”

“Well, that doesn’t necessarily determine anything, now does it? I mean, I was always large for my age, you were small, so--”

“Enough.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Great, now these two monsters are fighting. You close your eyes again, to disappear and to avoid embarrassing them.

“Oh, now you’ve scared him again.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Young man,” the Englishman says again in his voice reserved for your ears only, “we haven’t much time left. But we desperately want to tell you something--”

“--a little secret your parents won’t tell you.”

“Precisely! If you would please just grant us a moment of your attention, we can tell you something that will change your life--”

“--for the best!”

“--and we’ll be on our way.”

They aren’t taking no for an answer.

It is indeed a fox, a red fox with a deep red coat and a pearly white muzzle melting from his snout. Something about his facial appearance just sort of agrees with the idea that he’s British; something about his eyes, you think. The peanut-butter-brown bear is at once next to him and above him; his hat and wig and moustache are gone, and the hair on the back of his head seems to be glowing from the cabin light it’s blocking out, almost like the silver lining on a cloud in front of the sun. Laying there on the bench seat, looking up at these warm faces looking down upon you, you feel like a baby in a crib, right at the moment when sapience first materializes in your mind, looking up at the adults admiring you from above, and although you can’t put into words who they are, you somehow understand that they are looking out for you and want what’s best for you.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, young one. My name is Robert, but my everybody calls me Robin. Robin Hood, of Loxley in South Yorkshire -- that’s in England, if you couldn’t tell! And this is one of my closest friends in all the world; he’s called Little John. He might be scary to bad people, but he can be a big soft teddy bear when he’s your friend.”

“But you can call us Johnny and Rob, because you’re our friend now.”

“Indeed you are. What are you called, young man?”

And you simply stare at them. Speaking does not seem like something you can do even if you wanted to.

“Uh, what the British guy means is, what’s your name?”
A moment passes.

“I don’t think lexicon is the issue here, Johnny. But listen…” the fox gives you his undivided attention. “We took some time to get to know your mother and father. And we’re afraid that they might not be the best people in the world. That’s why we had to do what we did to them.”

“And we don’t think that they think they’re bad people, necessarily,” the bear chimes in, “maybe they just don’t know how to be good.”

“That’s quite right! But here’s the good news, young sir: you don’t have to be like them.”

The two of them just gaze gently down upon you, almost fighting for your eye contact. You look into the eyes of the fox for just a moment, then the bear’s, and then you split the difference and stare at the space between their pairs of eyes, hoping neither will be offended.

“You don’t have to be like them,” the fox continues. “You can be good. You can be a good guy. You don’t have to take advantage of people to get ahead in the world; you can do it just by being a good person.” He takes a deep breath. “You don’t have to be like them.”

“Sometimes we aren’t even sure if we’re the best we can be,” the bear adds, “But we do our best and we try to get better. And all we can ask of you, kiddo, is that you understand that we’re trying to be the best that we can be, and that you try to be the best you can be, too.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Heh, this is why we’re friends.”

“And you’re our friend, too, now, young man. As long as you always do what you truly believe is right, and care for your fellow man, and never make it harder for those who have it hard enough—”

“--then you’ll be our friend.”

“And if anybody should ever hate you for being our friend… well…”

“They’ll have to answer to us.”

“They won’t be Little John’s friend.”

“Damn straight they won’t.”

They keep the smiles going and you have no idea what to do. You have no idea of what you can do. But it isn’t them you fear anymore. What you fear is the confusion. What you fear is that you still can’t tell if this is real.

“Now, we need you to do us a massive favor. Is that alright?”

“In exchange for being our friend.”

“When your parents wake up, or when someone comes to see if you’re alright… don’t tell them about us. Just keep our friendship our little secret, alright? Until it’s safe. Can you do that for us?”

You do nothing but breathe.

“Come now, my young friend,” the fox implores you, “this is the first step to being a good person.”

“You’re our friend right?”
You have to say something. You don’t know why exactly, but you feel like you have to. Maybe opening your eyes didn’t get them to go away, and maybe this won’t either; maybe this is just the next step in a series of trials and tribulations that these strangers will put you through before they leave you alone. But in the state you are in, nothing is being solved. Therefore something must change.

“Martin.”

“Wh-- what was that?”

“...Martin.”

“Hey there, Martin.”

“Master Martin. Martin von Bartonschmeer, yes? Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Hey, Martin, how old are you? Rob and I were wondering.”

“...”

“You may be right, Little John; his voice-- I think he’s a bit older than we thought.”

“Than you thought.”

“Oh, hush, Johnny… Martin, my friend… can you keep us your little secret?”

“...”

“Martin?”

“Martin.”

“What was that?”

“...”

“Maybe he’s retarded.”

“Oh, don’t be so boorish, Johnny.”

“I know you’re thinking it, too.”

“I’m sure he’s just terrified. Courage and cowardice exist in all of us. I just think they’re raging inside of him right now.”

“And I’m with you on that, that’s probably what’s goin’ on, but has the thought not crossed your mind?”

“...”

“Well… We didn’t hurt you, Martin. Please don’t hurt us.”

“Do the right thing, Martin, I know you can do it.”

“Maybe we’ll see you again, Martin.”

“Maybe we will. I hope we will.”
They duck out and start to close the trunk lid, but the bear stops it halfway down.

“Hey, Rob, should we stick around until someone comes by to help him?”

“I would love to, Johnny, but what if the police get here first?”

The bear makes one strong guffaw, but then curtly opens the trunk all the way again and looks toward your huddled mass. “Just to clear the air, kid, not all cops are bad, but, uh, the high-ranking officials of all the police departments in this area, are pure fucking evil.” He ducks his head back out and regards the fox. “Oh, don’t give me that look. You know I have family that’re--”

“I don’t disagree, John, I just don’t think you needed to clarify that.”

“And you didn’t need to pet the kid like a cockatoo. Didn’t stop ya.”

“It’s called connecting, Little John.”

“Well it’s not too late to… y’know… dose him too if you think this all didn’t go so well.”

“No, no, I have faith in my methods… I’ll tell you what: we’ll keep watch after him, but… from afar.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan.”

“Splendid. Close the trunk and we’ll stake out a spot. And send Martin my regards one last time.”

The bear comes back to the trunk door and puts a paw on it. “G’night, Marty.” Then the darkness returns.

***

You finally awaken.

The sun is bleeding through the sieves between eastern tree branches. You hear sounds. You can’t tell what they are, but you can tell that they are hurried, not quite frantic yet but getting there. Bodies surround the SUV. Men in uniform; a few women in the mix, too. A few different uniforms. One type of uniform tends to your parents, who are beginning to murmur uncomfortably. Another type scour the area surrounding the vehicle, looking for clues to some great mystery. The last type of uniform is focused on you.

Everything is where it would have been if it happened as you thought it did. But you can’t fathom that it would have. You can’t imagine that your father would pull over and help complete strangers and your mother’s behest. You can’t imagine that your mother would fall victim to trickery as easily as your father. You can’t imagine that there would be modern-day highwaymen wandering a shrouded wood on the off chance that they would come upon someone so easily buttered up by disingenuous flattery, at which point they would patiently wait upwards of an hour for their victims to fall under their spell, and then run off with all of the loot they could gather, physically leaving on their feet with their spoils carried literally under their arms, nothing more sophisticated than that -- but not before taking a solid few minutes to stop everything and impart their own personal wisdom on a child whom they only know as the bloodkin of their enemy. Such characters would have to either be masters of their craft or wizards who could manipulate the cosmic forces of fortune itself. Or hell, they might be gods. But you can imagine that your parents simply act differently when they think you aren’t aware; there are clearly elements about them that they do not trust you with, and their true selves may be on that list. And while you don’t mean to stereotype, you can imagine that between a fox’s charm and a bear’s insistence, that combination
could persuade anyone.

They ask you what happened. You tell them that you don’t know whether it was all a dream.

***

_If on a summer’s night a traveler, outside the city of Nottingham, cavalier in attitude and vainglorious in disposition, should find himself approached by strangers who can tell wondrous tales and compel one to act against one’s better judgment, he had best not be a rich man, lest he be stripped of all his possessions and all his dignity; but if a traveler should be a poor man, he need have no fear, for he and all those like him shall find themselves under the sworn protection of the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest._

Or so say the children.

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* Jeez, that wasn’t supposed to be that long, but when you get rolling, sometimes you just can’t stop. Anyway, if so far this has provoked any strong reactions in you -- if you loved it, if you hated it, if it disoriented you on a spiritual level -- let me know. I need to know what my writing does in people. And I know that this is doomed to be fated as the king of all niche crossovers, but if you want to spread the word, I will be indebted to you (hey, if I were good at self-promotion, I probably wouldn’t have time to write this thing, now would I?). But as long as there’s one person reading this insanity, I’ll keep chugging. Peace and love. -Dobanochi
Merry Men in Trees

Chapter Summary

Two infamous outlaws find themselves in a rare moment of conflict and weakness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3 “Merry Men in Trees”

“Goddammit, Martin squealed on us!”

If there were, hypothetically, anybody in the vicinity of Sherwood Forest that morning who, unbeknownst to anybody outside themselves and possibly their inner circle, was hypothetically engaging in a moderately-to-severely illegal activity or conspiracy to do so, and this hypothetical person heard the very real non-hypothetical police cars and helicopters enclosing on the area from seemingly all directions, and this person who was hypothetically doing naughty things in a private venue assured themselves that the sirens could not be coming for themselves and their hypothetical/theoretical cohort on the grounds that there was no plausible way for the authorities to become privy to such well-guarded information of illicit activities, but then this hypothetical person was suddenly overcome with doubt regarding their security from retributionary punishment, the doubt manifesting itself as either an internal spark of dismay or a paranoid lament from one of their co-conspirators (whom it should be noted may [like this entire scenario] have never existed) itself complemented by a theoretical theory on how the authorities may have gained awareness of the hypothetical shady operation, such a hypothetical theory not even necessarily being likely or unlikely but in some hypothetical chain of events indeed possible, if such a person -- and may it be reiterated that this is all purely hypothetical -- if such a person existed, even if they were a fourteen-year-old amateur-cum-aspiring con-artist fox-boy who would not have such a destructive Napoleon complex if he were to physically embody the size of his megalomania and who had a long and documented track record of being wrong about a lot of things, even if heaven forbid such a hypothetical wretched soul were to actually exist, then such a person should really listen to their gut.

Because the police were not searching for any small-time schemers that Saturday morning. Instead, they were in pursuit of two costumed characters who presently were running through the forest, jumping fences, dodging trees, and trying to get away, these characters all the while contemplating nothing but escape, and how usually by now they would have made it, but the helicopters were certainly a curveball they were not expecting to be thrown.

They weren’t simply running aimlessly in hopes of getting the cops off their tails. The plan was to reach one specific destination before any ground units caught sight of them. If they could get even close to that spot, they would be in a part of the forest where the canopy was so thick that the helicopters above probably wouldn’t be able to catch even a glimpse of them, and they’d be home free, hiding in plain sight. Or at least they hoped that it would work out that way; they really were novices when it came to dealing with helicopters, but it was nothing that a little quick thinking and a leap of faith couldn’t beat.

“Alright, Johnny!” the fox panted, “How well do you know this forest?” He was by no means out
of shape and was certainly no stranger to making a hasty exit, but he was pushing himself to run at a speed that would find anybody having difficulty speaking and breathing concurrently; the greater-than-usual number of pursuants had in equal parts spooked, invigorated, and flattered him.

“Uh, pr--” the bear sputtered, having an even harder time multitasking with his respiratory system, “Pretty good…”

“Excellent! Then… think of… think of a line of trees… thick trees!... Between here and… and the Major Oak!”

“A li-- a line of… trees?”

“Don’t waste your breath, Johnny! Just… just run with me! And don’t… don’t let the choppers see you!”

The world seemed to squeeze in on them. The roar of the helicopters faded in and out as they zoomed by in lines overhead, not knowing that their suspects were right under their noses. Far-off yelling and walkie-talkie chatter and squeaks seemed to be converging on them from all directions. And as they drew closer and closer to the big oak tree at the heart of the forest, the canopy upon which they relied for shelter just started to feel suffocating.

And that was when they saw it. The clearing that served as their own backyard, punctuated by one of the largest trees either of them had ever seen outside of a primeval jungle. Its trunk was wide enough for them to make a cavity to hold all their worldly possessions. Its branches were thick enough to support the weight of very large mammals who might need to hide in a pinch. Its canopy was expansive enough to keep them cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Its realm was large enough to call home.

The tree’s one major flaw, however, was that it would stick out like a sore thumb in the heretofore unheard-of event of an unwelcome outsider trekking deep enough into the dizzying and disorienting wildwood and happening upon it by sheer dumb luck. Everything about it and its immediate surroundings screamed that it was somebody’s camp, and few could see it and not correctly deduce that that was the case. Honestly, it was probably the firepit that gave it away; Robin, John and company had never found a good way to conceal it without permanently ruining it, and after years of not coming even close to getting caught at their own home base, they eventually stopped trying.

When Little John saw them, he nearly let out a yelp squeaker than the one he’d heard Robin make that one time a few years ago when he’d gotten his tail caught in a revolving door; poor Robin had been shown in a rare moment of weakness then, and was again now that his eyes, which always did prefer the nighttime to that of the dawn, failed to register that there were two uniformed men making their way through the trees on the other side of the clearing.

Little John simply had too much inertia going for him to stop soon enough, so he collapsed his knees and slid to a halt like a baseball player sliding feet-first into second. Robin was running ahead of him, and when he heard the sound of dirt and turf swishing at his backside, his first thought was that John had tripped on something and fell forward so hard and with so much speed that he hydroplaned on the dewy grass.

“Little John!” Robin cried out as he tried to kill his own inertia by twisting his body backward and kicking his knees progressively higher so he wouldn’t make any more forward progress.

“Shhh!” Little John pointed to the figures through the trees. “Don’t you see them?”
Robin squinted and tried to look for any motion he could sense. It took a second, but he did soon notice what his friend was talking about. “It’s the Boys!”

“No shit, ya blind bat,” Little John grumbled as he got himself up. “C’mon, we gotta pick a different tree to climb.” He looked up at the one right next to him. “This one look good?”

“I can climb it if you can!” Robin wasted no time making his way up. “Hurry!”

“I’m not a fucking elephant, Rob,” Little John barked; after feeling like the little rich kid from the SUV had betrayed him, he wasn’t in the mood for much of anything. He began inching his own way up. But while luck might have screwed them over with the oak tree, it gave them a little back when a helicopter passed over again, ensuring that the two officers wouldn’t hear the grumbling grizzly grunting just a short ways-away.

The boys made themselves a nice little makeshift perch in the tree, Robin standing on one branch and holding onto another one at chest-level -- he would have much preferred to sit down for the first time in awhile, but he stayed on his feet just in case he needed a quick escape -- and Little John hugging the base of the tree in the biggest gap between branches he could find. They were still well below the top of the tree, so the helicopters should have been none the wiser, and high up enough off the ground that somebody would really have to be craning their neck at the exact right angle in the exact right spot to snuff them out.

“Can you see them from up there?” John asked.

“Ah… not as well as I’d like, but as long as they can’t see us, I won’t be complaining. Are you sturdy down there?”

“I can stay here for awhile, but I can’t stay here forever.”

“I’ve got a nasty feeling that we’re going to be here a little more than awhile and just shy of forever.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Alright, but if I’m not saying anything, assume there’s a good reason I’m being quiet.”

“Roger.”

And so the stake-out began in earnest. Robin watched as the two officers entered the sphere of sanctuary, visibly astounded by their discovery before they had even found the good stuff. They seemed enthralled by how nature had set one enormous tree in this precise spot and let nothing but grass and weeds grow in the dirt encircling it, forming an almost perfect circumference of space; but the firepit gave away that there was a mammalian connection to this place. The two officers, a light-gray rhino and an black-gray wolf who were wearing the blue and black of policial laymen, walked slowly around the tree, as if overcome by a sudden awareness that they were in the open in enemy territory and that spying eyes might be watching their every move. They weren’t talking to one another, but it was not immediately clear whether this was due to them having nothing to say, or their fears of being overheard.

“Curses, I knew I should have reset that trap!” the fox muttered to himself.

“Oh, the only person who ever got caught in that net was you when you were sloshed like I’d never seen before.”

Robin didn’t say a word. He was too busy keeping focus to even entertain the idea of being
mortified.

“That was a fun nigh--”

“Shhh! I think they’re about to find-- oh, no…”

Yes, they had found it. The little notch that had started life as a tiny knot hole when the Merry Men sawed off the lowest branch and was soon carved into a cubby hole where the bandits kept their life supplies. The wolf turned on his flashlight and illuminated the cavity as the rhino fished around with his billy club; Robin couldn’t see what they saw from his angle, but the looks on their faces showed that they were astounded to find clothes, bedsheets, cookery, toiletries, and anything else a civilized person would have when they just so happened to be living in the forest -- or at least it contained all that which could fit in the bountiful base of the tree. As spacious as it was, it still couldn’t fit, say, a mattress or a sophisticated plumbing system.

“Huh. You’d think they’d never seen an outlaw’s camp before.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“They’ve got a look on their faces like they just opened a treasure chest.”

“They must be new to the force. I mean, most cops would probably’ve seen something similar, like a bums’ hideout, right?”

“Or maybe they’re just astounded that the legends are true.”

“Oh don’t get so big-headed, Rob.”

“As if I could ever get a bigger head than yours.”

“Jealous?”

“Pshaw. Hardly.”

The officers were clearly being careful not to touch what they’d found, for they had no idea where it had been. They kept on digging deeper and deeper with their flashlight and baton, their arms almost entirely swallowed by the hole and their heads fighting for space to see inside, their mouths agape as they took in the small labyrinth that had opened up before them.

“Come on, get out of there!” Robin grumbled.

“They’re still in there?”

“Like you said, I wish they’d just write it off as some homeless people’s camp and leave us alone.”

Eventually, the two officers grew disinterested in fishing any further into the cache of conveniences, and they retracted themselves from it. They put their flashlight and baton back on their respective belts and started conversing with each other, but they were two far away for Robin and John to hear anything.

“Alright, they’re discussing something, but I can’t make out a word of what they’re saying. I’m hoping they just decide that it’s nondescript and they walk away.”

“We both want them to decide it’s nondescript and just walk away; we’ve already discussed this.”

“Well forgive me for my sins, Johnny, I’m a bit tense right now.”
“You’re not the one whose arms and legs are chafing like hell, now are ya?”

At this point, Robin felt the need to look down to make sure his partner was holding up well. “Are you sure you can hang on there?”

“My ancestors were lumberjacks; we know how to hang on in a tree.”

Robin just sighed in exasperation. “If you say so—”

That was when the both of them heard a voice that was strikingly familiar despite being coated with feedback and static.

“Where the hell were you two!?”

Robin looked back up at the officers, and John tried to make out what he could through the leaves and branches. The two officers were looking down at the walkie-talkie in the wolf’s hand.

“Oh, not this son of a bitch again,” Little John moaned. “How is he still in power?”

“Big-city politics is a soap opera that even my grandmother would find poorly-written and overwrought with vindictiveness.”

Little John didn’t have much to say about that.

“Why did you turn your radios off!??” hollered the man with a Southern accent that could make Little John sound like he was a New Yorker, and a high-pitched snarl on certain syllables that could make Robin sound like he was a lounge singer.

Little John even felt the need to ask, “Jeez, how can anybody take orders from a voice like that?”

The two officers were murmuring their answers especially quietly, and the Merry Men still couldn’t make out a single syllable that was coming out of their mouths, but the hothead on the other end of the frequency was hollering his head off so that nothing he said was left up to to ambiguity.

“Why were you trying to be quiet!?”

“Murmur murmur murmur.”

“Then you should have called for backup, shouldn’tja have!?”

“Murmur murmur murmur.”

“Just tell me where you are and stay put until we find you!”

“Murmur murmur murmur.”

“Well then figure out where you are, and tell me!”

“Murmur murmur murmur.”

“Now, you made a point earlier that you have family members in law enforcement; tell me, why would anybody subject themselves to abuse like this?”

“I don’t think this kind of behavior is normal. At least… at least not this bad. Police chiefs are hardasses, but they’re not always hard assholes.”
“Alright, now stay the fuck there until we find you and we’ll go from there!”

“Yes, but how does the Nottingham P. D. retain any of its new members in an environment like this?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Job security? Sucking it up to serve the greater good? Fu-- I dunno, maybe they’d never live it down if they quit… Rob, you heard me say I’m related to cops, not that I was one, right? I don’t know their ways inside and out.”

“Yes, but you probably still know more about them than I do.”

“Christ Almighty, sometimes I wonder if you ever met a blue-collar person before you came over here.”

“We were all fools in our past, Johnny. And over there, we use the term working class.”

“Oh, well excuse me, m’lord…”

And now it was time to test how good they were at waiting.

***

Robin was growing bored watching the two officers mill about by the Major Oak, themselves clearly bored out of their minds. He was almost relieved when he heard that infernal voice again.

“What the fuck were you two idiots doing!?”

A few birds squawked and ejected themselves from the trees when that scratchy voice pierced the silence. Little John, who had almost fallen asleep in his spot trying to count the individual lines in the bark in front of his face to kill time, was stirred back into reality with this unwelcome racket.

“God, dammi--! I-I’m back, Rob… what did I miss?”

“Nothing much. Chief Woodland’s grand entrance.”

“No, I don’t think I missed that.”

The City of Nottingham Chief of Police emerged from the density of the forest into the clearing, from around the same spot as the two officers before him did, and the slovenly gray wolf was followed by a few more officers in tow. The two who awaited him looked at once nervous and annoyed.

“I’m amazed he didn’t get stuck between a couple trees,” Robin laughed to himself.

To his credit, Ward Woodland was an imposing figure before you got to know him and pieced together how incompetent he was. The first time he had laid eyes on him, Robin had wondered whether a wolf-bear hybrid could exist. The guy was freakishly large in every dimension, but not so flatteringly so on the x- and z-axes. Yes, he was roughly a foot taller than the average wolf, and while a bear like Little John was still comfortably taller by at least a head, when John’s posture was poor (as a bear’s posture often is, especially when they spend extended amounts of time hanging out with shorter creatures) and Woodland was standing fully upright, the height gap seemed a lot lesser; but Woodland’s posture was typically even worse, forward-leaning more severely than Little John did, and burdened by more dead weight on his person than John had, proportionately speaking. There was one altercation in the distant past where the boys got in close quarters with a stranger who, judging by appearance, simply must have been a pre-Force Ward,
since they’d never seen before or since another person who looked and sounded even remotely like him; suffice it to say that that altercation began with Robin secretly freaking out about the sheer volume of this stranger when he caught a glimpse of him where the wolf was standing closer to him than Little John was and something about the angle and the optical distance and the ambient lighting and everybody’s posture all being just right made it seem like this wolf was the exact same size and shape as the damn grizzly bear right next to him and that sent a shiver down his spine, but suffice it to say that the altercation ended with Little John insisting that the stranger was a lot lighter than he looked by virtue of not having any muscle mass. Surely it must have been Ward that day so many years ago, who has since become their most frequently-appearing enemy short of the Prince Mayor himself; it really is a small world after all, evidently. Actually, between being a disproportionately tall member of a canid species and having a rather ursine physique, one might note that Woodland looked like a hybrid of Robin and John, quite fitting for their foil.

“So what the hell have we here?” Chief Woodland asked in a way that suggested he was still livid with his officers but losing the energy to express it.

“A campsite, Chief,” the smaller black wolf answered. “It looks pretty permanently set up, but obviously nobody’s around right now.”

“At least we hope not,” the rhino interjected. “That’s why we killed the radios.”

“Because you thought you might be bein’ watched,” Woodland finished.

“By highly-skilled criminals, yes. Exactly,” the rhino said.

“**Hm. Impressive deduction skills, Edward!**” Robin chuckled. He wasn’t aware of the eccentric way Chief Woodland’s first name was spelled.

“And Jesse and I were talking,” the rhino continued, “this could be their camp, or this could just be where some bums live.”

“Oh, c’mon, Rob, this guy might be a dumb son of a bitch, but I don’t think he’s completely stupid,” Little John retorted.

“Or maybe this place is abandoned and none of this matters,” said Officer Jesse Surname-Unknown.

“Are you just standing up for your people, Johnny?” Robin whispered with a smirk.

“But there’s a firepit that looks pretty recently-used, and in the tree there’s a hole full of clothes and, like, dishes and cups and things like that. We’re thinking somebody’s still here, Chief.” Jesse the Wolf was standing as straight as possible so as not to look intimidated by his hulking commander who against all logic belonged to his same species.

“‘My people,’ what’s that supposed to--!?” Little John stopped himself, knowing that an argument would be a waste of time and a risk of security. “I’m just saying, Rob... Even a stupid S.O.B. like him probably has flashes of brilliance, and it might bite us in the ass one day. You know, broken clocks. I guess... what I’m trying to say is nobody likes to be underestimated. You know, in a weird way, I feel like I can relate to him.”

Woodland started moving around the campsite with a suspicious eye, trying to see if there was anything his boys missed. He started over to the firepit and leaned over as far as he could to get a close-up look at it. All the while, Jesse and the rhino looked like they were debating whether they should argue their case further or just acquiesce, while the other two officers who got dragged
along, a spotted jaguar and a hippopotamus, kept glancing at one another every two seconds as if exchanging some witty nonverbal banter about how there was absolutely no reason for them to be there.

“And you don’t just mean you relate to him because you buy your clothes from the same aisle in the store?”

Chief Woodland stood up from the firepit and walked off, not giving any hints about whether he found it to be credible evidence. He meandered his way toward the tree’s cavity while looking all around the space, to see what he could see.

“And those stumps… Maybe someone’s been using them for chairs?” Woodland surmised.

“Hm! Didn’t even think about that one, Chief,” praised Jesse.

“Ya see, what I tell ya?” ribbed Little John.

Finally, the wolf’s quirky bouncy-waddle-motion brought him to the hole in the tree.

“And what did you say you found in here?”

“Everything, Chief.”

“We didn’t touch it with our hands so we wouldn’t get prints on th--”

But Ward Woodland was not a wolf willing to wait. He stuck his arm into the hole and pulled out the first thing he grabbed, which was a ratty old piece of cloth.

“What’s this?”

“I… think that’s a hand-towel, Chief.”

“He would know if washed his hands when he was done in the loo.”

“I swear, you’ve been such a smart-ass tonight.”

“What can I say? The von Bartonschmeers gave me so much material to work with, and now I’m finding inspiration everywhere.”

The next thing that Woodland pulled out was polo shirt, a little on the small side, a shade of green that looked like it was biased a tinge toward yellow. “Now we’re gettin’ somewhere.”

“Oh, don’t you get my shirt dirty, I just had that washed.”

“You’re welcome for that…”

Woodland held up the shirt to get a better idea of its size. “What kind of person would wear this shirt?”

“Uh… a white-collar work--”

“No, you idiot, I meant what species! Because the kid in the van said he saw a fox with a brown bear.”

“I toldja Martin squealed on us.”
“Oh, Johnny, I just didn’t want to believe you. But perhaps we can’t blame him.”

“I offered to drug him; you said no…”

“Now this can’t be the bear’s shirt, but is this fox sized? It looks kind of bigger than I’d think. How big are foxes usually? They’re up to like…” Woodland put out a hand and started moving it up and down to suggest a height range, but he was moving it all the way down and then back up to the level of his forearms and back down and up and down again, so he really wasn’t helping anybody visualize anything other than his own confusion. He finally stopped moving his hand around gut-level and proposed, “Hereabouts?” He grabbed the shirt with both hands and looked down at it pensively for a second, then tossed it to the ground. “Well they all look pretty small from up here, now don’t they?”

Everybody who heard that either rolled their eyes or really, really wanted to.

“Perhaps there’s more than two of them, Chief?”

“That’s a damn good point, kid!” Woodland went exploring in the hole again, and this time pulled out a huge jacket; this one was a darker shade of green. It seemed to be a lighter springtime or autumnal jacket, but the sleeves were cut off. “Now this is bear-sized!”

“He has my jacket, doesn’t he?”

“That he does.”

Then for a little something unexpected: Woodland proceeded to put on the jacket. All four of the officers were visibly confused and perhaps a tad repulsed, but they all knew that there wasn’t going to be any way to get through to him.

“Oh, come now, Edward, you don’t know where that thing’s been.”

“Wait, what’s he doing?”

“Trying your jacket on for size.”

“What?!”

“Same aisle of the store. I called it.”

“If he does something to it, I’m--!”

“No, you won’t. You’re going to stay here and keep covered.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

The jacket was mostly well-fitting on him, being a bit long in the back but using the extra space well in the front. The bottom of the jacket looked like it was going up at a forty-five-degree angle from back to front.

“Yeah, I’d say this is about the right size,” the grotesque wolf concluded as he began to take it off. “Well, the descriptions match the clues here, I’d say. Whoever left here, left here quick. They’ll be back. Let’s try around sunset to see if we can catch them.”

“So we’re coming back here tonight, Chief?”

“Yup. Even if it is just a bunch of bums, we can bag ‘em for vagrancy. But I don’t think this is just
a bunch of bums.”

“Yessir, Chief.”

“Y’know,” Woodland pondered, “we really oughta have some waste management people out here to clean up this litter, but then the fuckers might just move on… So instead!”

The ending to that sentence fragment was a demonstration of passion. Chief Woodland returned to the hole and simply started pulling out everything he could reach and dispersing it all over the ground without prejudice. Most things landed harmlessly, but some metalware clanged and some dishes cracked and chipped, and the chief of police successfully achieved his goal of thoroughly inconveniencing his sworn enemies.

“What’s he doing now!?”

“I swear this man was raised in a barn.”

“Is he just throwing our shit everywhere?”

“As much as he can.”

“I really just want to kick this guy’s ass.”

“And I want to watch that happen. But in times like these, we must restrain ourselves for our long-term goals.”

“Can you stop talking like a philosopher? I’m really not in the mood.”

“Sorry, Johnny, old habits are hard to break I suppose.”

Little John wanted to remark on the fact that Robin’s overeducated ass used suppose instead of guess, but he bit his tongue. He didn’t need any more conflict in this spot he was in. An evil man was making a lame but spirited attempt to ruin their day, his closest friend in the world was seriously getting on his nerves, he was stuck in a tree losing the feeling in his limbs, and he was starting to get hungry. He didn’t think he was in hell, but the idea that he was in purgatory wasn’t completely off the table.

Chief Woodland stopped grabbing into the hole and put his hand up on the tree to take a breather. He looked around and the beautiful little mess he had made; he hadn’t depleted the contents of the hole, but he had made a pretty good dent into it.

“Welp, I think my job here is about done.”

“So, Chief, just so we understand you right… we’re doing this in order to…?”

“To let ‘em know we know they’re here! Even if they aren’t here when we come back, we’ll know if they’ve been back because they’d’ve cleaned their stuff up. Genius, ain’t it?”

“So we’re just going to stop searching for them, Chief?”

“For now,” Woodland affirmed as he kicked a can of beans at the tree, popping the can open on impact. He smiled at this. “I don’t hate these scoundrels because they’re stupid; I hate them because they’re smart, but they think I’m stupid. They think that we’re stupid!”

“Edward, you flatter me.”
“Goddamn, I’m hungry.”

“They know that we ain’t found them for almost seven years, we ain’t gonna find them in seven minutes. But now we got us a harder lead than we ever had. We’ll find ‘em soon. But let’s let ‘em get comfortable for just a li’l bit longer before they move into their new prison cells.”

The four officers seemed to accept this as a good excuse to get the hell out of this forest. The Chief extracted his walkie-talkie as he lead the way out of the clearing back the way they came in from.

“Alright, boys, kill the helicopters. They got away for now, but we’ll get ‘em soon. Everybody back to your patrols and precincts.”

The wolf turned his back to the watchful eyes and his subordinates took one last gander around the space, confused about the plan but not caring enough to risk it, before following him out.

Robin breathed a sigh of relief and spoke in something more than a whisper for the first time in almost an hour. “Finally, they’re--"

Grrrbrgrbrbbrirrrgggh.

The officers stopped in their tracks and turned to face the noise behind them. Robin’s blood ran cold. Little John just looked down shamefully at his stomach.

“I told you I was hungry.”

“Little John, you may have just doomed us all.”

“What the hell was that noise!” exclaimed the Chief. “Are there gators in this swamp?”

“I… wouldn’t call this much of a swamp, Chief.”

“I think we’re too far north, aren’t we?”

“I mean it’s mucky in some parts, but--”

“Fuck this, I’m getting out of here!” And that was how Chief Ward Woodland made his exit.

The four officers behind him kept their eyes peeled, glancing in every direction and keeping a hand on their guns, but they hastily followed all the same.

And then there were only the two Merry Men of Sherwood Forest.

Robin Hood was stunned. “Amazing,” was all he could think to say.

“Can we go down now? My arms are falling asleep. And the rest of my body is falling asleep, too. We’ve been up all night, ain’t we?”

“Let’s give them a few more minutes just to make sure the coast is clear. And why didn’t you just eat something before we went hunting? Like you’ve always done?”

“Because honestly I’m still spooked by the Leftover Pizza Incident from a few weeks b--”

“Okay! Okay. I understand your point. You don’t need to remind me of that.”

“I’m just saying, something a lot grosser could have--”
“John, We can talk about something else while we wait.”

“Alright then.”

Robin and John then proceeded to exchange exactly zero words for the next seventeen excruciating seconds before Little John had a thought he believed was powerful enough to break the thick silence:

“Y’know, Rob, there actually has been something on my mind.”

“Is it something less unpleasant this time?”

“Well… I guess it all depends on what conclusion you draw from it.”

“Oh, hell’s bells, if I can handle dozens of near-death experiences in half a decade, I can probably handle whatever you want to talk about.”

“Now that’s more like the Rob I know. So… you, uh… you remember that one time, awhile back, I forget what we were running from, but we were running from something just like today, and we wound up in a tree just like this, and…”

“I remember a few times like that.”

“Yeah, but do you remember after we had a minute to mellow out, we were just hanging out there in the tree, talking about life, and… I thought, hey, I’ve got a tough question on my mind, and I’m here with one of my closest buds in the world, probably one of the smartest guys I know, and as long as there’s nobody else around to judge me—”

“It was just the two of us?”

“Yeah, I remember it was just the two of us, but… um…” Little John wished he had paid more attention to his friend’s vast vocabulary so that maybe he could have learned some fancy words himself to find a delicate way to bring up some not-so-delicate details. “I think I remember that it wasn’t really, uh, normal yet for it to just be the two of us.”

“…I see.”

“I’m sorry, Rob, I couldn’t think of a better—”

“It’s alright, John, the past can’t hurt me now.”

“Rob—”

“Continue, Johnny, I’m on the edge of my seat seeing where this is going. I don’t think I remember this conversation we had quite yet.”

“…I asked you, ‘Hey, Rob, are we the good guys, or are we the bad guys?’”

“I remember!”

“You remember?”

“I do! I remember you asking that and me thinking, what kind of question is that?”

“And that’s what I was afraid of.”
“...What do you mean?”

“I think I mentioned something about our whole ‘rob from the rich to give from the poor’ thing, because I remember you just responded with your little ‘Oh, silly Johnny, rob is such a dirty word, we’re just borrowing from people who can afford it.’”

“I remember that! And I still think that the only use for those three letters should be when a very close friend calls me by my--”

“Yes. Right. B-but tell me, now it’s bugging me -- do you still have apprehensi--”

“Robin, cut it out, that’s not my question anymore. I’ve got a better question now.”

“Ah. Alright. Well… what can I answer for you?”

“Son of a bitch, now I forgot.”

“Maybe it’ll come back to you.”

“It better! I’ve been thinking about it for forever now, and now I can’t make a sentence out of it.”

Robin just looked morosely down at his friend while Little John stared determinedly into space thinking about what it was he wanted to say.

“...We were soaking wet,” Robin recalled.

“What?”

“I’m starting to remember that exchange of ours; I could have sworn we were wet for some reason.”

“...We bumped each other into the river!”

“We did?”

“Yeah, on the log bridge!”

“On a log… Yeah, we did! A-and I think I remember that it was because we were joking around and being all gentlemanly to make up for that time that we first met, and--”

“We both thought the other was gonna go first!”

“Precisely! And we were being so silly and chipper that we didn’t even look where we were going.”
“There ya go!”

“This… heh, this is amazing, Johnny; it’s all flooding in at once. And then we had to get out of the river because a cop saw us and started shooting at us, and… and we got out of the tree when we saw a motorcade for the Prince Mayor and we just had to make ourselves pretty and loot him.”

“What was he even doing in these parts again?”

“I think he was trying to make some statement about the environment and nature -- some propaganda to look like a good guy. And then they had to cancel the event because of us! Huh-ha!”

“Oh yeah, that’s why the cop was in the forest, he was keeping watch!”

“Exactly as I recall, Johnny. Exactly as I recall…” The mood was successfully brightened for a moment as the two reminisced about times past, and the guys just sighed contently as they stared at the forest in front of their eyes, thinking of all the other wacky adventures they’d been through in its sanctuary. But the tension that was brewing earlier couldn’t be held off for long, and they knew that there was still some unresolved conflict that needed to be addressed eventually. Robin stepped up to the plate:

“So we got distracted… that’s why I never answered your question. Or at least I didn’t do it thoroughly enough.”

“Rob, it’s fine. It’s not the past I’m concerned about.”

“Have you remembered what’s ailing you?”

“I… I still don’t have the right words for it, but here goes: what are the rest of our lives gonna be like?”

“…What do you mean?”

“What do I me--!? Rob, it’s the most straightforward question I’ve heard all day. Where do we go from here?”

“I-I mean, yes, I understand that, but how does one even go about answering such a question?”

“Say words, make sentences. I thought you were the smart one.”

“John, none of us have all the answers. All I can say is that I know that I’m going to keep fighting until The Prince Mayor either stops ruining the lives of helpless people, or… he stops doing anything at all, if you gather my meaning. And I trust that you’ll be right there beside me.”

“Okay. I’m with you so far. But then what happens?”

“Well… when our jobs are truly done, we can return to our normal li--”

“Rob, I’m starting to seriously wonder if you don’t know squat about the American justice system. And I’m no expert on how it works in England, but over here, well-intentioned crime is still frowned upon, and it don’t get pardoned very often.”

“Then our jobs will not be done until the new government is fair and just--”

“So what, we fight corruption with more corruption to get a guy we like in City Hall? We switch gears from being outlaws to being a fuckin’ underground political machine?”
Robin looked down at Little John and for the first time in a few minutes he made eye contact with him that lasted more than a passing moment.

“Little John… please don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet now.”

“Are you seriously accusing me of being a coward because I’m thinking about our long-term safety!?"

“Little John…” -- a deep breath made clear that he wasn’t going to answer that question, for he had something bigger to say -- “…when I chose this life, I did it because I thought it was something that needed to be done, but nobody was doing it. I saw that something was wrong and I wanted to try to fix it in a way nobody else was trying. But I was young. I was stupid. I--”

“No shit! And you still are young, and sometimes you’re still stupid too!”

“I didn’t have a plan, Little John, I was just living in the moment. I was trying to be as selfless as possible, because I thought that that was what the kind of person I wanted to be would do.” He broke eye contact and gave his attention to his left elbow, propping him up from a branch. “And maybe I was wrong.”

“Rob, I’m not holding that against you. I’m just worried that it’s been seven years of our lives and we still haven’t made any progress--”

“Do you think I don’t worry about that, too!?” They were making eye contact again. “Do you think I knew it would take so many years? Do you think I’m happy knowing that I’ve had to abandon my family and lose so many of my friends and lay awake at night wondering whatever happened to that girl I loved? Do you--?”

“Rob! Rob, simmer down. Listen to me. When I asked you that day ‘are we the good guys or the bad guys?’ I didn’t need a lesson in fucking moral grayness -- I was asking for reassurance that we were closer to good than bad and not just the lesser of two evils. I was trying to see if you had any of the same… fucking… I don’t know, ‘insecurities’? Is that the word? I wanted to know if for even one passing second your charismatic ass was unsure of yourself even a little. I wanted to know that I wasn’t fucking alone, Rob. And you laughed it off and turned it into another chance to rally the troops with your army of one fucking guy. Just like you always do. And all I could say to that was ‘Oh, we’re just borrowing? Well, boy are we in debt!’ because I didn’t want you thinking I was some whiny little bitch. Should I have to feel like that when I’m talking to you? Do I have to feel like you’re going to lord over me with your unfailing frickin’ self-confidence?”

Robin looked away again. He was still in disbelief that this conversation was even happening.

“Well showing a lack of confidence isn’t a good leadership quality, now is it?”

“Rob, I haven’t stuck with you through all of this because I think you’re a good leader! I hung around because we were fucking friends! We were all friends! Maybe you thought we were just followers in your merry little band of badasses, but I wouldn’t have stuck around for more than a week if I didn’t think that on some level you thought of me as your equal. Am I a fuckin’ friend to you? Because I know that when things were good, and we were an unstoppable force and nothing could get us down, the rest of us didn’t think we worked so well because we were an army under a colonel -- we thought we were a team. Of friends.”

That was a lot of information to take in, and Robin’s brain was inundated. But he knew he had to say something before too long, lest he let the embers in Little John’s heart burst into another tirade. The full truth was that ever since he himself invoked the memories of the one he loved, he was
trying to quell any forlorn feelings that might distract him, but he was failing at keeping them at bay so distract him they did; however, surely Little John wouldn’t take an explanation of this as an acceptable answer. So he tried to piece together the key words he’d heard and formulate a passable response. This is the best he could come up with:

“Well as they say, never go into business with your friends.”

“Oh, shut the hell up!” Little John took an arm off the tree and socked Robin square in the shin; Robin’s leg got knocked off the branch and his other foot went with it. Robin yelped a bit as the impact almost tossed him out of the tree, but he caught himself on the upper branch with his chin and armpits. He flailed and grunted quietly and shamefully as he kicked his legs up to catch the lower branch again and stand himself up, burdened by the pig disguise he was still wearing, but Little John didn’t let this distract him.

“Wrong answer, Rob,” he pressed on. “At least you have a girl to miss. Let’s say by some miracle Jesus himself takes the escalator down from heaven and personally makes Norman pardon us. Then what do I do? Go join Tuck and become a goddamn priest? While you use your pretty-boy charm to win Marian back over and then you two live happily ever after and you never fucking think to me again?”

Johnny -- hrm -- my friend -- hmmm!” Robin was finally getting the footing to prop himself back up in the branches. “...You’ve been the most loyal companion I’ve had in my time out here. You’ve stuck with me through thick and thin, and even when I didn’t deserve you. And I’ve wondered whether I would have ever have met a man as great as you if I didn’t throw away my future and turn to a life of… a life like this. I’m indebted to you, Johnny. Even after the day that one of us is burying the other, I’m not going to abandon you. I don’t think I could live with myself if I did.”

Little John needed to breathe for a second and collect his thoughts, because clearly this conversation wasn’t accomplishing what he’d hoped. The way that Robin may or may not have suggested he thought John was going to be the first of them to die wasn’t making it any easier.

“That’s not what I’m worried about, Rob.” Little John glanced up at him to see if he was looking down at him, and he was. “Let me try putting it this way: You asked do I think that you don’t feel a little bad about spending your life this way? I. Don’t. Really. Know. You seem so obsessed with showing the world that you’re a cross between Jesus and Superman, even I don’t know what your problems are -- besides Marian. Don’t mention Marian. She’s the exception that proves the rule. But really, Rob, I’ve shown you my… uh… ‘insecurities,’ I guess, in ways that I would be downright mortified to do with anybody else. The boys back home would beat my ass half to death, my father would just glare at me without saying a goddamn word, my mom would be apologizing to my dad for making me a softie, and my brother… he wouldn’t understand. The dumb son of a bitch fundamentally wouldn’t understand that I have worries; he would just tell me to forget them and chill out like him. So Rob… maybe you aren’t obligated to share your own fears and worries with me, but… I’d feel better about myself if you did. I’d feel less weird feeling bad about things if I knew you did too. And for Christ’s sakes, some heroic flaw like lovesickness doesn’t count. I’m not trying to take that away from you. But it doesn’t count.”

Little John needed to catch his breath after that speech, giving Robin some time to think about what to say.

“...So… you think I should be more… what, ‘vulnerable’?”

“I don’t care what word you use, Rob. Just be a person. Be a friend.”

“Johnny, I really do apologize if I can come across as… ‘condescending,’ shall we say? I just--”
“Rob, you’re a smart guy with smart ideas, and a lot of times it makes sense to listen to you. But…” -- a sigh as big as he was -- “Rob, I love ya, man. You know you’re my brother.”

“As are you to I, Little Jo--”

“But I have another brother. A real one. A -- what’s the word? -- a *biological* one. And everybody likes him, too. And everybody wants to be around him, too. And he tries to be a good guy and he thinks he *is* a good guy, too. But when he fucks up, he still thinks he’s being a good guy. And that’s why I can’t stand the son of a bitch.”

“I see.”

“…”

“Well I don’t want to lose a brother again.”

“Oh--! Fuck, Rob, I’m sorry, I didn’t even think about--”

“You have nothing to apologize for, John. My feelings are my own responsibility.”

“…If you insist…”

They could feel that the heat was dying down -- not just in their argument, but in the fact that their outright yelling hadn’t attracted anybody, law enforcement or otherwise, to their location.

“I think there were still three of us.”

“What?”

“That day you asked the question about good and bad. I could swear that when that happened, there were still three of us.”

“It was only two of us in the tree.”

“Yes, but I think while we were there, he was off on his own little exploits.”

“Oh, yeah,” Little John recalled. “Dumb son of a gun… I’m sorry I brought up all these bad memories, Rob, honest.”

“Johnny, no, it’s fine. I actually rather enjoyed it. There’s nothing like memories so vivid that they can take you right back to a happier time.”

“…That you’re right, Rob.”

One last helicopter passed overhead. It would be the last one they’d hear that day.

*Hhrhrhghhhrgrgrdrdrdrdrd...*

“…I’m still hungry.”

***

After about half and hour of hanging out in a tree and playing a very low-energy game of 20 Questions, the duo agreed that it was finally safe to come out of their makeshift perch and investigate the damage done to their real home.
It wasn’t so much that the mess itself was devastating, but more-so what it represented: the end of an era of peace and prosperity. For the longest time the Major Oak was a safe haven for those who dared oppose the regime of John Norman and his cronies, a little slice of the world all to their own that nobody else had ever managed to find and that nobody, they thought, ever would. It was a representation of a time when it seemed like the self-proclaimed Merry Men were just on the verge of compelling the Prince Mayor to get the hell out of Dodge for fear of his life.

But things fall apart. Each time that the gang was pared down a member, they had to reconvene and re strategize to accommodate for their new group dynamic. All of their momentum was lost, time and time again, and Mayor John was instilled with a new sense of confidence, convinced that these mysterious menaces actually had no idea what they were doing and that their guerrilla tactics would eventually become unsustainable. And now there were two, resorting to simple robbery and redistribution to and from people and places, hoping such disobedience would get the job done. And now their perfect hideout was compromised. Even among vagabonds, they were homeless.

Robin and Little John walked slowly through the debris, careful to sidestep their possessions. “It’s gonna take awhile to clean up this mess,” Little John lamented.

“That’s the thing, Johnny,” said Robin, “I don’t think we should. We know they’re coming back to see if it’s really us. So I say if we just leave everything where it is while we’re away, perhaps they’ll think this camp was abandoned after all. Does that sound logical?”

Little John gave him a sideways look. “Alright, a couple questions. First off, ‘while we’re away’? Where are we going? I thought we were just gonna hold down the fort and defend our turf.”

“I find that tempting, too, Little John, but I think we’re just simply outnumbered.”

“Hrmph. Don’t remind me,” Little John growled. “But as for the plan, here’s my thing with it: it makes sense and all to throw them off, but…” Little John gestured to his Reginald Chutney costume. “…I really want to get changed right about now.”

Robin looked down at his own blind-rich-pig getup. “Yeah, I could probably maneuver better without this thing on.” The two of them were standing almost perfectly still as they conversed, not having much else to do but occasionally turning their heads again to see what more of the mess they’d missed.

“How much do you think Martin told the cops? Do you think I gotta retire the character?”

“Perhaps it is for the best; we’ve had some good times with old Reggie, but we may have been pushing our luck by not taking him out of our rotation after a bit.” The thought occurred to him that they had been pushing their luck a lot more than usual lately, but he didn’t want to stray from the pressing issue of their immediate safety. “And if they’re looking for us, it’s probably best we’re not in the costumes we were seen in. I for one welcome the chance to never have to wear this thing again.”

“Wait, where did your mask for that thing go?”

Robin’s eyes pursed open and he examined his person, patting himself down to see if he had somehow squeezed it into one of his pockets and forgotten about it.

“You didn’t leave it where we lost the loot, did ya?”

“Now I’m afraid I left it at the side of the road by Martin’s car. All I know is I don’t have it now. Oh, bloody hell, bloody hell…” Robin cursed himself. “That’s another issue, isn’t it? If we take
these off, what do we do with them? Leave them here for them to find key evidence?”

“Well, I think they already have plenty of evidence against us, it’s just a matter of finding us…” Little John kept scouring his surroundings to see what had gotten dirty. “Actually, it looks like Ward tossed out a bunch of our costumes and didn’t even put two and two together!” John picked up a wig that was under a fallen bag of potato chips – and while he was bending over, he picked up the chips as well. “Goddammit, I can’t wait any longer,” he grumbled as he went to town on the party-sized bag of Carolina Barbecue.

“Shall we just hide these clothes with the important stuff?”

“Oh, there’s another question,” Little John coughed through a full mouth. “What should we take with us? How long we gonna be gone for?”

“Oh, at least a few nights until the trail goes cold…” Robin pondered.

“Should we take our weapons?”

“Oh, most definitely.”

“All of them, or just ours?”

“Hm… I’m not sure myself…”

“Because--” --gulp-- “I don’t want to risk losing them, but I don’t think we will, either. I mean, are they going to climb a tree in the dark looking for something that might not even be up there?”

“Johnny, you make a good point.”

“How about our documents? I know you don’t like having them on you, but I think it’s better than risking letting them find out exactly who we are. We can risk losing their stuff, but I don’t want my SSN card getting lost.”

“Hey, you should’ve burned it then!”

“Rob,” --stuff, crunch-- “remember, I don’t know how things are in the U.K., but here you really don’t want to be running around without papers.”

Robin just sort of stared up at his friend contemplatively.

“What?” Little John offered the open end of the bag to Robin. “Ya want some?”

“You know what, Little John?” Robin put one hand on his hip and wagged a finger on his other hand at John. “I’ll defer to you. You call the shots this time.”

Little John stopped chewing when he heard that. “Really?” he asked through a full mouth.

“I mean, my decisions have gotten us into a bit of a mess lately, so… maybe your decisions can get us out of it.”

_Swallow._ “You sure?” Little John looked intrigued by what was transpiring.

“Hey, Johnny, I’ve been on a cold streak. Maybe I should step down from being The Ideas Guy. At least for a bit.”

“Well, uh…” Little John chuckled to himself. “I don’t know if I can trade you the role of The Big
“Then I’ll just be The Right-Hand Man,” Robin said with a smirk. He could tell that after the row they had earlier that Little John was seriously liking where this was headed, and watching the bear’s face light up made his own face light up. As he often did, he felt good about making others feel good. If anything, he almost felt too good about it.

“Oh, uh… alright, then! Um… so where do we start?”

“Why, at the beginning,” Robin joked. He was halfway uncertain that that remark would set John off again, but it was already halfway out of his mouth when he figured that, so he just let it finish and hoped for the best.

“Alright,” was all Little John said at first.

Robin breathed a mental sigh of relief. *Okay then, this actually might go pretty well,* he thought.

“So we’re taking our pieces and our papers…” Little John looked pensively up at the tree as he threw another chip in his maw. *Crunch, crunch, Gulp.*

*Hopefully this will make him feel better about himself; he’s no good to me as a sad-sack,* Robin’s mind meandered.

“…We can’t wear our costumes -- we don’t *want* to wear our costumes -- but we can’t leave them here, either…”

*I still can’t believe that he was acting like such a baby up there.*

*Crinkle… crunch, crunch, gulp.*

*Has he secretly somewhat resented me all these years, or is this a new development?*

“…and we need to make them think that we were never here. Hmm…”

*Oh, what am I thinking!? This lad’s had my back more times than I can count. Surely if he had a real problem with me, he wouldn’t have hesitated to say so. I mustn’t be thinking so lowly of him.*

Robin waited with bated breath and tried his hardest to maintain a neutral countenance.

“Hmm…” Little John kept pondering to himself. “You know what? ...I don’t think ol’ Ward’s got a photographic memory. I’d wager we could probably get away with taking a few things and he wouldn’t tell the difference.”

Robin acted intrigued. “Oh, but what if his deputies can tell?” *C’mon, Johnny, don’t back down. Think of an answer and stick with it.*

“Uh… you know, tell me. Tell me if you can name one thing yourself that you can tell isn’t on the ground now, that was on the ground earlier. Can *you* tell the difference?”

Robin looked about the things strewn around. “Is-- is this a hypothetical? Is there actually something that got moved?” *Ooh, caught me by surprise there, Little John!*

“Yup. Wait. Actually, two things.” Little John scarfed another handful of chips as he gave Robin some time to unravel the riddle. *Gulp.*

*Hm, he may have actually stumped me-- oh. Oh, he’s talking about the crisp bag. Chip bag.*
Whatever it’s called. The other thing must be the wig, right? Was he giving me a clue or could he just not contain himself?

“Because if someone as sharp-eyed as you can’t even tell, then I’m sure Ward and his goons don’t have a chance.” Crink, crinkle… crunch, crunch.

“Uh, I… I submit. What am I missing?” I’ll let him have this one. He’s earned it.

Little John just grinned as he held up the bag of chips with one paw and the old blonde wig in the other.

“Huh. You actually threw me for a loop there, Johnny!” Good lord, he goes off on me for being a condescending prick, and now that I know I’m being condescending, he seems to be loving it.

“Did you actually get stumped or were you just playing dumb for me?”

“Johnny, you stumped me like a truncated tree.” And Little John believed that; Robin could tell.

“Alright, then it’s settled! We can get changed, and take a few other things we need as long as we don’t take too much to make it suspicious.”

“Sounds splendid.” Although I really didn’t care for that comment that missing Marian was too romantic to count as legitimate sorrow, or whatever it was he said.

“And-- actually…” Little John dropped the wig and the bag of chips and started yanking up at his collar to doff the ill-fitting Reginald Chutney dress-shirt.

“Uh… where’re you going with this, Johnny?” I know right now I could say that I’d never wish to choose to cut either of them out of my life, but if he were to force me to pick between having her or himself in my life… that would just about make my mind up for me. Wait… does he just not understand what I’m feeling? Oh my God, he doesn’t understand, does he? My, my, I almost find that pitiful. But then again, I must be quite the lucky one…

Little John held the stretched-out shirt in his hands and examined it, with special attention given to the corners of the garment. “Do you think we could tie these into bags to carry our stuff in?”

“Good question. I don’t see why not.” But none of this matters because Little John would never be jealous and childish enough to pose an ultimatum between a man’s best friend and a man’s true love, right? Right… right?

“Well, there’s gotta be some sticks in the forest, right? We’ll carry them like bandanas on bindles.”

“That way we won’t be leaving them behind, but we won’t have to wear them either!” There’s a simpler solution than gathering sticks, but he still has time to have it come to him. In all, I’d say this went pretty smoothly. If a bit slowly, but I suppose I did put him on the spot a bit. That can spook even the Wittiest man.

“And they won’t look like the clothes when they’re all balled up, neither!”

“Ooh, I didn’t even think of that! I’m liking this idea, Johnny.” Robin gave a pedagogical, you did good, kid kind of smirk up at the bear who nevertheless had six years of age and a solid meter of height over him.

“Oh! Well, uh…” Little John chuckled nervously, “I’m glad you like it.” He was almost blushing through his fur as he looked down at the fox; John was seriously amazed by the quick turnaround
of attitude from just a little while earlier. This wasn’t the first time that John was given the reins to come up with and implement an idea, but most of the past instances were instantaneous moments of brilliance when he beat Robin to the punch before the fox could think of his own solutions; this was the first time in a long time that Robin specifically abdicated decision-making responsibilities to him, and certainly the instance where John received the most encouraging feedback on his choices. And it was so much like what he wanted that he didn’t even think to consider that maybe Robin was playing into him.

“Excellent! I’ll get what we need from upstairs and then we’ll start packing!” Robin squirmed out of his cumbersome Glenjamin Glutton getup and walked a jagged path to collect his regular clothes en route to the base of the Major Oak.

Oh, damn it to hell, why do I keep thinking like this!? Little John is one of the best blokes I’ve ever met, easily the loyalest, he’s smarter than I give him credit for, and I cannot figure out why I keep thinking of him as some younger guy. Heh, maybe his nickname is having that sort of effect on me after all this time…

He stopped at the foot of the tree to wiggle into his green polo shirt. I feel like I’m betraying him just thinking these thoughts, but… something just isn’t sitting right about all of that. That was unlike him. At least the him that I know. I’m certain a professional would have something to say about how I can’t stop dwelling on it.

He took an extended moment to check for and brush off any dirt that may have stuck to his shirt from its time on the ground. Actually, I’d like to hear and expert’s opinion on how it was that when I called myself a leader, John didn’t deny it, he just said he didn’t like me using that term; I imagine it would speak volumes about how he sees himself. Now, would we consult a psychologist or a psychiatrist for that? Gee, I haven’t had to think about distinguishing different types of doctors in years…

Finally he was ready to ascend. He glanced over and saw Little John just outside of the circle, starting to gather suitable sticks which they would never need to use. Robin forced himself to stop stalling and start climbing toward the sight that never got any easier to look at. But I don’t have time for such thoughts now and I won’t in the future. There’s too much to be done.

Toward the top of the tree, there was a spot where the branches bent and converged at all the right angles to build some sturdy shelving. It wasn’t quite invisible from the ground below, but unless you had a reason to look up, you’d never have a clue it was there. On the shelving were two sets of items.

One group was mostly contained inside of one other object, a mailbox ripped off its post and still sporting the address “1192” on its sides, each digit on an individual sticker. Inside the mailbox were two birth certificates, two expired driver’s licences, two social security cards (one clearly printed much more recently than the other), one green card, one hardly-used passport issued by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (also expired), all of which were kept around just in case a situation should arise where they would decide they’d be more screwed without these pieces of paper and plastic than with them, plus a bunch of polaroids of friends and family (mostly Robin’s) and a scrunched-up envelope containing even more documents belonging to people who would not be coming back to retrieve them for one reason or another. Along with the mailbox was a felt pencil-case that contained other trinkets of sentimental value which would only clutter the mailbox, mixed in with some basic first-aid supplies.

The other category of objects occupied the majority of the shelf, being mostly long and cumbersome things. Five of these six items were originally sourced from one of their earliest
involuntary donors, whose hobby had been collecting classical-style weaponry: there was a bundle set of an archer’s bow and a quiver full of arrows (the arrows being a mix of those original to the set which had been gathered, mended when applicable, and recycled after previous usages; others which were sourced and scavenged from places ranging from poorly-guarded renaissance faires to prep-school physical education departments’ storage rooms; and a few arrows that were homemade, the product of many years of self-education and trial-and-error); two long quarterstaffs (colloquially known as big fucking sticks), one about two-thirds the length of the other; and a sheathed broadsword, the scabbard concealing a blade which was reddened by rust and other substances, and which for all Robin and John knew was only ever actually used exactly twice. The outlying sixth object was a modern hunting slingshot complete with a wrist support, provided by its original owner. The best weapons were the hardest to trace.

“Hey, Johnny!” called Robin, “I don’t think we need any sticks for our load!” He grabbed the longer of the two quarterstaffs and offered it down below. “We’ve got one big one right here!”

Little John looked intrigued by the idea when he heard Robin call, and dropped all the sticks he had been holding and lumbered over, staring as if awestruck. “Huh, why didn’t I think of that?”

Little John grabbed the staff and examined it in his hands as if beholding it for the first time. Robin reached back up to retrieve the mailbox and pencil pouch and tossed them down to John.

“You might want to finish getting changed; I just need to grab mine and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Right-o.”

Robin turned back to the shelf and grabbed his bow and arrows, trying not to look at the things he was going to be leaving behind, lest he start thinking too much about them. Maybe this was the side of him that John wanted more proof of existing, because Robin wouldn’t want anybody to see his troubled face at this moment. He tried to reason with himself that in all likelihood, these things would be safe here. They had left them here for longer intervals than they were planning to leave them now, and the worst that had ever happened to the items while they were away is that sometimes some rainwater would leak through the tree and get them damp. Oh, but now they know about this place!, he worried. But he kept reasoning with himself. This was the same police force that had never been competent enough to catch them over the course of over half a decade; it wasn’t even a guarantee that they would be able to relocate the tree again in the dusklight, let alone get the inkling that there may be precious items on a perch several dozen feet in the air. He thought was giving them too much credit.

“H-hey, Johnny?”

“Uh-- I’m not decent, Rob.”

“Th-that’s fine, Little John, I won’t look. I just need you to grab my bow for me; I need to, uh, make sure my arrows are all holding up alright. I’ve not inspected them in awhile.”

“Oh, alright, just toss it down.”

Robin shuffled the bow down in his paws until he was only grasping the top, and blindly shoved it down for Little John to reach it. After a few moments, he felt the bow stabilize, telling him that Little John had a safe hold of it.

“Be gentle with her,” he said as he let go.

“Don’t worry, I know how to play nice with other people’s toys.”
Robin threw the quiver’s strap over himself so it was snugly on his back, and climbed onto the empty space on the shelf. He looked down to the ground below just for some added peace of mind. Sure enough, he could barely see the forest floor from the perch. He was sure that the items would more likely than not be safe here.

If anything, he told himself, perhaps it would be a good thing if they came back and the abandoned weapons were gone. It would be three fewer things hanging over his head, literally, when he tried to sleep at night. Three fewer unpleasant memories embodied in physical objects, suddenly gone away from him. How fitting that a master of disguise could stand to receive a blessing in disguise.

Robin climbed down to find that now it was Little John who was waiting on him. John was wearing his favorite forest-green cut-sleeve football jacket and had his quarterstaff balancing on his shoulder, with their costumes tied into bundles at each end containing all that they would need and any frivolities that would fit.

*He tied them together already? God, how long was I up there?*

“I got the mailbox, the pouch, some food, some clean underwear…” He handed Robin his bow back. “Honestly, if there’s anything I’m missing, I’m sure we can find it somewhere else.”

“I think I’d agree to that.” Robin accepted his bow, which was a smidge taller than he was and was going to be a pain in the ass to keep hidden if he should need to, but he’d much rather be with it than without. “So where shall we go seeking shelter?”

“Well, my first idea was to go hit up Tuck at his church, but…”

“But that’s in the city, and we can’t be seen there right about now.” *C’mon, Johnny, use your head… Well, I suppose he did say “but”… I’m doing it again, aren’t I?*

“That’s what I was afraid of. Are we sure we shouldn’t be wearing some other disguises?”

“No, no, there’s no time for overthinking. We can’t stray too far from the safety of the Forest.” *Or maybe we should be wearing disguises, but this is the plan you came up-- No. No, I’m not doing this again.*

“Maybe we should cross the river and be closer to the suburbs. I mean, those were all city cops, right? We could just run out of their jurisdiction if we have to.”

“Bingo! And by the time they coordinate with the suburban Boys, we’ll have had plenty of time to find a hiding spot!” *Good lord, did I just say “bingo”? I guess Little John’s vernacular was going to rub off on me eventually. Actually, I’m surprised it took this long.*

“Alright, should we get going?”

“Let’s!” Robin wasted no time to take the lead and start walking westward, but Little John grabbed him by the shoulder and stopped him.

“Well…” Little John looked down upon him with a melancholy anxiousness. “Are you sure you’re alright with leaving the guys’ stuff behind?”

*Oh, for the love of God, Little John, I just got over this…*

“Or is it like you said,” John continued, “the past can’t hurt you now’?”

“Ah… well, it’s that…” Robin held up his bow. “...and I think we have enough to carry already.”
“Are you sure? Because I can always carry more.”

“John, no--”

“Rob, this is me we’re talking about. I can handle it.”

“John, John, please… no. We mustn’t concern ourselves with the past when we have a future to worry about. Now let’s go exploring to see what we can see.” And Robin walked off before he could think about it any further.

“‘To see what we can see’? Heh… am I gonna be going over a mountain?”

And so the Merry Men of the Sherwood Forest of Southern Delaware walked westward toward the quiet satellite cites at the far end of the wildland, the sleepy sun to their backs and their shadows leading the way, leaving their beloved home and its precious memories to whatever fate may befall it. But they had begun this time of their lives as nomads, and so they had become nomads again. For all they knew, this could be a sign that the things were finally coming full-circle, and this long and tumultuous chapter of their lives may finally come to its bookend.

‘…I should have said yes to the crisps; now I’m hungry…’

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* At this point I want to reiterate that I really want to know what you think, dear reader. If you’re hate-reading this out of morbid fascination, tell me so. If you think that you should go tell it on the mountain that some madman made this crossover work, tell me (and everyone else) that too. But as long as I’ve got myself worked up over this, it’ll keep going till it needn’t go any more. Peace and love and I’ll see ya around. -Doby
Our main characters -- so far -- finally come into close quarters with one another.

4. “First Contact”

Fruitland. The Fruit Belt. The Four Sisters. Cannery Row. Those were just a few of the nicknames put upon the four suburbs that wrapped around the city of Nottingham from its west-northwest to where the city limits met the Delaware Bay to the due north. Daisy-chained together in the narrow strip of land between the dense Sherwood Forest and the smaller pine thicket now known as the Georgetown Forest, Lemon Brook and Peach Creek were the first two to be independently settled and named in this fertile crescent, and when it was realized that they had both went with the fruit-and-waterway naming model (and when it was confirmed that this miraculous soil really could grow anything you planted in it), they filled in the southwestern half of the corridor with the towns of Cherry Stream and Apple River, with industrious orchards bridging each to its neighbors.

It was these suburbs which were imperative to the growth of the city of Nottingham, which made a killing off of the assorted fruits that grew just a few miles away. The city got enough money to sway the state of Delaware to make a canal to more easily connect the Indian River-Rehoboth Estuary to the rest of the ocean, and when shipping took off, so did the city that sat right where the Indian River widened into a bonafide bay. The city expanded north to Rehoboth Beach and south to the Great Cypress Swamp, and outward toward Sherwood Forest and the Four Sisters that had made Nottingham so prosperous. A village called Georgetown at the southeast edge of Sherwood was annexed in the expansion, but for their troubles it became the namesake of the smaller forest on the other side of the orchard towns.

Eventually, Nottingham’s success in the agriculture sector allowed it to diversify its portfolio, and after the Second World War, it didn’t need to rely upon the Fertile Crescent of Delmarva so badly. The towns never completely developed over their orchards, but they did forsake most of them, and now Apple Valley, Cherry Stream and Peach Creek have become more or less contiguous. Lemon Brook is not so much the ostracized Sister as she is the one who thinks she’s better than the other three, and there is still a great gulf of space between Peach Creek and Lemon Brook, occupied by a few of Peach Creek’s last remaining farms in the narrows where the two forests get as close as they ever would to making contact, before it opens up again where Sherwood takes a turn east and Georgetown simply ends. Indeed, the northern borders of the Georgetown and Sherwood Forests form the southwest and southeast city limits of Lemon Brook respectively, squeezing into the gap between the forests by the old abandoned cannery; looking at a map of the area that emphasises municipal borders, one may agree it looks like Lemon Brook is funnelling into a pipe occupied by Peach Creek, Cherry Stream and Apple River, and many of Lemon Brook’s most civicly self-impressed like to make crude jokes about flushing their waste into the plumbing system that is the other three occupants of the Crescent.

The other three Sisters are typically friendly to one another, but all three harbor a bitter jealousy toward Lemon Brook, especially Peach Creek, whose northern outskirts have to lay their eyes upon the great silhouette of the cannery off in the distance. The relationship is so strained that all modern thoroughfares between the two cut through one of the forests and wrap their way back
around; the only direct connection are some old farm roads, some of which are still not paved.

Then again, all of the roads and streets in Peach Creek are a tad counterintuitive. Most of the town is legally on its own “south” side, which is actually the southwest side since the town’s grid is crooked at a 45-degree angle to match up with the main thoroughfares from the city: the older Sherwood Forest Road, and the 1950s-built Georgetown-Millsboro Highway, a raised toll-road originating right near the center of Nottingham and heading almost perfectly straight northwest along the diminishing banks of the Indian River, cutting through Sherwood Forest, Peach Creek, and Georgetown Forest before surrendering itself to a toll-free surface-level divided highway on its way up to Dover. But because of the asymmetry of the Crescent, bisecting it perfectly wound up putting most of Peach Creek’s residential area to the southwest of these highways. Peach Creek, however, respected its symbiotic relationship with the Big City, so when Sherwood Forest Road straightens out as it passes through the town (where it is labelled as Peachtree Parkway), that line was dubbed the official divider between north and south in the town.

That’s how one may find the curious arrangement where the 200 North block of side streets -- both of them, as this is where the Crescent gets suffocatingly narrow -- is a couplet of cul-de-sacs which mark the temporary end of suburbia, abutting a trailer park and two junk yards before dissolving to the agrarian ways of old.

***

“Stop!”

Screeeeech.

“What!”

“Were you goin’a turn right?”

“...Noooo.”

“Why not!”

“Why would I have?”

“Whadda you think!”

“Are you seriously demanding that I be able read you mind, Chief?”

“You wouldn’t have to read my mind if your mind was as smart as mine!”

“Then enlighten me, why would we turn right?”

“Because we’re trying to stick close to the woods! If you turn right, we get closer to the woods!”

“It’s a fucking cul-de-sac, it doesn’t go anywhere.”

“Do you not see the construction site at the end there? There’s probably a million places in there that they could be hiding!”

“Even if they were, it’s out of our jurisdiction.”

“They don’t know that!”

“They might.”
“Then fuck it, we’ll call in the local guys to nab ‘em if we have to! Just turn right!”

“Why are we even doing this?”

“Because I can’t wait any longer to catch ‘em!”

“Yeah, clearly you can’t; I meant why did you send everybody home to wait till tonight?”

“Can’t have the rest of the city running wild while the entire force is looking for some hooligans. All we need is you and me.”

“Yeah, a much smaller amount of people searching a much larger area. That makes sense.”

“Well I’ve got twelve hours to kill till then, and I can’t sleep until then knowing that I’m this close!”

“(God knows you’ve tried…)

“What was that!?"

“I think you just want to be the guy to personally arrest them. Personally.”

“So what if I do?”

“Yeah, it’s not like the chief of police for a large city has anything better to do with his day.”

“Goddammit, Nutsy, when we get back to the station, I’m gonna have ‘em take your badge away for un-subordination!”

“Fine, do it.”

“...”

“Do it.”

“...”

“Nobody else wants to work under you, Ward.”

“Hey! That’s Chief to you, Deputy!”

“Then arrest me.”

“...”

“Do it. I dare you.”

Chief Woodland and Deputy Nutzinger found themselves in a staring contest in a halted police car which was nevertheless still in Drive blocking the (north-) westbound lane of Harris Street, two blocks north (-east) of Peachtree Parkway at the north edge of Peach Creek, which was indeed well out of their jurisdiction as members of Nottingham’s Department, but Ward didn’t care for the rules and his deputy George didn’t have any power to tell him no.

Woodland didn’t think that Nutzinger was right, per se, but he knew that for other reasons, getting Nutsy fired would be difficult. It was considered an extremely progressive move when they hired a squirrel to the force, although the cynics thought they just did it as a good PR move, and the
pragmatists thought it was about damn time they got somebody who could work with the rodent community on their level, and Nutzinger himself believed both of these things were true because he had written the letter to the police department as part of his twelfth-grade English “write a persuasive letter to an authority figure” project telling them that they ought to make such a move for the above reasons, and when they actually replied saying that that would be a good idea and they could put him through the academy if he’d like to take a stab at it, he realized he didn’t have any better plans for after high school. In any case, it would look even messier if they cut him loose now, especially to do so over something like putting the immensely unpopular Chief of Police in his place.

Woodland did not, however, know that Nutzinger was very much correct that nobody else on the Force would want to be his Deputy. Nutsy only got the job because it was the least-inconvenient situation for everybody else: nobody else would have to work directly under and with Woodland, the functionally useless squirrel would be allowed to move up into what was basically a clerical role, and the squirrel himself wouldn’t have to deal as much with the disproportionate exposure to rigor mortis he was being dealt. Nowadays, he wasn’t being called upon to do it nearly as much as he used to, but when he was new, they sent him to go deal with every homicide, suicide, and really-bad-accident call in the rodent community, and this penchant for winding up in close proximity to stiffs lead to his nickname among the other officers, “the Vulture”; nowadays they only made him tend to the recently deceased when they were in a rodent-sized building or structure that the rest of the Force couldn’t physically access.

But he still wasn’t too keen on it. Nutzinger may have been jaded, but he still wouldn’t say that writing up reports about fresh corpses was preferable to his current situation of mirroring a glare coming from his commander while sitting behind the wheel of a squad car that was extensively (and expensively, thanks to the generous donations of the taxpayers of Nottingham) jerry-rigged so that an eleven-inch, nineteen-ounce squirrel could drive at the discretion of the six-foot-seven, four-hundred-pound wolf (although that second number might be outdated) barking directions from the passenger seat. The car’s modifications were arranged as soon as Nutzinger was promoted to deputy, as Woodland detested driving for reasons unexplained, but when theorizing why that might be, Nutsy had conjured some grotesque visions of the Chief in the driver’s seat and the steering wheel getting “lost,” as it were. Or maybe the fat asshole just found it too exhausting. In some ways, George was glad he got stuck with the Chief, because it was the ultimate test to keep reminding himself that not all obese people were as slobbish and slovenly as this guy.

The tension was broken when Woodland actually had a pretty good idea for once. Without saying a word, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out a street atlas of the entire metropolitan area. He flipped it open and started leafing through to find right about where they were. Then he hit a bit of a wall.

“...Nutsy, help me find the page of the map we’re on.”

Nutzinger was spent for snappy comebacks, so he just hopped over to the atlas in hopes of getting this moment over with. He had some trouble turning the pages in the huge tome that was probably bigger than he was, but eventually he got to what seemed to be the correct page.

“Alright, so...” Nutzinger read the map carefully to double-check, “There’s Peachtree, Bedford Street, Harris... There’s Rethink and here’s--”

“Re-think? That’s a dumb name for a street.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Wait... I think my sister lives somewhere around here. Huh. I ain’t seen her in years.”
“What, did you want to go say hi? Is that why I’m doing this?”

“Naw, I don’t care *that* much. Just a nifty co-inky-dink. But this is the right page of the map?”

“Looks like it.”

“Alright, and we are… here?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Well then look at this.” He pointed and the two leaned in to get a good look at the map. “So there’s the construction site. That’s part of Peach Creek.”

“Alright, so it’s out of our jurisdiction. Mystery solved.”

“Hold on, hold on… look at this. Behind the construction site is a trailer park--”

“Which is also in Peach Creek.”

“But what’s behind the trailer park?”

Nutzinger followed Woodland’s claw to a point that was along a creek, which wrapped around westward so it was practically behind the other cul-de-sac on Rethink Avenue.

“…A junkyard?”

“Mm-hmm. And what town is that a part of?”

Nutzinger looked. On the map, Peach Creek’s incorporated territory was highlighted in a pale green and Lemon Brook’s was light purple. The spot of the junkyard was just white.

“...*oh.*”

“It’s not in Peach Creek, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“It’s not in anything, is it?”

“It’s in Nottingham County.”

“It’s unincorporated. That means it’s fair game.”

“No, it means it’s under the county’s jurisdiction--”

“Or it means that it’s fair game.”

“...Okay…”

“So let’s go hunting.”

***

The second cul-de-sac, with the even more offbeat name of Reimagine Avenue, had a troubled history.

It was supposed to be Phase Two of the Peach Creek Estates Housing Development, with Phase
One being the homes built on Rethink. The development started with its focus on Rethink, which had more available space for houses, since Reimagine Avenue’s neck was already occupied by a playground built for the neighborhood on one side and Sherwood Forest on the other, leaving only space enough for four or five structures around the bulbous head of the street.

Phase One was finished up a little under fifteen years ago, and homes sold fast, especially to young families, many of whom were pleasantly surprised to find that their infant children were all born around the same time and would probably all be in the same grade together when they began school, and with any luck would all grow up to be the closest of friends. Everything seemed to be going well for the development company. The construction workers were getting ready to put up the extra five homes on Reimagine. But then the troubles began.

First came the discrimination lawsuit. It made regional news when they were found guilty of not wanting to sell one of the homes on Rethink to a family of skunks, and had to pay up a large sum of money which the skunk family used to buy an even bigger house in a neighborhood they felt was more tolerant. The house the skunks had tried to purchase wound up being the last one on the block to be sold, and eventually went to a wolf family relocating from the Northern Virginia area near DC, whose son was also the same age as most of the other boys and girls on the block, and even had a name homonymous with two of them.

The development company was badly beaten by this, but they weren’t out of the game yet. No, what finished them off in this weakened state were those trashy people from the Park ‘N’ Flush trailer park.

The proper way to access the Park ‘N’ Flush is a way that even the most patient person would find poorly-designed and annoying. One is expected to go down around the Reimagine and Rethink cul-de-sacs to the road along Georgetown Forest at the west edge of town, hang a right toward Lemon Brook and the cannery, take another right down the dirt road toward the two junkyards on either side of the creek, then take another right down yet another dirt path between the east edge of the junkyard and the west edge of Sherwood Forest. But it wasn’t always like this. What was eventually rechristened Reimagine Avenue was originally an asphalt-giving-way-to-gravel street, which provided a major shortcut to the trailer park through what was then public, unincorporated lands. Money is money, however, and the town of Peach Creek eventually sold some of that negative space to the developers who planned to build Peach Creek Estates.

The Park ‘N’ Flush residents really didn’t care for going the long way to get out of their trailer park when they could just drive through the construction site, cross Harris Street, cross Bedford Street, arrive at Peachtree Parkway and boom, they were at a major thoroughfare that could connect them to the rest of civilization. So they did. The developers tried to tell them no, and the residents threatened to sue. The developers thought that they were bluffing, certain that people as broke as they were couldn’t afford a decent lawyer let alone harbor a sufficient understanding of the law. The next thing that the developers knew, they were bankrupt and out of business, and all of the equipment at the construction site of Phase Two was left in its place because the owners didn’t have enough money left in their personal accounts to thoroughly advertise that it was for sale, let alone money to pay to transport it if a potential buyer demand they did.

Today, people looking for a shortcut to the trailer park or the junkyard can just drive to the end of Reimagine Avenue, hop the curb, and meander through the dirt past rusty bulldozers and crusty concrete mixers and the skeletal frames of houses that will never become homes. These stillborn corpses were supposed to be where families celebrated Christmases and Hanukkahs and birthdays and anniversaries and high-school graduations, where sons and daughters would learn and where mothers and fathers would learn to teach, where people would feel safe and sound after a long day out in the world, where people would sleep and have dreams so wondrous that they would be sad.
when they woke because knew they would never witness them again, where loving couples would grow old together and where children would conquer their fear of the dark and discover the hidden secrets of the attic and run through backyards blinded by visions of their own breathtaking imaginations while stepping around lovingly-tended gardens and dodging wooden sheds forever stained with passionate sweat, where happy memories were supposed to be forged so strong that photographs would be unnecessary, and where people would learn to love and be loved by the people they would never trade for the world. But this would never come to be. To the passers-by, however, this implicit misery was lost on them. To them, all of it was just a reminder of that one time that some rich people got busted for being a buncha assholes.

The town of Peach Creek legally reclaimed the land with intentions to just get rid of the construction site and pave Reimagine Avenue (which would be renamed to Khouth Street to match the rest of the roadway on the other side of Harris Street) all the way through past the trailer park and connecting to the dirt road that straddles the border between the orchards and the forest. But the town council just sort of never got around to it (when your town is next to a place like Nottingham, it’s going to pick up some bad habits), and in a pungent bit of irony, after almost a decade of cars getting flat tires and undercarriage scars from running over leftover construction tools and equipment, most of the residents of the trailer park now opt to go the long way around the construction site anyway.

But once in awhile somebody needs to get from civilization to the trailer park or the junkyard in a hurry and isn’t in any mood to worry about their vehicle’s long-term health. These people will cut right through the construction site anyway, and can range from a vengeful police officer in a furious hurry to a nostalgic motorist who doesn’t want to dwell any longer on the fact that he’s going to abandon his beloved old flames-on-purple van in the land of the forgotten, unaware that it might one day offer comfort and refuge to a party of troublemakers.

***

It was more spacious than they thought it would be in there, but that wasn’t saying much. And it was getting stuffy fast. The fact that Double-D was hyperventilating and wasting all the air wasn’t helping. Nor was it helping that that air was being replaced by fumes from the gasoline generators in the corner.

The curtains were drawn in the rear window, and the boys were lying down on the water bed to try to stay out of sight of the windows in the front. But the waterbed was listing toward Ed’s side, so Eddy and Double-D were stuck at the bottom of the hill formed by the displaced water. Neither was particularly happy about this arrangement, but they had bigger concerns.

Ed, for his part, had no greater concern than eviscerating his fatigue. The idea of letting Big Ed sleep through this long wait seemed like a great idea on paper, but in practice was a bit of a problem because of his tendency to snore loudly and with an open mouth, and if the ungodly sound that was louder than Krakatoa exploding six inches from your ear didn’t jeopardize them, the odor of his exhaled breath certainly would.

“Ed,” Eddy implored, “Ed!”

“Hoouh… Yes, Eddy?”

“You’re snoring louder than a bomb made out of lawn mowers!”

“Oh, I am sorry Eddy. Do you need help sleeping?”

“Wha--? No, I--”
Ed took the liberty of grabbing Eddy and holding him close like a child’s plushie. “Don’t worry, Eddy, I’ll take you with me to Sleepy-Bye Land.”

“Ed, get off me,” Eddy growled through gritted teeth.

“Nighty-night!” Ed closed his eyes again and passed out almost instantaneously.

“Double-D! Help me out!”

Double-D was shaking too much to be described as paralyzed by fear, but he certainly was not responsive to the world outside of the dungeon of his own insurmountable fears. Catatonic was probably a better word.

“Ed! Wake up! Let me go!”

But Ed started snoring again, his snout right above Eddy’s ears, and even Ed probably couldn’t hear Eddy over the noise of his own making. Therefore drastic measures needed to be taken.

Wiggle, wiggle… CRUNCH.

“Gah!” the bear hollered as he threw his bitten hand up in the air, incidentally taking its vulpine occupant up with it.

Thunk. “Ooph!”

Eddy hit the ceiling of the van and fell down to the waterbed, which gladly broke his fall and absorbed his weight, sucking him into its abyss. But as all things must return to equilibrium, it soon after rejected its guest and ejected him back up with a swish of waves of water moving underneath its surface.

Thunk. Eddy again hit the ceiling, which was a much more cold and rigid host, and he fell once more into the bed, which gave an encore presentation of its impression of a trampoline.

Swish, swish… thunk! “Uph!” Swish, swish… thunk! “Gwah!” Swish, swish… thunk! “Pltt!” Swish, swish… thunk! “Ed!”

Ed’s eyes followed the improvised gymnastics up and down; it wasn’t quite the motion of a metronome turned sideways, but you could probably still keep a beat with it all the same. He reached his paw out toward the nifty sight, as if trying to physically capture the moment.

“Eddy, I wanna try…” Ed murmured sleepily.

Thunk. “Ed, no!” Swish, swish. Eddy’s life flashed before his eyes when he imagined the idea of Ed getting up and trying to bounce up and down on the waterbed in the finite space of the van, the vehicle jumping loudly like a giant metal basketball and attracting all the fuzz within a ten mile radius of their hiding spot. Thunk. This time when Eddy came down, he sunk his claws into the surface of the mattress and damn near popped the thing as he dug in to get out of the cycle. Swish, swish…. Swish… And finally the momentum was broken.

“Ed, wait!” Eddy cried, only to see that Ed had passed out from sheer fatigue again. It would seem that Ed was going to have to settle for jumping on a bed in his dreams.

But even though it wouldn’t be as loud as a giant metal cage crashing in place in the junkyard, Eddy still didn’t want to risk attracting the wrong crowd with the sound of Ed’s unholy snoring. Thinking quickly, he grabbed a spool of extension cords and fashioned a nice little bow around
Ed’s snout. He could still snore loud enough through his nose to annoy Eddy, but it probably wouldn’t be a siren song for the authorities to come and bust them.

Eddy took a seat on the water hump away from Ed and Double-D. The three of them had been in there for a few hours, but the wolf was actually getting more nervous with the passage of time. Being alone with his thoughts had simply made Double-D more claustrophobic and nervous that every passing minute meant that they would soon be found, and with Ed being asleep and Eddy staring at the roof of the van to forget that he was bored out of his mind, it wasn’t like Double-D had anybody to tell him reassuring things.

Eddy, it should be noted, was not so much anxious himself as he was nervous by proxy from having to watch Double-D lose his mind, not unlike earlier when he was suffocated by Double-D’s fears until they started to infect him too. That part of him wanted to stay here for safety, while the other part of him wanted to split a long time ago when it had seemed like the heat had long since died down. But he stuck around anyway since his loyal lackeys were in no condition to move, and for all he knew they’d be too disoriented by fear and fatigue to think to find him at his house later on if he were to leave by himself. Now it was Eddy who was alone with his thoughts. At least it was much quieter now with Ed’s snoring taken out of the equation.

“Hey, maybe they’re in here.”

Well, then.

The first thing Eddy did was look at Double-D to see if he had heard it too. If he had, he couldn’t tell. Double-D seemed to still be in his own little personal purgatory and wasn’t showing any outward response to stimuli.

“Well, one of them’s supposed to be a grizzly bear, could he fit in something this big?”

Okay, hold on, how did they know about that? This second voice sounded quieter, but also somehow closer, as if coming from a smaller creature. It was much different than the first voice, which had a very discernable Southern accent. Heh, for a second Eddy considered that it might be Double-D’s hick uncle, and the idea of such an absurd coincidence transpiring actually amused him enough for a fraction of a smirk to crack his face amid the tension. But Eddy knew that it was incredibly unlikely that of all the cops in the metropolitan area that they’d ever run into him even once, assuming that he hadn’t been removed from the Force already like Double-D’s family suspected. But the possibility stayed on his mind and the small grimace quickly evaporated.

“Eh, that’s a good point, but it’s not that small of a van.”

Ah, yes, back to the question of how they knew Ed was in here. What the hell? Were they seen? Did they have details on all three of them, or just Ed, who was very hard to miss and could probably be seen around the curvature of the earth?

“Big enough for a grizzly with room to spare for a fox?”

Eddy heard that and came very close to giving a second meaning to the phrase “waterbed.”

“I’d say s-- God, damn it!” hollered the Southern voice. A small thud followed shortly thereafter.

“Aw, god--! What happened, Chief?”

“I stubbed my damn toe on this box.”

“Well this is why I don’t like riding on your shoulder.”
“Well, hey, Nutsy, I didn’t mean to knock ya off, but this box is way heavier than it looks!”

…”Box”?

“Well, what’s inside it? Cinder-blocks?”

Eddy looked around the van.

“Might as well take a look.”

The ironing board was behind him along the wall.

“I’ll laugh my ass off if we just stumbled upon, like, a brick of cocaine or something.”

The generators and extension cords were tucked behind the front seats.

“Well I’m sure the boys would enjoy that.”

Eddy couldn’t see anything else.

“Eh, I know a few who wouldn’t, Chief.”

Eddy got up and scrambled over Ed’s sleeping mass to see if there was any chance Ed was just laying on top of it. But it was nowhere to be found.

“Aw, it’s a bunch of, um… sheets of plastic.”

“Goddammit, Ed,” Eddy mumbled.

“That’s it? That’s what’s so heavy?”

“Wait, I think there’s something else at the bottom.”

Eddy looked at Double-D again. The wolf had stopped shaking and was either breathing calmly or wasn’t breathing at all. He was just sitting perfectly still, staring at the wall, contemplating crime and punishment and the fires of hell.

“There’s some plastic sheets in here, too,” the Southerner discovered.

“What, to make IDs or something?”

“To make IDs--? To make IDs! I bet that’s what they were doin’, Nutsy!”

Now Eddy wanted to hide within the hiding spot. He rushed over to the front seats to hide in the nook under the steering column.

“Oh, look. The shipping label is still on it. Dumbass.”

“Man Guy, 201 Rethink Avenue.”

Eddy could still see the daylight pouring in through the windows from under the dashboard, so he made his way back over the seats. He was going to gamble on a different strategy.

“That’s probably a fake name, but that’s gotta be a real address. You wanna pay ‘em a visit, Chief?”

“Nah, that’s the PCPD’s problem. Besides, we can’t prove nothin’. That address sounds familiar,
though...”

“That address sounds familiar”? To the Chief of Police? He couldn’t have… no, could he?

Eddy was over the seats now and saw that Double-D now had his head turned right at the rear doors of the van, listening patiently and placidly.

“But you know what? I bet we could use these ourselves!”

Eddy heard that one in his heart.

“Yeah!” the Southerner continued, “We can probably figure out how to make our own fake IDs and sell them ourselves! Or at least sell them to someone who knows how to do that.”

“Do I get a cut, Chief?”

Eddy lifted up Ed’s massive arm and tucked himself back in there, not for the comfort of either of them, but for one to disappear under one who was already dead to the world.

“Oh, Nutsy, I’m not evil...”

A grunt was heard as the Chief of Police presumably picked up the box of materials that formed the crux of Eddy’s brilliant plan, which was now in severe jeopardy of being delayed, if it were ever to come to fruition at all. The plan was not to make any mistakes, but Eddy reasoned with himself that this was not a mistake he had made. He didn’t willfully allow his creation to fall into the hands of some corrupt officers who were going to flip his goods for private profit. But he didn’t do all he could to prevent it, either, and he knew it. For a few moments, these conflicting feelings of blame and guilt managed to take the spotlight in the mental theater of anguish.

Then this happened:

*Squeak!* “Chief Woodland, Chief Woodland, do you copy?” A voice squawked over a police radio.

Eddy turned to Double-D again. Double-D didn’t move a muscle, but Eddy had a funny feeling that he had heard that all the same.

“This is Chief Woodland, whaddaya need?”

“Are you in the middle of something, Chief? Because we need you downtown ASAP.”

“Uh, um... Y-yes, Deputy Nutzinger and I were, uh... helping an old lady cross the street!”

Eddy was a bit surprised by the timid manner of his answer.

“Well when you’re done, try to get to City Hall as soon as possible. The mayor wants to talk to you. Preferably Nutzinger, too.”

“He does?”

“Yes, Chief. What’s your current location? Do you have an ETA?”

“Uh, yeah, uh, um... We’re just in Georgetown gettin’ back from the Forest, we were taking surface streets. We’ll be there soon!”

“10-4, I’ll let him know.” That was the last Eddy heard of the dispatcher.
“You shoulda just told him we were trying to get the forest bandits,” the one called Nutsy insisted. “How else are we goin’a explain a couple of criminals in the backseat?”

‘Forest Bandits’? Eddy wondered, Is that what they’re calling us?

“Nutsy, there’s this thing called ‘shoot on sight,’ have ya heard of it? In a place like this, nobody’s gonna notice.”

Once again, Eddy was glad that he hadn’t consumed even a drop of water since last night. Double-D was still as steadfast as a statue. Ed was none the wiser.

“Oh, right, like nobody’ll hear a gunshot in the the trailer park next door. Or the subdivision across the creek. And heaven forbid you don’t connect on the first try and you have to shoot them more than once apiece.” Eddy, eyes pursed shut, was hoping this deputy character could somehow convince his superior of this, not just for the sake of the boys’ lives, but also for the Chief’s sake, since this Nutsy fellow made a very good point.

“You’re a little asshole, do you know that?”

“I’m your better half, Ward,” was the smarmy response.

Ward? Eddy asked himself, What the fuck kind of name is--? Wait…

“Well, tell me this, Nutsy: how would they know it’s not just some kids testing out their playthings?”

“Chief, do you seriously want to take any risk of getting caught? I don’t know about you, Chief, but I need this job. To live and pay bills and shit. And if we get fired, we’re probably not employable anywhere else.”

“That’s why you don’t get caught, Nutsy!”

These two were an unstoppable force and an immovable object. Eddy was half-seriously debating sticking his head out and telling them to quit bickering because the back-and-forth was driving him crazy. Luckily, he wasn’t the only person who was getting sick of the unresolved conflict.

“Okay, fuck it!” Nutsy exclaimed, and then there was a sound of a slight struggle with some rustled garments.

“Hey! What’re you-- My gun!”

Eddy thought he was going to hear a loud bang and a hearty thud, but instead he heard some rustling running under the van. Was there a snake or something moving down there? How big was this Nutsy guy, anyway? Wait, what didn’t he mention something about riding on the Chief’s shoulder?

The sound went to the front of the van up against the trash heap, paused for a second, and went out the right side.

“Why the hell did you do that!??”

“Looks like you’re gonna need a new gun from the station, Chief.”

“Do you know how bad that’s going to make me look!??”

“Yeah: less bad than shooting some people outside of your jurisdiction. Now c’mon, The Prince is
“waiting!” The voice seemed to get quieter as the statement went on.

“Goddammit, Nutsy!” And then the ride began. The van started shaking left and right to the rhythm of some grunts coming from the front right side. Some more muttering and swearing under breath was peppered in there, and as well as some strained breathing. Eddy wrapped his arms around Ed’s to hang on during the rollercoaster ride, fully aware that the shaking could cause Ed to roll onto him and crush him, but trying not to think about it. Somewhere below his sideways line of vision, he heard Double-D fall forward softly onto the mattress, seemingly forced out of his paralysis.

The shaking stopped and more grunting was heard as the Chief must have abandoned his quest to retrieve his weapon. “Nutsy, get back here and get me my gun!”

“The fuck are you gonna do, shoot me?” The voice was very small and distant now.

“We ain’t even checked out this van yet!”

“They’d’ve made a noise by now if there was anybody in there!”

More nonverbal cursing and grumbling was heard, punctuated by a sudden shattering of glass. Eddy shifted his eyes toward the sliver of negative space where he could see to the passenger’s side window. He didn’t get much of a complete picture, but he could have swore he saw a short, wide blue sleeve over a flabby gray-furred arm, a bent elbow retreating from the space where a window once was.

“Hell, now I’m bleeding.” There was no more muffling of voices; it was all loud and clear. The sound of spitting could be heard, and then of frustrated footsteps taking their leave.

Eddy could feel behind him that Ed was stirring. Eddy wiggled his way out of the crook of Ed’s arm.

“Hrrrrhm?” Ed said through a tethered snout.

“Shh!” begged Eddy as he went over to the victim who was most affected. “Uh… Double-D? How ya holding up?”

Double-D was sitting upright again against Ed’s stomach, legs crossed neatly and his hands on his legs. If not for the distress in his eyes, one might think he were meditating. Eddy approached him. Even sitting down, the wolf, who was barely averaged-sized for his own species at his age, had to look down upon the dwarfish fox standing next to him. Eddy noticed this; in this strange moment, he didn’t care.

“Doub-- uh… Double-D, you know a lot of… stuff, right? Um… do you know if your mom’s maiden name is, uh… really common?”

For a second, Double-D just stared at him with a look like he had just seen innocence incarnate murdered and violated by a mob in the street. Then he opened his mouth and said:

“I am prepared for death at any moment, Eddy.”

“Wh-- What?”

The footsteps returned, and the boys turned to face the direction from which they came. Without a word, the heavy stomping made its way to the back of the truck, stopped to make way for a grunt, and disappeared again.
Double-D turned back to Eddy, who knew he was going to have to spend another few hours in here while his friends emotionally recuperated. At least it wasn’t as stuffy with the window open.

“I am prepared for death at any moment.”

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The sun was now high in the sky and it was starting to get hot in there.

“Jeez, I guess your parents really don’t keep up with the guy.”

“I recall that when he first started, he was almost invariably put on night shifts, so my parents used his odd hours to to justify never attempting to contact him, seeing as he’d never be awake at the same time they would be.” It had taken awhile, but he had come back up to Earth.

“Well, when did they promote him?”

“I don’t know, Eddy. After they came to their rationale for never having reason to call him on the phone, that was the last we’d heard of him. I believe my parents assumed that he would soon be fired and that we would one day receive a call asking if he could seek refuge from homelessness in our house. But that call never came, and I always assumed he was simply busy with his line of work, remaining as a low-level officer. I’m sure that if I questioned my parents, they would tell me that they assumed he had shamefully returned to my grandparents’ home in Virginia without saying a word to my mother or father.”

“But you do think that was him, though, right?”

“His speech patterns and accent do certainly match the uncle I last encountered when I was eight. I do suppose that living in such close proximity to his place of work would have made encountering him on-duty an inevitability if given enough time.”

“I just can’t believe it.”

“I share your disbelief, Eddy, but perhaps our beliefs flew in the face of logical deduction.”

“And I still can’t believe you’re related to a guy like that.”

“That’s the thing, Eddy…”

“What?”

Double-D was looking down at his folded hands, trying to piece together what was not completely clear to him either. “I confess that I harbor a strong distaste for this man, but as I heard his voice again, I began to wonder whether I only resent him because of what are informed flaws.”

“Eddy, Double-D’s using big words again, and it’s making me feel like my head is lifting off of my body to blast off into space fight the bad guys from *Rejects of an Alien World 2.*”

“That’s ‘cause you’re sitting too close to the gas fumes, Ed.”

“Ed, what I mean is that as much as I heard aggression and malice in his voice, it reminded me of all the times I actually interacted with him, and I must say that the personality I remember is very incongruous with what I heard outside those doors. I’m starting to wonder if I ever really witnessed him engage in anything evil. I do remember that he was rather uncouth and--”

“Huh?”
“...He was rather improper in demeanor.”

“Like how?”

“Like you heard, constantly swearing and showing complete disregard for formal pronunciation or grammar. Furthermore, he would often leave abhorrent messes about and wore clothes with holes in them and ate as would a savage, and even as a child I noticed this. I know for certain my parents noticed this, and after we stopped seeing him around, my parents told me about shameful and unscrupulous things he had done in his life, ranging from that which is embarrassing to the downright despicable.”

“Double-D, it ain’t just Ed bein’ Ed, I’m lost. Where are you going with this?”

Double-D sighed and looked up again to match Eddy’s gaze. “As simply as I can put it Eddy, I think I’ve had an epiphany that I once knew my uncle as a man who, despite his poor manners, was actually rather kind-hearted, at least toward me. I think that I had only begun to hate him when my parent’s cautionary tales of his misdeeds began to outweigh the positive memories I recall of him. Does that make sense?”

Eddy held his hand out and tilted it side to side while putting on a confused wince. Ed simply cocked his head.

Double-D sighed and gave it another go. “I… think… I used to think… that he -- my uncle Ward -- I used to think -- when I was a little kid, I mean -- I used to think he was a ‘cool’ uncle. But my parents didn’t like him. So when we stopped seeing him, they… they told me all the bad things they could about him… until I believed them. And if that was indeed him out there, perhaps they were right. About his being a bad man. Was that… can you comprehend that?”

“Double-D, don’t talk to us like you think we’re stupid.”

“Oh, for the love of--!” But he bit his tongue. “Do you get what I’m saying or not, Eddy?”

“Double-D, chill out, I get it. He was your favorite uncle until your parents brainwashed you.”

“But also--”

Gasp! “Double-D’s been brainwashed!”

“Ed, no.”

“That’s not the whole picture, Ed--”

“We must un-cleanse him!”

“Ed, calm down.”

“‘Un-cleanse me’!?”

“I will sop the bleach from your head, Double-D!”

“Ed, shush!”

“Ed, what do you--!? Aah!”

Sluuuuurp.
“Ed!”
“Ed, unhand me!”

Shluuur-up!

“Goddammit, Ed!”

“This is disgusting!”

Slurrrrp.

“AAARGH!”

“Both of you, shut up, you’re gonna get us all killed!”

“I can feel his saliva in my ear canal!”

“Do you hear voices?” asked a peculiarly British accent from far away, with a tinge of an echo; at least that was their best guess at what was said, as it was a bit hard to hear.

Silence returned to the van. The three of them disengaged from their struggle and turned toward the open window.

“Not really,” asked a much more American voice, also distorted by distance and topography.

“Of course, now that I ask, I can’t hear them anymore,” Robin lamented. No longer seeing the need to stay still and attentive, he kept making his way around the mound of trash.

“Maybe they heard us?” Little John posited as he began following again, adjusting the quarterstaff with bindles so it rested more comfortably on his shoulder.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. If there’s anybody here, we have our wits and our weapons about us.”

“And if they have a shotgun or something?”

“Our wits and our weapons are stronger than the sum of their parts, Johnny. Have some faith in yourself.”

“I’m telling ya, Rob, if it’s just gonna be the two of us, we ought to invest in a firearm.”

“Johnny, my boy, when did you develop such a bloodlust?”

“I meant just to have. For emergencies. Which we keep winding up in.” Little John squeezed past a washing machine that was smack dab in the middle of the valley between the two mountains.

“Oh, you Americans and your guns…” Robin stopped to look at a pile of cans to see if any contained something they could use. They didn’t.

“Hey, Rob, you don’t know my people like I know my people.”

“But am I not one of your people now?”

“I dunno, Rob, do you wanna pull over and remind yourself how long ago your green card expired?”

“Oh, piss off, Little John,” was Robin’s friendly scoff. “I’ve been here for, what?... Eleven years
now? I’ll take the citizenship test in front of their eyes if they want me to. I’m qualified.”

“I thought you already took the test and failed,” Little John said with a smirk.

“I didn’t fail, Little John, I just didn’t stick around long enough to find out if I passed,” Robin corrected with confidence as he stepped over an old bicycle in his way.


“Quiz me then!” Robin was nearing the clearing at the exit of the valley.

“Alright, fine. Uh…” Little John tried to think of a good one as he picked up the bicycle with his free hand and tossed it onto the mound with a muffled crash. “Okay, here’s an easy one. Who was president the year you were born?”

“That would be-- Oh, Lord.”

“Nope! It was Nixon, you limey bastard! And you said you--”

Little John caught up to Robin and saw what had inspired his remark. It looked as though the center of one of the mountains could not hold and now there was a bunch of junk splayed all over the place. It didn’t quite look like a bomb went off, but the scene certainly could bring that old idiom into one’s mind.

“...Oh,” muttered Little John. “For the record, I thought you said ‘Ford.’”

“What? Oh, that. No, no, no. Ford wasn’t inaugurated until Nixon resigned the summer after I was born.”

“Huh. Well, alright then.”

“So evidently… these piles can just collapse at any time.”

“I was afraid there were other people in here with weapons and you basically called me a pussy; now you’re afraid of a little bit of structural un-integrity after living in a tree for seven years?”

“I’m not afraid, but I am apprehensive. I’m sure that another collapse like this isn’t likely, but I just had a thought that it would be ridiculous if after all we’ve been through, we died in an avalanche of garbage.”

Little John took his own assessment of the damage from his higher vantage point. He saw something way off to the right, around a bend almost hidden behind the slope of the same mountain that they were just working their way around.

“Maybe we could stay in there?” he pointed.

“Where?”

“There.”

“I don’t see anything, John.”

Little John gave Robin a look of frustration, and as he looked down at him, he realized that because of the slope of the mound, its base was thicker at Robin’s eye-level and he genuinely couldn’t see what he was pointing at. Little John put down his staff and grabbed Robin under the armpits, and before the fox could protest, Little John lifted him up and thrust him in the direction
of his discovery.

“There.”

“...Do you mean the van?”

“I mean the van.”

“I don’t see why not. Let’s check it out!”

Little John put Robin back down gently. “There ya go, little guy.”

Robin picked up the bow he dropped during the sudden altitude change. “Hey now, I’m not the one with little in his name, now am I, Little John?” he ribbed a bit loudly.

“What can I say?” Little John picked up his staff and placed it back on his shoulder. “I come from a long line of bears with a great sense of humor,” he proclaimed proudly. They both knew that wasn’t a completely accurate explanation of the etymological quirk, but if Little John were ever to be in the mood to discuss it, it certainly wasn’t going to be now.

“Okay, so now we know one of them’s a bear, and I think his name is... ‘Little John’?” Eddy whispered to his boys, breaking the silence; those last few sentences were the first they could truly hear clearly. “That’s a stupid name, but... Ed, would you be able to do the talking to this guy if he gels with you?”

“But what if he’s mean like Dad is!?”

“That’s why you’d be doing the talking.” They were whispering just loudly enough that the voices of the two outsiders were obscured, even as they did get closer.

“While I will concede that this ‘Little John’ character seems like he may be an aggressive personality, judging purely by his voice,” Double-D observed, “it also seems like he is being fairly jovial to this other fellow -- did I hear ‘Ron’ or ‘Bob’? But I have to ask, Eddy, do you really think that Ed would be the best ambassador to his ursine brethren?”

“People like talking to people who look like them, Double-D. When you grow up, you’ll realize that.”

“Would you rather speak to fox you didn’t know than a stranger of any other persuasion?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Now hush, I think they’re getting clo--”

“Well, the window’s open!” remarked Ron-Bob the British Person. “If it’s locked, we can at least open it from the inside!”

“It actually looks like somebody broke it,” noted Little John the Presumably-American Bear. “See the jagged little pieces sticking up from the bottom?”

“Ah, good eye, Johnny.”

Then they saw him. A distinctly canine head welcomed itself in, craning into the window frame and looking straight down at the glass in the passenger’s seat. Nothing registered in his peripheral vision in the brief moment between his head entering the van and when the seat’s headrest began to block the beings in the corner from his line of vision.

“Remind me not to sit in the passenger seat!”
“Eddy! He looks just like you!”

Ed was wrong. Despite being members of the same species, they looked noticeably dissimilar. This guy had fur that was almost blood red with dirty-snow grayish-white, whereas Eddy and his kin had a mix light tan on a rustier, almost-orange red. Furthermore, Eddy thought there was something strange about how this fox was just leaning into the window of a truck this large; was he standing on something? But Robin didn’t know about the inaccuracy of the comparison yet when he jumped from surprise and turned toward the sound of the voice.

“Oh! I, uh… a thousand apologies, gentlemen! I didn’t see you there!”

Eddy and Double-D were too shocked and confused to say a word. Ed was disoriented by the big words again and decided to sit this round out.

“Wait, Rob, there’s people in there!?” The boys could hear Little John right outside the window but they still couldn’t see him.

“Er-- Excuse me for a moment, lads.” Robin pulled his head out and addressed Little John. “Put these under the van for a second,” they heard him whisper from out-of-sight.

“Wait, why?” Little John asked at full volume.

“Shh! I think they’re just kids, we don’t need to scare them.”

“Do they not wish to scare us so they can make us feel comfortable before they do harm to us?” Double-D pondered softly. Eddy and Ed had no good answers to that.

Some shuffling was heard of objects being shoved under the vehicle. Robin stuck his head back in and went to place his hands on the windowsill, forgetting that it was not quite suitable for resting his palms.

“Sorry about that; now do you boys live he-- gah! Bloody… fucking hell!”

“What did I miss now?” asked the bear.

“I forgot about the bloody glass!” Robin pulled himself away from the window to show Little John, who was just now standing back up.

“Jeez, Rob, how do you forget about broken glass two seconds after you pointed it out?”

“I’m tired and my mind is wandering, Little-- fuck, that actually does hurt!”

“Robin,” Little John whispered mindfully this time, “you run from bullets on a regular basis and you can’t take a few cuts?”

The Eds didn’t hear that, thinking instead there was a lamentful silence between the two strangers. Ed was still silent, fascinated by this man who he would have swore looked just like Eddy, and Eddy himself was still trying to make heads or tails of whether these two were friendly or fiend-ly. Double-D, meanwhile, was trying to assess this situation in the context of everything they’d been through that morning.

“Rob, stop squeezing your hands, you’re just drawing more blood out,” Little John insisted as he continued trying to account for the damage. Before Robin could answer, however, there was a voice the two of them had never heard.
“E-excuse me, Mister… ‘Rob,’ is it?”
Robin perked up and leaned back toward the van. “Did someone say my name?”

“Y-yes, I do apologize, we couldn’t help but overhear your conversations, and we picked up on recurring names along the way. B-b-but, uh, more to the point: are you in need of first aid assistance?”

“Double-D, what are you doing!?” whispered Eddy.

“I don’t want to take Eddy’s long-lost cousin to the doctor, Double-D! The doctor is scary and his lollipops taste like apricots!” whispered Ed.

“Oh, no thank you, I don’t think we need any help, young man, we -- aah! -- we’ve some supplies in our--”

“Robin!” barked Little John as silently as he could, “You just said you wanted to hide the weapons! The supplies are tied to my staff!”

“Oh, how will they even know it’s supposed to be a weapon?”

“Well if you draw attention to the staff, the bow’s right next to it! And they’ll wonder why our shit’s under their van when we just got here!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite hear that,” said Double-D.

“Er, uh…” Robin leaned back into the window and craned his neck to see around the headrest. “C-come to think of it, we’ve misplaced our medical kit, so if you have something that -- g’shah! -- something that could help, I’d much appreciate it!”

“You know what, Mr. Rob? For your comfort, I invite you to come to the back of the van. We’ll open the doors for you.”

“What!” gasped Eddy.

“Oh, that would be splendid, thank -- ghee-yah! -- thank you, my boy.”

This Robin fellow pulled his head out and disappeared toward the rear of the truck. Double-D took a deep breath as he stood, and he walked slowly toward the front of the van to maintain his footing on the waterbed mattress. Eddy thought Double-D was being paranoid when he stocked first-aid supplies in the van’s glove compartment just in case they’d ever need it, but now it was finally being made useful, and in what great timing as well. Double-D had worked his whole life to be a model citizen, student, and son, and now some unwitting misadventures with his associates had landed him an arrest warrant and likely a criminal record, possibly to be carried out by his maybe-good, maybe-evil uncle. If these men were dangerous, it was worth the risk to serve them, to do good as an act of penance for his misdeeds. The opportunity for redemption was well worth the price of any harm these strangers could inflict upon him. After all, he was prepared for death at any moment.

Double-D leaned over to the glove compartment, careful not to fall into the bed of glass shards on the seat cushion. He grabbed the little red-and-white pouch and made his way back to the rear doors. At this point, if there was no dangerous excitement to be had when those floodgates were opened, he would actually be kind of disappointed.

“Are you seriously going to help these guys?” Eddy interrogated in vexed disbelief.
“I’m going to try to be a good person, Eddy, and if you don’t wish to help me in that, then stay out of my way.”

Click, grind… squeeakeak.

“Thank you, good sir,” said the gentleman fox, “Pleasure to finally get a good look at you boys.”

Next to him was the bear the Eds had heard so much about, leaning sideways to be able to see into the back of the van. “Do him a favor and don’t read too much into that, alright?” Seeing his face in conjunction with his voice did nothing to help the boys discern whether this bear was being dryly playful or coolly threatening.

Eddy had the most visceral reaction to seeing them. For one thing, there was another bit of strangeness about this Rob fellow’s appearance: he didn’t seem to have any ‘gloves.’ Not real winter-wear, of course, as it was damn-nigh the height of June, but rather the distinct discoloration around the hands and feet and tail sported by every fox Eddy had ever seen. Some, like those in Eddy’s family, had black gloves, others white, and some just a slightly lighter or darker shade than the rest of their coat, but this dude’s hands were just plain red -- bloodstains notwithstanding. Eddy would later make a mental note to try to see if this guy had anything going around his feet or tail, without being too weird or obvious that he was looking for demarcations in such odd places.

But never mind all of that: just as Eddy had feared when he saw him in the window, this guy was fucking huge. Granted, his shins were out of frame underneath the bumper, but Eddy could extrapolate that he was probably the tallest fox he’d ever seen in his entire life, and Eddy really didn’t want to see such a creature. Being crippling paranoid with height, Eddy knew four numbers: 3-foot-2, which was how tall his mom was, and which was the average height for a female adult red fox in the United States, and which was the bare-ass minimum Eddy would allow himself to be as an adult without blowing his brains out; 3-foot-4 was the average height for an adult male of his species; his brother was 3-7 or 3-8 and his dad was considered fox-tall at 3-foot-9 (a potential fifth relevant number Eddy knew was four feet even, which is what his brother and father put when prompted for their height on documents and such, since they assumed -- correctly - - that nobody would correct them, and that the taller mammals that ran everything couldn’t perceive a four inch difference from up on high). Eddy had done his research, because of course he did, and for that reason he also knew that red foxes were a species with a notably wide height range; but just as it didn’t comfort him knowing that there were some poor fucks out there who were shorter as adults than even him as a stunted teenager, he did not feel very self-confident in the presence of a man who surely must have been a head taller than Eddy’s own dad and brother.

And yet -- and yet -- here was this brown bear that this giant was hanging out with that paradoxically make the fox look tiny at the same time. While doing his research, Eddy had seen that bears were also on the list of species with a wide range of plausible adult heights, and this “Little John” was certainly not the tallest specimen Eddy had seen or heard of, but just by eyeballing him, Eddy could guestimate that he was still significantly taller than Ed or Ed’s father (the last time Eddy checked, those two were roughly the same height, much to Mr. Browne’s chagrin). And yet again, this bear didn’t look particularly huge -- he didn’t look stretched out and his head didn’t look disproportionately small on his body. If not for the van for reference, Eddy might guess that this guy looked a foot or more shorter from far away. That, in turn, made the fox look even smaller, even though Eddy knew he wasn’t, so if you just focused your eyes on the fox and treated his bear bud as a background object, the fox would look tall again, but then you remember the bear isn’t just a piece of the scenery and that dangling elbow roughly level to the fox’s ear belongs to a sapient being and now you’re not so sure about anything...

Eddy’s brain processed all of these thoughts in the span of a few milliseconds. Between the
paradoxical height, abnormal color scheme to his fur, and the supremely out-of-place British accent, Eddy wondered if he was actually having a horrible nightmare and these figurants were monsters, or perhaps he’d been gravely wounded by a cop’s bullet and these were demons come to torment him as he lay dying. But all Eddy really cared about was that he wouldn’t have to stand next to this Englishman and find out how he measured up. He’d rather it be a mystery.

Double-D, by virtue of not sharing Eddy’s deep-seated size paranoia, was able to take a much more empirical assessment of these guests, and draw educated conclusions accordingly. He did still note the above-average physical frames in front of him, but shrugged it off as a weird quirk, thinking that between these two and his friend-cum-foe uncle, whom he also recalled being notably taller than his parents, Double-D hadn’t witnessed this many incidentally freakishly tall characters in rapid succession since he finished reading that 1100-page novel over Spring Break by an author who evidently had even more of an obsession with tall and short people than Eddy did; but Double-D simply dismissed this as a bizarre coincidence, albeit one compounded by the fact that this same novel was also the source for his newfound fatalistic mantra.

He was more focused on the fact that the Englishman was rather well-dressed with a lincoln-green polo shirt, and while his American associate was not quite as buttoned-up, he did not look by any means disheveled in his forest-green jacket; he did notice the bear’s jacket had slightly-dark spots that suggested the letters “J”, “E”, “T”, and “S” were once emblazoned on the jacket, and Double-D barely recalled that to be the name of some sports team from New York (God help him if he could remember which sport they played), but he wrote this off as the bear either being reasonably thrifty and continuing to wear a fully-functional coat after its decals had fallen off, or perhaps he peeled them off himself if he shared Double-D’s disdain for sports.

A fox and a bear. Double-D was the first to make the connection. But curiously, he consciously told himself that these couldn’t be the two suspects being sought by law enforcement; this fox was simply too eloquent to be on the wrong side of the law, and this bear surely must be an upright fellow to make his gentlemanly acquaintance, and after all, why would a British national come all the way across the ocean just to turn to a life of crime?

Poor Double-D didn’t even notice that the letters expunged from the bear’s jacket, as if to allow its wearer to hide more easily among greenery and have fewer unique details about him when standing in a crowd, these details sitting right in front of his nose, were a major clue that his conclusion was off-base. If you told him that he also neglected to realize that green clothes would best blend into a forest’s leaves, Double-D might have just dropped dead from sheer embarrassment.

As for Ed, he only saw one logical response to laying eyes upon them.

“Eddy! It’s you and me from the future!”

“Oh, c’mon, Ed…” grumbled Eddy.

“Cool! You turn into one of those people with funny accents!”

Upon seeing such a chipper young man excited by his own imagination, Robin couldn’t help but smile. Little John would normally join in the joviality, but he was tired, frustrated and thoroughly confused, so he just looked unimpressed.

“Gasp! But where’s Double-D!?” worried Ed.

“Oh, don’t you worry about me, Ed, I--”
Afraid for his friend, Ed grabbed him and hugged him tightly. “Poor Double-D! He was torn apart by mutant robots in the Mecha-Apocalypse! Huh! No! He was devoured by the reanimated cadaver of the Giant Peruvian Tapeworm from *Hunger from Another Hemisphere*! Nonono, I know what happened! *His brain exploded from being too smart!*

“Uh, Ed--” Double-D choked out, “you’re embarrassing me in front of our guests.” In the close contact, Double-D could almost feel the salt from Ed’s delusional tears sting in his own eyes.

Robin chuckled. “Heh, have we interrupted a special mome--?”

“You boys see the man’s hands bleeding all over the place, right?” Little John cut in.

“Oh!” Ed realized, “Double-D, you need to help heal Future Eddy!” He finally let go of the wolf and Double-D wheezed as his lungs regained full functionality. “Otherwise I’ll be all alone to fight the robo-mutants myself!”

“Of course, Ed,” Double-D conceded. He made a point to wait a few seconds before making eye contact with the adults for lack of wanting to have to answer for Ed’s antics. Instead he made his way over to the fox’s outheld hands and took a seat at on the edge of the bumper.

“May I examine the wounds, Mr. Rob?” Double-D didn’t grab the bleeding paws yet, but didn’t wait for an answer to start looking at them hands-free.

“Young man, I beg you not call me ‘Mr. Rob,’ ‘Robin’ is just fine.” He gave a playful glance up at Little John. “Or just ‘Rob’ if you really can’t be bothered with a second syllable.” Little John didn’t even acknowledge that Robin said that. “And yes, do with them as you must.”

“Oh, but I would feel so insolent if I were to address an adult by their given name.” Double-D grabbed the paws in his face and looked at the depth and frequency of cuts.

“Well then, you were raised well. But luckily for you, my given name is actually *Robert*; ‘Robin’ was a family nickname that everybody preferred; I often wonder if my parents had buyers’ remorse with the name they bestowed on me. ‘Robin’ actually started out as an nickname for ‘Robert,’ did you know?”

“Is that so? How intriguing!” Double-D would have thought it incredibly rude to point out that he, in fact, already know that.

“Robin’s a girls’ name, but okay,” muttered a cynical Eddy, but nobody had anything to say to that, so they all acted like he said nothing at all. Eddy was still glad he said it, however, as he felt it legitimized a leg up he had on this tall guy.

“Now, Mister, uh…” Double-D struggled for the correct title.

“My good man, if you absolutely insist, you can call me Mr. Hood.”

Little John nudged Robin in annoyance. “Jeez, Rob, just hand him a copy of your life’s memoirs, it might save us some time.”

Eddy, who was trying really hard not to focus on his boiling jealousy, found himself agreeing with that statement. He was liking this Little John guy’s responses to everything.

“Splendid, Mr. Hood,” Double-D continued. “Now, it seems that your cuts are not too deep at all, but they are quite numerous, so common adhesive strips likely would not get the job done. With your permission, may I apply some gauze and bandages?”
“Be my guest!”

As Double-D went searching in his pouch for the relevant supplies, Robin made a point to exchange friendly smiles with the other two boys, who were being incredibly quiet in all this. He decided that if he was going to be a guest in their space, and ultimate ask if they could borrow this space, that he might as well try to make the atmosphere more amicable.

“So unless my ears deceive me,” ventured Robin, “I’m the guest of both an ‘Ed’ and an ‘Eddy’? Both short for ‘Edward,’ I presume?”

Ed was still reeling in the presence of future iterations of himself and his buddy, while Eddy’s mind was halfway to elsewhere trying not to perish in a spiraling hole of self-pity.

“Uh… yeah, that’s right,” Eddy coughed out.

“A fine English name! And my caretaker, I hear they call you ‘Double-D’. What might that stand for?”

“I’ll bet a quarter it’s something boring like ‘David Daniel’,” Little John offered. This was another sentence from the adult bear that the young fox was intrigued by.

‘Actually, it’s also short for ‘Edward,’ but with three d’s, with two consecutively after the initial E; it’s an old family tradition from my mother’s side,” Double-D clarified.

“Heh, pay up,” Eddy chuckled nervously. The bear returned the weak chuckle but showed no indication of actually producing currency. Eddy was starting to have second thoughts about warming up to this guy.

“Now, Mr. Hood, is it alright if I apply some hydrogen peroxide to reduce the risk of infection?”

“Surely.” As Double-D poured some antiseptic onto a cotton ball, Robin went to further bridge the gap. “So I’m in the presence of three young men all named Edward, am I? I wasn’t going to mention this, but--”

Double-D applied the peroxide to the cuts, swabbing liberally to spread the moisture as well as to mop up the blood. Robin seethed and tried not to seem to emasculated by the penetrating stinging.

“Hhhhhhhhh!... As I was saying, I should have no problem remembering your names, since Edward’s my middle name as well! Funny how things work out!”

“Hm. Really!” Double-D said, genuinely fascinated by this coincidence, assuming that it wasn’t all just a ruse to gain their trust.

“And our friend Little John over here is just barely locked out of our club; his mid-- Hhhhh!” Robin hissed as Double-D started cleaning the other hand with a fresh cotton swab.

“For the record, Rob, I didn’t consent to you airing out all my personal details,” Little John grumbled.

“Why, what on earth are you talking about, John Edmund Little?” Robin chuckled.

“Eddy, can you write those names down?” Ed asked. “We need to make sure we don’t mess up our future selves when we change our names, or we might irreparably destroy the future!”

Eddy just shot him a dirty look; it was the best he could do, since he probably couldn’t get a word
out from the embarrassment of not knowing what irreparably meant if even Ed did.

Robin chuckled affably again, and not just to be polite; he was seriously getting a kick out of watching these kids and their bizarre dynamics. “Well, if you didn’t know our names before now, there will be little need for you to know them them after we part. This will all just be a pleasant encounter.” But someone among them perceived some arrogance in that statement, and felt the need to challenge it.

“Wait,” Eddy spoke up, “why would we already know your names? Are you famous or something?”

“Er… in some circles, perhaps. But aren’t we all?”

“So Mr. Robert Edward Hood, is it?” asked Double-D as he unwound the spool of bandages. “Well! For history’s sake, it’s probably a good thing your last name isn’t Lee!”

“Now why would it be a good thing that that isn’t my last name?” Robin asked. Hearing this, Double-D tried to hide a look of disappointment on his face; this gentleman had proven himself to be so learned before this bump in the road, and Double-D shamefully confessed to himself that this passing moment of fallibility was deflating his opinion of the stranger.

Little John nudged Robin again and stood up straight so the boys couldn’t read his lips above the doorway. “There’s no way you would have passed that citizenship test,” he whispered. Robin was puzzled for a second, but he ultimately got the reference.

Robin turned back to Double-D, who was wrapping up the fox’s left paw. Robin looked past him and saw an ironing board along the side of the mattress and some generators and extension cords pushed toward the front, and figured there was no time like the present to pop the relevant question.

“So you had these medical supplies in the van ready to go. May I ask, do you boys live here? Are you in need of any help?”

Eddy looked confused; Double-D looked embarrassed; Ed looked at a fly crawling on the wall. “Uh--” Double-D sputtered, “Why, I--”

“Oh, Christ, no, we don’t live here!” said Eddy, “This is just a place we hang out sometimes. Do we look like we’re homeless to you?”

Robin admired the kid’s spunk but didn’t care for his snark. “Oh, I do apologize if it seemed like I was making assumptions; between this and the power source, I was a bit thrown-off.”

“Power source,’ what now?” Little John bent over further to get a good look at the interior; from his high angle of view, he hadn’t been able to see much deeper into the van past the boys.

“Oh, that’s just for, uh…” Double-D squirmed as he conjured up a worthy fib. “…um, for diversionary activities! Yes!”

Robin was debating whether he could mine any relevant information from asking what kind of activities?, but Eddy had a more urgent question.

“Hey! Are you guys cops or something!?” Eddy’s fear of getting busted on the first day of his new operation was no match for the desire to defy the ones who dared suggest that he, Eddy the Inevitable Future Millionaire, were a homeless person.
“Eddy!” barked an embarrassed Double-D.

“I beg your pardon?” demanded an offended Little John.

Robin was also taken aback by the outburst, but he was certain that cooler heads would prevail, so he forced another chuckle out. “Oh, my lad, -- Eddy, is it? -- I wouldn’t have moved across the ocean just to join a police force.”

“Wait, where’re you from that’s across the ocean? I thought you were British or something.”

Robin couldn’t even pretend to be amused by that one. He shot Little John an unimpressed look, which John returned with a look of Hey, this kid doesn’t represent me. Double-D forced himself to focus more closely on wrapping up the injured paw, trying desperately to disappear in plain sight.

“Why, do you got sumpthin’ to hide, kid?” asked Little John.

“Uh-- no!” coughed Eddy.

“Y-you’ll have to forgive Eddy, Mister, um, Little, is it? He’s, uh, just… very private about his procection. D’no! I mean… protective about his privacy.”

“I’ll say,” mumbled Little John; he just wanted to go to bed at this point. “Can we cut to the chase?”

“The chase?” pressed Eddy, “What chase?”

“Did you want to play tag?!” Ed proposed, then leaned over to the older bear and laid a hand on his forearm. “Tag! You’re--!”

“Nope,” was all Little John replied, cowing Ed into retreating and acting like their exchange never happened.

“What Little John means is--” started Robin, but Little John wasn’t in any mood to have anybody speak on his behalf.

“Can we borrow this place for a few nights?” Little John spat. “...And days?”

“You really must excuse Little John; he’s really usually much more affable than this when things are going well. But right now? Things are all but well at the moment,” Robin took the reins again and tried to exercise his charm for some damage control. “You see, we -- oh, I don’t want to upset you with our problems, but -- our apartment caught fire, and--”

“Oh, my, I’m so sorry to hear that!” Double-D interjected.

“You two live together?” Eddy asked in a way that sounded more malicious than genuinely confused.

“Ahh, yes, it’s not the greatest arrangement, but we are struggling actors, trying to cut our teeth in the Nottingham theatre scene so we can work our way up to Hollywood one day.”

“Yeah, so you don’t have to worry about us defiling your personal space, kid,” Little John said with eyes locked on Eddy, “if that is what you were asking.”

Eddy tried his best not to look intimidated.

“So imagine our dejection when our microwave caught fire last night while we were cooking
“dinner!” Robin continued. “Silly me, I left a shard of aluminium foil on the edge of the bowl! The fire wasn’t too bad, and we were very lucky that most of our possessions were unharmed, but the damage was done and our landlord said it would be a few days until our flat would be liveable again. And broke as we are, we can’t just go to a hotel and rent a room. So we went looking for some cheap real estate to tide us over.”

“Oh, my,” Double-D repeated, as it was the politest, most inoffensive response he knew. “That sounds downright dreadful! What a poor streak of fortune!”

“So you live in the city, and now you’re looking for a place to stay in a junkyard in the suburbs?” Eddy was skeptical.

“We--”

“It was a long night,” Little John growled. Looking at Eddy again, that certainly got the point across.

“Indeed it was,” finished Robin, “and so we were hoping we could seek shelter in this old van, and then we met you fine lads. We were going to leave it be since we thought this was your own dwelling, but if you have other homes to go back to, I’ll admit, we’re curious if we could work something out.” He was looking right into Double-D’s eyes, trying to appeal to the obvious smart one in the group, and Double-D looked back into the eyes of the master of bullshitting extemporaneously, from whom he could stand to learn a few lessons.

“Are we gonna have a sleepover!?” ventured Ed.

“Shit, works for me,” said Little John.

“Oh, get the fuck outta here!” hollered Eddy. “We’ve been taking care of this old rustbox for, what? Two years now? Just like it was a second home. This is our house! Finders, keepers; losers, get lost!”

“The little shit’s got moxie, I’ll give him that,” mumbled Little John, who was fading fast.

“Easy for you to say, Mister Fucking Beluga Whale! You wouldn’t last two days if you were my size!”

A couple of mispronounced syllables in that phrase rattled some unpleasant memories in Little John, but they were so deeply embedded in that sentence that even Robin didn’t pick up on them. Little John really wanted to pick this kid up and dropkick him to the moon, but he knew that Robin would never see him as a good man again if he took out his frustrations on a child, so he came up with the most composed and concise reply he could think of:

“You…. don’t know shit… about my life.”

“Oh, you really must pardon my pal Johnny, he really is not being himself today,” Robin jumped in. “I only wish you could have met us when we were fully rested so you could see the man I know as almost like a brother to me.”

“You stay out of this, Rob.”

“Not to worry, Mr. Hood, I’ve not seen him instigating any conflict here,” Double-D reassured. “If anything, I’d ask if you were interested in a trade for Eddy!”

“You son of a bitch, Double-D! Back me up!”
“Now, while my fellow foxes might chastise me for abandoning one of our own,” Robin said, “I would still be interested in a negotiation. We can’t afford a hotel room, but we can probably afford to pay you a little something for your hospitality.”

A shockwave rang out through the air, one that only Eddy could perceive.

“Pay?”

“Oh, I do believe you’ve just said one of Eddy’s favorite words!” remarked Double-D.

“Hm. Is that so?” Robin was starting to have second thoughts about the other fox -- and the other two boys for associating with him. But he wasn’t writing them off just yet.

“What can I say? I’m a fan of economics,” Eddy insisted slyly.

“Ah, macro- or micro-?” Robin quizzed him playfully.

“Uh… what?”

“Mr. Hood, please disregard him,” Double-D implored of the Englishman, “He’s not been on his best behavior today, and he doesn’t deserve any type of financial reward for his conduct.”

“Double-D, what the hell are you talking about!?”

“I’m trying to do the right thing, Eddy.”

“And I admire your noble quest to do what you think is right, but are you certain we can’t give you anything?” Robin turned to Little John, whose head was invisible above the roof of the van. “Little John, don’t you have twenty dollars on you?”

“TWENTY FUCKING DOLLARS!?” Eddy screamed at the top of his lungs.

Little John wasn’t responding. Robin nudged his arm while looking up and realized he couldn’t see his head. “Joh-Johny? You alright, lad?”

“Hm?” Little John woke up groggily. Restraining himself toward Eddy had drained his remaining energy and he had promptly rested his chin on the roof of the van and fell asleep.

“Johnny, do you have a twenty spot on you?”

Elsewhere, Eddy was drowning in his own saliva.

“Hm. Oh, yeah. Why?”

“Because we’re negotiating,” -- a wink in the eye on the side of his head which the Eds couldn’t see -- “with our friend Eddy for room and board.”

“Oh, sure, fine by me,” Little John said sloppily as he fished in his jacket pocket and produced a Jackson.

“Money!” cried out the only one of the five who could be reasonably expected to cry that out.

Eddy went for the piece of paper in Little John’s hand, but the bear boredly held it up to the roof, out of Eddy’s reach. The tiny fox jumped on the edge of the water bed trying to get the leverage to reach the outheld dollar, whimpering in money-lust the whole time, until after a half a dozen bounces he arced too far forward and fell out of the van between Little John and Robin, landing in
the dirt with a thump.

“I insist,” insisted Double-D, “keep the money. After hearing what you’ve been through, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing I extorted money out of you in exchange for basic decency. I only hope this humble abode sufficiently suits your needs.”

“Please don’t say ‘sleep,’” Little John murmured lazily, eyes struggling to stay open. Then they burst open with the feeling of an unwelcome touch and a now-familiar sound of whimpering. “He-hey! Get the hell off me, kid!”

Eddy was trying to do the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest during an earthquake as he clambered up the squirming bear, trying to get the legal tender at the end of his arm.

“Eddy, get down from there!” scolded Double-D.

“You have to respect his resilience,” noted Robin.

Little John wiggled violently and Eddy lost his footing; another few shakes and he was splayed on the ground again.

“Goddamn, kid....” Little John said incredulously.

“Aw, c’mon!” Eddy growled as soon as he got back up. “I’m not giving up my property without proper reimbursement!”

“Eddy, we wouldn’t be able to split twenty dollars three ways anyway.”

“Sure you can! Ten, ten, and fifteen! Now cough up the dough!”

“Oh--! Mr. Hood, you’ll have to trust me that Eddy is not an accurate representation of the average product of the American schooling system!”

“It’s quite alright, my boy,” Robin reassured. Neither of them believed what Double-D said.

“My money!” Eddy screamed while pounding on the ground on which he sat, looking not unlike a toddler in more ways than usual.

“Mr. Hood, Mr. Little, you’re going to have to forgive my two associates for leaving without saying goodbye.” With that, Double-D pulled out the ace up his sleeve. He stepped out of the van and took a spot next to Robin to clear the exit. “Oh, Ed? Isn’t there a movie marathon on the Sci-Fi Channel this afternoon?”

Ed perked up. “Movie marathon?”

“And I’m sure that Eddy would hate to miss it, too!”

“Uh… Double-D?” Eddy whimpered.

“Monster movies!” Ed hollered as he sat up straight from his semi-reclining position -- and promptly hit his head on the roof of the van. Undeterred, he twisted himself out of the van, forced his way past Double-D and the strangers, picked up Eddy, threw him over his shoulder, and ran off toward home.

“Ed!” Eddy shrieked, “There’s a marathon on every weekend! Calm down! Double-D, don’t you want jawbreakers!?”
Ed screeched to a halt. “Wait. Something is missing.” Ed turned back to the three by the van. “Double-D, aren’t you coming, too?”

“I’ll be right behind you, Ed! I’m just seeing off our new friends!”

“OKAY!” Ed cheered as he ran off. “More monster movie for Ed and Eddy!”

“Ed!” cried Eddy. And then they were gone.

The other three just stood there watching, horrified, amused, and astounded.

“...Welp!” Little John broke the silence. “Thanks for the room! G’night!” He offered a two-finger temple salute before starting to crawl into the van.

“Little John, we haven’t said our goodbyes yet!” Robin corrected.

“Well, for fuck’s sakes, Mom, aren’t you tired, too?” Little John backed out and took a seat on the dirt, leaning lazily against the van. He still towered over the fox and the wolf from his seated position.

“Absolutely exhausted,” Robin clarified and turned to the young wolf, whom all three found was curiously still a solid few inches taller than Robin. “Eddward, I cannot thank you enough for your help. Little John and I are indebted to you. We may move some of your stuff around for comfort’s sake, but I assure you, this van will be as pristine as you left it.”

“And we’ll be gone as soon as we have somewhere else to go,” Little John added, “With any luck, we might be gone by morning.”

“Oh, good sirs, it’s a pleasure to be able to aid you in your time of need. If you’d like, I can stop by periodically to check in on how you’re doing. Perhaps I can provide you with some supplies. Some toiletries, perhaps?”

“Eddward, you needn’t worry about us. We’ve been through tougher hardships than this; we’ll be just fine.”

“Oh, but I insist! Can I at least fetch you some hand sanitizer? Or perhaps I can take down the number of your landlord and call to ask for updates on the situation of the--?”

“Eddward, Eddward, Eddward. You’ve assisted us in being able to live our lives; now we ask that you not let us impede you in living yours. Would you do that for us?”

Double-D thought for a moment. “Well, Mr. Hood, I offered our place to you because I wanted to do the right thing... I suppose heeding your well-wishing would be the next logical step toward that end.”

“Attaboy, lad! I hope your parents know they raised a good boy.”

Double-D’s cheeks grew hot with this affirmation of his goodness.

“Mr. Hood, it’s been a pleasure to meet you and I certainly do hope to see you again before you depart. And to you, Mister--” Double-D glanced at Little John dozing against the van. “Oh, he’s fallen asleep again.”

“Just because my eyes are closed and I’m not talking or moving doesn’t mean I’m asleep,” Little John corrected.
“Oh! My apologies, Mr. Little!”

“No, kid, listen… Jesus, I-- I’m sorry I’ve been such a… well, a bear to you and your friends, but seriously, I’m really fucking tired. But you helped us out big here, kid. I appreciate it. Hey,” Little John said as he placed a big paw on Double-D’s shoulder. “You seem like a good guy. Saying you wanna do what’s right. I like that. Don’t lose that.” Then he said something that he couldn’t decide if it would be nice to say or just odd, but he decided to say it anyway on the grounds that he didn’t know if he’d ever get a chance to say it again. “You kinda remind me of myself when I was your age… except you seem a lot fucking smarter.”

“Well it seems that Little John’s blabbering in his fatigue, so maybe it really is best we finally retire for the night,” Robin said, the fatigue finally starting to get to him as well. “…or, the day, rather. And it seems like you’d best be getting back to your friends. Who knows where they’ll wind up without their leader?”

Leader? Double-D’s face lit up like a Christmas tree when he heard that. He had fancied himself many things, but this was never among them. And he was liking the idea of it.

“Uh-- yes, sir, Mr. Hood! I won’t let you down!” And off he went to seek his fortune as a leader of men. Robin and John watched with tired smiles as he ran off until he was out of sight.

“Jesus fuck, I’m going to sleep now,” Little John bellowed as soon as the strange young wolf was gone, and started crawling back into the van..

“Johnny, if you bring out their generators and such, I’ll move them around the side.”

“You’re lucky I don’t want to breathe in gasoline fumes,” John grumbled as he started extracting the goods.

“And after that, can you retrieve our weapons and put them in the front seat?”

“I suppose I could.”

“And can you sweep the glass out of there while you’re in the neighborhood?”

“Robin, I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Little John got the obstacles out and went around the side to reach for the bow, arrow, staff and supplies under the van.

“Those kids were weird,” Little John noted.

“I can’t disagree, but they had their charms. But I’m glad we didn’t give them the money. The look of greed in that fox lad’s eyes told me he wouldn’t be spending it in a worthwhile way. But I could be wrong.”

“Hey, I was asleep for half of that,” Little John said from under the vehicle. “And you’ve used the word ‘lad’ more today than I’ve heard from you in years. I thought I did a good enough job infecting you with the Americanism!”

“Honestly, John, I think I was forcing it, especially since it seemed to be winning over that wolf
boy. He clearly equated my accent and dialect to intelligence, regardless of how much slang I used.”

Little John barely heard half of that, partially because his hearing was muffled, and partially because he was distracted by something he found under the van that didn’t belong to either of them, but which he had been thinking they could use. “Oh, hello…”

“What was that?”

“Erm-- I was just thinking, could that wolf kid ever start a sentence without ‘oh’? Was he even capable of it?”

“I was thinking more about that bear that really did seem to think that we were him and his friend from the future. And you thought poor Martin had issues…” Robin’s voice seemed to have a different auditory quality to it now, as if coming from a different place.

Little John was listening just enough to carry the conversation as he inspected his treasure. “Martin wasn’t talking, whereas this kid was using big words out of nowhere every so often. He’s definitely got something going on, but he’s not retarded.” The identification number was still intact, so he’d have to do something about that, and while he didn’t want to make a noise by unloading the cartridge, he could estimate from the weight that it was probably loaded. But with any luck, he’d never need to find out.

“I never said he was, now did I?”

“Yeah, well you insinuated it.” Little John opened the passenger’s side door to put his new security blanket in the glove compartment. “Hey, you’re already laying down!?”

“I needed to stake my claim, or your big arse would have bumped me out!"

Little John very quietly opened the glove box and put the piece inside. “Haven’t you Brits staked your claim on enough?”

“Your Manifest Destiny has nothing on the English Empire!”

He needed something to cover it with, just in case. “Hey, whatever happened to that first-aid pouch thing?”

“Oh, of course!” Robin tossed it over the front seats without looking and it smacked off the dashboard and landed on the glass-covered seat. “There ya go!”

“Hey, c’mon, Rob, it landed right in the glass!”

“Well, there’re Band-Aids in there if you cut yourself!”

Little John used the pouch to sweep as much glass as he could out of the seat and off the floor out of the van. “We ought to at least put a plastic bag over this window to repay them.”

“Good idea! First thing in the morning… or the evening!”

Sweep, sweep, sweep.

“Now you got me thinking about if those kids were our past selves.”

“In your timeline, do I become English later in life, or am I just always American?”
“I mean, honestly, a little part of me is thinking about how I fucking wish I was that kid’s size at his age. Hell, I didn’t even catch their ages, and I know I wasn’t his size at his age. That guy’s gonna be fucking huge. And that fox would probably kill to be as tall as you.”

“It really is a little part of you that’s thinking about this, isn’t it?”

“Oh, shut up. But more than that, I’m thinking… what if we were friends when we were kids? Ignore the transatlantic shit; really, would we stick together as adults? Would we be doing… this?”

“I sure hope we’d stick together. But who would our wolf friend be?”

“Fuck, I dunno, Woodland?”

“Heh. Don’t make me laugh, Little John. I don’t have the energy.”

“Well, then, we’d be three Eds, too, now wouldn’t we be?” Little John got all the glass out as he could and put the first-aid pouch in the glove compartment, trying to conceal the contraband.

“That is a strange coincidence, but it is a rather common name.”

“Not as much as it was in our parents’ generation. And it definitely ain’t as common as John or Robert. But I digress…” Little John slammed the door and made his way to the rear doors, ready to collapse. “Move over,” he said as he opened the gateway to the land of slumber.

“I’ll be telling you the same thing in five minutes.”

Little John crawled in, surprised by the surface of the mattress. “Hey, I didn’t know this was a waterbed! This is cool! These went out of style over a decade ago! I’ve never actually been on one of these!”

“And you may never have if you didn’t choose this life. Just don’t pop it.”

The waterbed shifted under Little John’s weight as he made his way in. “You’re gonna have to close the doors, Rob; I don’t think there’s enough space for me to turn around and reach them.”

Robin got up and stumbled over to the doors to close them. “Little John, the world doesn’t have enough space for you.”

“Preferable to the opposite problem. I say this as an expert authority.” Little John found a comfortable spot and collapsed. “Alright, goodnight.”

With the doors closed, Robin turned and found that his original spot had indeed been annexed by the grizzly, so he just collapsed in his place and closed his eyes. He had enough energy for one more remark: “You know, between you and I, we really do bicker like an old married couple sometimes.”

Robin could barely hear Little John’s muttered response: “Heh, I guess we might as well adopt three kids.”

*A.N.* Not much to say besides tell me whatcha think. I appreciate ya. -D
Eddy confronts a world that doesn't understand him, and which he doesn't understand much himself.

5. “Walk of Shame”

If there was one thing about his size Eddy couldn’t complain about, it was his ability to escape through small openings, like Ed’s basement-bedroom window. He would have just waltzed out the front door without a care, but he had been a prisoner in Ed’s clutches. It wasn’t the first time that the cable channel had strained the relations between them.

Sometime during the spring, the channel had begun airing marathons of campy old horror and sci-fi movies every Saturday from 9 to 9 Eastern and Pacific, 8 to 8 Central and Mountain. From the moment Ed heard the announcement, a new tradition began with an almost religious fervor, and Ed effectively was robbed of one-seventh of his week, every week. Eddy and Double-D had had to work around this schedule to interact with him, because they had absolutely no interest in spending twelve hours of their weekend watching films that were so bad that they genuinely couldn’t discern which ones were trying to be taken seriously and which ones were going for an offbeat sense of humor (and which ones didn’t know themselves which they were trying to be), all the while watching their friend twitch and squirm and quiver with visceral reactions to the trash he was watching, rolling in his seat like he was possessed by a demon with no real goals for what to do with its new corporeal body but to mess with it. If it was hard to watch the movies, it was even harder to watch Ed watch them, so Eddy and Double-D always declined Ed’s invitation to come over and bear witness to what Ed would surely regard as the highest of high art.

Eddy, in turn, had specifically asked Ed if he was okay choosing movies over his friends, and Ed answered in his indirect way that he wanted to make time for both, but he could only make a specific interval of time for his movies, which outside of the context of Ed’s terrible addiction may have seemed like a rather cogent answer. But Eddy just saw this as more evidence that the trio was starting to become unwound.

After a particularly rough Memorial Day weekend wherein the channel played old B-movies for sixty consecutive hours (of which Ed managed to stay awake and attentive for fifty-seven), they cut the weekly marathon because quite frankly it was a strange programming decision that was destined to fail from the get-go. Ed was distraught that first Saturday in June on that last weekend of the school year, and Eddy was relieved that this would bring Ed back into the fold and not interrupt his big Plan for the summer, but then it was announced that the channel had brought the block back on for a once-monthly routine on the second Saturday of the month, noon to six; everything in moderation, after all. But for all of Ed’s excitement at the return of his monster movie marathon, the fatigue of the early morning scrambled his brain, and his dire need to ingest the films was unwittingly neglected until Double-D was so kind as to remind him of what Eddy had been consciously trying not to remind him.

So it was that Eddy was involuntarily subjected to the better part of what was surely some strange old film, although Eddy couldn’t have told you much about its plot since he was basically being
compulsively and unconsciously manhandled by an auto-gesticulating Ed every forty-five seconds for a decent hour and fifteen minutes, until finally Ed had to let Eddy go so he could relieve himself after drinking an entire two-liter of cola. Eddy made his escape and resolved not to think any more about what bizarre goings-on occured in that basement. After all, he had plenty else to think about.

If one were to ask Eddy in that moment whether he was more pissed about Double-D’s uncle stealing key supplies for his Plan or some random British guy showing up and presenting himself as a living embodiment of everything Eddy wished he could be physically, intellectually and charismatically, Eddy would probably have just jumped at this hypothetical interrogator and clawed his face out, all the while screaming many syllables but not saying a word. It had been a long day and he wanted it to be over, and he was intending to go back to bed as soon as he got home so that it would all end faster, preferably without any impromptu interviewing between now and then. Of course, between his racing mind and his raging fatigue, it could go either way if he were to not be able to sleep for hours, or if he were to pass out for several calendar days.

Ed’s house was only two doors down from Eddy’s, a journey made even shorter if one were to disregard the curved sidewalk around the bell of the cul-de-sac and just walk straight across the asphalt. But it was still long enough for Eddy to stew in a bitter mix of anger and depression, and seeing the other neighborhood youths out and about enjoying this sunny Saturday in June did nothing to help assuage his frustration.

Immediately to the right of Ed’s house was the house where Jimmy (“The Poor, Tortured Soul”) Hutchinson lived as a rare only child in a family of rabbits. Or maybe they were hares; Eddy didn’t care to remember. Jimmy was planting flowers with his platonic gal-pal, Sarah, Ed’s baby sister who looked much more like their parents than Ed did with her strawberry-blonde fur; Sarah also seemed to have inherited both Mrs. Browne’s passive aggression and Mr. Browne’s active aggression. But of course, quickness to anger was a prevailing stereotype of their species, begging the question of whether Ed was unnaturally placid for both his species and his family, or if his brain was just so low-functioning that he couldn’t access that side of himself except under extreme duress (then again, with regards to other stereotypes of grizzlies being gluttonous, unhygienic and downright dumb, Ed certainly had those boxes checked, so outside observers like Eddy had to consider that perhaps it was the rest of his family who were the weird ones). Suffice it to say that contemplative thoughts about Sarah’s hot-headed temper and Jimmy’s insistence that he be protected from the world at all times were inspired by the dirty looks that they gave Eddy when he regarded them.

Therefore he averted his gaze and looked straight ahead, where he saw Johnny “Two-by-Four” Holden, the weird big-headed koala kid who hung out with an imaginary friend in the form of a plank of wood which was (rather unimaginatively) named Plank. Johnny was fishing in the open manhole cover in the middle of the circle, and another rod was set up so that Plank could fish too. Eddy often wondered if all the children of former hippies turned out like Johnny, and was glad that he himself was the son of two moderately successful salespeople and not two organic urban farmers. Actually, come to think of it, Eddy wondered if recreational substance use had something to do with how the fur on the top of Johnny’s head was so short and thin that he almost looked bald.

“Hey, Eddy!” Johnny greeted him. “Plank almost caught a real whopper, but the slippery son of a gun got away!”

“Boy, Johnny, that really, uh… that really blows, huh?” Eddy thought it was curious that whenever Johnny said anything remarkable had happened to him and Plank, it was always Plank that had the remarkable thing occur to him. There was probably something about that that spoke volumes about
Johnny’s warped psychology, but Eddy didn’t know what it was. He thought for a fleeting second that maybe if being an entrepreneur didn’t pan out, he should find a line of work where he could pose deep psychological questions but would have somebody else around to actually answer them. But Eddy would never need such a fallback plan, as he would never allow himself to quit.

In any case, Johnny didn’t say anything more to Eddy. Eddy couldn’t for the life of him get a clear read on that little freak. In a neighborhood where everybody hated the Eds, there had been some times where Johnny was nice to them when everybody else was ready to kill them, and other times when Johnny wanted to join in on killing them. Hell, among all his other issues, maybe the kid was bipolar too.

Past Johnny, Eddy saw the true workhorse himself, Rolf Schäfer, the Ambiguously Germanic Guy. In a rare moment of not being occupied in his backyard farm, Rolf was mowing the front yard of his house, which was directly across the street from Eddy’s. Eddy sometimes wondered what Rolf’s goals were for the rest of his life. The guy wouldn’t shut the hell up about how his ancestors had been shepherds in the Old Country, but the days of sheep working in serfdom were long past, and sharecropping wasn’t what it used to be, so now the Schäfer family needed the help of hired farmhands like Victor and Wilfrid to keep the operation running. Was Rolf just going to keep this suburban farm going as long as he could? Were Rolf’s parents even making enough to sustain what they had? Did Rolf even realize that there were avenues outside of agriculture?

Rolf reached the sidewalk and stopped his mower for a second to greet Eddy. “Hello, Fat-Tail-and-a-Thin-Wallet Ed-Boy!” the stallion waved. “Shall Rolf fetch his coin purse to purchase a bridge you would like to sell Rolf!?”

Eddy was disappointed when, seventeen milliseconds after the end of that sentence, he realized Rolf was being sarcastic. “Uhm-- Not today, Rolfe boy,” Eddy stammered. He wondered why Rolf didn’t just have Victor cut the grass, on the grounds that the goat would probably jump at the chance to take the grass clippings home to feed his family. Then Eddy wondered if that thought would sound racist if he said it out loud. Then he figured it was too late to un-think it regardless.

The last two he saw were the pair that broke his heart. It wasn’t so much that they were official now that was surprising, but that after all this time of their mutual attraction being the cul-de-sac’s worst-kept secret that they bothered making it official at all. At the corner, the bastard hyena Kevin Lafferty was chatting up the girl of his dreams (and Eddy’s dreams, and Ed and Double D’s dreams, as well as Johnny’s and probably Rolf’s and possibly even Jimmy’s dreams, plus the dreams of half the guys they knew from school and probably a few of the girls, too), the bobcat bombshell known simply as Nazz. Kevin half-sat-half-stood in the seat of his bike by the stop sign at Harris Street, and Nazz was standing there smiling and chuckling politely every so often at whatever unfunny shit Kevin was saying. Eddy might have been able to concede that they were a cute couple if he didn’t have personal experience with how much of a mean-spirited twat Kevin was. Eddy would simply never be happy for Nazz as long as she decided that Kevin was a suitable suitor. He wondered what she saw in him. Did every heterosexual female really harbor an unshakeable primitive attraction to men who were domineering, rebellious malcontents, compelling them to yearn for these browbeat bullies against their better judgment? Whether or not that was the truth or simply a bad stereotype, it certainly applied to some women out in the big wide world, and Eddy had a sneaking suspicion that Nazz was one of them. If that were the case, and Nazz was driven toward this piece of dick-cheese -- whom she had personally witnessed engage in aggressive and antisocial behavior on several dozen occasions and had gone as far as to personally admonish him for it many of those times -- by forces beyond her control, then Eddy would almost go as far as to say he felt bad for her. But if she had consciously chosen Kevin as a significant other despite bearing witness to all of the horrific shit he’d done, then he would feel relieved, because evidently there would be no reality where Eddy and Nazz have a healthy future
together. Or maybe she just hated short guys.

Kevin saw Eddy walk toward the driveway of his house, which was next to Kevin’s own. Nazz saw Kevin focus on something past her and turned to see Eddy as well. Kevin gave a steady glare to the fox he regarded as the single most annoying creature to ever walk the planet; Nazz maintained her friendly smile and waved at Eddy. She was not evil, at least not yet.

Eddy faked a smile and waved back to be polite to Nazz, even though he was sure that Kevin wouldn’t take it well. Eddy fully expected Kevin to give him the finger or to very loudly call him a dork, but instead he just kept glaring, his eyes following Eddy until he was at his stoop. Nazz said something to Kevin and Kevin turned back to Nazz, and Eddy turned his back on both of them, opened his door and walked inside.

He was alone. Saturday was a busy work day for his parents. At present, his father was sweating in the sun in the lot of a used-car dealership and his mother was shivering in one of the many overly-air-conditioned boutique stores in the luxury mall where Lemon Brook met the coast. There was a reason why Terry and Toni never discouraged their sons from trying to make money by any means necessary.

But -- while Eddy would never say this to their faces -- he didn’t much envy his parents’ sales skills as much as he did his brother’s, because his parents may have been successful, but they weren’t *gifted* at their trade. His brother was gifted at selling stuff. It wasn’t just that his parents weren’t *as rich* as Eddy would like to be himself, because his brother certainly wasn’t either. His brother was barely scraping by on the West Coast or wherever he was by now. But his brother had gotten successful enough at an early age to move out at seventeen and bounce around the country in the years since, answering to nobody but himself. Terry and Toni were good enough at their craft, but still, here they were, living in a middle-class suburb with bosses to answer to. Their elder son was simply a huckster prodigy, and he probably still had plenty of time to become a millionaire by thirty if he could just restructure his business model and stop being so complacent with breaking even. It was weird, because there was a time in his youth that Eddy’s brother had actually been dead-set on defying the vulpine stereotype and living on the straight and narrow, but then something-something happened with some shitbag kids -- Eddy had never known exactly what; he had only ever heard bits and pieces of the story, which occured when Eddy was a baby and their family was still living in the city -- after which his brother said fuck it, the life of a shifty scammer fox was the life for him. Eddy thought it was probably actually a good thing that happened, otherwise his brother would never have found his true calling in life. But this was something he’d never say to his brother’s face -- along with “Hey, bro, let’s go into business together,” and “Hey, bro, maybe other people think that tie makes you look more professional, but I know your secret, and you’ve completely failed at your goal of popularizing ties as a part of casual wear, and to me you look like a fucking tool.” Eddy still wanted to collapse in bed, but first he had to visit a certain room of the house.

What *drove* them?

That’s what he was wondering as he was alone with his thoughts. All those kids outside, lackadaisically enjoying the first day of what was sure to be one of their last summer breaks: How could they just waste their time like that? Had they no sense of urgency? Did they fundamentally misunderstand the progression of linear time? Were they really okay with waiting until they were older to get ahead in life?

It was conflicting: when he laid eyes upon them, he didn’t see children anymore. He saw them as very young adults with adult needs and demands, like fake IDs so they could acquire adult beverages and other adult accessories and engage in adult activities, all so that they may feel what
it’s like to be an adult, even if nobody was convinced of their maturity except themselves and the company they kept. And yet they surely couldn’t be adults because they had no apparent appetite for success. What were these creatures who surrounded him?

From where he sat, he could close his eyes and faintly hear the sounds of the adolescents’ merrymaking outside. He could visualize them running through the same repertoire of insipid, hedonistic time-wasting activities as time sped up and they all aged until they disintegrated into viscous mounds of pus and bones and viscera and dust. He thought he was nearly going to vomit from the vision of it.

Look at ‘em: unbeholden to the allure of silver-gray coins and unmoved by the siren song of sickly-green paper. Surely they couldn’t simply be ignorant of its joys and beauty; if they were, they wouldn’t be so hesitant to part with the money they already had. How were they content with some without having an insatiable yearning for more? Would they live and die this way? Could he save them? Should he want to? After all, this way there was less competition for him and his ventures. But maybe if they were more sympathetic to his cause, they wouldn’t be such tough customers. Eddy knew that many would pity him for what seemed to be an unhealthy obsession, but he quite frankly thought that the many were wrong.

Oh, and those goddamn goons, the wolf and the bear. They didn’t even like money for its own merits, they just wanted what money could buy. Yes, they appreciated it enough to help him in his exploits to gather it, inasmuch as they wanted a cut, but they were almost as bad as the other denizens of the cul-de-sac. It wasn’t so much that Ed and Double-D were a step above the other kids as much as there was a slight ridge in the floor and the two of them were on the imperceptibly-higher side of it. And the both of them could stand to either prove their loyalty or buzz off and stop teasing him.

Double D. Oh, Double-D. That poor poor dear. Did he realize he was never going to be the main character in his own life? Did Double-D know that regular people simply did not value the way he hoarded a massive surplus of impractical knowledge in his head? Eddy knew that modern wolf culture had, for the most part, started downplaying their centuries-old alpha/beta/omega caste system several generations ago, but sometimes we all have to embrace even the ugliest parts of our heritage. Double-D inarguably had the intellect of an alpha but the personality of an omega, and his omega personality so greatly outweighed his brain that he would be lucky if that averaged out to the overall status of a weak beta. Eddy felt bad for him. Eddy felt bad for all of those kids out there, but he especially pitied Double-D. If the kid had a heart to match his head, he’d be a force to be reckoned with, but as it was, he’d only ever be a tool used to build someone else’s machine of success. Eddy considered that he ought to help Double-D develop himself to be all he could be, but he decided against it, partially because he had no reason to believe that Double-D would ever be capable of becoming such a person, and partially because Eddy simply did not have the time.

And Ed. Ed, Ed, Ed. Silly old bear. The whole “comically dumb” schtick was starting to get old. What the hell was he going to do with his life? How could somebody possibly be so stupid and useless? If Double-D’s highest prospect was the life of a right-hand man, Ed would be too at-risk of fucking up at such a job to have a feasible future in that industry. Were they sure there wasn’t something clinically wrong with him? Was he ever taken to get diagnosed? What if his parents didn’t want him getting formally diagnosed because then their son would be put in Special Ed (no pun intended) and then the whole world would find out that Hill and Matilda Browne were actually siblings or cousins or something and Ed was *inbred* which would explain the low intelligence and the monobrow and the eyes being too far apart on his head and then the Browne parents agreed to have Matilda secretly fuck some other guy to conceive Sarah as a ruse that everything was alright genetically with them, but now their cover was blown and everything was conclusively *not alright* and the whole world would know and, and, and…
That endless train of thought ground to a halt to give right-of-way to a startling realization. It wasn’t even a particularly novel thought, and he had many similar thoughts time and time again before, including one that lead to this conclusion as part of an instantaneous series of synapses that transpired in the background while his forefront focus went on a rollercoaster making an impromptu conspiracy theory about why Ed was such an ugly-lookin’ son of a bitch.

First it was the common thought: Eddy hung out with a drooling idiot who liked sci-fi shit and horror movies and comic books and jawbreakers, and an overeducated living conglomeration of anxiety who liked science and math and technology and jawbreakers; Eddy himself liked money and cash and currency and capitalism and classic tunes on vinyl records and vintage print pornography and money and jawbreakers. Okay, not the first time he’d confronted that notion. He was aware that he actually had very little in common with his friends.

But as the brain of a sapient creature sometimes does, it takes a thought its bearer has had a thousand times over and invites itself to modify it to paint a picture that seems new despite all the parts being the same.

Eddy did not believe he had any real friends.

He had nobody whose presence he found more enjoyable than annoying; nobody whom he could trust in any situation that may arise in a million years of eventualities; nobody whom he could recruit to be the best man at his wedding or the godfather of his children. It wasn’t just that Eddy didn’t have someone with whom to share a fraternal bond stronger than the one he shared with his actual brother -- indeed, most people aren’t so fortunate; but Eddy did not feel like there was somebody in his life that he could accurately describe as a “friend” without some modifiers attached to damn them by faint praise.

The intrusive sound of flushing reset his brain, and the torturous thoughts were gone from him. Instead, as he waltzed his way toward his bed, he thought again about how he was going to rebound from having his supplies stolen. He entertained the thought of tracking down Chief Woodland and stealing the laminate kit back, but between the three Eds, thievery was not a skill anywhere among them. He figured he would just have to bite the bullet and buy more if he ever wanted to catch up to his brother. But then again, catching up to him shouldn’t be too hard as long as his brother was still living out of a van--

Oh yeah, those weirdos in the van. As Eddy collapsed into bed, he wondered where they had come from and where they were going to go. Well, he thought, maybe he shouldn’t call them weird. At least not yet. He didn’t know their story. All he knew was that it was just the two of them. Hey, he had just been pondering whether anybody really has a legendarily tight platonic friendship; maybe that was what one of them looked like. Or maybe they really were a couple and they didn’t like that Eddy seemed to be disapproving of them. Whatever the case, as long as the van was clean when they vacated it, and there were no signs of a destructive drunken bro-out nor mysterious stains in the mattress, he could force himself not to pass judgment on these strangers, if for no other reason than he had more important things to think about.

And God knows he wanted to stop thinking about them, especially that British guy who seemed to have had every genetic marker land heads-side-up. Roger, or Robin, or whatever his name was. Eddy had paid paranoid attention to the guy, trying to keep a running tally of readily-evident pros and cons about this guy, hoping the cons would outnumber the pros so that Eddy could feel better about his own insecurities.

Alas, all the flaws he could come up with weren’t even that bad: Robin’s lack of gloves was kind of weird (but maybe only other foxes would notice that), his eyes looked kinda-sorta bulgy from
the side (though Eddy’s brother probably had it worse), the sideburn fur on the side of his cheeks pointed out a weirdish angle that made it look like a triangle with the tip broken off (or maybe he brushed it that way and it was a fashion statement that Eddy didn’t have the style or confidence to pull off himself?), he wasn’t quite ripped like a vulpine Adonis (but at his size, would he need to be?), he still hung out with someone who made him look tiny (but that comes with the territory of being a member of the cleverest species), and he was British (lame). Oh, and now he may or may not have lasting scars on the palms of his paws because of a momentary lapse in judgment; that could be one or two more for the list. Time would tell.

But other than that, Eddy had just been face-to-face with a physical manifestation of the person he wished he could be: tall, lean, handsome, charismatic, persuasive, smart -- Double-D was so convinced that he was talking to a genius that he was displaying more respect and admiration for this gentleman fox after knowing him for fifteen minutes than he ever gave to Eddy after knowing him for a decade. Eddy had no idea that such a perfect specimen could even exist, and now that he did, he was pissed that it was somebody else and that it would never be him.

Then again, it was entirely possible that he’d overslept that morning, and that this was all a bad dream. Maybe it was simply a nightmare that he had been confronted by a manifestation of all the things he wanted to be and knew he never could, and that scene was actually the third act of a much grander production wherein he wasted hours of his finite time on this earth hiding in a van for fear of apprehension by Double-D’s uncle who had been MIA for the better part of a decade, who then appropriated key supplies for Eddy’s great new plan to flip to some government employees who probably already have plenty of the shit, and he was somehow such a bumbling idiot that he got within a few feet of them but couldn’t seal the deal because his partner (who was a mouse or something?) got the better of him, and the both of them were only there in the first place because somebody saw big stupid Ed fucking around in the junkyard and causing an avalanche of trash, and saw Eddy too, but somehow not Double-D, although maybe that stupid hat of his was enough to confuse the eyewitness on what species the kid was, and so the cops were only informed that their wanted fugitives were a bear and a fox, maybe even only a bear and a fox and no wolf, and wouldn’t Eddy have been pissed if he and Ed got booked but Double-D got off scot free on a lack of a warrant or however it works, so they would only arrest the bear and the fox because that’s who they had clearance to arrest, the bear and the fox but no wolf, but none of this insanity matters because wait wait wait stop stop stop stop wait.

Wait.

*A.N* Probably some shorter (relatively) chapters coming up after this. Now watch the next one wind up being five times as long as this lul. Thanks for watching, folks. -D
Ward Goes to the Mayor

Chapter Summary

The ill-reputed mayor of Nottingham, Delaware, has a chit-chat with his law enforcement to try to sort out his feelings about justice and ego.

6. “Ward Goes to the Mayor”

The gothic-revival office building took up an entire city block, and while it certainly wasn’t the tallest building in town, it had more floors than any building you would see in the suburbs. Everyone called it city hall, which wasn’t incorrect, but it didn’t paint the complete picture. It chiefly contained the mayor’s office and the offices of all of his council members, but also all of the offices for all the municipal departments (public works and all that); precincts for the city, county, and state police departments (being the main precinct of the first two); a few floors of other offices for private businesses; and a shopping center and food court on the ground floor and basement levels, just for good measure. It had been an idea under the mayoralty of Richard Norman to maybe start moving the contents of the building around, just in case heaven forbid there was a fire or something like that, then not everything would be taken out at once. But his little brother’s administration had other priorities.

That younger brother sat impatiently at his desk, his chair turned to face the wide window on the north edge of the room. He wasn’t bored for lack of things he wanted to do. He would have much preferred to hop on the phone and start talking up his donors, or proposing some new laws and regulations to his helpless council just for the hell of it, or even gussying himself up in the mirror or simply counting his cash. But he knew the second that he started occupying himself, the imbecile would finally show up. He understood that the Chief had to drive in all the way from Georgetown, park in the garage on the second basement level, take the elevator up, absentmindedly get off on the wrong floor, be possessed to stop at the food court and grab some fries or a chicken sandwich or something, take the elevator to the fifth floor, go through security, get on the other elevator to reach the top floor, and take a solid five minutes trying to remember where the mayor’s office was. But he was still furious that it was taking this long.

So he sat there, looking out on the city over which he ruled, twiddling his thumbs to ward off an embarrassing compulsive habit of his, and trying really hard not to move any part of his head or his face so that his top hat wouldn’t slide over his eyes again. The top hat, antiquated as it was, was an old family heirloom dating back to the Victorian Era in the Old Country, reserved for the preeminent head of the Norman family. Richard didn’t take it with him to Washington because he thought it would be a silly look for the national stage, but John had no qualms about taking it for himself. John had tried to have it padded so that it wouldn’t keep sliding down his gaunt and thinly-maned head, but every expert he showed the hat to insisted that modifying it would ruin it. And yet this old thing was basically a crown in his family line, so wearing it precariously was better than not wearing it at all.

There was a thump at the thick wooden doors to his backside. It wasn’t a knock; it was a thump. That’s how he knew it wasn’t Chief Woodland.

“Come in, Hiss.”
There was a struggle with the handlebar doorknob, and it opened slightly and shut back on itself a few times as the mayor’s assistant had trouble propping it open enough to get into the gap, but eventually the weasel got his foot in the door and was able to weasel his way though.

“You didn’t use your mouth, did you?” the gangly lion asked without turning his head.

“No, Your Majesty, I wouldn’t think of it.” After all these years, Charles “Hiss” Hess didn’t even think anymore about how odd it might seem that he referred to the mayor as “Your Majesty”; what had started out as a condition of his employment became just a force of habit, and since his boss had shown him more dignity than most people in his life had (especially since the accident), he was more than happy to indulge him in his regal fantasies. Besides, he loved his work; it provided him with opportunities he’d never imagined he’d have.

“That’s a good boy, Hiss,” the so-called prince praised passively, again without looking; he had to keep steady to keep that hat on his head, after all. “Now, what is it that demands my attention? You know I’m expecting company soon.”

“That’s just the thing, sssire,” the weasel replied with another one of his monikers for his employer. The genesis of his own serpentine nickname was a perfect storm of not just his last name and a highly-noticeable physical attribute (or lack thereof) that he shared with snakes, but also for how the gap in his teeth gave him a lisp that made s sounds sound a bit like a th-, but even more so like a hissing sound, something he liked to exaggerate for effect every so often when the moment seemed right. “I’ve finished cleaning up the record-books and now I’m ready for the next assignment. Perhaps I can arrange for something to help pass the time until the Chief and his deputy arrive?”

“No, no, Hiss, they’ll be here any time now, and I’m sure there’s more paperwork somewhere if you look for it.”

“Ahh, but I inssist, milord!” His favorite part of his job was getting closer to power than he had ever thought possible. “Please, let me pour you a glass of wine to ease your troubled mind!”

“Hiss, do you really think of me as the kind of man who would get drunk before a very important meeting!?”

“Sire, one drink will not do you ill! And wouldn’t it make a meeting with Chief Woodland all the more bearable?”

Prince John finally turned his head to the persistent weasel. “Hiss, what on earth is with your insistence on giving me a glass of wine? Are you plotting to poison me!?”

“Oh, nonononono, Your Majesty! I just hate to see you so tense! It’s my job to serve you, after all, and why should I not take initiative?”

“Because you’re pestering me at an inconvenient time.” He turned his head back to the window; this time, the hat slipped down over his eyes. For a moment, he just sat there like that, at once too angry and mortified to acknowledge the shame. Then he finally allowed himself to readjust it and grumbled, “Oh, to hell with it, give me half a glass. And use the slip-ons!”

“Why, of coursssse, milord,” Hiss bowed and made his way to the swivel chair in the corner that was just for him. He jostled it out of the corner with one of his feet and gently pushed it along with his hips until he got to where the wine rack and glasses were. He then scurried over to the next corner down the wall, where there was a box of sterilized latex gloves, also expressly for his usage. He nudged the box down to the wine station with his foot; he’d have put them on in the corner, but
he didn’t want to get them dirty.

John Norman was still in a “I-could-take-it-or-leave-it” mood for the wine, but what made up his mind was his fascination with how Hiss managed to find elaborate ways to pull off tasks that the able-bodied would find all too simple. It was absolutely a spectacle to behold, and was a major reason why he kept the weasel employed when others would call it impractical (though many would say it was one of the least impractical things about how he ran the city). One could even say that to the Prince Mayor, watching Hiss do anything other than walk and breathe was almost hypnotizing.

Hiss was carefully slipping the gloves on his feet, making sure he still had the dexterity of his toes. He grappled the wine bottle by the neck, hooking his big toe under it for added grasp, and used his other foot to carefully slip the cork out. Wine was poured to the point where the glass was exactly half full, and the bottle was lowered back onto the counter, its surface perfectly parallel to the bottom of the bottle. The bottle was recorked, and Hiss slipped the neck of the glass between the toes of one foot while using his other foot to push himself and the chair across the thinly-carpeted floor.

John shifted a bit in his seat to better face Hiss as he came to deliver the drink. Now that he knew it was coming anyway, he was developing a genuine craving for it, and was beginning to feel a tinge of legitimate thirst. He reached out to his right to grab the glass from Hiss’s gloved foot, but Hiss kept scooting along just out of the mayor’s reach, parking himself right in front of him so that Prince John had to move back into his original position.

“Why, th-thank you, Hiss,” he reached out one hand again to grab the glass while using the other to keep the hat over his brow. “I really--”

“But wait, Majesty! Let us give it a nice good ssswirl…” Hiss insisted, and he started slowly swaying the glass right and left and a little more right and a bit more left, the liquid making waves that crashed upon the rim. “A steady ssswirl will be good for the flavor. Don’t you agree, sssire?”

“H-Hiss, please just, er… please just give me my--”

“The liquid rocked back and forth like a pendulum that was just so damned enthralling to watch, and as Hiss kept his focus on his boss’s face, he was glad that he wasn’t returning eye contact.

“It’s been sitting in that bottle for sssso long, milord,” Hiss said in his best attempt at cooing someone into tranquility. “We’d best ensure there are no sssediments.”

John Norman wasn’t saying a word. He didn’t quite look like he’d yet been made to lose conscious control of his body, but it looked like he was on his way there. Charles knew that this probably wouldn’t be the day he’d pull it off, but practice makes perfect.

“You know I have your best interests in mind, sssire,” Hiss murmured, very much making a point to incorporate s sounds near the ends of his sentences as he worked his magic.

In an interesting development, John’s lips peeled apart from one another and his jaw started sliding open. Hiss also noticed that the mayor hadn’t blinked for a bit. Hey, maybe this would be the day. A bit ahead of schedule, but no complaining there. Granted, he didn’t have quite a solid plan for what to do next, but if he had actually successfully wrested control of the mayor, he’d have plenty of time to figure it out.
But this would not be the day that Charles Hess would put his improvisation skills to the test. The knock at the door broke the trance with a visible tic on the lion’s gaunt face. Hiss stopped swinging the glass immediately and quelled the shit-eating grin that had been brewing on his face so Prince John wouldn’t realize what he’d been trying to pull.

“Op -!” Mayor Norman spit out. “I-- I appear to have blacked out there again. Oh, my, I do need to see my physician about that--”

Knock knock knock. “Mister Mayor! Do ya want us to come in or not!?” An annoyingly familiar voice was getting agitated.

Prince John grabbed the glass of wine and swung around toward the door. “Oh, yes, yes, come in! The door’s open!” he hollered before taking a long swig.

The Chief of the Nottingham Police Department welcomed himself in, with his deputy reluctantly standing on his shoulder, trying to keep balance despite his superior’s horrible posture and bouncy, ungracious swagger.

Hiss stood from his chair and went over to greet the guests, nudging the swivel chair into the corner along the way. He made a mental note that he could probably have better luck winning over the mayor if he only could get his feet on a pocket watch, but since his job was to wait on Prince John more or less around the clock, stepping away to go buy a nifty accessory would be a bit of a challenge.

“How’s it goin’, Prince John?” the wolf greeted, then regarded the weasel. “Hiya, Chuckie.”

Hiss simply nodded and bowed a bit; he, like Nutzinger, didn’t exchange polite greetings aloud because they knew that Mayor Norman wanted to get to to business as soon as possible.

“It’s going poorly, Chief Woodland,” the lion grumbled. “Very, very, poorly. But I may have an idea to remedy our situation. Have a seat, you two.”

Woodland sat himself down in the chair opposite Mayor Norman. Nutzinger did his best to not fall over in the process, grabbing Woodland’s ear when he nearly lost his balance.

“Gah! Nutsy!”

“I wouldn’t’ve had to grab onto you if you were more elegant when you sat down, jackass.”

“Deputy Nutzinger, I can have Charles fetch you your own seat if you’d like,” the mayor offered, gesturing to the weasel standing at attention to the side.

“You tell me, boss,” Nutzinger answered. “I can stand right here if we aren’t gonna be here for, like, five hours. And if this guy can sit still for two minutes.”

To that, Woodland reached his arm up and flicked his thick finger on the squirrel’s gut. Nutzinger contained his exclamation of discomfort and pretended he didn’t feel anything.

“Well, we’ll certainly be here much longer than we need to be if you two don’t stop behaving like children!” Prince John scolded and gulped down the rest of his wine. “Thank you for the wine, Charles; I needed that.”

“Certainly, Mayor,” Hiss answered, less inclined to charm him with a hiss in the presence of company.
“Anyway, gentlemen,” Mayor Norman continued, “I’ve had a thought cross my mind as of late. I had thought it was quite the silly idea, but I may be having a change of heart now that I hear that you, Chief Woodland, have found a settlement in Sherwood Forest -- is that so, Eddward?”

“Absolutely, Mister Mayor!” the chief beamed. “And every indication is that it’s where the bandits live!”

“How so? Elucidate me.”

“Wh-what?”

“Explain the settlement, dumbass,” the squirrel muttered into his boss’s ear.

“Well, uh… there were a bunch of clothes in there. A lot of eyewitness reports say that the suspects are a fox and a bear, and I think the clothes were about the right size.”

“You think,” answered the mayor. It was not a question.

“I do think that. Yes, Mayor.”

“What proof have you that they belong to a fox and a bear, Woodland?”

“Well, they were about the right size--”

“Do you or your department have any concrete proof that the assailants are a fox and a bear, Chief Woodland?”

“We have a whole bunch of eyewitnesses that say--”

“We’ve also had eyewitnesses over the years reporting coyotes, raccoons, badgers, wolves, wolverines, hippos, rhinos, and as recently as twelve hours ago, a pig.”

“I-I know that, uh--”

“Tell me, Woodland, what kind of fox and bear?”

“I know that one! A red one!”

“A red bear?”

“No, no, the bear’s brown! Or… tan? Orange! But, um, closer to brown than orange--?”

“Deputy Nutzinger, have you anything to add to this?”

“Sir, no, sir. Chief told me to stay by the road and make sure nobody took off with the car.”

“No, I didn’t! I told him to stay there to make sure no civilians went into the woods while we were investigating.”

“And to make sure they didn’t steal the car.”

“Nutsy!”

“Again.”

“Enough!” roared the lion. “I have other things to accomplish today than to watch you two have a row.”
Nutzinger and Woodland stopped talking and turned their eyes toward the mayor. They each gave
him a ‘don’t-you-dare-suggest-that-I-was-being-as-much-of-an-asshole-as- he -was’ look.

Prince John let out a light sigh. “Hiss, another glass of wine please?”

“Yes, Mayor!” the weasel vowed as he went off to fetch his swivel chair.

“Full this time…” the mayor muttered before he turned his attention back to his chief of police.
“Eddward, George, I apologize if I was being rather… catty with my interrogation? Would that be
the right word? Sarcastic? Unconstructive?”

Woodland and Nutzinger still weren’t saying a word.

“Well anyway, let me be clear: it wasn’t that what you were saying was wrong , per se, Chief
Woodland. The consensus is that there are only two of these bandits still wreaking havoc after all
these years, and while they are -- evidently -- masters of disguise, they’ve give us enough clues that
the tall, fat one is almost certainly a brown bear, and the small, slender one is either a coyote who
looks like a fox, or a short-statured wolf who looks like a fox, or simply a rather tall fox. As for my
own encounters with them? They were always either in some stupid get-up or making a quick
getaway, but from what I’ve seen, I do espouse the fox-and-bear theory…”

John noticed that Hiss had finished filling his glass in his periphery. He paused to take a long
swallow of the wine.

“...But you can’t prove any of it. You’re sloppy, Eddward. You found some clothes that perhaps,
just maybe would fit these two? That’s it? No… ‘signs of life,’ shall we say?”

“Well, there were plenty of signs of life! There were sleeping bags and toilet paper and a teapot--”

“That’s not what I meant! I meant proof that the people you’ve been looking for were there!”
Prince John was getting flustered and his sentence structure was deteriorating. “Did you see a stash
of all that they stole? Did you see weapons? Did you see things with people’s names on them? Did
you see them ? You can’t arrest some homeless people because they have toilet paper and a teapot.
Or, rather, you can , but at the peril of making the entire city look bad. And you’ll make me look
bad for appointing you. And that simply will not do, Eddward.”

Another brief moment of silence as the mayor gulped more wine down. When he finished, he took
the remainder of the glass with him as he turned in his chair and stood to walk toward the window.

“Another quiz for you, Chief Woodland: how have we not found them yet over how-many years?”

“Seven! Seven years, Mayor John.”

“Eddward, that wasn’t the question. How do they keep eluding us?”

“Urm-- because they’re great masters of disguise!”

“And ?”

“And… they…”

“They’re damn good at hiding, too,” piped in the squirrel.

“There we go! Thank you, George. And since their stomping grounds are right in the grey area of
your jurisdiction, surely some of their hiding spots are in the suburbs, and that means what?”
“We have to cooperate with the suburban and county Boys,” answered Nutzinger without even giving Woodland the chance to think; George just wanted to press the fast forward button and have the mayor get to the point, but John Norman had always been a lover of dramatics.

“Precisely!” confirmed Prince John ecstatically.

“I’m sorry, Mayor, but… I’m not really getting where you’re going with all this.”

“Ah, yes, yes, yes. Reeling me in. Thank you, George. Showing more initiative than your commander, I see.”

Woodland knew better than to disagree.

John waltzed toward the left edge of the window and turned his gaze northwest. While the building was surrounded by skyscrapers on three sides, a point had been made not to obstruct the view from the mayor’s office all the way to the northern horizon, and from that window he could see the sea, the Fertile Crescent, and a sizeable thicket of trees bisected by the Georgetown-Millsboro Highway that the mayor now fixed his eyes on.

“Gentlemen, I have been made a fool of by these hooligans. Their capture is of the utmost importance, in a very personal way. And yet I don’t want anybody but my city’s police to be the ones to apprehend them. But! But… I acknowledge the fallacy of all this. I should want to see these mongrels captured by any means necessary. Yet the same minds that provide us with rational thought also fill us with irrational emotions. It’s such a cruel paradox. A travesty! But while I’m sure the men and women of the county and suburban departments are fine officers… they aren’t loyal to me as you two are. You deserve the glory more than they do. More than I do. So you boys can imagine how conflicted I feel when you tell me that now you’ve found a specific location that may be the outlaws’ hideaway. And of course it’s in that infernal purgatory where every department lays claim when it’s convenient for them and shies away when it’s not. It eats me up inside, gentlemen. Truly it does.”

“So are we gonna tell the other departments to fuck off and let us into their territory?” inquired Woodland.

“That’s the splendid thing about my idea: if it runs smoothly, we’ll not need to do something so drastic and overbearing. Shall I share it with you?”

“I was born ready,” Nutzinger spit out. Five minutes ago he would have been concerned that that came out sounding too sarcastic, but at this point he didn’t care.

“Lay it on us, Mister Mayor,” agreed the wolf.

“You’re planning to return to the campsite in Sherwood tonight to see if you can find anybody, correct?”

“Yuh-huh.”

“And you’re certain you’ll be able to relocate it, yes?”

“Yessir!”

“Splendid. Would you be opposed to taking some County officers with you? Perhaps even their Sheriff?”

“Uh-- is there a reason for that?”
“Eddward, would you agree that the County officials want the glory of capturing these delinquents as much as we do?”

“I-I think they do.”

“Hell, they’d jump at the chance to beat us to it,” Nutzinger added. “Make us look like a bunch of dumbfucks.”

“My fear exactly, George,” said John. “Would you also agree that it’s unlawful to be in the forest after sundown?”

“I would, Mayor!”

“That’s not even an agree-disagree thing; that’s just the law,” Nutzinger pointed out.

“Ha! The little squirrel knows his stuff! Now…” the mayor trailed off as he made his way back to his desk chair. “I think I have a way to bridge my rational desire to see these two captured with my irrational desire to want to be in charge of the people who do the capturing. Tonight, I want you to see to it that the first civilians you encounter in the depths of that damned forest -- if you encounter anybody at all -- see to it that they are beaten and arrested on the spot. If it’s the outlaws, then that’s brilliant. Mission accomplished. But if not, and it’s simply some trespassers, then -- oh, how shall I put this? -- it may open a new window of opportunity.”

“You want us to beat the shit out of the first random bums we come across!?” asked Nutzinger. Woodland wasn’t saying anything, but he clearly was also surprised by the tactics the mayor was advocating.

“Now George, after all of your good responses, this is quite the poor one. I never once said that you’d be the ones doing it. Simply that you’d be seeing to it. And again, it might wind up being the criminals, in which case they’ll have rightly deserved it! But just in case it isn’t…”

Mayor Norman stopped to take a sip of wine, adjust his hat, and open a drawer. From this drawer he pulled out a lump of metal and plastic emblazoned with the word “NOKIA”.

“Now, I’m about to ask you a question -- two questions, actually… no, no! I tell a lie! Three small questions! -- and I want you both to say yes, and mean it, for each of them. Firstly, are you two decent actors? Secondly, can you two both be persuasive? And thirdly, Ward -- pardon me, George, but for size and spatial reasons, I’ll have to defer to Eddward on this -- Eddward, have you ever used one of these newer cell phones which can also be used as a camera?”
In an attempt to dig up some family information, Double-D confronts one of his biggest fears: his parents' disapproval.

7. “Sticky Notes”

“Double-D, are you fucking stupid!?” The phone’s speaker squeaked a little bit from the sheer volume. “All those books you’ve read, and you’ve never learned basic elementary-school logic!?”

Double-D sat at the table in his dimly-lit kitchen, remaining calm as Eddy berated him, if only because he knew that Eddy wasn’t one to be receptive to anger, even if it was justifiably reciprocal. “On the contrary, Eddy, I would argue that the reading I’ve done over the years has bolstered my deductive reasoning skills in such a way that I feel confident—”

“In English, Sock-Head?”

Double-D held the phone away from his mouth for a second and took a deep breath. “...I have already had the same thought occur to me, Eddy, but I used the evidence at my disposal to conclude that that was a false notion.”

“Double-D, there’re easier ways to tell me you think I’m stupid.”

Yes, but that would be a waste of a vocabulary; that’s what Double-D wanted to say. Instead, he tried to reframe his point for a third time. “I considered that they were the suspects the police were looking for. I decided, however, that their behavior simply would not fit the profile of wanted criminals.”

“...Wait, what?”

“How much clearer can I make this, Eddy? I made the connection that the authorities were in pursuit of a fox and a bear. I pondered that those two were the suspects, as opposed to yourself and Ed. But I came to the conclusion that they were simply too civil and sophisticated to be denizens of the wrong side of the law.”

Eddy was speechless for a moment, so Double-D continued.

“I’ve done my fair share of reading, Eddy. It’s simply too difficult for anybody to successfully conceal their true character for too long. Between the two of them and the three of us, surely one of them would have faltered in such a way to make their true intentions known, and surely one of us would have picked up on the fact that we were in the presence of evil.”

“...Double-D… I’m dead serious… are you stupid?”

“Eddy--”

“Are... you... mentally... stupid?”
“Eddy, whom among us truly thinks themselves to be stupid?”

“You really think they weren’t criminals just because they were ‘sophisticated’? You were just a sucker for that fox’s accent. Roger or whatever. Because that John guy was a grumpy old fuck that sounded like he gets into bar-fights for fun. You’re a fucking maniac if you’d call that ‘sophisticated.’”

“Really? Is that how he came across to you? He was certainly much more reserved than Robin -- I would even concede that he came across as tad abrasive -- but remember, he had just suffered a significant casualty, he was visibly fatigued, and he was in a position where he needed to swallow his pride to ask a mortifying favor of complete strangers -- not just any strangers, mind you, but the members of the infamously empathy-empty demographic known as teenage boys! Any of us would struggle to be amiable in such a tight spot. Furthermore, he was actually much nicer to me after you and Ed departed. Considering the prevailing stereotypes that his people’s culture is rather antisocial, he was certainly more agreeable than Ed’s father. Surely he must have been a fine fellow to make the acquaintance of a gentleman like Robin.”

“Who you just went gaga for his accent!” Eddy’s sentence structure was atrocious, but Double-D doubted Eddy would care for a correction right about then.

“Oh, I confess, Eddy: encountering a well-spoken Englishman in a junkyard was a pleasant surprise. But it wasn’t the sonic quality of his speech that convinced me that he was an upstanding citizen, but rather his diction and mannerisms. He fell in line with all the other intelligent and worldly adults I’ve encountered in my lifetime, and such a person simply could not be a criminal. Besides, why would someone move all the way across the Atlantic just to begin a life of crime?”

“Maybe he had to high-tail it out of there because he had an arrest warrant; did you think of that!?”

“Oh, yes, Eddy, it’s so very easy for a person with an arrest warrant to book a flight, navigate their way through an international airport terminal, get on an airplane, and disembark in the land of one of their home country’s closest allies, all without being seen or recognized by police or security even once. Especially after all the increases in security measures in the last few years.” Double-D had to readjust in his seat; he realized his posture was slumping.

“So he faked some documents! That’s what criminals do!”

“Do pardon my obnoxious skepticism, Eddy, but I don’t think it would be that easy for a fox who’s almost five feet tall to conceal their identity.”

The line was mostly silent for a second, but Double-D thought he heard a faint seething on the other end. Realizing that he’d likely just struck a nerve, Double-D decided to reroute the conversation.

“Eddy, I understand that you mean to have a healthy distrust, but one can easily over-do it. Trust and distrust can both be dangerous without enough empirical evidence! The fact of the matter is that we don’t know too much about these two, and good and evil exist in each and every last one of us.” At this point, Double-D decided he needed to get up and pace around his kitchen a little bit as he talked, lest his legs fall asleep. “But I, for one, gathered all the clues and hints that I could, and I decided that these two were more good than evil, and that helping them would be the right thing to do. I did my best, Eddy, and you will not make me feel stupid or ashamed for doing that.”

“Jesus Christ, Double-D, how can you be this naïve? Have you never been taken advantage of by a smooth talker before?”
“Of course I have. By you.”

“Oh, hush!” Eddy scoffed. Double-D was a bit surprised that Eddy wasn’t flattered beyond words that he’d just been called a ‘smooth talker’ as he’d always striven to be, just like his brother. Eddy continued, “The guy tells you to your face that they’re a couple of actors -- people who play pretend for a living -- and you still believe every word they say!”

“So you believed them, too.”

“... What?”

“You’re going on about them being liars, and then you cite their own claims of being actors as evidence that they’re liars.”

“...?”

“You’re saying the lying man calling himself a liar proves that he’s a liar.”

“Double-D, will you tell your brain to quit doing jumping jacks or whatever! It makes perfect sense that they’d be the criminals that cops were looking for! They were looking a fox and a bear, not a fox and a bear and a wolf wearing a stupid little hat! If I saw us, that stupid fucking hat of yours would be the first thing I’d notice!”

“Eddy, we caused a very loud avalanche of trash and were carrying around implements for a decidedly illegal activity.” Double-D took a moment to stop by the window and peel back the blinds to see just how dark it had gotten outside. It was very late, and the sun was nowhere to be found after a long June day. “I don’t know about you, Eddy, but I didn’t see them engage in anything illicit.”

“Us and everybody else in the cul-de-sac’ve been fucking around in the junkyard for years! We’ve done worse damage and nobody’s ever called the cops on us once! Why would today be the day?”

Double-D needed some new territory to pace in, so he meandered his way into his living room. “Sometimes you just get unlucky, Eddy. And I got lucky by not being seen by whoever alerted the authorities. All I know is that it would be unfair to Misters Hood and Little to assume that they were perpetrators of some ambiguous infraction just because they matched an extremely vague description, much like how it would have been unfair to us if they were the culprits but we were apprehended because two of the three of us were of the same species. Eddy, I have been falsely implicated in misdeeds several times over specifically because of my association with an outwardly antagonistic person like you. I know what it is like to be held guilty until proven innocent in the court of public opinion, and it is not a fate I wish upon anyone.”

“Oh, boo hoo, some people misjudged you once or twice, so now you blindly trust people who you should have realized were playing you. Cry me a river under the bridge I’d like to sell ya.”

“Eddy, may I ask a question?” Double-D proposed.

“What now?”

“Without an ounce of sarcasm, Eddy, I need to know: even if you were right, even if the three of us looked hardened criminals in the eyes today and didn’t even realize it, even if I am as naïve as you believe me to be... why are you telling me this?”

“...What do you mean, ‘why am I telling you this’?”
“How do you want me to act upon this revelation, Eddy?” Double-D had wound up back in the kitchen. The digital clocks on the microwave and the oven, which had been meticulously timed to be perfectly in-synch with one another, read 10:07. “Do you want me to call the police? Do you want me to march down there with you and demand that those rapscallions leave our space? Do you want me to resolve to always defer to your judgment, now, always, and forever?”

“...Well, originally, I was going to ask if you thought they might be those robbers or whatever who hang out in the woods.”

Double-D stopped and propped himself up on the back of a kitchen chair to think for a second. “...Robbers?”

“You know, the ones everyone says live in the woods and rob rich people, but they only keep enough to live and give the rest to charity or something?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Eddy.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“I am doing nothing of the sort.”

“You’ve never heard anyone at school talking about them? I mean, it’s not like they’re a hot topic of conversation or nothing, but I can count on two hands the number of times I’ve heard people talk about them.”

“It’s not ringing a bell, Eddy. Sorry.”

“...Jesus fucking Christ, you really don’t talk to anybody at school, do you?”

“Oh, where is this coming from, Eddy?”

“If you weren’t such a fucking nerd, you’d probably have talked about it with other kids at least once! Do you talk to anybody besides us and the other cul-de-sac retards?”

“Eddy, I am quite sociable at school! I simply don’t waste my breath entertaining urban legends of paradoxically altruistic thieves!”

“How are you so sure that it’s just an urban legend?”

“Eddy, was that the only reason you called me?” Double-D’s voice betrayed his burgeoning fatigue; it was past his preferred bedtime, and his body knew it.

“You really wanna know why else I called you Double-D?”

“Enlighten me, Eddy.”

“I want you to feel stupid.”

Double-D started walking again, back to the living room, hoping the motion would keep him awake for just a little bit longer.

“Now what would that accomplish, Eddy?”

“It’d light a fire under your ass to step up and be the smart one in the group like you’re supposed to be!”
“You didn’t realize yourself that they may have been the suspects until much later, and now--”

“Are you deaf, too? I just said you’re supposed to be the smart one! The--”

“Are you sure that you don’t fancy yourself to be the smart one, Eddy? Because you sure sound like you do.”

“Hell, maybe I should start calling myself that! The deal was that I’d have the business acumen and you could be the detective-type, always keeping a close eye on all the little-shit details. But if you realized that they could have been the guys the cops were looking for, and you consciously fucking decided that they weren’t, well, then… hell, there’s no substitute for street smarts, I guess.”

Double-D was getting exhausted just listening to this inanity. He needed to sit down on the couch. “Okay, then, fine. I feel stupid. Now what?”

“Are you fucking with me!? You feel stupid, and then you want to change so you stop pissing me off! You should want to be better at doing your part in our partnership. It’s called a partnership for a reason! For fuck’s sakes, Double-D, when someone you care about is pissed at you, you’re supposed to change so they aren’t pissed at you anymore! Or do you not care about me?”

“Do you care about me, Eddy?”

“…Uh…”

“Would you change to stop irritating me, Eddy?”

And then there was silence. Double-D had a hunch that Eddy was working up the nerve to say something big, but he didn’t know if it Eddy was gearing up to say no and telling one of his few allies in the world to make like a tree and screw off, or if he was trying to swallow his damn pride and say yes. But instead, Eddy went a third toute:

“…Whatever happened to the three of us, Double-D?”

Double-D leaned forward on the couch. “…I… beg your pardon, Eddy?”

“I mean, I don’t know why that came out so weird, but… yeah, whatever did happen to us? We were a great team, Double-D. Brains, brawn and charisma. I mean, shit, even if we barely ever made any money off of those scams, we sure showed a hell of a lot more initiative than the other kids. We were on pace to get somewhere eventually. Maybe fifty years from now, but we would have gotten there. I… Jesus, I’m just gonna ask: are you and Ed… over it?”

“Over… what, exactly?” Double-D asked as he stood again.

“Listen, listen,” Eddy said calmly, “I know it’s past your bedtime, ain’t it? We’ll talk more about this tomorrow. But if you and Ed don’t want to help me with my plans anymore… Christ, just say so. It’ll save all of us a lot of time.”

“Eddy, I--”

“One last thing, Edd? So, situation: your apartment catches fire. Your house doesn’t burn to the ground, but you still can’t stay there that night. You’re a starving artist and you’re flat broke, so you can’t afford a hotel, and between you and your… roommate, I guess, whatever kind of roommate he is to you… neither of you have any friends, apparently, that you can stay with. Now, you might not have a lot of options, but is your first choice to drive all the way out to a junkyard in
the suburbs hoping there’ll be an abandoned car you can crash in? Actually, no, wait, fuck it, why didn’t they sleep in their car? Or did they not have a car? Did they walk all that way? Is that what you’d do, Double-D?”

Double-D stood in his living room, staring at the wall, as Eddy waited for an answer on the other end of the line. But even Double-D’s mind had its limits.

“I’m just saying, Double-D,” Eddy continued, “I sure think that’s a lot more unlikely than if they just waltzed out of the woods right next door, looking for a place to hide until the heat died down. But what do I know? I’m not the smart one. Alright. G’night, Edd.” There was a click and then a dial tone, but Double-D held the phone to his ear for a few more seconds after that.

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Back in the kitchen, Double-D double-checked all the sticky notes before he got ready for bed. He had already had his first day of summer vacation ruined; he didn’t need the next one to be marred by a sternly-worded sticky note telling him that he had failed to fulfill his filial duties.

Everything seemed to be in order, but he wanted to consult one specific sticky note one more time. He knew the gist of what it would say, but he wanted to see whether there were any fine details he had missed.

The note was stuck right on the chin of the wall clock in the hallway, and was written in print with blue ink, a telltale sign of Vincent Lupo’s handiwork contrasting to Sammantha’s insistence on writing in cursive with a red pen. The note was already peeling a bit from the last time Edd peeled it off and reattached it; an adhesive can only last so long. Double-D plucked it off the clock, not intending to reattach it this time. Besides, he needed to get a close-up look at it to read the tiny text; Mr. and Mrs. Lupo had long since become experts at being as spatially efficient with their sticky notes as possible.

“Dear Eddward,

“I would like to remind you that your mother and I will be in Virginia Beach today. We will be home late tonight.

“Love, Father.”

Double-D had remembered them saying that they were going to a chemists’ conference down in Virginia, but he didn’t remember whether they specified when the conference ended. They had pulled out of the driveway before dawn this morning, even before Edd woke up to help Eddy with his disastrous little plan, and Double-D didn’t know now whether his parents were still in Hampton Roads or just down the street. Double-D had actually left them a sticky note insisting that they stay overnight in a hotel down there -- at least one night before or after the convention, if not both -- for their own sakes, but they insisted that they could make the drive there and back, both because they didn’t want to be away from home for too long and because they could probably make the best time when there were hardly any other cars on the road.

Double-D didn’t remember offhand how long the drive was; he was tempted to turn his computer back on and go to Mapquest to see how long the drive would be, so he could extrapolate when they would be back if they left at a given time or another. But that would take a few minutes to wait for the computer to warm up, wait to dial up to the internet, and wait for the web-page to load. It was a shame that Double-D couldn’t just pull something out of his pocket and access the internet instantly from that, but unfortunately such technology would be something Double-D would also have to wait for, and right now, Double-D didn’t want to wait; he wanted to go to bed as soon as
Then again, it wasn’t guaranteed that he’d be able to sleep well anyway if he was obsessing over his worry that his parents would fall asleep at the wheel and drive off the bridge into the Chesapeake Bay. Double-D had spent plenty of time before wondering whether his constant concern over his parents’ well-being was healthy. One might say that of course it’s natural for a son to not want harm to befall his parents, but Double-D definitely knew plenty of people who would say that his concern for his mommy and daddy was a bit too much for someone his age. But even beyond the nay-saying cynics, those very close to him might propose that there was a selfish element to it: Double-D was well aware of the luxuries he was afforded as the dependant son of two successful intellectuals. If something Dickensian were to happen to them, Double-D would surely mourn them as a well-adjusted person would, but he would simultaneously lament the loss of all of his potential if he were to be shunted off to the next-of-kin.

Come to think of it, Double-D wondered, whom specifically would that be? His father’s brother Francis was probably the next-most well-off of his relatives, running the Lupo family’s decrepit but sustainable butchery shop back up north in Philadelphia, but Uncle Frankie was a grumpy son of a bitch just like Grandpa Lupo was, and Edd could see Francis simply refusing to take his nephew into his home even under the most tragic of circumstances. So failing Uncle Frankie, the next in line for emergency custody would probably be, uh…

...Oh, yeah: his other uncle.

Of course, if his parents had any say in it, that would never happen, and for reasons he still didn’t fully understand. And being a proud autodidact, Double-D didn’t like not fully understanding something. It made him feel uncomfortable and incomplete; his insatiable thirst for knowledge simply would not allow him to only know part of a story. But it would be quite a challenge to figure out what specific event or action was the impetus for Sammie and Vince to tell Ward to get permanently lost, a challenge that Double-D wasn’t sure he would be able to tackle. After all, what could he do? Ask his parents? No, no, that would never work, because... because, um... hmm.

What exactly was stopping him from simply asking? The most direct answer was anxiety: fear that his parents would not only tell him that it was a matter between grown-ups and that it was none of his business, but that he was also being an insubordinate little delinquent for daring to pry for knowledge that was none of his business. At least that’s what Edd was pretty sure would happen; his parents didn’t raise him on the straight and narrow just to allow him to cavalierly demand privy information on interpersonal matters that only tangentially involved him. Yeah, he was pretty sure that that’s what they’d do.

But he realized he wasn’t certain that that’s what they’d do. Double-D didn’t like being uncertain about things.

His next inhibition up to bat was a worry that his parents would be thoroughly annoyed that to come home from a long drive and immediately be blindsided with a question of of the blue about a character who had, for about the last decade, been more of a mythical cautionary-tale urban legend figure than an actual person participating in their lives. But they would surely read all the sticky notes that their son had left in reply to them, written in his designated green ink, as soon as they got home, just as they always did. Tonight might actually be the best time to pop the question, strategically speaking: if they were heavily fatigued from their trip, perhaps they wouldn’t have the mental energy to be cross with him. Maybe they wouldn’t even think anything of it; this, of course, ran the risk of Mother and Father not even answering the question, but to yield no consequences would be better than to yield negative consequences, Edd reasoned. He wasn’t sure which outcome was the most likely, and he didn’t like being uncertain about things.
His last worry was about how to actually phrase the thing. He had never asked such a question of his parents before, and he was worried that it would come across as an unimportant question and a waste of everyone’s time to answer it; the Peach Creek Lupos were not only wolves of science, but also of pragmatism, and to ask a question from which nothing is to be gained by finding the answer would be a foolish thing to do. And yet, Double-D thought, there may come a time when he had to ask a more pressing question, one that actually was important, that his parents may perceive to be unimportant, and he would have to challenge his parents and find a way to solicit the information from them; in that event, it will have been better if he had practiced asking such difficult questions now so that we will have been ready when the time came for asking something more urgent. He wouldn’t want to be in such a position in the future where he didn’t know how to communicate with his own parents when he really needed to; Double-D didn’t like not knowing things.

In the hallway was a small closet with a thin folding door that the developers of Peach Creek Estates certainly never thought would be used almost exclusively to house sticky notes. Double-D grabbed one and made his way to the kitchen, grabbed the green pen, laid the note out nice and flat and sat down to try to try to think how to articulate his question.

Dear Mother and Father, he wrote; okay, so far so good. Now what? He was writing this in ink, so he hadn’t any opportunities to make a mistake without having to start from scratch; his parents never left him a note with something sloppily scratched out, and Double-D had inferred that he was not to leave such a garish note himself. This was proving tougher than he thought.

Pardon the unexpected -- wait, should he have written unanticipated instead? Too late now. Speaking of late, the clock was ticking, every passing moment meant increased fatigue and even less cogency, and for all he knew, his parents could walk through the front door any moment now and wonder what it was that he was writing them. Then he would have to answer them verbally. And Double-D knew very well that he was one of those people who was much more articulate with a pen and paper than with the tip of his tongue, especially when under pressure.

This was going to take a while.

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Dear Mother and Father,

Pardon the unexpected question, but I was wondering about the whereabouts of my uncle Eddward; suffice it to say that my associates and I were discussing our respective extended families, piquing my curiosity. Please let me know if you would like me to provide any more-specific questions or a notebook for writing an answer too long for a sticky note.

Love, Eddward

Okay, so the sticky note actually turned into four sticky notes daisy-chained together, and he was worried that because he had failed to specifically ask what the hell did he do that you told him to fuck off forever? that his inquiry would simply yield a reply of his whereabouts are that he’s still an uneducated police officer and a disgrace to mammalia as a whole, now why in God’s name did you ask?, and he was feeling a bit self-conscious about his usage of the words “about” and “whereabouts” in close proximity, but that’s what he came up with. The clock read 11:11 p.m. and Double-D was trying to remind himself that perfect was the enemy of good.

For lack of a better location, he left those sticky notes there on the kitchen table, with the sticky parts plastering down the loose ends of their respective predecessors, and hoped that his parents would not chastise him for his poor form. But it was now or never.
He went through his bedtime routine worried about the potential fallout of his query, running different scenarios though his head and planning how he would react to them, ranging from being scolded for asking a sensitive question out of turn to being met with confusion about why he would want to know about such a deplorable being. He even had some new scenarios pop into his head, like the idea that Ward had done something really bad and that it was actually his parents who were going to be nervous, dodging the question so as not to upset their son; but Double-D did not see this as a viable possibility. From what he seldom saw of his parents, fear of speaking the truth was not a state he’d seen them in.

Despite his racing mind, however, Double-D was still on the verge of passing out from sheer exhaustion. He skipped the warm milk and the foot lotion and many of the other pre-slumber habits that he was trying to kick anyway after that one night a few summers back when he had to crash at Eddy’s house, when he tried to get Eddy to fulfill the duties usually performed by Sammie and Vince, only for Eddy to explode at him the next morning and tell Double-D that he hadn’t been able to sleep that night because he was genuinely disturbed by the infantile nature of Double-D’s secret home life; if the events of that preceding day had been some downright wacky antics that would make for a great episode of a beloved TV-Y7 cartoon, the dialogue of the next morning was so brutally honest and unfathomably awkward that it wouldn’t make for good TV for any demographic.

All for the best, perhaps. Although on a night like this, he wished that his parents were there to take turns reading him an article from *Science Monthly* or a passage from *Tailor’s World Encyclopedia*, not because the readings themselves would give him comfort, but because knowing that his parents were home safe and sound would, along with knowing that the next time he saw them in person, the sticky note conflict would probably be behind him. The last thing that Double-D remembered thinking before he dozed off was that he no longer harbored his earlier sentiment that he was prepared for death at any moment, and not just because he was no longer fully convinced that he was a wanted fugitive (although that certainly helped); he wanted to stick around long enough to find out what was so irredeemably insidious about his uncle. Maybe after that, he would be prepared again.

***

It was the faint click of the door’s latch scuffling that woke him up. The door began to open ever so slightly, not even enough to call it ajar, before it stopped in its tracks.

“Sammie! We shouldn’t wake him up!” was the first of many harsh-but-hushed sentences he heard coming from the hallway.

“I know, but I don’t want to wait until morning!” he heard as the door slipped back shut, but the latch didn’t reengage. Whoever had their hand on the knob hadn’t let go of it yet. There was a sliver of dim light coming from under the door, indicating that a light was on somewhere, but not the hall light immediately outside his door. “If it’s something serious, I want to know it now!”

“So do I, but he’s asleep, and we’re exhausted, and all three of us will be much more clear-headed in the morning.” Oh, what they didn’t know.

“I don’t disagree, Vince, but I won’t be able to sleep if he knows something we don’t know!”

Double-D sat upright in bed. He wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out. The last thing he wanted was to turn the target of the conflict upon himself. But then, the first thing he wanted was to know what information they thought he was withholding from them.

“What can you do with that information now that you wouldn’t have to wait until morning to do?”
A cold shiver overcame him. *Did they know of their encounter in the junkyard today? No, no, no, they couldn’t have access to that information… or could they?*

“Decipher how much of an idiot my brother is!”

...Okay, now Double-D was just confused. He didn’t very much like being confused, and that dislike was even stronger than his dislike of getting between his parents. That was what got him to slide out of bed and make his way to the door.

“Well, then you *really* won’t be able to sleep!”

Double-D grasped the doorknob and pulled on it without turning it, knowing it was already being held open on the other end. As his eyes adjusted to the faint half-light of the hallway, he could still see the startled looks on his parents’ faces, and his mother recoiling her hand off the doorknob as if she just realized she’d laid her paw upon something filthy.

“E-Eddward!” Sammantha choked out.

“Apologies, Mother and Father, but I couldn’t help but overhear your, um, *conversation*, as it were.”

Sammantha and Vincent shot nervous glances to one another while struggling to find words appropriate for the situation.

“Oh, uh, uh-- Son, it’s no problem,” Vincent sputtered, “I-i-if anything, you helped, uh… you helped us make up our minds. A-about whether or not to wake you.”

“Mother, Father, is this about my note? I apologize if it caused you alarm; I just--”

“Edd-Eddward. Mellow out. We’ve had a long day, and it seems you have, too,” Vincent continued. “We may or may not be about to discuss some serious family business, *as* a family, so you don’t need to worry about formalities right now. We’re not in public right now. We’re not Mother and Father right now; we’re Mom and Dad right now. And we don’t want your precision of language to get in the way of saying what you think you might need to say. Sounds good?”

“Uh-- Yes, Fa--” Double-D caught himself. “...Okay, Dad.”

“Eddward, we’re sorry for waking you up; we just wanted to ask some questions while they were still fresh in our head,” Sammantha clarified. “May we take a seat?”

“Uh, y-yes, but, um… may I ask some questions, too?”

“Why, of course,” Sammantha reassured her son.

“I’m just afraid we’re not going to have all the answers,” Vincent confessed.

The three went over to Edd’s bed. Edd, having been the closest to it, got there first, and began to take a seat near the head of the bed.

“Uh, son, why-why don’t you take a seat in the middle?” Vincent asked.

“Your father’s right, we don’t want you to feel like you’re being edged out of your own space.”

“Um… alright, then,” Double-D conceded as he scooted down the bed. His father sat to his right near the end of the bed and his mom sat down near the pillows.
“So… we have a lot of questions, but we don’t know where to begin,” Vincent decided to start off with.

“Especially me, since, you know… I might be more of an expert on this,” Sammantha added. “But maybe it would be best if you asked us a question first?”

“What do you want to know about Ward that you don’t already know?” Vincent asked.

Double-D found something off about that question; it was if they genuinely didn’t know how deprived of information he felt himself to be. “Um… Well, the, uh--”

“Son, don’t worry about perfect sentence structure; just tell us what you’re thinking,” said Mr. Lupo.

So Double-D went for it. He delivered the following paragraph while looking into his palms:

“Well, Fa-- Dad, it’s funny that you should say that, because, uh… I realized recently that I don’t know much about Uncle Ward. I know what you and Moth-- what you and Mom have told me about his gluttony and slobblish-ness and ignorance and belligerence, and I remember him acting in such ways at times, but… I… I also remember you alluding to other, more terrible things that he’s done, and I realize that this is purely anecdotal, and that I didn’t witness much of this myself. I-I-I-- Please don’t interpret this as my calling you two liars, Mom and Dad, but, it’s just… I started wondering if it’s right to hate someone just because I was instructed to hate them. Or at least I feel as though it was that I was led to hate him. I certainly recall him being markedly improper, but never evil as I feel I’ve been led to think of him. I suppose my one main question is… was there one specific action of his, or event, that inspired you to tell him to never come visit us again?”

Only then did Double-D dare to look up and face his parents. First he looked to his Mother, then his father. Despite his vast vocabulary, the closest word Double-D could think to come up with do describe the look on their faces was spooked.

“Well, um...” Vincent said as the first to attempt a sentence, “…that’s a lot to unpack.”

“Maybe we should have asked the first question,” Sammantha wondered.

“I’m sorry, Mo--”

“Nonononono, it’s fine!” Vincent reassured. “That’s what we needed to hear!”

“This gives us invaluable insight into where your head’s at!” Sammantha assured.

And then for a moment, there was silence. It was abundantly clear that Double-D’s parents were in no hurry to actually answer their son’s question.

“So…” Double-D coughed out; he was having trouble psyching himself up to talk to his parents informally, so he tried to imagine he was just shooting the shit with the boys. “What did he do?”

“Huh?” the Lupo parents asked more or less in unison.

“Neither of you actually answered my question.”

“Oh, well, uh…” Sammantha began.

“W-we’re still unpacking it!” explained Vincent. “In-in our heads.”

“What was the question again, son?” asked Sammantha.
Never in a million eventualities would Double-D have thought that this conversation would see him getting frustrated with his parents’ coyness rather than the other way around.

“Was there one specific thing that he did that inspired the two of you tell him not to come see us anymore?”

“We-w-well, uh, it was more of your mother’s prerogative,” Vincent said, “seeing as it was her brother. The guy was practically a stranger to me!” Vincent was obviously giving his wife a help me out here look that Sammantha looked to feel conflicted about receiving.

“Your father isn’t wrong, Eddward,” she said, “It was my place to be the one to tell him to get lost. B-but, um… like most things in life, it happened for more than one reason!”

“What were those reasons?” Double-D asked without hesitation. Seeing as he wasn’t 100% positive anymore that all of this wasn’t just a really annoying dream, he decided he might as well push the envelope to see where it would go.

“Well, he was a loser,” said Sammantha. “He was a slob, he… he had no manners, he barely had a job--”

“I remember clearly that he had become a police officer,” Edd interjected, “and that he worked night shifts.”

“Well, yes, precisely!” Sammantha said. “So he couldn’t come over because he was working when we would be asleep! Plus we didn’t expect his employment to last long…”

“And he had fleas, so that didn’t help,” Vincent added.

“He did !?” Double-D exclaimed. “Eew…!”

“He didn’t, actually,” Sammantha mumbled.

“He didn’t ?” asked Vincent incredulously.

“That was something I made up to help get you to agree that we should tell him to stay away.”

“Sammie!” Vince growled a bit.

“I lied to accomplish something and it helped me accomplish it,” Sammantha stated unapologetically.

“So let me get this straight,” their son piped up. “This was a concerted effort to forbid him from our home?”

“Well, yeah,” Sammantha said. “Between all those things--”

“I had already heard of all those things -- that he was impolite and ignorant and all of that,” Double-D said. “But was that really all? By these rules, Uncle Francis would be eligible for banishment as well.”

“Okay, now you say that you already knew all that, and that honestly scares us,” Vincent said rather forwardly.

“What do you mean?”

“His behavior and demeanor were all the reasons that we saw , but…” Sammantha trailed off for a
moment. “...We were afraid he might have done something else. That we didn’t see and couldn’t prove, that is.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, you know,” Sammantha said, “He didn’t have any woman in his life, he didn’t have any real friends—”

“If you’re saying that he seemed antisocial, Moth-- uh, *Mom*, that’s what confuses me. He always seemed quite friendly -- to me, at least.”

“Okay, now *that* scares us even more!” said Vincent.

“Mom, Dad, I must say that I’m thoroughly confused by what you may be leading to.”

“Oh, Eddward,” Sammantha cooed, “I’m so sorry, we shouldn’t have woken you up at this hour. You’re sleepy and disoriented--”

“Edd,” Vincent asked, “is this suspense making you nervous?”

“Extremely.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Wh- what !?”

“Vincent!” Sammantha shrieked.

“What do you mean by *hurt* ?” Double-D asked.

“You know! Did he-- did he molest you?”

“Vince, what the hell is wrong with you!?” Sammantha hollered. Edd, for his part, was busy trying to figure out in which direction he ought to focus his eyes.

“I can’t stand pussy-footing around this anymore! We’re all dying of anticipation, so I just asked the question we were all wondering and got it over with!”

There were no words for a bit as Vincent took some deep breaths to get his frustration out of his system. Edd himself was reeling because he had only ever heard his parents use explicit language fewer than a dozen times combined, and now they each used some definitely impolite verbiage after an extremely blunt and blindsiding question.

“I-I apologize. F-for my language. Pardon my French, but I’m glad I ripped that band-aid off.”

Vincent turned his attention back to his son exclusively. “But yeah… *did* he?”

Double-D did not remember the last time he felt so uncomfortable in his own bed, barring some physical ailments back during flu season.

“I… I do not remember Uncle Ward being anything other than friendly and kind to me,,” Edd asserted as calmly as he could. “And if he had done something malicious, I would have told you.”

Vincent and Sammantha exhaled deep sighs of relief. Vince even collapsed backward onto the bed and stared blissfully at the ceiling for a moment.

“Well, *that’s* good to hear!” Sammantha finally said.
“Is that what it was all about? You thought he… he assaulted me!?”

“I mean, yes and no,” Vincent said as he sat back up. “It wasn’t so much about did as much about what we were afraid he might have done. And that’s both a past- and future-tense might .”

“Quite honestly, Eddward, we were afraid he was getting too friendly with you,” Sammantha said.

“What did he do that made you think he did that!?”

“Like we said, it wasn’t what he did . Heck, I think I even remember your mom and I discussing that he wouldn’t have had the opportunity to… um… do anything , because we never left you alone with him for more than a few minutes. And at a certain point, we didn’t leave you alone with him because we didn’t know what he would do.”

“I don’t know if it was a joke he wouldn’t let die or if he actually believed it, but no matter how many times I reminded him that you were named after his and my father, he insisted that we named you after him . And he was always so excited to see you. He always wanted to play with you, or talk with you, or sit you on what passed for his lap--”

“--And it all could have been innocent! It could have been! We might have misjudged him; I acknowledge that! Maybe you were the only person in the world he was nice to! But it also could have been a blood-red flag waving two inches in front of our faces. So we erred on the side of caution.”

“And knowing what we -- what I -- know about the rest of the guy’s life, I think we made the right decision. I don’t care how innocent it might have been; nobody’s favorite person should be their nephew .”

“ Or their uncle,” Vincent added.

“Exactly. If nothing else, we were forcing him to get his own life instead of inserting himself into ours. The Woodlands are fucked up enough--”

“ Sammie! ” Vincent sounded more concerned than offended by his wife’s language this time.

“Vince, I’m tired . And thinking on my brother brings forth the vocabulary he and I were raised with.” Sammantha turned her head a bit and stared into space for just long enough to put a thought that had been forming in the back of her head into words. “Oh--! I’m going to be so pissed if this turns out to be a case of a repressed memory! I’ll kill the son of a bitch.”

“I haven’t repressed a memory; he never hurt me!” Double-D barked.

“You don’t know that,” Vincent muttered defeatedly. “And neither do we.”

“And he might not know either depending on whatever drugs he might have been on,” Sammantha said.

“Uncle Ward does drugs!?”

Sammantha just scoffed. “Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Edd, don’t you ever just get an intuitive read on a guy? And you feel like you can successfully guess a whole bunch of things about their lives?” Vincent asked. “That’s what’s going on here.”
“Your father and I didn’t bust our asses to become intelligent people just for anybody at all to come along and tell us that our educated guesses were anything less than intelligent.”

“Mom, you’ve been, uh, rather profane tonight.”

“Yeah. Honey, are you still drunk?” Vincent asked.

“I’m fine, Vince.”

“But… he did actually brutally assault a civilian for jaywalking while he was out on patrol, right?” asked Edd.

“Probably,” Vincent quipped. “If not for jaywalking, then something else incredibly minor, I’d bet. A busted taillight or something, maybe? That’s just the kind of guy he is.”

“Did he-- did he actually ever beat a woman he was dating?”

“If he ever found a woman, I’d bet he did! The asshole...” Sammantha mumbled. “The man’s been lonely for so long, he’d probably have no idea how to treat a woman right.”

“Edd, the point is, your mother and I feel confident in saying that, even if he never did any of the things we can feel in our bones that he’s probably done -- or something similar -- if he didn’t want us thinking so lowly of him, then he shouldn’t have been such a… such an unpleasant person in our presence,” Vincent explained. “Let this be a lesson to you, Eddward: if you’re unpleasant enough as a person, people will take creative liberties in negatively rewriting the story of your life, and they’ll feel completely justified in doing so. Or it can work the opposite way! George Washington never chopped down that cherry tree and told his dad about it, but we say he did because that’s just the kind of guy he was -- he probably would have done something like that. Being a good person really is rewarding.”

Double-D was speechless. How the tables had turned, and in a complete three-sixty: first he was afraid that his parents would think he was asking stupid questions and begin to condescendingly explain things to him; but when his parents actually talk to him, they’re shaking in their boots as they fear they’re asking their son stupid questions; then the answer to their question is anticlimactic, which inspires him to ask questions about their questions, which they think are stupid questions, leading them to begin to condescendingly explain things to him.

But the things they were explaining to him were… strange, to say the least. Controversial may have been a word.

“Hey, Vince?” Sammantha asked, “Did you ever for a second think my brother was gay?”

“No, I think if he were, he’d have bathed more oft--”

“So has he ever been with a woman or not?” Edd asked, “Have you not even spoken to the man in the last -- what? -- six or seven years?”

“Sometimes Gramma tells me things about how he’s doing, even though I don’t ask. She knows we don’t talk,” Sammantha answered. “I think he’s still a cop, and he actually got promoted a few times.”

Double-D bit his tongue.

“Remind me to drive especially carefully in the city, just to make sure he doesn’t pull us over,” Vincent remarked.
Double-D just wanted to go to bed. “Mom? Dad? I think I’ve had all my questions answered.”

“Are you sure?” Sammantha asked.

“For now, yes.”

“Alright,” Vincent said as he stood from the bed. “We all ought to be getting to bed.”

“Indeed,” said Sammantha. “If there’s anything else you want to ask us, just leave us a note.”

“You know, that’s probably a good reason we had this talk in person,” Vincent said, “because I don’t know how many sticky notes this would have taken!”

Sammantha guffawed as Edd pretended to chuckle. Sammie rose and walked toward the door, and her husband put her arm around around her shoulders as they walked toward the door. Being a Woodland wolf, she was tall, and she was maybe but a tinge shorter than her husband.

“I’m gonna take you to bed, honey,” Vincent joked, and Sammantha chuckled again. They stopped at the door and turned back to their pup. “Goodnight, son.”

“And if you remember anything happening to you, you let us know ASAP!”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Alright. Goodnight,” she said as she walked out the door, her husband following and closing the door behind them and turning off the light.

“G-goodnight,” Double-D mumbled, but they probably didn’t hear him.

He got back under the covers and tried to find a comfortable position. He was grateful that he had gotten the hour or so of sleep earlier, because he wasn’t sure when he was going to fall asleep again. His head was already spinning with worries over his uncle’s unclear past, the strangers’ uncanny refinement, he and his friends’ unsettled schism, and his own uncertain criminal record. Now added to that whirling gyre was the fear that his parents weren’t the noble empiricists he had always made them out to be. But maybe such mischaracterizations are inevitable when you communicate with someone for years but almost never hear them speak.

The sirens in the distance didn’t make sleep come any easier, either.
Chapter Summary

Robin Hood and Little John find themselves in an increasingly awkward series of situations and become earwitnesses to an event that will shake Nottingham to its core.

8. “The Naked and the Afraid and the Famous and the Dead”

Cough, cough.

“Are you alright, Johnny?”

“You awake, Rob?”

“I just spoke to you, now didn’t I?”

“Oh, c’mon, Robin. How could someone as worldly as yourself never once run into somebody who talks in their sleep?”

“Have you encountered sleep-talkers who say entire sentences that directly relate to the situation at hand?”

“Yessir. Several times, in fact.”

“...Huh. Well then. You got me there! I suppose one man can only have so many experiences. Ah... It’s a curse, really. A tease. All the time we get to spend on this Earth, and we have to spend it stuck in one body. You know, I--”

“Rob, whenever you’re done philosophizing, I’d like to have a turn to say sumthin’.”

“What’s up, Johnny Boy?”

“You smell that, don’t you?”

“...I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want to embarrass you, Little Jo--”

“You thought that was coming from me !?”

“Where else could I logically deduce it’s coming from?”

“I dunno, maybe those kids murdered a rodent and the guy’s rotting under the driver’s seat.”

“Oh, that is a grotesque image, Little John.”

“Hey, they didn’t seem like they’d be murderers, but maybe that’s their bent. Maybe they’re even better actors than you and me.”
“Oh, wouldn’t that be an intriguing twist!”

“And maaaaybe that smell is actually coming from you and you’re just blaming it on me to cover your own ass!”

“What!? No…”

“And after all I’ve done for ya, Robin…”

“Come now, Johnny, I--”

“My people have been the victims of prejudice that we’re a bunch of dirty, unhygienic mongrels, and you perpetuate that hurtful stereotype just because you’re too embarrassed to own up to your body’s natural functions? For shame, Robin.”

“Little John, surely you’re just taking the piss with me, right?”

“I’ll take your weird little Britishism and raise you some good ol’ American folk wisdom: ‘he who smelt it, dealt it.’”

“I thought that only referred to, er, gas, not body odor in general.”

“Ain’t we talking about gas?”

“…Okay, the fact that we’re having this confusion tells me that perhaps it really wasn’t you.”

“T ook ya long enough. But seriously, I kinda smelled something when we first got in here, but I was too tired to say anything. I might not have been able to sleep through it if I weren’t drop-dead exhausted.”

“I remember smelling something, too, but it wasn’t nearly this strong. I would have thought that it would have aired out by now with the window open.”

“Oh, yeah, the window’s open! That is weird! Th-that it stuck around I mean. The smell.”

“I understand you, Johnny.”

“I’m not stupid, Robin. I’m just sleepy-headed. I just woke up. I’m not thinking straight yet.”

“I never disputed this.”

“Hm… But I really do think it’s some… residue or something from what the kids were doing, whatever they were doin’.”

“It would have aired out by now. The window’s-- no, you know what? The window isn’t even open because the window is gone. It’s but a memory.”

“How nice your life must be that you’ve never encountered a smell that just won’t air out after hours and hours and hours.”

“I count my blessings, Johnny, don’t you worry.”

“Maybe it’s a smell they left combined with our, uh… our own--”

“Aromas ?”
“That’s the ticket.”
“Like our musk and the van’s must are working in synergy?”
“More or less.”
“But the only really pungent thing that I saw them with was the generators full of petrol.”
“And this don’t smell like gasoline.”
“I’m glad we can agree on this.”
“Ditto. But… hey, come to think of it, that bear kid did look kinda funky.”
“How was he looking ‘funky’, Johnny? I was just a young lad in the seventies and I don’t remember them very well; you’re going to have to give me a crash-course.”
“I didn’t mean that the kid looked like he was on his way to the fucking disco hall, Robin. And I barely remember the seventies myself, but I don’t remember them being that great.”
“Glad to hear I didn’t miss too much.”
“I meant that I could see that kid skipping showers.”
“Well, then. You’re the one judging a minor by their looks, not me!”
“Oh, hush up, Rob.”
“For the record, I thought you were going to say the bear boy looked like something else.”
“Like whaddaya mean?”
“…Nevermind, it was stupid.”
“You can tell me. No skin off my bones.”
“No, no, it was an underdeveloped joke that doesn’t really make sense now that I think about it. Spare me my own embarrassment.”
“If you say so.”
“…”
“…How long has it been since we’ve been together in a space this small for this long?”
“I’d say it’s been awhile, Johnny.”
“And how long’s it been since we’ve had the chance to take a dip?”
“Longer than I’m proud to admit.”
“If Marian knocked on this van’s door right now, would you be afraid that you’d scare her off because you looked and smelled like a homeless person?”
“Oh, come now, Johnny…”
“Hey. Hey. Rob. I’m sorry… but was that not a damn good way to pose the question?”
“...It was.”

“So would you?”

“Would I…?”

“Resist the urge you’ve held for years to embrace her because you thought you were, oh shall we say, hygienically unbecoming?”

“...Well, the thought would certainly cross my mind. I suppose it would depend on her reaction to my, er...”

“Odor.”

“To put it bluntly.”

“So, my thinking is that even if the smell isn’t coming from us and us alone, we’re probably not helping our own cause.”

“Little John, you do make a solid argument.”

“I forget, did we pack soap before we left?”

“I think I grabbed a bar of hand-soap for when we’re done using the facilities.”

“Well, I don’t wanna go wash up in the latrine. Do you think it’s safe to go run to the creek for a few minutes?”

“What’s the point of finding a safehouse for the night if we just go right back into the woods?”

“Well Rob, what’s the point of having a safehouse if we can’t breathe the air inside the safehouse?”

“...Johnny, I’m not saying you’re wrong, I’m just saying that it might be foolish to go and act upon what you’re saying, even if it is right.”

“We just won’t go anywhere near the tree. Easy.”

“And if they get lost and run into us by stupid luck?”

“Then we see them coming first and we ambush them. Disarm them and take them on in a scrap. I can take ‘em.”

“I tried to tell those boys you were a good guy, and here you are itching to jump headlong into a row.”

“Robin, every man and boy in my life always told me to toughen up as a kid, and I wanted to, too. So I did. Yeah, it took until my fucked-up pituitary got its ass in gear, but eventually managed to get myself to a point where I could be a honey bear in my natural state, but switch to a grisly bear when I need to be. And dearheart, wouldn’t it be a waste if I didn’t put that new side to me to good use? After all I did to try to become more like the person I wanted to be?”

“Truly an inspiring story, Johnny.”

“Now I just need to buy some of your charisma and charm off of you.”
“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself, Johnny! I wish I could be the life of the party like you!”

“You say this now, but I wish I could be the person people turn to when it ain’t time for partying.”

“That’s why we work so well together!”

“And I can appreciate that. But for most of my life, I wasn’t part of some dynamic duo, and if one day I’m in that position again, maybe I won’t be prepared.”

“Johnny, stop thinking so much about things like that which may never even happen.”

“You’re right -- let’s think about this smell instead. It’s dark out; do we know what time it is?”

“Night-thirty.”

“Heh. Real funny. So much for the legendary wit of British humor.”

“Seven years, and you still bring up the transatlantic quirks at every turn.”

“Yeah, because never had I ever thought that I’d find myself being tight with a well-to-do British guy. It never stopped being downright astounding. Every single day it amazes me that this is how my life turned out. I just stop and think about it: ‘Wow, I’m livin’ in the woods, using morally-difficult vigilante tactics to try to make other people’s lives a little less bad, and my closest confidante is a British guy who grew up crazy rich and crazy tall and crazily good with an arrow, among other old-timey weapons.’”

“For the record, Johnny, I didn’t grow up rich. And no I need to explain to you the socioeconomics of the North of England again?”

“Buddy, you were able to go to college across the ocean from your house. You might not have been an aristocrat, but you came from money in my book.”

“Should I go back home and rob my parents and give it to the people of Nottingham?”

“You could probably afford to fly first-class both ways and still have plenty left over!”

“Oh, nonsense!”

“That sounds like something a posh British guy would say.”

“Do you want to hot-wire this van and drive me to the airport, then?”

“Heh…”

“…”

“Okay. So. I’m gonna go grab the soap and maybe my stick and I’m gonna mosey on down to the creek. You can come with me, or you can stay behind, knowing you left me alone to die, and then you can fantasize about your woman and whittle your weiner or whatever you do when I’m not around.”

“…”

“…”

“You need me to help you find the soap, don’t you, Johnny?”
“Oh, would you be a dear?”

“It would be shameful for a posh English aristocrat like myself to not help out a dashing young lady like yourself.”

“Why, thank you, milord.”

“Certainly.”

“…”

“…”

Sniff, sniff. “I figured it out.”

“What?”

“Gravy… This van smells like gravy.”

***

Honestly, Little John really had come a long way in terms of self-confidence, including but not limited to his relatively-new devil-may-care attitude to being bare-ass naked in the presence of others, especially other men. The first several dozen times that the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest had decided that they needed to take a timeout to go to the Peach Creek and wash the parts of their bodies where the sun refused to shine, Little John had always insisted that he wait for the others to finish before he went, and he would hang out on the banks “keeping lookout” -- which wasn’t incorrect when he was looking in any other direction but at the other guys -- while the others fraternized without him.

Just the thought of joining them brought back unpleasant memories of several occasions during his youth -- no fewer than two times but not exceeding seven -- when, during his lonely walkabouts through the wooded hilly countryside at Nashville’s edge, he happened upon some other boys skinny-dipping in the river. The boys were all some combination of bigger, stronger, older, socially smarter, tougher and/or meaner than him, and each of them invariably was brimming with a self-confidence that John Edmund Little simply did not yet have. Accidentally invading their public privacy would have been mortifying enough, but when they saw him, they all had the compulsive urge to jump out of the river, chase him down, bumrush him -- recall that they’re all still stark naked throughout all of this -- and kick his ass while accusing him of being a homosexual for looking at them while they were nude. The irony was palpable, and the boys probably realized it but didn’t care; teenage boys in the Bible Belt during the Reagan era will be teenage boys in the Bible Belt during the Reagan era. Eventually, Little John just started walking somewhere else.

Of course, the worst part of those memories is that on at least one of those occasions, John’s brother, the big personality and friend-to-all that he was, was among the boys in the river, and in his infinite blissful ignorance, the guy just thought that they were play-fighting; after all, sparring and boxing had always been some of the naturally-extroverted brother’s favorite pastimes, so he had genuinely thought that John had stopped by for a spur-of-the-moment good old friendly dogpile. At the end of it all, the dumb motherfucker was genuinely confused as to why Little John would limp away toward home trying not to openly weep instead of laughing it off and coming back with him to chill by the river and finally be one of the guys. Said guys would then profess to the bigger Little brother their ardent disbelief that the two of them were brothers, let alone fraternal twins.
Little John still did think about that when it was bathtime, but now he had become able to rationalize it, knowing that he was among trusted friends (who were also exposed in their birthday suits) and that there probably wouldn’t be anybody or anything there who would try to hurt him. Plus it had eventually clicked in his brain that he was roughly three feet taller and several magnitudes heavier than any other member of any iteration of the crew, so he knew that they knew it would probably be unwise of them to risk pissing him off by joking that he had funny-looking genitalia.

But as the duo crossed the log-bridge to get to their usual spot on the opposite side of the creek, Robin was in no mood to praise his friend for having achieved a serviceable level of confidence. It was essentially an entire day later, and he was still gobsmacked that his friend -- a man who was pushing forty, no less -- had acted so damned childish that morning. Or maybe childish wasn’t the right word, but that was the word that kept popping into his head. Robin had always regarded Little John as mature, at least inasmuch as a product of the bear’s sense of loyalty, his great balance between bravery and caution, and a touch of jadedness, and now opening a can of worms about how he was starting to suspect Robin had regarded him as lesser -- seeing John as juvenile, one might even say -- seemed in and of itself to be a juvenile move that clashed with the Little John he knew.

Vulnerable? John wanted him to be more ‘vulnerable’? Granted, it was Robin who had conjured up with the word ‘vulnerable’ to describe what Little John was getting at, but John didn’t fight it when he asked if that’s what he meant. Evidently John’s self-confidence still had a ways to go if he needed to see his friends be weak before he could feel strong by comparison.

Ironically, Johnny had come close to forcing that side out of him by invoking the names of his girlfriend and his brother. One of them was a case of lovesickness that had run unabated until it eventually developed into a forlorn heartbreak, and the other was… well, a profound personal tragedy, to say the least; one of them was someone he was growing increasingly certain he’d never see again, and the other was someone he knew he’d never see again, at least not on this mortal coil. Because things that are cruelly uncertain and things that are cruel certainties can feel equally but oppositely bad, the which of the two he felt worse about flip-flopped on an regular basis, but rarely did a day go by when he wouldn’t take some extra time when he had excused himself to use the water closet to be alone for a second and just stop and think about each of them and how damned terrible he felt. He would think about how alone he felt, abandoned even, with those two gone, let alone all the others who’d came and went. And now that his closest and last remaining friend was turning into a stranger, that wasn’t doing much to help assuage his feelings of loneliness.

But he had to stay strong -- not just for himself, nor just for Marian nor Will nor any of the others left behind, nor just for the poor people of Nottingham who relied upon him, yes for all of those people but beyond them all, he had to stay strong for Little John. Johnny might not like it that Robin was lording over him with his mental, physical (well, proportionally speaking) and emotional strength, but little did Little John know that he needed Robin to do it for him. If the two of them were to survive -- nevermind whether they were to successfully dissolve Nottingham’s political machine and dethrone the Prince Mayor, if they were to literally, physically stay alive on the fringes of society -- they would have to be strong, and if Little John wasn’t going to be strong for himself, Robin would have to do it for the both of them. Ol’ Johnny was deteriorating. But after all the loyalty he’d shown to Robin, it would be cruel and unfair to John if Robin were to deprive him of a shared sense of strength when they needed it most.

No, no, no -- Robin realized he was doing the both of them a disservice. It wasn’t that Little John had a low resilience factor and Robin was at the baseline; Little John was at least as mentally tough as your average person, if not still much stronger, while Robin was just crazy off-the-charts headstrong. But doing what they were doing for seven years and watching their numbers dwindle
would take a major toll on anybody, and in that time, the two of them had probably both lost a fair chunk of their minds since they’d started -- Robin just still had a long way to go before he’d start to show it. Their birthdays were both coming up in the fall; Robin would be thirty-two, John would be thirty-eight, and they both were seriously wondering if the rest of their lives were just going to be like *this*, so Robin couldn’t hold it against him if the old bear was starting to lose his grip. Poor John was the victim of circumstance, and Robin felt bad for blaming him.

And Robin knew that if he absolutely needed to confide in anybody, Little John was as good a choice as anyone; the rapport was there, the respect was there, and John was right that he’d already spilled so much of his guts to Robin that Rob could probably tell a stranger a pretty good rendition of the story about how Little John literally and figuratively went from being tiny and timid to being big and boisterous, so Robin did indeed owe him a secret or two simply as a metric of trust. But that would be all well and good if they were civilian friends chit-chatting while watching sports and drinking beer on their day off from their 9-to-5 jobs. As it was, there may have indeed been lulls in the action when, for example, they’d be stuck in a tree for more than an hour with little else to do but talk, but even in moments like those, there was the persistent threat of danger coming out of the shadows at any moment. There simply was no good time nor place to sit around and talk about what made them feel bad and experiment with the boundaries of platonic male bonding. It would have been foolish to do so.

Then again, they still had a long walk until they got to their preferred spot, with the rock formations that made the perfect place to set their clothes and weapons and accessories down without them getting sandy or dirty. And as they walked along the eastern bank, the only other signs of intelligent life they’d heard were their own footsteps, the only other beings there were the fireflies and the junebugs, and the only thing watching them was the moon above their heads.

“We need to go robbing again,” Robin finally said, breaking the silence. “Martin’s family was a wash, so that didn’t count.”

“You’re saying this like we’ve been out of commision for a week,” John responded in as low of a voice as he could; after all those years of trying and failing to garner attention, he now had trouble keeping his voice down. If Robin thought that John was cross with him, he needed to remember the size of the bone Little John had to pick with genetics and puberty.

“It might be tempting to ultimately take a week off while we’re hiding out in the van. But we can’t have the people of Nottingham feeling like we’ve abandoned them.”

“Oh, they know we would never do that.”

“Yes, but stressful situations like an unexplained absence can make one’s mind draw some irrational conclusions.”

“Heh. You said it, brother.”

The near-silence returned. Little John thought it was simply a boredom silence, but to Robin, it felt tense.

“I think it might actually be safe to speak, if you do,” Robin offered. “Just use your inside voice.”

“Shit, I’ll try. Did you wanna say something?”

“So you say you want me to tell you more when something’s eating me up inside?”

“Only if you want to.”
“Well, I feel like I ought to tell you that I can’t stop thinking about how you said that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t stop thinking about how you said that. It was so… unlike you.”

“How was it unlike me?”

“How was it not unlike you?”

“…Well, shit, sorry I said anything.”

“You don’t have to be sorry; you just told me to tell you, so I’m telling you.”

“It really bugged you that much that I said, ‘Hey, Rob, sometimes you’re a pompous dick’?”

“Mellow out, Johnny. I wasn’t offended, I was just shocked. I had no idea you felt that way. So… thanks for telling me?”

“Are you actually grateful I said that, or are you just saying that because that’s what a good leader would do?”

“Bloody fucking hell, Johnny, you want me to prove that I have flaws like a normal person, and then you give me shit for it when I do?”

“Brother, do I need to write ya a dissertation on how everything you’re saying has a subtext of you thinking I was actin’ like a pussy or whatever?”

The two arrived at their usual spot and started preparing as if the conversation wasn’t even happening.

“Well, if you really want to know what rubbed me the wrong way.” Robin mentioned, “was your casually writing off my feelings about Marian and then about Will all in the span of five minutes.”

“Huh! So now I finally know what really gets to ya.”

“Oh, does it make you feel good to have this sort of power over me?”

“Absotively posilutely.”

“What do you plan to do with this power, Little John?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll use it wisely.”

“It wasn’t very wise of you to just forget my half-brother existed.”

“Hey!” Little John grunted as he doffed the last of his garments. He lumbered over to where Robin was turned sideways from John, neatly folding his shirt. Little John made a point to stand not just immediately next to the fox, but also over him. “Is that the kind of fucking person you take me for?”

Robin saw his approach in his periphery, but was nevertheless surprised when he turned his head to the left and saw the upper regions of Little John’s gut staring back at him less than a foot away from his face. Robin turned his head to the sky to try to make respectful eye contact, but that was a tad difficult because Little John’s head was hanging directly over him and the scant available moonlight was now behind his face. From the lungs that were right in front of his ears to the snout
that was dangling a meter above his head, Robin could hear from all parts of John’s respiratory system that his exhales contained a faint but unmistakable growling.

Right at about that moment, a cool breeze passed through the woods. A cold shot ran through Robin’s body, and certain parts of his now-exposed body may or may not clenched or retracted in a most emasculating way. Robin hadn’t felt this afraid of this creature since the conflict they had the day they met. For the first time in seven years, Robin had actually, genuinely, irrevocably pissed off his eight-foot-and-change, eight-hundred-or-so-pound grizzly bear friend. And he didn’t enjoy remembering what it felt like to realize that.

“I didn’t forget about Will,” Little John growled, speaking in a much deeper register than usual, a gravelly grumbling that Robin had heard before, but he didn’t remember the last time it was directed at him. “What the fuck kind of asshole do you take me for?”

As for Robin, who had on several occasions throughout his adult life been told ‘wow, Robin, you have such a nice deep voice for a fox, and yet it just doesn’t match your face… or species,’ now found himself speaking in a higher-pitched voice that much more matched his face, and species: “Er, Lit-Little John, I, er, I apologize --”

“Do you think I’m stupid, or do you think I’m just forgetful?”

“I-I-- Neither, John. Nei-neither…”

This reminded Robin of when he and Marian had taken an acting class together in college; it was their first time being taught the ropes of theatre by an American. In that class, the professor had imparted them with a quirky little stateside moniker for a situation when two actors in a scene are in extremely close proximity to one another: “fuck or fight” distance; if two actors are that close to one another, especially if they’re facing each other, then surely they’re either about to start fucking or start fighting. Right now, one of those wasn’t an option, and Robin doubted that either one of them had much interest in the other.

Further complicating this was when Little John put his huge left paw in the crook where Robin’s neck met his right shoulder. Instinctively, Robin turned to look at it, but Little John took his other paw and grabbed Robin under the snout to turn his head to face him.

“Look at me. You think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“Wh--!? N-no! Johnny, I--!”

Robin tried not to dart his eyes when he remembered that his bow and arrow were literally just a few feet behind him to his right.

“You think you’re a wise-ass fox-boy and I’m just your brainless beast of burden, dontcha?”

“Little John, I misspoke ! I’m sorry !”

“We’ve been through this before. You think yer so smart, but ya don’t learn lessons.”

“Little John, you’re scaring me.”

“Fuck off. We both know nothin’ actually scares you, Mister Fucking ‘Hero-of-the-People’.”

“I-I’m serious--”

“THEN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!”
So he did. Robin twisted his head and shoulders in opposite directions as he jumped backwards to get out of John’s grasp. When Robin realized he had miraculously not broken his own neck, he hopped back toward the bow and arrow as John came after him. By the time Robin reached his stuff, John was too close for Robin to get extended with his bow, so Robin just grabbed an arrow and held it like a dagger.

“Little John, back off--!”

But Little John’s inhibitions had called in sick to work. He grabbed the arrow out of Robin’s paw with his left hand and grabbed Robin around the neck with his right, and without a visible hesitation bit the metal end off the arrow with the side of his mouth. He tossed the broken end off into the woods to his left without looking and turned to spit the metal point into the creek, where it landed with a troubling splash. Little John grabbed Robin’s arms and pinned him down to his torso.

“You wanna feel big around Little John? Then why don’t I make ya feel big?!”

Little John picked Robin up and held him right in front of his face. Their faces were level, but Robin didn’t want to look into John’s eyes; he didn’t want to see what was in there.

“Look at me,” Little John ordered. Robin kept his head turned but slid his eyes over to meet John’s. It was a measure to make sure they wouldn’t have to smell and taste each other’s breath, but Little John wasn’t in much of a mood for such an arrangement.

“Look. At. Me!” he hollered as he shook Robin back and forth until he got the hint. Robin turned his head to face John head-on, and took in what it was like to be eye-level with a giant.

“I didn’t forget about Will,” Little John seethed. “I didn’t think of him as your brother; I thought of him as our friend. Because that’s what he was: our friend. We lost our, fucking, friend.”

He stopped to growl-breathe for a moment and plan his next sentence. It almost sounded like his throat was starting to hurt from growling more than usual. Eventually, Little John figured out what he wanted to say:

“...And maybe I lost you, too.”

Despite the scarce light, they could both see every individual eyelash on each other’s eyelids. Despite all the noise they’d been making, there still hadn’t been a sound of anybody else in the area. There was another cool breeze, but it may have been that there had been many cool breezes, and they had only noticed the ones that came by in moments of silence.

Robin didn’t know what he ought to say, so he said the only thing he could think of:

“Are you going to kill me, Little John?”

Little John just stared and seethed with his infuriated look frozen on his face. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale … and then there was a twitch on his face, and his look was broken.

Little John tossed Robin up in the air for a quick moment before sliding his arms under Robin’s armpits and pulling the fox into a very literal bear-hug. Robin’s chin came to rest on Little John’s right shoulder, along with his left arm, and his right arm was limply strung around John’s left shoulder. Their cheeks and ears were ever so slightly brushing one another. Robin, still processing what was happening, maintained a petrified look on his face. As for Little John, although Robin couldn’t turn his head to see his face, he could hear the bear was crying.

“God… dammit!” Little John choked out; now it was him whose voice was hitting the high notes.
“I… I just… I just want to feel competent!”

Robin was still stupefied, and his speech was on autopilot. “Little John… I’m sorry.”

“I ju-just want to feel good at-- I wanna feel like I’m good at being a person!” A loud sniffle came through, and Little John rocked the two of them back and forth. “I want to-- For fuck’s sakes!”

As John turned back and forth, Robin -- who was at least three feet off the ground, probably more with the outward angle of Little John’s stomach, and who couldn’t even feel whether the tip of his long tail was brushing the ground -- tried to accept that he was just along for the ride. He made a better attempt at connecting his arms around the bear’s neck to reciprocate the surprise hug, and he succeeded. “Little John, I’m sorry.”

“I just want to be like you, Rob!”

“Y-you do?”

“I-I wanna be confident, a-and I want to be-- I wanna be charming and charismatic and all those words I’ve heard people call you! I wanna command respect like you do!” -- Little John paused for a moment to clear his aching throat -- “And I wanna always feel like I’m saying the right thing like you always say the right thing! And I want to be someone who other people like without feeling like I have to try really hard to be somebody they’ll like! I want to feel like the person I am and the person I want to be are the same person! I just wanna feel like I’m being myself and be happy with that! Like you! A-and my brother! And like every other man on this planet seems to be when I’m around!”

Robin debated telling him that he didn’t always know what to say, and that he wasn’t always confident, and that in tough situations he had to try really fucking hard to maintain his air of charisma so that he could still come across as a capable leader when somebody had to fill that role but nobody else could; an uncomfortable and alien situation such as this perfectly exemplified all three of those things. But no; he had to be strong for John when he couldn’t be strong for himself. If he were to divulge sensitive information, they’d be there all night.

“A-and girls think you’re fucking handsome, and-and…” Little John trailed off.

Hm. Robin didn’t know how to fight that one..

“How--” Little John sputtered, “How can someone so perfect exist, and no matter how hard I try to change who I am, I still can’t be who I want to be!?”

“I’m not perfect, Little John.”

“Oh yes the fuck you are, and we both know it!”

“And I like you just the way you are, Johnny.”

“I don’t.”

“I wouldn’t trust anybody else with my life as much as I trust you. I wouldn’t have trusted Will as much. I wouldn’t have trusted Tuck or Alan as much. I wouldn’t even have trusted Marian as much, nor my own mother and father. I like you just the way you are, John.” He felt sappy repeating that line, but he thought Little John really needed to hear it.

“You sure as hell thought I was gonna kill ya just now,” John blubbered. He had stopped swaying, but his hold hadn’t loosened.
“Because I trust your judgment. If you thought that would be the right thing to do… I would have let you.” Robin had tripped up for a second there because of a sudden itchiness that he thought was a bug walking on his face, but to his surprise, it was a tear of his own running down his cheek. He wasn’t being insecure about his feelings; he genuinely didn’t know where the tear came from, because no part of him felt like crying. Upon closer inspection, his eyes were a tad watery; apparently the mood was infectious. “Maybe I would be a narcissistic twat without you around. But you keep me in check, Little John.”

“There! Ya see! Ya always know exactly what to say!”

“Oh, no I don’t…”

“Well, I wish I was as good at faking it as you were.”

“And I wish I were as intimidating and supportive and… fun as you are. Life is strange like that, I suppose.”

“Oh, hell, you’re all three of those things.” Little John seemed to be regaining his composure.

“More than anything, Rob… I want to be as **heroic** as you are.”

“I’m no hero, John.”

“Not everybody would throw away their future and break the law on a regular basis to help a bunch of starving people. Most people wouldn’t put everyone else but themselves first like that.”

“You did that, too, Johnny.”

“I followed your lead.”

“Little John, if you knew the things I knew about myself, you would know I’m not a hero.”

“Okay. Then tell me what I don’t know.”

A series of breaths.

“…A real hero would be able to tell you.”

“Ya see? You always know exactly what to say, Robin.” Little John took a deep breath to clear his lungs of pain. “Do you ever think I’m just a small man in a big man’s body?”

“…Of course not.” Robin didn’t think he was lying.

“Well, I do.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say to change your mind.”

“Even when you don’t know what to say, you know what to say…”

“I wish I was as **flattering** as you, Little John.”

Little John kept standing there perfectly still with Robin in his arms. He thought about what the boys from back home would think of him if they saw him there, completely naked, hugging another completely naked man a fraction of his size, all the while both were crying in the moonlight at the river’s edge in a public space. He forced himself not to care; he knew what was really going on, and they weren’t there.
“Goddammit, I’m sorry I list my damn mind, Rob.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Johnny. I’m the one who should be sorry for making my closest friend feel betrayed.”

“You and me gotta look out for one another. I love ya, brother.”

“I wouldn’t look out for you if I didn’t feel the same way, Little John.”

Little John grabbed Robin by the arms and torso and held him out at arms’ length to get a good look at him. “Welp… that just happened!”

“I won’t tell the boys back in Tennessee if you don’t tell Marian!” Robin joked.

“Honey, you know I’m not one to kiss and tell!” Little John said, and the two of them chuckled; it was a laugh they both badly needed.

Little John put Robin down, but let go before Robin -- whose legs were half-asleep by this point -- fully found his footing. Robin stumbled backward and landed sitting on his own tail, which bent at a painful angle.

“Aaargh!” he yelped as he pursed his eyes shut and turned his head to the ground.

“Oh, shit, Rob, are you okay? My bad, man.”

Robin opened his eyes and slowly started raising his eyes toward John, but stopped when he fixed his eyes on Little John’s belly button -- but from John’s vantage point, he couldn’t tell what Robin was looking at. Robin felt like he could use another laugh.

“Oh, so that’s what the old meat and veg look like!” Robin quipped. “First time laying eyes upon them after all these years -- I never thought they’d look like that!”

Robin rolled over laughing as Little John pieced together what he said.

“Oh, why, you little--!” Little John cut himself off as he picked Robin up under the armpits again, this time from the backside. He swung Robin to his left -- as Robin himself was still having a laugh and a half -- and then to his right, letting go at just the right exit angle to send the guffawing fox right into the deepest part of the creek.

Robin’s laugh blurred into a holler of exhilaration while he was sailing through the air, and he landed with a satisfying splash. After a second, he came up for air, spit out some water, let out a whoo-hoo! And immediately started laughing again.

“You son of a bitch!” Little John jeered playfully as he grabbed the bar of soap and started wading his way into the water. “Cheeky little bastard!”

“That was actually quite fun!” Robin remarked. “We ought to try that some more! I’m just sorry I can’t return the favor! Heh… My, why haven’t we done that before?”

“I’m assuming you mean getting tossed in the water.”

“Oh, no, Little John, of course I’m referring to the naked hugging and crying!”

“Anything to see you smile, buddy,” Little John quipped as he used his giant paw to splash the still-smirking fox square in the face. And for a time, it seemed like all was well again between them.
It was back to the task at hand: get themselves clean and get back to safety. They tossed the bar of soap back and forth as they took turns lathering up different chunks of their body. The only issue was that the soap was dissolving quickly after every time it made incidental contact with the water.

“Man, this stuff is murder on my fur,” Little John muttered. “We shoulda thought to bring the body-wash stuff with us.”

“I certainly didn’t think we’d need to take an emergency bath, otherwise I would’ve brought the shampoo!” Robin answered. “But now we know for next time.”

Neither of them wanted to think too much about how many ‘next times’ of running away to a temporary hiding place there would be -- or whether the last of the next times would be followed by a return to normal life, a vacation in prison, or a trip to the grave.

“Hey, Robin, serious question: should we start recruiting again?”

“Recruiting for our little army? I wouldn’t be against it, but how would we go about it? Just asking anybody who seems friendly? Or putting an ad in the personals?” Robin was moving up toward the bank to start covering his lower body without completely melting their only soap. “I’ll be the first to admit that I got lucky the first time finding four people to join me in just a few months.”

“Well, one of them was grandfathered in.”

“How do you mean, Little John?”

“...Your brother,” Little John answered as gently as he could.

“Ah. I see your point. But recall that I didn’t want him to join us at first. But he insisted. I didn’t want him risking his own life when he was just a lad.”

“You were just a kid, too! You were, uh…” Little John counted on his fingers. “Twenty-four? And a half?”

“Ah, where does the time go?”

“Hey, do you think Skippy and the Turtle are out of juvie yet?”

“Johnny, even if they were, I think I’ve just established that I was barely comfortable recruiting a university-aged kid; I wouldn’t want to drag an actual minor or two into this.”

“How old would those boys even be at this point? I know Skippy’d just turned seven when we met him, but I don’t remember how many years ago that was.”

Robin was silent for a second, as he had to do the mental math, too. “I remember it was after we lost Will. I remember taking a shining to Skippy because I thought, ‘I failed my first protégé, but maybe this is my chance to learn from my mistakes.’ It must have been the summer after.”

“Honestly, that’s another thing about you I’m jealous of. I wish I was that good with kids. But I’m afraid that I’d just seem creepy.”

“Little John, you’re overthinking it.”

“No the hell I’m not. Have you not pieced together how big ‘stranger danger’ is over here? Are you aware of the ‘pedo-bear’ stereotype?”

“My lord, you Yanks are a paranoid bunch…”
“You freaking Europeans aren’t paranoid enough,” Little John grumbled, not really joking. “...It was really nice of you to give that kid your bow and arrow, you know.”

“Oh, it’s not like those were my only ones. Or even my best.”

“Still, I remember that kid following us around that summer. He admired you.”

“And then that fall came, and we were so close to getting Prince John to resign out of fear for his life, but then... that thing happened in New York, security was increased everywhere, people started cautiously trusting their government again because they had nobody else to trust to protect them...”

“...and they arrested a couple of second-graders who were trying to copy us,” Little John finished for Robin, who was getting visibly hot and bothered by the recollection. “I remember that now. That was four years ago, then. The boys would be eleven. Ish. Skip’s birthday was in the spring, right?”

“We didn’t just lose our momentum; we lost our hope for the future in those two lads,” Robin said as he squeezed the bar of soap, which was now waterlogged and malleable.

“Chill, buddy. There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have given Skippy the bow and arrow for his birthday. He probably would have been content with just the hat.” Robin was aggressively scrubbing his thick tail with the soap, which now was a very strange shape which had no name. “But in that spot, I would have given him the bow a thousand times out of a thousand, because zero times out of a thousand would I expect that those bastards would be so mean-spirited as to throw actual children in jail.”

“And I believe that,” Little John affirmed, waiting patiently for Robin to pass the soap back over. At this point, they were only about knee-deep still in the water. “You’re a good man, Rob.”

“Aargh, not as good as I’d like to be,” Robin mumbled glumly and passed John back the soap, which was down to a flimsy little strip.

“Oh, c’mon, Rob, save some of the soap for me. I’ve got more surface area than you do!”

“But you don’t have a body part that drags on the dirty ground so often you don’t even feel it anymore,” Robin corrected.

“Hey, do you remember what Skippy and the Turtle’s real names were?” Little John wondered aloud. “I feel like the raccoon was something with a ‘T’, like ‘Tommy the Turtle’ or something?”

“‘Toby,’ ‘Toby in the turtleneck sweater’. Skippy’s name was... was...” Robin realized he was completely stumped. “Did we never actually hear his name? He called himself ‘Skippy,’ his sisters and his mum called him ‘Skippy’... his real name couldn’t have been ‘Skippy,’ could it have been?”

“It better not have been!” Little John quipped. “His mom seemed like such a nice lady; I’d hate to find out she named her kid ‘Skippy’ -- that’d be child abuse!”

Robin let out one sharp laugh at that, and John bellowed one out to join him. This was a bad decision.

“I knew I heard people over here!” hollered a voice sounding like it sounded like a pubescent boy.
“Huh!? ” Little John spit out, but Robin elbowed him in the gut.

“Shh! ” Robin hushed. “Get down--!”

But before they could submerge themselves, a teenage hyena wearing a backwards baseball cap ran around the bend in the riverbank and came to a halt as soon as he laid eyes on them.

“Oh--! They’re fucking naked!” the boy shouted as he made a dramatic display of shielding his eyes from what he’d already seen.

Robin and John both bent over and covered their nether-regions with their paws.

“Do we run, or do we negotiate?” asked Little John, showing none of his earlier enthusiasm for trying his hand at leadership.

Robin answered by example: “Oh-oh, don’t worry, man!” he called out to the hyena, trying his best at putting on an American accent to hide one of his most unique denotative qualities; to conceal his other most notable attribute, he tried to shove his tail under the water, so that he might pass for a coyote or a small wolf instead of a large fox. “W-we’re just taking a dip!”

“Kevin, what’s going on? Who’s there?!?” came the voice of a teenage girl from somewhere beyond the hyena.

“I told you that I heard splashing and voices coming from somewhere!” the one called Kevin answered the girl.

“Don’t worry, buddy, we don’t mean no harm!” Little John tried his hand at civil discussion. “We’ll give ya yer space if you give us ours -- we were about to leave soon anyway!”

“Kevin, let’s go!” the girl shouted, sounding rather distressed. Robin and John still couldn’t see her.

“Stay back, Nazz! I’ll fend off these nutjobs!” the hyena screamed back at her.

“Should we run for it now?” Little John whispered nervously to Robin.

“They might not know who we are!” the fox whispered back. “We mustn’t do anything that might incriminate ourselves!”

“Look out!” Little John shouted as he grabbed Robin by the elbow and yanked him toward himself, tumbling him into the water.

Splash. The rock the hyena had thrown may or may not have successfully hit Robin where he’d been standing, but it was much too close for comfort.

“Get out of here, you faggots!” the hyena yelled just in time for Robin to pull his head back above the water and hear him. Kevin tossed another rock, but in the dark of the night, they quickly lost sight of it. It was soon rediscovered, however.

“Gah!” Little John roared as he clutched the spot on his stomach that was hit. He was lucky that it didn’t hit a foot or so lower. He turned to Robin sitting on the creek’s shallow bed and spat, “You were saying !?!”

“Oh, sod this!” Robin swore as he scrambled out of the water and onto the shore. John stumbled ashore behind him as quickly as he could. Unfortunately, their stuff was on the same bank as the
hyena boy, a few dozen yards away.

“Get the fuck out of here!” the hyena shouted.

“Kevin!” the one known as Nazz pleaded.

“Get a room, fags!” Kevin screamed.

“Johnny, guard me while I get my bow together!” Robin begged as he scurried to find his accessories in the dark. “Actually, no -- grab our clothes!”

“Are we fighting or running?” Little John was understandably confused.

“The first one while we’re doing the second one!”

“This ain’t your place to go fucking skinny dipping!” the hyena yelled right before another rock plunked John right in the sternum. This one got him down on one knee for a second.

“Stay down for a second, Johnny!” Robin said. “I need a clear shot!” In the slim moonlight, Robin pulled back and released his arrow, hoping this wouldn’t be the first time in years that he’d miss his target.

The hyena, also blinded by the darkness, could barely even see the arrow coming, and might not even have realized that it came by if not for the distinct ripping sound he heard coming from the crown of his head.

“My hat!” the hyena cried as he felt the top of his head and realized his favorite cap had been split cleanly in two. Just as the fox intended.

“I’ll let you believe that I missed high if it makes you feel better about yourself!” Robin jeered, no longer even trying to conceal his unmistakable accent.

“Kevin, what’s going on!? I can’t see you!” Nazz shouted.

“Is that a fucking bow and arrow!?” Kevin yelled.

“Well, it’s just a bow now, but I can present you with another arrow if you insist on hanging around!” Robin called. Meanwhile, Little John, who didn’t have a damned clue where his quarterstaff was nor what he could do with it if he could find it, made due with the tools at his disposal.

“Yeah, and you wanna see even more primitive weaponry!?” Little John bellowed as he hurled one of Kevin’s rocks right back at him, sailing through the narrow gap between the hyena’s arm and his torso. Startled, the hyena hit the dirt.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!?” Kevin cried.

“Nice aim, Little John!” Robin praised quietly.

“Uh-- thanks, Rob,” John answered, not daring to mention that he hadn’t been trying to miss on purpose. Little John turned his attention back to Kevin the hyena and answered the question asked of him: “What’s wrong with you, kid? Don’t you realize we were here first!?”

Robin set up another arrow, stepped into a well-lit spot so that Kevin could more clearly see him, and took aim, hoping he wouldn’t have to release it this time. “Please don’t make me waste another arrow on you, lad; these things are so hard to come by!” Robin pleaded smarmily. His smile didn’t
“I-I know who you are!” the hyena murmured. He said it very quietly, but Robin and John could hear it perfectly.

“Wh-what?” Little John stammered, not knowing what else he could do.

“I-I… You’re real!”

“Damn straight, we’re real!” Little John boasted, not yet understanding the gravity of what he’d just affirmed.

“Johnny, grab our stuff and head back to the safehouse. I’ll hold him off.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone with this asshole kid!”

“The grab our stuff and get ready to head back to the safehouse while I hold him off.”

“Right-o!” Little John got to business while Robin made sure the kid didn’t move a muscle towards them.

“You—you’re the outlaws who live in the woods!” said Kevin.

When Robin heard that, his entire body shook a little. He almost lost his grip of the arrow.

“I don’t want to hurt a kid,” Robin spoke stoically, “but asking you nicely to leave doesn’t seem to be working.”

Little John heard Kevin’s epiphany as well. He picked up the pace and started grabbing all the clothes he could find and bundled them up in his jacket.

“My girlfriend was just telling me about you today!” Kevin declared shakily. “You w-were the ones who…”

He trailed off, and it wasn’t clear if he was going to finish his thought. But Robin was concerned for whatever might be coming next.

Fwhoosh! Swish. Fwhoop!

Robin was just as shocked as Kevin or John that he had released the arrow. He was able to point it down at the last second, and it hit the ground in front of Kevin’s face, bounced off the sand and went sailing over his head. Kevin jumped up and took off running.

“Kevin!?” Nazz cried one last time, the location of her voice still a mystery to the Merry Men.

“Okay,” Robin said with his voice uncharacteristically quivery, “I’m ready to go. Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready to go!” said Little John.

“Then let’s go!” And off they went.

They ran all the way back down to the log bridge, all the while hearing Kevin and Nazz calling out to one another in the ever-furthering distance, but they did not pay attention to what they were saying. They only slowed down when they got to the bridge, needing to go slowly in the dark across the log to make sure they wouldn’t fall into the water and make another loud splash that
would betray their present geography.

“So,” Robin began as he caught his breath while tiptoeing across the log; ever the extrovert, talking to people could often help him concentrate. “This is… twice today that… some kids have mistaken us for a gay couple. Is… is that an American thing, or just a middle-class suburban thing?”

“I… I woulda…” – Little John, naturally, was more puffed out than Robin was after their sprint -- “I woulda said that’s just a teenage boy thing. But… to be fair, we were naked this time.”

“Not to invoke some unpleasant memories, but… I thought that skinny dipping was… a popular pastime over here, though?”

“Yeah, if you live in a hick town like I did.”

“I see your poi--”

“Hey, who’s there!?” shouted a gruff voice in the distance. It was a voice they’d heard before, but not a voice they’d heard recently.

“Huh?” came the faint voice of Kevin the hyena.

“They’re trespassing!” came a much more familiar voice with a Southern drawl and an erratic speaking pitch. “It’s your jurisdiction, get ‘em!”

“No way,” remarked Robin upon recognizing the voice.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Little John moaned.

“Stand down!” the gruff voice hollered.

“Kevin?” called Nazz again.

“I got ‘em, Sheriff!” came a slightly smoother voice. This one put the pieces together: this speaker was County Deputy Sheriff Goldthwaite, and the other voice had been Nottingham County Sheriff Elkins.

“Crap, let’s run!” Robin commanded, and he was about to take off before he realized Little John was in no hurry.

“Hold up, Rob. We’re safe to stop here for a second. I need to catch my breath some more. Plus we might wanna hear this.”

That’s when the screaming started.

Two of them were screams trying to inject fear and assert dominance, trying to command authority and demand submission. Another scream was a pained scream, shouts and cries of infliction and oppression that contained no actual syllables nor sentences and yet told a thousand words. Yet another scream was a mixture of shrieks of terror and pleas for mercy:

“Stop, stop! What are you doing!? Stop! Let him go! He didn’t do anything!” these shouts were coming from the girl called Nazz.

Most surprisingly, however, were the shouts of two others in near-harmony with hers. The loud jeers of Chief Woodland and the quieter shouts of Deputy Nutzinger. They too urged the County officers to stop whatever it was they were doing:
“Elky! Goldy! Elky, Goldy, stop! Stop!”

“Sheriff, Deputy! Stop! Stop right now! This isn’t necessary!”

Little John and Robin stood at the banks, naked, wet, cold, and growing increasingly confused.

“I… don’t want to hear this anymore,” Little John confessed.

“Er, just as a point, I was serious about needing to restock on arrows,” Robin noted soberly as he led the way to their home away from home.

The two kept some pep in their step as they navigated their way back to their makeshift hotel, but they didn’t go faster than a quick walking pace. To be polite, they may have told you and I that they travelled slower because they weren’t entirely sure of the way back and didn’t want to run in the wrong direction. But the reality was that they knew the only ones who would have an interest in doing them harm were, evidently, preoccupied. Even when they heard the sirens of emergency vehicles coming from the major roads miles away, they would come to a complete stop and follow the sound with their ears, waiting for it to pass them by before they continued making their way back to the junkyard in no discernable hurry.

When they returned to the van, it still smelled like gravy, and Little John thought his nose now also detected hints of buttered toast.
Chapter Summary

A day in the happy-go-lucky life of Ed, while everyone around him seems to be having a very strange day.

9. “Ed’s Sunday”

BOOM!

“Are you still asleep down there!?” Mr. Browne hollered into the basement before the sound of the blast had even finished subsiding.

“Yeah, I am a-rising and a-shining, Dad!” Ed answered from his room, for the noise had successfully awoken him.

“What the hell was that noise!?” Mrs. Browne screamed from some other part of the house.

“I woke up our son!” Hilary screamed back.

Ed rolled himself out of his bed and thumped onto the floor.

“What was that noise, Hill!?”

“I woke … him up,” Mr. Browne answered, trying to make his annoyance clear.

Ed tried standing from the floor, but stood too fast, and in his light-headed dizziness, he collapsed right back onto his bed, which gave way with a loud creak.

“Dad probably threw an M-80 down the stairs again,” Sarah said from somewhere near her mom.

“Hilary, are you trying to burn our fucking house down!?” Mrs. Browne cried.

Ed realized he was actually quite comfortable in the position he landed in, and didn’t bother moving a muscle. Besides, he was still tired from his odd hours and his movie binge yesterday, and staying awake after one’s REM cycle is interrupted is a tough task for anyone.

“I’ve never burned our house down before; why would it happen today?” Mr. Browne answered; after getting farther away, his voice seemed to be getting closer again. “Matilda, does it ever cross your mind that maybe I’ll take your grievances more seriously if you were better at picking your fucking battles!?”

The sound of heavy ursine footsteps making their way down the basement stairs didn’t disturb Ed’s feeling of comfiness.

“Oh, fuck off, Hilary!” Mat scoffed. “This is really the house I wanted to come home to!”

“Ed!” Mr. Browne barked from the doorway to Ed’s room. “I thought you said you were awake! Did you fucking lie to me?”
“No, Dad, I’m awake!” Ed answered, unfazed by the aggression of his father.

“Then get out of bed!” Hilary ordered. “It’s one-thirty! Look alive! You’ll never get ahead in life if you sleep your life away!”

Ed gathered all his strength to lunge himself up from his bed, and leaped out of the mattress from its end. But he carried so much inertia with him that we went tumbling straight into the opposite wall, bounced right off of it, and stumbled backward, ultimately being tripped by and landing in his mattress once again.

“Jesus Christ, Ed, what are you doing with yourself?” Hill grumbled as he looked at his son, whom he couldn’t tell whether he was just dazed or if he was falling asleep again. “Do I need to break out the smelling salts?”

But Hilary didn’t feel like going all the way back upstairs again. He grasped his son by the hand and forcefully pulled him up out of the bed. Ed almost fell straight over again, but Hill grabbed him by the shoulders and held on until he balanced out.

“Ed is now upright, and right up! Right, Dad?” Ed beamed.

Hilary was about to say something, but something inspired him to first correct his posture as much as possible first. He swore that Ed got taller again, and this time the younger Browne might have finally eclipsed the elder. Before he realized that his son was starting to catch him, Hill hadn’t felt much insecurity about his height in a long time -- being a seven-ish-foot male grizzly was like being a five-and-a-half-foot wolf or a three-foot red fox: not down in the height range of social embarrassment, but certainly on the low end of the spectrum of normalcy; but he was mostly able to forget about this thanks to his decision to move his family into a home designed for medium-sized mammals, with eight-foot ceilings and doorways that were still cheaper to have widened than it would have cost to move into a physically larger home, so for much of the past decade he felt like he sat undisputed at the top of the food chain as long as his sample size was restricted to Rethink Avenue and the neighboring blocks. Then his son ruined that when he went ahead and won the genetic lottery -- perhaps not in inherent intellect, but certainly in all the physical categories that the ursine community valued amongst themselves. His wife simply chalked this up to Ed getting all the good genes from her own father’s Kodiak ancestry. Hilary would have cursed his thing for large women if he believed her explanation. But he wasn’t so sure he believed it. The kid’s fur being a much darker shade of golden-brown -- that is to say, there was no visible gold in it -- certainly didn’t help his skepticism.

But Hilary straightened his posture and forced himself not to think about his assorted insecurities, much to the relief of this narrator, who would very much like to go a few pages without mentioning a character having plot-relevant height anxiety lest you, dear reader, start to get the impression that that’s all this story is about. But if Hilary Browne had read the preceding sentence, the only value he would have gotten out of it was a sense of dissatisfaction that his idiot son didn’t have such self-awareness as this narrator.

“Ed, what are we going to do with you?” Mr. Browne grumbled, more to himself than to his addressee.

“Ooh! Ooh! I know, I know! You’re going to--”

“That’s not a question for you to answer, Ed,” Mr. Browne told his son, paternal disappointment leaking into his voice.

Ed simply looked surprised and a bit saddened. He really was hoping he could convince his
parents that this could be the year they finally take him to Area 51.

“Oh, don’t give me that look!” Hilary growled. But he decided if he was going to get anywhere with his son, he was going to at least have to fake being amiable. He took a deep breath and straightened his posture one more time for (literal) good measure. “Now, Ed, there’s two things I want you to remember that’re happening in the upcoming week. For one thing, Father’s Day is next Sunday, and--”

“FATHER’S DAY!” Ed yelped and came in and gave Mr. Browne an unexpected hug. He then proceeded to start jumping up and down while taking his dad along for the ride. “I’m going to make you the very best present that any son has ever given any dad on any Father’s Day in any--!”

“Why is the house shaking!? ” Mrs. Browne yelled from upstairs.

“Ed!” Mr. Browne barked and squirmed out of Ed’s grasp, killing the son’s momentum until he finally came to a stop. “Ed, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you did the same thing last year and you completely forgot about it when the day actually came around.”

Ed looked hurt again. “I’m sorry, Dad! I’m going to get you two super-duper amazing--!”

“I don’t care what you get me or how many. I’m not concerned about getting stuff from you. I’m concerned about you not remembering to fulfill your responsibilities in life. If you can’t remember a little thing like Father’s Day, what can you remember?”

Ed stared and thought about that one for a second, while Hilary started rehearsing how he was going to respond to the impending genuine answer to a rhetorical question.

Finally, it clicked in Ed’s brain. “I can remember the monster movie marathon!”

“Uh… that you can, Ed. But all I want for Father's Day -- really -- is for you to be an adult.”

“I can’t grow up that fast, Dad.”

Like hell you can’t, you fucking elephantine little pituitary case… “Well, you will before you know it.” And that frightened Hilary in more ways than one. “Oh! I almost forgot the other thing! Your mother is going to call to make you an appointment for a… sort of doctor. But not a--”

“Doctor! But I just went to the doctor, Dad! And he told me I was too old for a lollipop this time!”

“Ed, I didn’t finish my thought. This is a different kind of doctor.”

“Will he give me a sucker!?”

“…Maybe. I don’t know. This is a doctor for your head. For your mind.”

“Mind doctor? Is he going to hypnotize me and turn me into his zombie slave?”

“I really doubt it. This is more to try to figure out… how you tick.”

“…Do you think I’m stupid, Dad?”

Yes. “No.”

“Then why do I have to go?"

“Because maybe they can help understand what’s running through your head in ways that your
mother and Sarah and I aren’t smart enough to understand.”

“Ooh! Are we all going to the mind-doctor together!?”

“Probably just you and your mother. It’s probably going to be during a weekday when I’m at work.”

“Oh. Well I’ll miss you there, Dad.”

Hilary didn’t think too highly of Ed, but he’d never deny that the kid never withheld affection for the people he cared about. Even if Ed wasn’t good at showing his affection in a way that the other person would appreciate.

“And I’m sorry I won’t be able to be there with you, son. Now get on upstairs and have breakfast. Or lunch. Or whatever -- it’s almost two o’clock. You’re burning daylight.” *I don’t know what the hell you were going to accomplish today, kid, but you’re running out of time to do it.*

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Ed saluted and then took off running up the stairs, still in his half-dressed slumberous attire. Hilary watched him go all the way up the stairs, just in case the dumb son of a bitch tumbled right back down; Hill was very deliberate in mentally referring to the kid as a *son of a bitch*.

Ed grabbed a box of Chunky Puffs out of the pantry and a gallon of soy milk out of the fridge. There was no need for a bowl or a glass or a spoon; it would only be more dirty dishes. He made his way into the living room, and his father followed in soon after. The television appeared to be a live news broadcast from Nottingham City Hall, but all to be seen was an empty stage with a vacant podium; nothing substantial seemed to be happening yet.

“What’s on TV!?” Ed inquired, asking more about what else was on instead of what was presently on the screen.

“Well, it was the Orioles game,” Hilary explained as he got settled in his armchair, “but apparently it’s getting preempted for some local news update.” Mr. Browne reached over for the TV Guide and flipped through to find the day’s listings. “So I guess if the Nationals need to build a fanbase from scratch, the least we can do is give them the time of day,” he said as he very slowly and carefully pressed the buttons of the remote with the tips of his claws -- his ursine fingers were far too big for the buttons.

The channel flipped from 11 to 23, which showed the empty podium at city hall from a slightly different angle than Channel 11 did.

“What the hell happened that every channel’s having a live news… thing?” Hilary wondered.

“Maybe it can explain why traffic was so bad and there were police cars and emergency vehicles everywhere,” Mrs. Browne said as she walked in, having just come downstairs after getting changed out of her Sunday best and into something more Sunday-afternoon-y. She glanced at the TV and saw that it was literally just a shot of the podium with no graphics on the screen and nobody saying anything. “Wait, what *are* they doing?”

“I was hoping you’d know--”

“--and we do apologize again for the inconvenience,” the female narrator said on the TV. “Mayor Norman’s press conference was scheduled to start eight minutes ago at 1:45; we’re just waiting on him now.”
“Of course you’re waiting on him! Thank God we don’t live in the city under him… Speaking of God, how was church?” Hilary asked his wife half-heartedly.

“Well, traffic was bad,” Matilda reiterated, “and the priest went on a tangent for forever again about the importance of almsgiving and charity. And it’s like: we get it, Father, but… A) We agree, but it’s not like most of us are in any position to just throw money away; B) You say this every time that it’s your turn to do the sermon, and it’s getting old; and C) Hey, Father, maybe somebody with a gut like yours isn’t in any place to talk about greed. You fat asshole.”

Ed, for his part, was completely disinterested in the conversation, as well as whatever was transpiring on TV, and was happy to just go to town on a box of cereal and swig some milk to wash it down.

“Fat asshole? Is he one of us? Or is he a pig or something?”

“No, he’s that badger; I’ve told you about him before. The one with the weird bald spot? He’s the one who used to be homeless before he found the priesthood. I guess then he’d have a personal stake in preaching about charity.”

Hilary and Ed were not familiar with this character, as only Matilda and Sarah still went to church on Sundays, and even then it was more for traditional and cultural reasons than any spiritual sense of fulfillment. Mr. Browne didn’t go because he didn’t see the urgency in going. Ed wasn’t invited -- his antics as a younger child had gotten him kicked out the parish up in Lemon Brook, which Mrs. Browne thought was disproportionate punishment, inspiring her to instead take her and her daughter to a different parish on the other side of Sherwood Forest in the city. The idea had been floated to let Ed start going again when he calmed down (calmer than he used to be, at least), but the Brownes agreed that he probably wouldn’t ‘get it’ -- not that the adults thought it was particularly imperative that he did.

“I don’t remember you ever telling me about this guy,” Hilary answered as his eyes remained fixed on the screen.

“I mean,” Matilda continued, “I guess he does also touch on things like sticking together as a community in rough times -- it’s clear he doesn’t like the Mayor very much, but who does? -- and he talks about what God would want you to do when there only seems to be wrong options -- like he talks about how he used to need to rob people to survive--”

“Jesus Christ,” mumbled Hilary with a wince.

“I know, and he talks about how he felt bad doing that, but it was either rob or starve to death -- ironic, with the way he looks; maybe his metabolism is even worse than ours -- but he’s said if he allowed himself to die so easily then that would basically be suicide, which is a sin, and then he really couldn’t serve God, so he says he always tried to rob people who seemed like rich assholes since they would hurt from it the least, and then the moral of the story is that when we’re in a position like that we should view it through the lens of What Would Jesus Do, but not the God-Jesus but the Mortal Jesus, stuff like that.”

“Is this guy a communist or something?”

“Well, he’s a Catholic priest, so if anything, I was afraid he was a Republican like all the others… Then again, he doesn’t go on tirades about abortion being bad like the others do. But he really doesn’t go on tirades about anything but charity and community and tough decisions and then charity again. He kind of mixes it up, I guess, because he’s really the only one of the four of ‘em to talk about their personal lives, but… what does he expect us to do?”
“There’s the cocksucker!” Hilary exclaimed. On the screen, Mayor John Norman was finally making his way to the podium, his gait very still and formal, probably to keep the top hat in its precarious perch on his head. Really, everything about the guy looked antiquated, from his suit and jacket quite literally sourced from Merrie Olde England, to the cane that he carried but wasn’t actually using, to the look on his face which clearly conveyed to everybody that he was brought up to believe that stoic is the only way for a man to be. In front of him, a sea of reporters’ cameras illuminated their flashes, and behind him, his double-amputee weasel assistant took a spot on the back of the stage, flanked by two enormous bodyguards, a rhino and an elephant.

“I feel so bad saying this, but it always weirds me out to look at his assistant,” Matilda confessed to anybody who would listen.

“Hey, the 1890s called,” Hilary jeered at the screen, “they think you look like an enormous asshole!”

Chew, swallow, slurp, gulp, continued Ed.

And so the show began.

“Good afternoon, my citizens,” the Englishman began.

“Fuck you,” Hilary muttered, and the TV station’s microphones picked up a few members of the press conference muttering similar sentiments.

“It has been brought to my attention that there has been an incident in the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve involving high-ranking members of both the Nottingham County and Nottingham City Police Departments, as well as a young citizen of the Town of Peach Creek.”

“Wait, what happened!” Hilary exclaimed.

“Why didn’t the priest mention this today?” wondered Matilda. “Do they have TV or a computer in the priests’ house?”

Ed perked up a bit when he heard his hometown being name-dropped, but otherwise continued unabated with his gorging.

“I am unhappy to confirm that, while in search of other suspects, County Sheriff Thomas Elkins and Sheriff’s Deputy Matthew Goldthwaite very early this morning came across a fourteen-year-old boy who was trespassing in the forest after its posted closing time at dusk,” Mayor Norman droned, “whereupon the Sheriff and Sheriff’s Deputy used excessive force to suppress him.”

“Fourteen? Ed, is this a kid you might know that he’s talking about?” Hilary asked. But Ed didn’t hear him over the sound of his own feasting.

“Wait…” Matilda said, seeming to be putting some pieces together. “It wasn’t…?” She made her way over to the window that looked out toward the cul-de-sac.

“That boy is currently in Bethlehem General Hospital, where he is listed in serious but stable condition,” the mayor continued, almost seeming annoyed that he had to make such a mundane announcement.

“That’s why all those cars are over there!” Matilda shrieked as she peered out onto the neighborhood.

“What cars?” asked Hilary. “Over where?”
“Now, I must also confirm that the two highest-ranking members of my police force were present for the incident as well,” said the lion, his voice weaving in and out of a grumble. Maybe what was actually bothering him was how painfully still he had to keep his neck so as not to jostle the hat; he was only turning his head on its $y$-axis, and it seemed like his snout was getting in the way of seeing his notes since he either wouldn’t or couldn’t tilt his face down.

“There’s a bunch of cars in front of the hyenas’ house!” said Matilda. “I thought they were just having a family get-together or something!”

“Wait. No fuckin’ way,” Hilary said as he got up to make his own way to the window.

“In the scant few hours since the incident has transpired,” said the mayor, “I have already been asked of my public, why did Chief Eddward Woodland and Deputy George Nutzinger do nothing to stop the overreaction? And these criticisms are not invalid.” Mayor Norman visibly seemed to try really hard to believe that he meant that last sentence. Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Browne -- who, like most suburbanites, didn’t pay too much attention to the who’s-who of big-city politics -- did not have any familiar associations with the surnames ‘Woodland’ and ‘Nutzinger’; incidentally, they also didn’t know the maiden name of the wife and mother of the lupine family that lived at the corner by Harris Street, since it was none of their business and they never asked.

“I-I mean,” Matilda stammered, “maybe they are having a family get-together--”

“There’s cars out in front of Mercedes’ house, too,” Hilary interrupted. “Doesn’t the hyena kid fuck around with her daughter?”

Ed had a quick spark of thought about his parents’ conversation: they were frustrated together rather than with one another. Ed had the thought linger on his brain for a bit more before it faded away, but it was more of a still image than anything fluid that this narrator could verbalize; Ed did not have an internal monologue. He went back to his ravenous consumption.

“But I have spoken to the Chief and his deputy,” the man on TV assured, “and not only have they convinced me that they had done all that they could do, but they have gifted me -- gifted all of us, really -- something invaluable to our mutual pursuit of justice.”

“I-I want to call them and ask if everything’s alright,” said Matilda, “but if something’s going on, I can’t pry!” She walked away from the window, appearing as though she was on the verge of tears, while Hilary continued observing the neighborhood, not having much to say. “I know! I’ll ask Sarah to call the bobcat girl!” Matilda walked hurriedly towards the hallway. “That-that’s not too rude, is it?” She didn’t stop to wait for an answer and disappeared upstairs.

Hill just made his way back to his seat while the mayor kept talking.

“Chief Woodland and Deputy Nutzinger told me of their belief that it would have been futile, if not outright dangerous, to try to restrain Sheriff Elkins and Sheriff’s Deputy Goldthwaite,” Prince John continued; he seemed to be lightening up, as if he was happy to enlighten his citizens with some wisdom they would be grateful to receive. Chief Woodland and Deputy Nutzinger postulated a theory that the Sheriff and Sheriff’s Deputy would have been impervious to any physical resistance due to a state of heightened adrenaline, and that there would be no opportunity to stop their assault until the so-called ‘rush’ had passed.” Some murmurs in the crowd suggested that they saw where this was going and didn’t like it. “Far be it from me to blindly accept some pop axiom without evidence, I made several calls to some experts whom I consider friends. These were medical, psychiatric and psychological professionals. I must report that, while the Chief and Deputy were not flawless in their recitation of the inner workings of an angry man’s body, their hypothesis that it would be a fool’s errand to try to stop the attack on the boy was indeed more grounded in reality
than in myth or fiction.”

“Well, he’s convinced himself that he’s good at convincing other people of things,” Hilary quipped to himself. “Prince John, you fucking maniac.” The crowd was similarly unimpressed.

“That is not to say that my men did nothing! Indeed, they had made do with what resources they had had at their disposal. Chief Woodland…” -- the mayor seemed to trail off as he went fishing in his pocket, but quickly extracted a small block of silver metal -- “...had had the mind to record the exchange with a mobile phone which, among other things, has the capabilities of a camera.” The mayor held up the phone -- he still barely moved his head -- and the crowd had no idea how to react. Some booed, some murmured in confusion, but most seemed to be silenced by disbelief that this was being heralded as a positive revelation.

For his part, Hilary just said, “What?” Ed was almost done eating.

“The video they recorded has provided indisputable evidence that Sheriff Elkins and Sheriff’s Deputy Goldthwaite have acted severely out of line, and at the expense of one of the very same citizens whom they had been sworn to protect. The video itself has already been viewed by officials from city, county, and state police departments, and will be transferred off this phone’s storage system and onto a computer as soon as this press conference has concluded, at which point it will be shared with those departments as well as local media, who may do with it as they wish. Though if I may quickly remark, in the interest of full and complete disclosure, if they should choose to release the video to public viewing, you may note the presence of another young person, a 14-year-old girl, also of Peach Creek. Rest assured, however, that, although surely unsettled, this girl was unharmed in the incident, and was taken into police custody only for questioning; she has since been released to her mother.”

“Uh… honey?” Hilary called toward the stairway. But Matilda had already returned, looking like she’d just witnessed a plane crash.

“I heard that,” she answered. “Sarah’s on the phone with her right now. She just got home from downtown.”

“Jesus Christ, Elkins, what did you do?” Hilary asked the television set.

Despite his face being a bit hard to see on TV because of the graininess of the screen and the faraway vantage point of the news-camera, viewers such as Hilary Browne could tell that Mayor John Norman was now looking rather pleased with himself. After a rather somber start, he was starting to act as though he had to contain himself from beaming; one could even say it looked like he was smiling ever so slightly. It was almost as though he was getting to the part he was happy to announce.

“For my part,” the Prince Mayor continued, now having even more trouble hiding his self-congratulatory smirk, “I have spoken with County Commissioner Doty Roe, who has also seen the video and shares my abhorrence for the situation that has transpired. Commissioner Roe and I have discussed what is to be done with the state of the county police department with the disgraced state of its two highest-ranking officials and the rampant corruption that has been made evident at all levels of the county police force.”

“Oh, like you’re one to talk!” Hilary remarked. Matilda wasn’t in the mood to talk anymore. Ed was focused on extracting a Chunky Puff niblet that was stuck in a fold in the lining.

“Therefore Commissioner Roe and I have decided to merge the Nottingham City and County Police Departments. As a reward for their quick and correct thinking, my appointed Chief
Woodland and Deputy Nutzinger will be fulfilling the roles of Sheriff and Sheriff’s Deputy of Nottingham County until the elections next November.”

Mr. and Mrs. Browne shared their non-verbal mouth-sounds of disbelief with much of the crowd of journalists, who at this point could no longer contain their biases. At this point, people across the Nottingham Metropolitan Statistical Area were cursing their ignorance of local politics.

“I… didn’t know that was allowed,” remarked Matilda.

“If he jacks up the taxes to pay for his expanded police force, I swear to God we’re moving out of this godforsaken state,” vowed Hilary. “I’d sooner pay sales taxes than I would pay him.”

His big announcement now out in the open, the lion entered the denouement of his speech: “I would like to thank the people of our local law enforcement who helped us begin to remedy this mess, as well as you, my citizens of both the City of Nottingham as well as the surrounding suburbs, and especially to Nottingham County Commissioner Doty Roe, whom has agreed to let me work much more closely with her in the future to help ensure that the needs and desires of the municipal and county governments are more closely aligned.”

“Define ‘closely,’ jackass,” Hilary spat. “Are you two fucking or what?”

“Honestly, I had always guessed that Prince John didn’t exactly prefer the company of women,” Matilda joked.

Hilary didn’t laugh because he didn’t realize she was joking and he agreed unironically. “Yeah, I’ve wondered if that thumb of his is the only thing he’s been sucking on.”

“I trust that this goes without saying,” Mayor Norman finished, “but I have personally seen to it that Sheriff Thomas Elkins and Sheriff’s Deputy Matthew Goldthwaite have been relieved of duty, and I will be seeing to it that they are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for their transgression of violating the trust of the people of Nottingham City and County. If there are any more relevant details which I believe my public should know, I will not hesitate to share them. I thank you for your time, my citizens, and I wish you a good remainder of your Sunday.”

The mayor collected his notes and stepped away from the podium, and the television feed cut to a live reporter at city hall addressing the camera herself.

“That was Mayor John Norman addressing an incident that occurred last night in the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve near the Northwest Suburbs—”

“All gone!” Ed proclaimed as he jumped up from the couch and ran back to the kitchen with the empty cereal box and milk jug. His parents watched him scamper off, with melancholy looks on their faces now that they had to remember their son existed.

“Ed, remember to rinse out that milk jug, or the entire house is gonna reek again!” Matilda warned.

“Just like his room always does,” Hilary said as he rolled his eyes. When the two of them looked back at the TV, the baseball game was back on, and the Nationals were beating the visiting Mariners 2-0 in the top of the fourth, but neither of the Brownes were in quite the mood for sports. “Fuck that, I ain’t paying his taxes.”

“Hilary, let the record show that I wanted to move to move to Zootopia when we got married!”

“Oh, yeah, right, because I could really afford those tax rates.”
“Um, hello?” Matilda said as she gestured toward the television, which was no longer displaying the likeness of John Norman, but both understood to pretend it did for her point of the argument.

“What, like anybody could have reasonably predicted this? Whereas anybody could predict that some bullshit planned paradise city would have tax rates up the ass to pay for that impossibly fucking all-accommodating infrastructure?”

“Well, at least there, you’d get the feeling that your money’s actually going toward something and not just being stolen from you, and not lining some fat-cat’s pockets,” Matilda said. “...Or should I say ‘malnourished-cat’?”

“Hey, you wanna find out how it really is over there? Go give the foxes a ring,” said Hilary. “Last I heard, Toni and Terry’s other son’s living in Zootopia these days. Ask them about his tax rates and how he feels about how his money’s being spent.”

“Oh, that kid was a sneak and a swindler!” Matilda scoffed. “He was more of a delinquent than that hyena kid! I’d bet he doesn’t even pay his taxes!”

“Hm. It kills me to say this, but you’re probably right about that one,” Hilary admitted. “But I’d bet he’s still more successful than our son’ll ever be.”

Matilda still had that look on her face. “It kills me to say this, but you’re probably right about that one.”

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It was approaching eighty degrees that day, but Ed was still wearing his favorite green jacket over his favorite red-and-white striped shirt. If anything, his jacket was so baggy that it sort of ventilated him and kept him from overheating. It was just another piece of evidence in the hypothetical argument that where others saw Ed as an idiot for doing something odd, such as wearing heavy outerwear in the heat of summer, he was actually a genius in a most indescribable way.

When Mrs. Browne peered out the window and remarked that there were cars piled in front of Kevin’s and Nazz’s houses, it wasn’t inaccurate, it just wasn’t painting a complete picture. Those two homes did indeed have clogged driveways, but all the rest of the curb space on Rethink Avenue seemed to be similarly occupied. Decade-old sedans were concentrated around the Lafferty residence, and youthful SUVs and coupes driven by well-to-do cousins congregated near the home of Nazz and her mother. But Ed didn’t think about this very much. He didn’t think about anything unless he needed to. Whether this was further evidence of Ed’s inborn density or a subtle sign of a wise efficiency of mental energy was another round of the aforementioned debate.

Ed decided to check Eddy’s house first. Ed always checked Eddy’s house first. It was closer, and on the way to Double D’s house anyway. It was easier this way.

Ed waltzed up to the foxes’ doorway and rang the doorbell.

_Ding-dong_.

Two seconds later, he rang the bell again.

_Ding-dong._

Precisely the same interval later, he rang the bell again.
Ed may as well have had a metronome in his head for the perfect rhythm he was keeping. Indeed, Ed loved the musical quality of doorbells. He loved how every doorbell had its own unique sound and pitch and consonance, and the adored phenomenon of hearing a doorbell’s chime oozing through a closed front door as the sound bounced around the walls of a house, with every home’s unique floorplan modifying its resonance in a way that gave its doorbell an added layer of uniqueness. To Ed, every individual doorbell was a musical instrument that could be found nowhere else on planet Earth, and yet an instrument that anybody could play.

After the seventeenth press of the doorbell button, Ed started to hear the door’s deadbolt and lock being disengaged. Ed was on his nineteenth ring when the door opened.

Terry already had his head craned all the way up when he opened the door. He wasn’t home during the day very often, but he had been around the house often enough to know that when the doorbell was being rung in immaculately-timed two-second intervals, it could only have been his son’s grizzly/Kodiak friend come a-calling.

“Hey, Ed,” Terry greeted boredly. He wasn’t trying to be unfriendly, but he wasn’t trying very hard to be friendly, either. He typically worked at the dealership both days on the weekend, but his manager more or less forced him to take this particular Sunday off in exchange for working next Sunday on Father’s Day. Terry still hadn’t made up his mind whether his manager was giving him a day of rest out of the genuine kindness of his heart or if he was trying to cut in on Terry’s opportunities to make serious commission money on upcoming-holiday sales of five-year-old Corvettes with sticky gear-shifts and four-year-old Vipers with secret transmission issues and six-year-old convertible Mustangs with soft-tops that wouldn’t stay on correctly if you drove over forty-two miles per hour to mothers trying to surprise the fathers of their children and young professionals trying desperately to gain the approval of their quinqua- and sexagenarian dads and fortysomething guys who won’t stop offhandedly mentioning that they’re buying themselves their own Father’s Day present because they don’t trust their...wife/girlfriend/mistress/boyfriend/child/grandchild/great-grandchild/whatever-you-call-the-benefactor-of-a-sugar-daddy to buy for them when in reality they have no such people in their lives.

Terry was also none too pleased that his day of rest was being tarnished by the sounds of his obnoxious hyena neighbors and their entire extended family loudly losing their composure over the state of their son, and Terry just wished he could knock on the door and tell them that as much as his own son was no angel, their son was an asshole to his son and his idiot friends he didn’t feel sorry for the kid and while maybe he didn’t deserve to get his ass beat by the Nottingham County Police Department, he definitely deserved to get his ass beat by somebody, and that Mat and Hill and Sammie and Vince would probably back him and Toni up on that. But Terry couldn’t do that; he knew that, as he had successfully instilled in his older son, it was important to maintain good connections with people, even people you hate -- hell, especially people you hate -- because you never know when you’re going to need to ask them for a favor you can’t, or won’t, pay back. There was a reason why, in some circles, he was nicknamed ‘Classy Terry’.

To be fair, however, the Laffertys had mellowed out considerably since they first got back from the hospital around lunchtime, which Terry theorized they only left because a doctor or a nurse or somebody had to politely tell them, ‘Hey, sorry you’re kid’s in a coma, but it’s a fire hazard to have this many people in one room.’ Either that or they were asked to leave because their hyenic sobbing came across sounding more like cackling laughter that simply wasn’t appropriate for the ICU.
“Hi, Mr. Eddy’s Dad!” Ding-dong. “Can Eddy come out to play?” Ding-dong. Now that the door had been opened, the bell’s pitch and resonance had changed again and came together to make another combination of sounds that could not be quite replicated anywhere else in the known universe. Ed would truly never get tired of this.

“He’s hanging out in his room--” Ding-dong. “--with Double-D right now.” Ding-dong. “You can come in, if you’d like.” Ding-dong. Terry really would have found Ed’s sense of rhythm impressive if he wasn’t preoccupied with finding it annoying. Terry would have wondered if the kid had inherited some sort of genetic musicality, but he didn’t know Hilary or Matilda to be such virtuosos themselves. Heck, maybe if Ed and the sock-headed wolf-kid with the knack for the pedal steel guitar could work something out, maybe they’d have something decent going for them; Terry only wished his own younger son was so talented.

“Thanks, Mr. Eddy’s dad!” Ding-dong.

“Of course,” answered Terry as he stepped aside to make way for Ed.

Ding-dong … ding-dong … ding-dong … ding-dong …

“Ed?” Ding-dong.

“Yes, Mr. Eddy’s Dad?” Ding-dong.

“Just, uh…” Ding-dong. “Watch your head on the way in--” Ding-dong. “--will ya?”

“Oh!” Ed said as the trance was broken. He rushed into the doorway and immediately thunk ed his head on the top of the standard six-foot-eight-inch door-frame, consequently shaking the entire house in the process. “Ouch!” Ed said, but it was more akin to an exclamation of seeing something interesting than one of being in pain.

“You alright there, big guy?” Terry asked, crossing his arms and taking in the spectacle he was observing. This was not the first time this had happened, so Terry wasn’t worried about the structural integrity of his door-frame; if it was going to break, it would have already done so by now.

“Is everything alright?” Came a timid adolescent boy’s voice coming from within the house. “I heard a loud thumping sound, Mister-- oh, hi, Ed.”

“Double-D!” Ed cried in euphoria as he ran in the house -- thunk ing his head on the crossbar again, snapping his head back, but he kept going as though nothing had happened to justify stopping -- and came to give Double-D the customary suffocating bear-hug. “But where’s Eddy!!?”

“I… can take you to him,” Double-D choked out as he struggled for air. “He’s in… his quarters.”

“Eddy got a quarter!” Ed bellowed, and he ran off to Eddy’s room carrying Double-D along the way.

“Have fun, kiddos,” Terry quipped to nobody but himself. He closed the door and went right back to vegging out on the couch, just in time to see the Orioles give up a two-run homer to the Reds’ stud hounddog hitter, Ken Gruffey, Jr., in the bottom of the fifth to break the 4-4 tie in Cincinnati. The pitch was delivered courtesy of the Orioles’ erratic and overweight Aruban pitcher Sidney Pronghorn. Well, they said he was too good to cut after his DUI, Terry thought; I wonder if moments like these make management have second thoughts. The Reds were now winning 6-4, and this and the interruption for the news update were just two more things that further tarnished
Terry’s day off.

Ed entered Eddy’s room to find that Eddy was laying perfectly still on his bed, his long tail and his little legs dangling off the edge and what could only be called a petrified smile on his face. He looked like he had just seen the face of a loving God as his soul was extracted from his body, at which point his corporeal being had turned to stone.

“Hi, Eddy!” Ed saluted, but Eddy didn’t avert his beaming eyes from the ceiling.

“Uh-- hey, Ed,” Eddy answered quietly, not wanting to break his state of bliss.

“E-Ed…” Double-D coughed as he squirmed his way out of Ed’s grasp, “May I ask for your assistance in reasoning with Eddy?”

“The reason for what?” Ed asked.

“I’ve been pacing back and forth in a fractional circle around Eddy’s bed while trying every combination of words and tones to convey to Eddy that it is unconscionable, repugnant, and downright disturbing that he should be so outwardly gleeful -- no! that he should be either inwardly or outwardly gleeful -- about what happened to Kevin!”

Double-D had succeeded in making Ed look worried, but it wasn’t the kind of worried he was hoping to get out of him. “What happened to Kevin, Double-D?”

Eddy just snickered. “I told ya he wouldn’t know about it. Ya owe me a quarter, Double-D!” Only now did Eddy turn his head toward the boys.

“Oh, I owe you nothing of the sort!” retorted Edd.

“But what happened to Kevin, guys?” Ed repeated.

Double-D simply wasn’t prepared for this. “Uh, well… last night, Kevin--”

“Kevin got beat up by some older kids!” Eddy cut in.

“Uh… sure,” Double-D conceded, only agreeing to go along with this because it seemed easier to lie to Ed than to explain to him the messy concept of good cops and really, really bad cops.

“And now he’s in the hospital because his head is broken!” Eddy said, once more focused on the ceiling.

“Y-yes, wh-what Eddy said,” Double-D mumbled; he reasoned with himself that Eddy’s last statement wasn’t really even a lie.

“Oh no!” Ed gasped.

“B-bu-but it’s alright, Ed! Um… the doctors are going to make him aaalllll better soon enough--”

“And then maybe he’ll know to stay in his fucking place and stop impeding our greatness!” Eddy exclaimed. “Or at least my greatness. That’s the other thing I wanted to see you two about, Monobrow: are you done?”

“Eddy!” Double-D didn’t think Eddy’s shift in tone and topic was appropriate nor tactful.

“Done with what, Eddy? Ed already did his homework, thank you very much!” Ed answered, vexed that Eddy had inadvertently reminded him of school.
“Done with--” Eddy began, but Double-D felt the need to be pedantic as always.

“We have no homework, Ed; it’s summer break.”

Ed gasped, but all the breath he inhaled came right back out soon enough: “SUMMER!”

The other two braced as the house shook. Eddy’s mellow disappeared on the spot and Double-D lamented his pedantry.

“That’s right, guys, it’s summer!” Ed beamed. “I want to go fishing, and jump in a sprinkler, and chase an ice cream truck, and build a rocket ship to the moon, and fight a plague of zombies, and--”

“Hey, boys?” Terry called from the living room. “You don’t have to go play outside, and you don’t have to keep quiet, but you gotta do one or the other.”

“Uh… sorry, Dad!” Eddy replied, his joyousness now completely evaporated.

“Just be glad your mom ain’t home,” answered Terry, “or she’d plunk you in the skull with her bottle of migraine pills.”

Eddy sat up on the bed and the trio just regarded each other in an awkward silence for a moment. Then Ed said something that was either stupid or profound:

“I wanna have an adventure, guys!”

“Wouldn’t we all, Ed?” asked Double-D. “But surely Eddy will want us to work on restructuring his scam to sell fake--”

“No, no, don’t you worry your little head off, wolf-boy,” Eddy said. “I’ve had my enjoyment for the day. The plaaan for the fake IDs can take a vacation day. ‘Sides, I’d hate to bore you with a plaaan you’re not fully committed to. Now, how’s-about you boys plaaan your little adventure ?”

“Eddy, please don’t be so vindictive!” said Double-D. “I never suggested that all of our money-making schemes have been--”

“Double-D, let’s not fight in front of poor little Ed!” Eddy mocked.

“What’s wrong guys?” Ed asked, and then as he was wont to do, he grabbed Eddy and Double-D and forced them into another one of his trademark hugs, which made the fox and the wolf feel exactly as uncomfortable as you’d come to expect. “Ed doesn’t like it when Edd and Eddy are fighting!”

“Uh, we ain’t fighting, big guy,” Eddy choked out, and then set his eyes on Double-D: “Now look whatcha did,” he grumbled.

Double-D tried to scoff, but couldn’t expand his lungs enough to get the required breath support.

“Are you sure ?” Ed asked as he drew his two buddies closer to one another. “Ed just wants us all to be friends!”

“We’re friends, Ed!” Double-D pleaded, then glanced at Eddy as he added, “…For one reason or another.”

“Now how’s-about you lettin’ us down and we go have that summer adventure , eh, Ed?” asked Eddy.
“SUMMER!” Ed hollered again as he dropped Eddy and Double-D.

“Goddammit, Eddy!” Terry yelled from the front room once again; he didn’t bother wasting energy putting on his charming façade when addressing his son.

“So: any ideas, boys?” Eddy asked as he picked himself up off the floor.

“Well… I do have an idea for something we ought to do,” Double-D proposed hesitantly, “but it might not be the most adventurous exploit in the world. Though, who knows what adventure may come of it?”

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Eddy’s fear of confronting the likely fugitives in the junkyard was greatly outweighed by his desire to shove it in Double-D’s face that he was right and Sockhead was wrong; Eddy found fewer greater pleasures in life than glorious vindication.

Unbeknownst to him, Double-D was already emotionally preparing himself for conceding victory. He still wasn’t entirely convinced that the well-spoken Englishman and his crass cohort were wanted criminals and masters of deception, but he was much, much more open to the idea after his conversation with Eddy the previous night. Eddy had done a bang-up job of articulating the fishiness of the strangers’ circumstances, but despite his sworn devotion to empiricism, Double-D just couldn’t shake his gut feelings; he was trying hard to force himself to be spiritually okay with the fact that a strong attachment to one’s own visceral feelings -- even when inherently illogical -- came with the territory of sapient thought. At this point, he was telling himself that this act of checking up on Misters Hood and Little was not just an act of neighborly kindness, but also one of testing to confirm or refute a hypothesis, though at this point he was so confused that virtually any outcome would surprise him.

Ed was also there. He was happy to be with his friends. He would have preferred a little more action in his adventure, and he would rather not have encountered his mean future self again, but he was happy to be with his friends. Ed liked being Ed.

“I’ll laugh my ass off if they somehow hotwired the thing and got it started again, and drove off with it,” Eddy attempted to quip, but it just came out clunky. “Or could the bear-dude even fit in that thing? What was his name? ’Uncle Tom’?”

“’Little John’, Eddy; though you really should be referring to adults by their surnames,” said Double-D. “You’re getting his nickname mixed up with the titular character of the antebellum novel from which we had to read excerpts in Social Studies class.”

“Well thanks for correcting me, Encyclopedia Brown.”

“What have I done that’s reminiscent of a preadolescent detective, Eddy?”

“Double-D, what the hell are you talking about?”

“…oh, never mind.”

“Is ‘Encyclopedia Browne’ what I name my daughter before me and Eddy change our names in the future, Double-D?” asked the only one of the three who would ever ask a question like that.

The other two found this question more confusing than usual, but after a few seconds, they remembered the previous day’s case of mistaken identity.
“Now, Ed,” said Double-D, “I confess that I cannot prove this, but I don’t think that Misters Little and Hood are actually you and Eddy from the future.”

“Hm… are you sure, Double-D? Because they looked just like Eddy and me!”

“Uh… well, as an impartial arbiter, I can concede that you and Mr. Little did share a vague resemblance, but I can’t say that I’d ever describe Mr. Hood and Eddy of being similar in appearance, lest I sound like one of those blind bigots who thinks all members of a species other than my own look the same.”

“But I thought he looked just like Eddy!”

“I must disagree, Ed; for starters, Mr. Hood was ---”

“Ya better pick your words wisely, Double-D,” Eddy said, only now reentering the conversation to warn Edd that he would not hesitate to lay malice upon his face if the wolf dared use the four-letter t -word, the three-letter b -word, either of the five-letter s- words, or the six-letter l -word, or any permutation thereof, in a way that was flattering to Robin and/or unflattering to Eddy.

“Uh, yes, uh… well, Mr. Hood was certainly more ‘red’ red, rather than orange.”

“And white instead of tan,” Eddy said, wanting to fill in the blanks as quickly as possible to get this moment over with. “And you two may not have noticed this, but the guy didn’t have any highlights on his tail or gloves on his hands and feet. My people pick up on those things.”

“Did he now? Interesting! I hadn’t noticed that, Eddy; I’ll have to keep my eyes peeled in the future, now won’t I?”

“And-- uh, nevermind,” Eddy sputtered as he decided not to bring up the thing with Robin’s eyes looking weird from certain angles, for fear that saying that would make it seem like he was really obsessively checking this stranger out (which wouldn’t have been untrue). Not to mention, the thought had crossed his mind that he was being too hard about the eyes thing -- the stranger’s bulbous-y British-y eyes might still have been preferable to, for example, the googly cartoonishly large eyes that his brother had. So with the eye thing off the table, would Eddy have traded bodies with the stranger? Well, if he could swap bodies with anybody, he’d rather be a tiger or something commanding like that, or maybe even would have taken the not-the-largest-but-still-safely-larger-than-average ursine frame of Little John, and no matter who he swapped with, he would have wanted to do so with someone his own age or younger so as not to inherit a bunch of extra mileage that he’d never get to use. But if he had to stick to his own species, he didn’t think he could come up with any reason to believe that the heroically tall and impossibly dashing gentleman fox was anything shy of a perfect vulpine specimen. Eddy was once again so wrapped up in jealousy that he was temporarily functionally deaf, not even noticing when Ed asked:

“…Or is ‘Encyclopedia’ the name of my son, Double-D?” Ed certainly would have enjoyed bearing witness to a Freaky Friday -type thing with Robin and Eddy, as it would have quenched his thirst for adventure; but fear not, dear reader -- this story isn’t going to get that bizarre.

They turned the corner around a mound of refuse, and there it was. The van was still there, its rear doors staring them in the face, perched right next to the mountain, unmolested by any rude guests, its pearlescent paint shining in the sun. All was calm, and all seemed right. And yet none of the three of them wanted to make the first step forward.

“Are they asleep, or are they gone?” asked Eddy.
“I’m… not certain, Eddy,” said Double-D. “Shall we investigate?”

Realizing that the other two weren’t going to, Edd forced himself to be the first to walk up to the van’s rear doors. The curtains were still drawn shut, and there was no noise coming from anywhere, inside or otherwise, that would indicate intelligent life was about.

“Uh…” Double-D murmured to the universe and raised a paw to the door, then held it there for a moment. He elected not to try to open the doors, and instead chose to rap his hand ever so gently on the window.

_Tp, tp, tp._

Perhaps he knocked a little too softly, as Ed and Eddy, who were standing something like eight feet away, could see his wrist’s action but couldn’t hear a sound.

“Did you just pretend to knock?” Eddy asked quietly. He and Ed hadn’t taken a single step closer since Double-D initiated an attempt at contact.

“I didn’t _pretend_, Eddy,” Edd retorted, speaking a bit louder than Eddy. “I just don’t want to wake them up if they’re asleep!”

“They moved my stuff, but they didn’t _take_ my stuff,” Eddy said. “I guess I’m alright with that.”
“Oh, they probably just had to make space for sleeping,” Double-D said as he made his way over to the back. “Besides, you wouldn’t want to breathe in a bunch of toxic fumes while you’re trying to sleep, now would you, Eddy?”

“Hey, I said I was fine with it, didn’t I? What kind of asshole do you take me for?”

Double-D found the one and only piece of genuine trash left behind: a pair of coils of bandages with an archipelago of small blood stains upon each of them. He didn’t know how to feel about the fact that the intelligent fox had done something as ignorant as littering, but he wasn’t entirely sure that that’s what the intended action was.

“Well, this is the last sign of them,” said Double-D. “It certainly seems that they’ve likely moved on.”

“Yeah, to go walk on foot to some other junkyard fifty bajillion miles away,” said Eddy.

“I do have to wonder, though, if they’re simply out for the day and if they plan to come back to this place of refuge. They may be attending to business relating to the fire.”

“You still believe that?”

Double-D assessed the scene and took a deep breath before carefully choosing his words. “I believe that, whomever they were, they treated us kindly and treated our property -- though we have more or less acquired it via squatter’s rights, but I digress -- with respect. I believe that they were good, courteous guests to us, and whatever affairs they may engage in during the rest of their lives is, at this juncture, none of our business.”

Eddy just shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“What if those band-aids were from a mummy that came and took them back to his crypt to devour them?” asked Ed.

“Ed, ‘Band-Aid’ is a brand name, and they refer to an entirely different thing. These are bandages,” Double-D said to Ed, hoping to confuse the bear into forgetting his own question, and then turned to address Eddy: “Shall we try again tomorrow?”

“What, is that how badly you want to see these guys? We came to see if they were still here. They aren’t; case closed. Did you want to give Rob a handjob while telling him to talk British to you?”

“Eddy, I’m in no mood for your crass vulgarity. I’ll go myself if I have to.”

“Fine. Me and Ed won’t be here when they rape and murder you.”

“I’ll come with you. Double-D!” said Ed. “I want to tell Mr. John to say hi to Encyclopedia for me!”

Double-D gave Eddy an I win, you lose, now shut the fuck up look.

“Alright, smart one,” said Eddy, “gimme your opinion: we’ve gotta keep the generators and the ironing stuff somewhere until I can get my hands on some more laminates and plastics and shit. We could hide this stuff in any of our places... but it might look fishy if our parents find it. And I don’t think even Ed’s stupid enough to agree to have gas fumes coming out of his closet. So you think this stuff is safe here?; should we take it home?; or do you have a better idea for where we can stash it all?”
Double-D still had no idea what to make of the strangers. Were they secret bandits, or were they just an unlucky pair of actors who responded to a bad situation in an unorthodox way? Double-D tried to tell himself that because they were nice to them, it didn’t matter, but he knew that if the boys had been harboring wanted criminals, it would have mattered. He also considered the possibilities that it didn’t matter that it did matter, or that it did matter that it did not matter. His own gray matter was doing its best to keep itself straight. This had not been a good few days for him, psychologically speaking.

“You tell me, Eddy: are you certain that Mr. Hood and Mr. Little aren’t coming back?”

“I can say that it’d be pretty fucking stupid of them if they did.” And as much as the strangers had filled him with an envious rage, Eddy couldn’t reasonably claim that they were stupid. At least not yet; he needed more information before he could deduce that.

“Then I’d propose that we take the ironing accessories and extension cables -- the less-suspicious of our implements -- back to one of our homes, and keep the generators here in the van. Anybody seeking gasoline to salvage surely wouldn’t look inside the cabin of the vehicle for fuel. The generators ought to be safe here,” Double-D said. “Especially if we check on them at least once a day.” He acknowledged to himself that there was risk in encountering these strangers again, but he liked the way that they liked him. Therefore he pretended that there was only a negligible chance that any scavengers would open the van and say fuck it, why not? and make off with the fully-filled generators anyway; in this, he could set up the chance that they’d all run into the strangers again. And Double-D was glad that he had been the one to make that choice; Robin and Little John had tabbed him as the boys’ leader, and he intended not to make them incorrect in their assumptions.

Ed didn’t very much care who led as long as they let him follow along.

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It wasn’t much adventure, but it was something to tide the boys over until something more exciting happened to them. After leaving the junkyard with the iron, ironing board, and extension cables, they stashed them in the mess of Ed’s room, then went over to Double-D’s house to while away the afternoon watching television reruns. Ed did notice that Double-D seemed tense and Eddy seemed bored more than anything, but they were together, and they weren’t fighting, and that’s all that mattered.

All in all, it was a good Sunday for Ed. He got to spend time with his friends, and none of them were tormented by Kevin, who was conspicuously absent from the cul-de-sac for reasons that Ed still didn’t fully comprehend, but he didn’t want to ruin the mood by digging into it. He also wasn’t tormented by Sarah or her bro-ho Jimmy, both of whom seemed to be in no mood to antagonize them today, and he was not tempted by Nazz, who was also strangely absent from public scenes as far as Ed could tell. The sunlight had been abundant, the sunset was pretty, and the moon looked pretty darned nifty as it approached half-full. The Nationals beat the Mariners, and while the Orioles lost to the Reds, they lost in a manner that was more fun to watch than the manner in which the Nationals won, and Ed, who did not particularly care about sports, still found this to be a good thing, as he attributed it to why his father was so much more reserved today than usual. Perhaps the best part of that Sunday, however, was that Ed was allowed to enjoy every last second of it until it went away, and with no school in the morning, he had no apprehensions about watching monster movies well past midnight, at which point Ed’s Monday got off to a great start.
Profiles in Anarcho-Monarchism

Chapter Summary

What exactly makes "the Prince Mayor of Nottingham" tick?

10. “Profiles in Anarcho-Monarchism”

Before he stepped into the limousine, he took off his top hat and stuck it on the head of his assistant.

“Hold this for me, Hiss.”

“Yes, ss sire.” Charles’s voice was muffled now that his head was entombed by the top hat. The armless weasel actually looked not unlike a coat-rack in this current arrangement.

Mayor Norman pivoted his head in every conceivable direction; his neck was killing him, but it was a small price to pay to look classy -- or, perhaps more accurately, to look the way he thought he looked best. While there was a great public debate in those days -- as there is still today -- over whether the old adage of *don’t worry about what other people think* really was a virtuous ideal that promoted being okay with oneself in the face of ridicule and wayward malice, or if it was actually a rather tone-deaf and narcissistic way to go through life (with the idea being that people might have legitimate reasons for disliking you and you’ll never grow as a person if you don’t take their criticisms into account, even if they are from mean-spirited strangers) -- or, third option, if that old adage simply worked better in some situations than others -- nobody could deny that “Prince” John Norman embodied that mantra to a tee. He simply did not worry about what other people thought of him if it conflicted with his own self-opinion and if the person did not have the power to immediately endanger his life as inspired by their disdain for him. There was only one person, living or dead, whose approval Prince John desperately sought, and she had long since stopped living and become dead, so at the behest of a therapist (whom he no longer visited), Prince John tried desperately to put her in the past and live only in the present; he succeeded more on some days than others, though an outside observer could usually tell what kind of day it was for the mayor by looking at how dry or wet his thumb was at any given time.

The rhinoceros who was holding the door open was trying to find something else to look at as the mayor continued working out the crick in his neck all while making seething and high-pitched moaning sounds for the better part of a minute. Eventually, toward the end of the performance, the bodyguard did happen to see his recently-promoted sheriff and sheriff’s deputy jogging toward him. Woodland and Nutzinger’s respective new statuses had been made official earlier that day in a closed-door ceremony. Mayor Norman had been debating whether it would be convenient or just tasteless to present the new sheriff and deputy in the same press conference that he acknowledged a minor had just been the victim of police brutality, but his mind was made up when Ward and George weren’t back from their lunch break in time for the conference. Mayor Norman did, however, still want them to at least be present for the press conference, so he tried to borrow them some time, but they didn’t take the loan.

“We’re here, Mayor!” called Woodland as he approached, catching his breath.

“Maybe against our better judgment, but we’re here,” Nutzinger mumbled.
“Exssscuse me!” Hiss, uh, hissed, all the while still having his head engulfed in the mayor’s top hat and relying on sonic clues to determine which direction he should turn to in order to face his addressee. “Deputy Sheriff Nutzinger, how dare you insssinuate that it’s anything shy of an honor to be in the presence of Mayor Norman!”

“No, no, Hiss,” said the mayor, “Deputy Nutzinger has a valid fear that it would be, shall we say, unwise to show his and his superior’s faces immediately after they led me to make a fool of myself. Gentlemen, may I inform you that I delayed the press conference from one o’clock to one-thirty, then to one-forty-five, and even began that eight minutes late because I refused to give up hope that my loyal constables would show up?” The shame that the mayor felt was, of course, entirely self-imposed; it was entirely coincidental that the rest of Southern Delaware agreed with his self-assessment that he looked like a jackass after delaying a press conference by fifty-three minutes.

“Oh, Mister Mayor, Nutsy and I do apologize a thousand times over!” Woodland said.

“Sheriff Fatass here decided that he really, really wanted Hardee’s today,” Nutzinger added. “I know you don’t eat fast food too much, Mayor, so let me tell you that the closest Hardee’s is waay out in the suburbs. Like, it’s not actually all the way in Maryland, but it might as well in Maryland.”

“Yes, it’s true, I couldn’t resist! There’s something about their chicken strips that just gets me going!”

“And why, pray tell, couldn’t you answer when I had other officers try to contact you over the police frequency?” asked Prince John.

“We were way out of town, Mayor,” said Nutzinger. “We were probably out of range.”

Prince John had no idea how police radios worked, and probably didn’t care, so he didn’t know that a county-level police department’s radio frequency should theoretically be able to reach all parts of the county. For that matter, his temporarily-blinded assistant didn’t know either, and while Rocky the Bodyguard knew, he also knew that he was there to be seen and not heard. Mayor Norman and his assistant completely bought the story that Ward was so possessed by his own gluttony that he’d do something so stupid.

And Ward and Nutsy knew that they could play up Ward’s affinity for junk food to cover their asses despite an enormous plot hole in their alibi. In reality, after having been working for many of the last forty-eight hours, they decided to turn off their squad car’s radio and pass out for awhile. When they woke up and realized what time it was, they quickly agreed that a fake story about Ward having an insatiable hankering for burger-joint chicken tenders would be less embarrassing than confessing that they had been blatantly derelict of duty mere hours after a major promotion. Maybe sometime soon they would have to spin a more sophisticated yarn to someone who wasn’t so easy to dupe, but they’d cross that bridge when and if they came to it; if nothing else, they could just say they were helping an old lady across the street again, except this particular old lady was very, very slow this time.

“Well, since it may be beneficial for me to parlay an abridged version of the events,” the mayor began, “the people are displeased by this development.”

“Shocking!” Nutzinger remarked.

“Deputy Nutzinger,” Hiss said, “do not use sssuch impudent sssarcasm in the presencce of our mayor!”
“We’ve already established that I don’t regard you as an authority figure, Uriah Fucking Heep!”
Nutzinger spat at the doubly-impaired weasel from the safety of the monstrous wolf’s shoulder. George Nutzinger had never actually read *David Copperfield*, but first learned of the character of Uriah Heep from a high-school extra-credit project on famous literary archetypes, at which point he realized that the infamous yes-man was also the namesake of one of his dad’s favorite bands, and having made that connection, he never totally forgot the name after that; never had Nutsy ever thought he’d actually *say* the name out loud, let alone use it to address somebody who embodied the character disturbingly well. As for Woodland, he had absolutely no clue who his deputy was talking about, and perhaps that was for the better, as he was keeping quiet so as to piss off neither his superior and his sycophantic servant nor his little buddy who could bite him in the jugular at any time if he really wanted to.

Hiss, who had read *David Copperfield* since it was required reading back in school in England, let out an offended gasp and turned vaguely toward the direction the mayor was standing in. “Mayor Norman! Why do you allow *ssssuch*…” -- Hiss realized he could see a little out of the bottom of the hat, and turned more to more accurately face his boss judging by where the lion’s feet were -- “… *ssssuch* rude characters to be the heads of your police force!?"

“Oh, Charles, do you not think before you speak?” asked the mayor, who was also familiar with the novel and character as a consequence of his English education, and who actually thought the comparison was not only rather fitting but also a tad bit amusing. “You think yourself in the right to chastise Deputy Nutzinger for what you perceive as insubordinate behavior, and yet you turn to me and question my decision-making immediately afterward? Are you trying to be ironic, Hiss?”

Nutzinger just smirked, and Woodland, feeling proud of himself for understanding the words *chastise* and *insubordinate* and *ironic*, was trying not to laugh. Rocky was glad he was wearing sunglasses to maintain his poker face. Hiss, who really hadn’t seen the irony in his actions until they were pointed out, simply hung his head in defeat.

“Er-I-- I’m *ssssorry, Your Majesty, I--*”

“Brother, did you just call him ‘Your Majesty ’?” Nutzinger interrupted.

“Oh, he really is such an obsequious little soul that he sees me as like royalty!” said Mayor Norman. He thought he did a bang-up job concealing his shock that Charles had let slip one of his secret regal titles for him. “Give me my hat back!” the mayor said as he liberated the weasel from his confinement and placed the hat carefully back upon his own maneless head.

Ward and George were just nodding along with everything; even George, who sometimes read books recreationally, didn’t know what the fuck *obsequious* meant. He was starting to wonder if he had bit off more than he could chew when he decided to drop in a literary reference to prove to the mayor and his aide that he wasn’t just another uncultured American -- perhaps it had worked all too well.

“I’m *ssssorry, sssire--*”

“Now you’re calling him *sire*?” asked Nutzinger.

“I believe he was calling me *sir, Deputy,*” said Mayor Norman, getting frustrated by his assistant’s uncharacteristic carelessness. “I believe it may be an accent quirk from his region of our homeland. But I admire your resolve to ask the questions that others wouldn’t dare, George.” John turned back to Mr. Hess: “Hiss, don’t you see that this defiance is an indicator of bravery? A bravery we need in our city’s police force?”
“Yeah, Chuckie!” said Ward, who now thought it was safe to speak again. “We’re the badasses Nottingham needs!”

Under his mortified countenance, Hiss was fuming. He tried to remind himself that some day soon he’d be the one in control of all of them, and then they wouldn’t think of him as such a Uriah Heep-type anymore, but he was losing his patience waiting for that day.

“No quite the word I’d use, Eddward -- ‘badasses’ -- but I’ll allow it,” said the mayor. “But, er… oh, a thousand apologies, gentlemen, it seems I’ve lost the plot after our little spat here. Where were we?”

“Shocking!” repeated Nutsy. “You said the people didn’t like the news. You didn’t specify what news they didn’t like, but we couldn’t imagine anybody not liking anything when you say it. We were absolutely flabbergasted. Our feeble minds couldn’t comprehend such an eventuality.” Nutsy didn’t break eye contact or even blink as he reminded the mayor of the topic they’d been discussing.

“Ah, sarcastic as you may be, Deputy, you do speak truth to power, and I commend that,” the mayor lied. “But as for public opinion: to put it simply, we have much work to do, and I’m relying on you lads to help me. Now, because someone decided to defy my judgment--!” -- he stopped to try to give Hiss a stern look of disapproval, craning over the weasel and starting to look down before he realized his hat was slipping off his head, at which point he reeled back, tried to catch the hat, failed miserably, and watched it land back on Charles’s head; much blood was shed as Woodland, Nutsy and Rocky all bit deeply into their personal tongues trying not to laugh their asses off -- “-- I won’t have much time to give you the full details of my plan, and indeed the plan may still change based on what resources may become available or unavailable to us as we go along,” the lion said as he repositioned his hat delicately. “But suffice it to say this: we will need to make the people of this city, and this county, and of whatever other lands and jurisdictions we may find under our thumb, feel like they can trust us.”

Wait, what does he mean by that?, thought Woodland.

I don’t feel comfortable hearing this guy say the word ‘thumb’, thought Nutzinger.

“We’ve already made one large step forward by convincing the people that the county police force are a bunch of brutish bullies,” John continued.

“I’m not so sure that we’ve convinced them that we’re much better,” said Nutzinger.

“That’s the next step, George,” said the mayor. “Now… how can I say this as theatrically as possible?”

“Jesus Fucking Christ, just say whatever it is,” Nutsy let slip. “Oh! I-I’m sorry, Mayor, I--”

“No, no! No apologizing! There’s that brave brazenness that I wish I had myself again!” said the mayor. “So to be blunt: while I convince the people that I am the most trustworthy of all authorities, you gain the trust of the people and convince them that they cannot trust themselves. Find the bandits in Sherwood, and any other ne’er-do-wells you may encounter, and make them regret who they’ve chosen to be. A-and make it clear to the people that they are evil and we are good! Give them the impression that there would be chaos and disorder without the Nottingham Police Force!”

The mayor delivered that line with a flourish and a self-impressed grin. George Nutzinger -- who, unlike many of the other gentlemen in this story, was usually completely at peace with his physical
size in the scope of mammalian society -- just this one time wished he was lion-sized so he could knock that smile off Mayor Norman’s face, preferably in a manner that would cause physical pain and mental anguish. Ward Woodland would likely have shared the sentiment if he wasn’t spending all of his mental energy trying to keep up with whatever the hell the mayor was saying and trying to remember whether he knew what the heck a nairdoohell was; for all his time spent in the mayor’s presence, hearing him use big words didn’t mean anything if nobody was going to tell them what they meant.

“While you make the people fear a lack of power,” Prince John said, “I’ll make them fear power itself -- except for my own, of course! And then when the people want a strong leader…” -- the mayor extended his arms out at his sides and glanced to his left and then his right -- “…they’ll look around, and all they’ll see is me!”

Nutsy almost got knocked off of Woodland’s shoulder during the mayor’s demonstration, since Ward had turned his own head to try to see what his boss was looking at.

“Jesus, Ward, watch it, buddy!” said Nutzinger, grabbing hold of the wolf’s snout to keep his balance.

“Aw, sorry, Georgie. I guess there ain’t nothin’ to see.”

“Give this your patience, boys,” the mayor said, “and there will be much to see before you know! And you’re going to like what you see, I assure you!”

“And we’re going to be the pawns in your vague little plan to take over the world?” asked Nutzinger; he was now getting the hunch that the mayor wouldn’t want to undo all of his work at interrupting the status quo by firing his sheriff’s deputy the same day as his appointment, so he was feeling a little more flippant than usual.

“You know what, ss sir?” piped up Hiss. “I will! I will ssay that I have doubtss in your choicces for the ssuperiors of your policces forccce!” His tongue slipped on s sounds more than usual when he was flustered.

The mayor turned his head slowly toward his assistant and raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

“Well if you think we ain’t fit for the job,” said Woodland, “why don’t you do it yourself then?”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, there’s no need to fight!” said Prince John. “I’ll say this to all the three of you: I believe in my heart of hearts that I need you each in the world I’m trying to build.” He then regarded the rhino for the first time since the cops had shown up: “And for that matter, you too, Rocky.”

The bodyguard nodded stoically. He was still holding the limousine door open and his arm was starting to fall asleep.

“As they say,” continued the mayor, “no man rules alone.”

“It’s an honor, Mayor,” said Ward.

“Yesss, yesss, Mayor! A right honor to be a part of your plans!” said Charles, trying to one-up Ward.

“What they said,” said George.

“Now, Eddward, George,” said the mayor, “if I were to send you into Sherwood Forest right this
moment to go to that tree where the bandits may live, would you know precisely where to find it?"

“We’d certainly find it, boss!” Woodland said resolutely, hoping his ambiguous-but-determined answer would instill confidence in his boss.

“Your determined -- but ambiguous -- answer does not instill confidence in me,” Mayor Norman frowned. “You two need to be not just confident, but correct in the thoughts you’re confident about.”

“Mayor Norman?” came a female voice.

The five gentlemen turned to see Nottingham County Commissioner Doty Roe approaching, with her own assistant and bodyguard in tow. The deer appeared to be speed-walking, just a touch slower than Ward had been when he arrived, and looked like she was a turbulent mix of inwardly anxious and outwardly pissed.

“Ah, Commissioner Roe!” said the mayor. “What a pleasant surprise it is to see you here!”

“Mr. Mayor,” said Rocky, “Do you allow these people to be in your presence?”

“Oh, I welcome their presence, Rocky, but good on you for thinking to ask.”

“I’m glad I got here before you took off,” said the county commissioner, sounding just a bit winded herself. “I called your office, but your secretary didn’t answer the phone. And then I--”

“My assistant was with me,” the mayor said as he gestured to the weasel. “You know he goes wherever I go.”

“I… did not say your assistant, Mayor, I said your--”

“I’m afraid we may have a misunderstanding here, Commissioner; Mr. Hess is the only one who answers my phones.” The mayor did not use Charles’s serpentine moniker outside of his inner circle, and with the commissioner’s mongoose assistant present, it seemed like it would have been a bad joke waiting to happen if he did.

The county commissioner just looked confused for a second before her assistant whispered something in her ear:

“Um, Miz Commissioner, I think I remember hearing that Mayor Norman fired his secretary when he bought a new answering machine last year,” she said.

“Uh… th-thank you, Krupa,” Commissioner Roe muttered. Returning her attention to the lion: “But I came here and walked right up to your office security guard demanding to speak with you in person if I couldn’t get a hold of you on the phone, and when he told me you were on your way out, I ran myself over here to catch you, and--”

“Commissioner, I’m flattered that you’ve gone through such an incredible journey just to see me, but I really must be on my way.”

“…As I was saying,” continued the commissioner, “after all that, I don’t think it’s too much to ask for a moment of your time.”

“Oh, it is most certainly not too much to ask, but unfortunately, it is a tad too much for me to fulfill at the moment.”
“It won’t take long, Mayor. It’ll only be a moment.”

“Ah, but these gentlemen right here---” -- the mayor put his hand on Ward’s shoulder right behind where George was standing -- “have already requested a brief moment of my time, which I was kind enough to grant. If I were to grant my time to everyone who said it would not take long, then that would add up to very long indeed, now wouldn’t it?”

“Can we go now?” asked Nutzinger. Everybody ignored him.

“If you absolutely insist on speaking with me, Miz Commissioner,” the mayor offered, “you can accompany me in my ride to Bethlehem General.”

Doty blinked. “Mister Mayor… our car is parked here.”

“Oh, that’s quite fine with me.”

Commissioner Roe couldn’t tell if John was being stupid or being an asshole. “Mayor… our car is parked here---”

“They will not tow you, Doty, I assure you.”

Yup, he was definitely being an asshole. “--and you’re offering us a one-way ride.”

“I beg pardon, Commissioner, but I only recall offering you a ride.”

The county commissioner was frustrated by this conversation, but she didn’t want to go back out into the world before her bone with Mayor Norman was thoroughly picked.

“Ryan, would you and Krupa take the car and meet me at Bethlehem General?”

“Sure, Commissioner,” the towering tiger said, “but are you sure you’re fine being out without either of us after the… uh…”

“…Unpopular announcement?” Krupa finished Ryan’s thought.

“I’ve made it this far as a woman in politics; I’ll manage,” said the commissioner.

“Don’t you two dears worry; Rocky will watch out for all of us until we rendezvous again,” said the mayor. “Now, Hi-- Hess, if you would please set up the private compartment for the Commissioner and I? And make sure the chauffeur hasn’t dozed off waiting!”

“Certainly, Mayor!” the weasel said, and he hopped into the limousine.

“After you, madame,” said the mayor, gesturing. The commissioner looked at her aides and nodded to dismiss them; they returned with nods and walked off as the doe made her way into the vehicle. “I’ll join you in just a second; I just need to say some parting words to my police officers!”

“Surely,” Doty said morosely as she disappeared into the limousine’s private compartment.

“Now… Eddward,” the mayor said slowly and deliberately, “these words are especially for you.”

“Okay, fuck this!” Nutsy shouted and started shimmying down the chief-cum-sheriff’s torso. “I’ll be in the car.”

“Nutsy, where are you going!?” asked Ward.
“I literally just said ‘to the car’; are you fucking deaf?” George stopped at Ward’s breast pocket to fish the car keys out. He regarded the mayor one last time: “Sayonara, Prince John-Boy,” he scoffed and hopped his way down Mount Woodland.

As Nutsy scooted off, the Prince Mayor relished in his regal nickname, and he took a small moment to fantasize about the day when he would have convinced his public to start calling him “King John” without his persuasion to modify the moniker seeming too inauthentic and obvious.

“Eddward, you understand that I trust you, yes?”

“Yessir, Mayor, sir.”

“I wouldn’t have selected you as my Chief of Police if I didn’t.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And your loyalty is something that I wish others strove to have themselves.”

“Thank ya kindly, Mayor.”

“But surely you know that I don’t like feeling betrayed.”

“...Y-yes, Mayor?”

“I don’t want this to feel like an attack, Eddward; I trust you, I really do. But we are not friends; we’re professional partners. And in that way I can never fully trust you like friends or lovers could trust one another. Please don’t take it personally, Eddward; you’re a good man.”

“I mean, I can’t help you if you’re lookin’ for a lover, but if you’re lookin’ for a friend--”

“Ward, I worded that poorly, and I apologize for--”

“‘Cause if you wanted to go bowling or sumpthin’--”

“Eddward, I misspoke, and you misunderstood. I’m not asking you to be my chum.”

“...Oh.”

“You know what? Let’s take a page out of George’s handbook and try straightforwardness: if I feel like you’re going to betray me, I will not hesitate to replace you.”

“...I see.”

“Please… don’t make me do such a thing. I would hate so deeply to do such a thing.”

“Uh… yes, Mayor.”

“I like you, Eddward. You’re the perfect Chief of Police, and you’ll be the perfect County Sheriff. You’re aggressive and driven, you’re forceful and commanding, you’re big and strong…”

“Why, thank ya, Mayor.”

“...and personally, I find your accent quite amusing. It cheers me up when I’m feeling low.”

“Thank… you?”

“Not to mention, while it’s rare that I get to witness it, it’s always a side-splitting sight watching
someone your size and shape running.”

“...Uh--”

“But if I get the feeling that anybody -- anybody, be it George, or some stranger on the street, or
even Thomas or Matthew after a reinstatement to the Force -- if I feel that anybody would be a
more perfect Sheriff than you, I will replace you. Understood?”

“...Yes, Mayor.”

“You’ve been doing splendidly so far. There’s no reason to foresee you slipping up now.”

“Thanks, Princey!”

“One thing, though, Eddward?”

“Yessir?”

“Spell ‘sheriff’ for me, would you please?”

“Uh… su-sure, um… S-H… E-R-R--”

“Oh, dear, Eddward. Pick up a dictionary; it may help you be a more perfect sheriff. Or do you
prefer to stay the Chief, since that’s easier to spell?”

“Oh… if you want me to!”

“Spell ‘chief’, then.”

“C-H-E-I--”

“Eddward, your first assignment is to pay a visit to the library. I don’t care what you and George
do there, as long as it strengthens the community’s trust in the police and government, and it
involves you learning to spell all the words you should really know how to spell.”

“Did I spell ‘chief’ wrong, too?”

“Speaking of George, perhaps he should have stayed around for this. Be sure to relay the message
to him that if he falters, he will be replaced at my earliest convenience; he may need to hear it more
than you do. Good day to you, Eddward.” The Prince Mayor turned and entered his limousine.
“Thank you, Rocky,” he told the bodyguard, who himself turned and nodded at the sheriff before
making his own way in and closing the door behind him. Elsewhere, the chauffeur was chugging a
Pepsi to wake himself up and get ready to drive to the hospital.

When Woodland arrived back at the squad car, he glanced in the window and saw his rodent
partner passed out on the wolf’s favorite car-pillow. He tapped a claw-nail on the glass.

“Gah! God… dammit!” Nutsy shouted as he was awoken, and turned to see his boss making
himself comfy in the passenger seat. “Ugh… so what did Mayor E-Norman-ous Asshole want?”

“I thought he was asking me to hang out with him ‘cause he was lonely, but it turned out to just be
a spur-o’-the-moment spelling bee.”

“Did you pass--? Hey!” George protested as Ward picked him up to reclaim the pillow.

“I passed fine enough.”
Nutsy was going to try to at least pretend to bite Ward’s hand, but he didn’t have the energy.

“By the way,” Ward continued, “who’s that ‘Yuriel Heaps’ guy you two were talking about?”

“‘Uriah Heep’. A character from a British book I had to read about but never actually read, but those limey bastards probably both understood who I was talking about. I swear, the Brits mock our educational system for being nothing but one big circle jerk, even though theirs is basically the same thing.”

“But what’s so special about this guy?” Ward asked as he tried to position the pillow just the way he liked it.

“He’s an archetype. The ultimate suck-up. A kiss-ass to the point of being a manipulative asshole.”

“Heh! Like ol’ Chuckie could manipulate shit!”

“If I were Charlie, I’d have fantasies of, like, puppet-string power, too, if I didn’t have any fucking arms.”

“Yeah, but he ain’t never gonna get it as long as he acts like as much of a suck-up as he is.”

“Agreed. I pissed him off good, though, now didn’t I?”

“Hey, when he ‘manipulates’ Prince John, you’re gonna be the first person he has killed!”

“Oh, I’m shaking.”

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“The private compartment of the limo was as soundproofed as you could get for the midsection of a moving vehicle. Commissioner Roe was sitting on the right side of the limousine, opposite Mayor Norman.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Commissioner; it seems I’ve overdressed for this highly informal conversation.”

“Do you think saying things like that is going to ease the tension, John?”

“Oh, Commissioner, I do beg pardon; I couldn’t help myself but to--”

“T’m not the county commissioner right now; I’m Doty right now. And right now, Doty’s pissed.”

The mayor took a slow sip of his wine, tilting the glass to his mouth and keeping his head perfectly steady so as not to trouble the hat. “Now, I do have my hypotheses for what you may be cross about, but I’ll let you speak; in my years on this side of the Atlantic, I’ve been made quite familiar with the vulgar little American colloquialism about what happens when one does assume .”

“Why did you bring my name up?”

“Please explain to me how I could go about--”

“Answer the question .”

Prince John raised an eyebrow and took another sip; this time he accidentally shifted his head just a little bit, and the hat started to slide down the back of his head, and although he did catch it and reposition it in time, the save didn’t look nearly as smooth as he’d hoped.
“I am well aware of the poor form shown in answering a question with another question, but to better understand your query, I must ask: How could I have explained that we were merging police forces without invoking your name but once?”

“Just don’t say it! Take responsibility for your idea, and when the press asks me later if I cosigned on it, I can answer in my own words!”

“But do you not want the people to think it was your idea, too?” The Mayor wanted to take a heartier swig of wine, so he said screw it and took his hat off and put it on the seat next to him. “Don’t you want them to think you’re a strong leader who makes strong decisions? Did you not want credit for action?” Sluurp.

“You know, John, in most other cases, I’d say yes, but I correctly predicted that this wouldn’t go over well with the suburbanites. I didn’t want my name on this.” Doty wasn’t planning on consuming any of the wine offered her, but she was getting riled up enough to change her mind. Glulp. “I’ve already got to deal with egg on my face after stupid Tom and Matt beating the everloving shit out of a kid; if there were ever a day to be humble and run around with my tail between my legs, today would’ve been it.”

“Can that tail of yours even reach between your legs?” the lion asked the deer.

Doty gave John a mortified-but-angry look. “I don’t know what they teach you in aristocratic British society, but over here, it’s not polite to say anything involving ‘between your legs’ to a woman. That figure of speech was for me to say and for you to hear and that’s all. With your inability to read social cues, I don’t know if you’d ever be elected to any office legitimately.”

“Oh, I’m not always so egregious in my faux pas.” Prince John uncrossed his legs and crossed them the opposite way; he didn’t even flinch upon hearing the commissioner’s closing comment. “But back to our point, Doty, I cannot see any eventuality where I wouldn’t have included your name and title.”

“Then why didn’t you think about that before you promised not to use it!?”

The mayor couldn’t help but smirk. “Why didn’t you think of that before you believed me?”

Doty had had a feeling that she’d get a response like that, but she’d felt the need to try asking anyway. She took another draw from her wine. “John, just so you know… unlike your citizens, I don’t think you’re stupid. I just think you’re evil.”

Prince John looked intrigued by this revelation. “And when, may I ask, did you decide this?”

“Oh, long ago, John.”

“Was it before I paid your house?”

Doty was about to take another sip of wine when she heard that; instead, she put the glass back down. “Why does that matter?”

“Because I wouldn’t want to give gifts to people who think so… unflatteringly of me.” The words tasted good in his mouth as he spoke them. “So if it were the case that you thought I was evil when I did you such a kindness, I would very much like to rescind my gift. What about the car?”

“I’m… not giving them back to you.”

“Now, my memory is foggy -- did I buy you a Maybach or a Jaguar?”
“They’re in my name and you aren’t getting them back.”

“’They’? Oh, yes, I bought you both, now didn’t I? And a nice Land Rover for Sundays with the family!”

“John, you lose this one. I manipulated an evil man for my own gain and his loss. I win; you lose.”

John took a sip of wine and tapped his fingers as he conjured the most melodramatic way to deliver his next thought. “Very well then; if I cannot get them back, I would like to at least receive credit for buying them for you… that is to say, in the public sphere.”

“…The hell are you talking about!?”

“I have the records. Receipts with my name on them, squeezed into a manila folder next to documents showing title transfers wherein I legally resold each of them to you for a dollar apiece.”

The commissioner picked up the wine glass again, but had no intention of drinking from it; she just wanted something to hold. “You really have your bases covered, don’t you?”

“If I understand that basketball metaphor correctly, then yes: I have all my eggs in a row. A lesser man may destroy the evidence, but I like to keep it around. Partially as a sort of scrapbook of memories, partially to give Charles something to do…” Slurp. “…but mostly for moments such as this.”

“And you’re willing to take yourself down with me just to get back at me?”

“I do beg your pardon?”

“You want to show the world that you embezzled money and spent it on bribes?”

“Oh, nowhere does it say where I got the money from. For all you know, it may still be what I’ve received from my family. In fact, as a matter of statistics, some of that money surely must have been mine legitimately.”

“I’m looking at a regular Machiavelli, aren’t I?”

“My, my, you really do think I’m simply evil, now don’t you?”

“Convince me otherwise.”

“Oh! Oh, but I shall!” And he got himself comfortable in his seat for his defense statement. “I have heard my people cry. I know that they are skeptical of my methods. I know also that a great many would describe my actions as selfish. But you must see, Commissioner, that I have never neglected the heart of my subjects -- I am simply preoccupied. For most of my life, I’ve been torn between my altruistic desire to be an effective and helpful and good person, and my -- shall we say -- animalistic drive to better my own lot first and foremost. And now I’ve--”

“That really seems like the sort of thing you should have straightened out before you assumed public office!”

The mayor tilted his head and feigned disappointment, as though he’d just witnessed a child make an outburst. “Now, there are many things I could say to that; I could say that the opportunity to become mayor only came once, and I was not going to allow it to pass me by; I could say that I believed that having such responsibilities thrust upon myself would then inspire me to ‘straighten myself out,’ as you say. But quite frankly, Doty…” Sip. “...I simply wanted to be mayor! There’s
that animalism again! Let me make this clear to you, Miz Roe: I truly believe in my heart that I will be a much more selfless person when the selfish side of me is satisfied.”

“Then when the hell will it be satisfied?” spat the commissioner, flabbergasted. She was beginning to lean ever so slowly forward.

“When the moment comes, I will know it. And I am just as impatient in waiting for it as you, madame. And as are my people; I yearn for the morning when I wake and I suddenly feel that I don’t need to tax my people to death to feel a numb, tired sense of victory. And yet it sets up its own endgame: the weaker my people become, the more powerful I will become, and if all goes well, the time that I am satisfied with my power will align with the time when my people recognize my power and turn to me for guidance when there are no other powerful figures to be found. When there is nothing to challenge me, I will surely have the confidence to lead them to bigger and better things.”

“Leading your people to bigger and better things’ -- what the hell are you talking about?”

“We’ve already thoroughly discussed my need to feel satisfied for myself before I can feel confident in letting my guard down and letting my inner advocate out; did you think I was content just being a mayor of a midsize city in a nation full of hicks that I’m only in because my family dragged me here? Why do you think I let people call me ‘Prince John’ to my face? It’s because I’m holding out for the day that that title organically evolves into ‘King’.” Siiip . “It’s strange; this is much the same conversation I had with my men before you showed up. I almost feel the need to apologize for repeating myself.”

“Well… hey! Speaking of your family, why aren’t you content with your family’s wealth, you maniac?”

“Partially because I don’t only wish for material wealth, but more-so because it just feels better to have earned something for yourself instead of being gifted it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would disagree.”

“…Then that is your problem.” Sluurp .

Commissioner Roe worked her hands all around the wine glass as she stared into her reflection in the liquid, which rippled in every direction as the limousine tumbled along the streets of Nottingham. She was now leaning completely forward and had barely noticed her position shifting before this point. “I-I’m sorry-- are we going to see me in the hospital? Did I hit my head on something, and this is a coma dream? Or did you really just confess that you’re going to Stockholm Syndrome your citizens until they help you take over the world?”

“And my citizenry is larger now as a consequence of your agreement to merge our police forces, and for that I thank you.”

The doe’s eyes were starting to sting from being excessively pursed open in disbelief. “You’ve gotta be joking.”

“Must I be? I confess that I’ve implicitly signed off on your using excessively dramatic words and terms like ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, but I think my main point is clear enough.”

“You’re a madman,” said the commissioner; she was so appalled and yet fascinated by what she was hearing that it was like a lucid dream, and now she wanted to say exactly what was on her mind, no matter how simple the thought, just to see what would happen next.
“If that’s how you feel, I will gladly take my blood money back.”

“You don’t belong in politics.”

“Oh? And you do? Do you or any of your other cohorts who’ve accepted my bribes? In the privacy of my mind, I’ve always considered that to be a means of networking, whereas it seemed that you and all the other elected officials in this state simply saw it as a greedy end.”

“That’s regular politician stuff. You’re some next-level crazy. And evil. I don’t know which word describes you more at this point.” Roe started to wonder if the driver, bodyguard or assistant could hear her outside of the little compartment. She didn’t know if she should care.

The mayor recrossed his legs; he still had not broken an emotional sweat. “You know, Commissioner…” -- *siiiip* -- “I don’t actually very much like politicians. Or politics at all, for that matter. Nor government, really; it’s so easily manipulated, no matter the systems in place…” -- *swirl, swirl* -- “Perhaps by the time my people have come around to me, they’ll share in my sentiment. By then, perhaps, they won’t see me as another politician -- just the leader they need to guide them out of the darkness.”

“If you don’t like politicians, then why are you saying that to a politician? Are you an evil genius, or just an idiot?” Amid the flurry of emotions Doty was feeling was a strange sense of excitement from poking this odd creature. “I can tell all the other politicians in town how you really feel. About them and everything else.”

“Oh, they all hate one another anyway, now do they not?” *Sluuurp*. “Besides, I’ll just bribe them again until they’re on my side once more. Have you noticed how I give ten times more bribes than I receive, and the ones I do receive near-exclusively come from civilians and not civil authorities? It’s because when I want money, I can simply raise my taxes and get it like that; from other politicians, I crave their power. I can demand money from my people and I can demand power from my colleagues; the opposite is not the case.”

The commissioner stared at him blankly for a second, then coughed out a nervous chuckle. She leaned back in her seat, grasping the wine glass with both hands, and seemed to collapse into a state of delirium as a few more confused chuckles came out.

“I knew you’d used me, in the way that all of us use each other,” she said. “But… I’d never thought it was this… *calculated*.”

“Oh, I’m flattered, Doty.” *Siiip*. “Though even I would be the first to confess that at times I went ahead setting up for plans I hadn’t fully fleshed out. But the best memories are borne of spontaneous decisions, are they not?”

Doty’s gaze had turned to the ceiling and could be described as inward. So John Norman here was just openly spelling out that he was much more than the selfish piece of shit that everyone believed him to be. And the whole ‘selfish-side, selfless-side’ thing -- was this guy for real? How much alcohol did she drink? Was she drunk? Was she even awake? Did she fall from bed and hit her head and not wake up in the morning? Did she fall into a coma from an undiagnosed brain malady and now she was experiencing some hallucinations too mundane to be described as a fever dream but too implausible to be confused with reality? If this was actually happening, this John Norman character would be a great villain in some legendary tale of a ruler gone mad in every sense of the word at once. But in that moment, she decided with finality that this was, in fact, not really happening.

“So why are you *telling* me this?” she asked, still looking at nothing but the ceiling. “I-I mean…
"why are you telling me this?"

"After all you’ve done for me today, Commissioner, the gift of awareness is the least I can repay you."

"But you hate politicians."

"Well, you are a special one--"

"Do you hate politicians because of your brother?"

When she realized that he wasn’t answering, and that she could hear the sound of the tires treading on the pavement, Doty looked back down to be met with a glaring face. Any pretense of joviality was clearly off the table. But Doty still wasn’t sure whether this was just another element of the fantasy that overlapped with reality.

"I invite you to retract your statement, Commissioner."

"I didn’t make a statement; I asked a question."

The Prince Mayor put his wine glass back in the cupholder. "Commissioner--"

"I mean, in confidence, Mayor, you can tell me."

"Doty--"

"Because I totally get if you’d be bitter that he’s in a much better position to take over the world than you."

John answered by pounding on the window to the driver’s compartment. "Lawrence! Lawrence!"

The mayor continued pounding as the window slowly rolled down. "What?" asked the driver.

"Pull over at your next convenience."

"You gonna say please ?" asked the horse.

"PULL OVER AT YOUR NEXT CONVENIENCE!"

"This thing won’t fit in a parking lane on the side of the--"

"Lawrence, STOP THE BLOODY CAR! " John hald-stood and stuck his head in the open window.

Lawrence, ever obedient, slammed on the brakes, much to the chagrin of all the cars behind him, whose drivers honked in protest, as well as to the chagrin of the limousine’s own passengers, who all jolted westward with the sudden change in inertia, most chiefly the mayor who had requested the stop in the first place, who found himself flying halfway through the open window with his face in the floor-mat beneath the passenger seat and the windowsill’s lip pressing unwelcomely into his netherregions.

The door to the compartment clicked with the key of the bodyguard, and Rocky popped in, with Charles Hess dutifully behind him, trying to catch a glimpse of his employer.

"You alright, Mayor?"

"GET HER OUT OF HERE!" he shrieked. That seemed to awaken some sense of cogency in the
county commissioner.

“What, just kick her out of the--?”

“YES!”

“Wait…” Doty now, for the first time since their riveting conversation had begun, had the mind to look critically at the landscape outside the window; she now believed again that this was indeed happening. “Where exactly are we?”

“You’re the head of this county, Commi ssioner!” the weasel jeered. “Shouldn’t you know this pla cce like the back of your hand?”

“Do not speak to the Commission--!”

“GET OUT OF MY CAR!” hollered Prince Floor-Face.

“You’re just going to kick me out of your limo and make me walk--!?"

“What the bloody fucking hell does it look like, you stupid bitch!?”

“Miz Commissioner,” said Rocky, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave--”

“Just grab her!”

“Miz Roe, please don’t make me grab you. I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that.”

And the commissioner could see in the rhino’s face that he wasn’t too thrilled himself to be following the lion’s orders, but that he also didn’t feel like he had much say in the situation.

“He doesn’t need to grab me,” she said as she got to her feet and made her way toward the exit. “I’ll see myself out. Take care, you thumb-sucking motherfucker.”

She had now invoked Richard’s name and said the $m$ -word all in the span in a few minutes; this infuriated the half-incapacitated mayor, who grunted as he kicked wayardly around the cabin in an attempt to land a blow on the commissioner, but only succeeded in making contact with the bell of his wine glass, which promptly shattered, with much of the wine spraying onto the top hat on the adjacent seat and much of the glass embedding itself in the pads mayor’s foot-paw. John immediately stopped flailing his legs and started screaming again, but this time he wasn’t angry at any specific entity. And he was crying.

“Watch your step,” Rocky said as he helped the fuming commissioner out of the limousine. “Did you have a briefcase or a bag with you, or…?”

“No, Krupa has my briefcase. With my cell phone in it.” Doty looked around the neighborhood again, not knowing if she should be nervous or angry. The area didn’t look crummy so much as it just looked old, architecturally speaking. The streets were populated by pedestrians who didn’t look mean, but who didn’t look nice either, and several of these neutral nihilists were staring either at the out-of-place limousine stopped in the middle of an intersection or at the doe who looked strangely familiar.

“There’s a, um, pay phone, like, around the corner and down a block. It’s in front of a liquor store, if I remember right.”

“You know this area?”
“Yeah, I grew up around here.”

“What part of town is this again?”

“Georgetown.”

“...Oh.” The commissioner, having been raised in Apple River herself, always had heard of Georgetown as a bad neighborhood. Now she had to remind herself that it wasn’t that bad -- it was the kind of area where its lower-middle- and upper-lower-class residents weren’t so much violent as they were rough around the edges and perpetually bitter about life in general, and understandably so. It was the kind of neighborhood where most people wouldn’t mess with you unless you personally gave them a reason to, but once you did, they would not hesitate to mess with you. Doty was afraid that her actions earlier today, publicly disclosed on regional television, might constitute a personal offense to these people whose policing situation hadn’t changed but whose tax rates almost certainly soon would. It really could go either way.

“Thanks for the tip,” she continued, “but I don’t have any change on me.”

“Neither do I,” said Rocky. “I’d tell you which shops would let you use their phone, but--”

“Rocky, the Mayor requires you come back into the car,” said Hiss as he poked his head out, only to immediately return to the private cabin to be with his superior.

“...But they wouldn’t help a politician out?” Doty attempted to answer Rocky’s statement.

Rocky simply said, “Well… they might,” and shrugged as he turned his body back toward the limo before turning his head. “Good luck, Commissioner,” he said and closed the door behind him.

The limo stayed there for a second -- Commissioner Roe correctly guessed that they were pulling the Mayor out of the dividing window -- and then took off through a red light, inspiring another cacophony of car horns that almost drowned out the distinct sounds of a fortysomething man with a British accent wailing for his mama.

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Patients, visitors, and employees alike were instructed to stay clear of the hallways as the mayor and his entourage made their way to the hyena boy’s room. The only people still left in the hallway were the presiding doctor, the photographer from the newspaper, and the hospital security guard assigned to watch them both, just in case. There were no actual reporters or journalists to go with the photographer; the newspaper had been made aware that the mayor would answer any and all questions via phone when he decided to call them at his greater leisure.

The room was at the far end of the hallway, and the two groups of three made steady eye contact with one another long before they were within speaking distance. None of the six of them could gauge exactly where “speaking distance” began, which was a bit of a problem.

“Aren’t you going to stand before the mayor?” asked the mayor in a quiet inside voice from halfway down the hallway.

“What he say?” asked the photographer to the doctor.

The giraffe hadn’t heard much better, either. “I don’t know, but I think that I’m going to stand up just so he doesn’t think we’re disrespecting him,” he said to the opossum. The doctor -- whose head and upper neck was already well up against the ten-foot ceiling -- got back onto his feet, and now had even more of his neck parallel to the ceiling. He wanted a transfer to a newer facility that
would be less murder on his spinal cord, but he knew that even the most modern and accommodating public spaces would only give twelve or thirteen feet of vertical space before it became financially unfeasible for the buildings to be constructed any larger for the comfort of such a small, tall demographic. Moments like these made Dr. Jordan regret going into medicine, and also made him have a moment of clarity about why all the other men and many of the women in his family were content with their low-paying outdoor jobs, doing things such as working on power lines.

“Is that what he asked us to do?”

“Maybe. It kind of sounded like that.”

“Did you hear him?” the opossum asked the buffalo.

“I did not,” said the guard flatly.

“If anything, you should sit back down, Doc. It looks like you’re not too comfy right now.”

“Yeah, I’m going to go on break and stretch on the roof after this. But I’m used to it.”

“That’s kind of messed up that they make you--”

“Excuse me,” said the mayor.

“Regards, Mayor Norman,” said the buffalo unenthusiastically. The other two looked to see him standing there with his assistant and bodyguard, having seemingly just materialized out of thin air before them like ghosts. All three of them thought something looked off about him, as though he was missing a certain oversized accessory that had recently been soiled, but none of the three of them could put their finger on it.

“The mayor asked you nicely to stand in his presence!” said the weasel.

“I asked if that’s what he said,” said the photographer. “We couldn’t hear you from all the way down there.”

“I believe I’d made myself clear,” said the mayor. John was getting vibes from the photographer similar to what he got from George Nutzinger, but this opossum’s remarks seemed completely genuine and without an ounce of biting sarcasm.

“You really didn’t,” said Dr. Jordan.

“If it was so easy to hear, then why couldn’t you hear us asking if that’s what you asked?” asked the opossum.

“...B-because I didn’t ask it, I said it!” said the mayor. “I said they ought to stand before the mayor!”

“Why?” asked the buffalo, to everyone’s surprise. “You’re the Mayor of Nottingham, not the King of England.”

The mayor’s face twisted in anger and rendered him effectively speechless, allowing his assistant the chance to cut in:

“Do you think that is any way to speak to any civil authority, royal or else?”

“Brad, chill out,” Rocky said to the buffalo. “It was a rough ride over here.”
“Jeez, what happened to your foot, Mayor?” asked the doctor. The others hadn’t even noticed that his foot was covered in a pile of Band-Aids that were so densely populated that they seemed to be impeding each other’s ability to heal a wound.

“I was hoping you could check that out after we’re done here, Doctor.”

“Doctor Jordan. And I can get--”

“That’s nice.”

“...Um… and I can get you fast-tracked for some care downstairs with another doctor, but I really need to take my break soon. Or is it urgent?”

“May we get this photo shoot over with?”

“Brad, I’ve got the room, you can stay outside,” said Rocky.

“Actually, Dr. Jordan, why are you even here yourself?”

“Um… I-I’m here to walk you through the kid’s injuries--”

“No need. I’ve had a tumultuous enough day. I needn’t be weighed down with more negativity. We’ll have the photo-boy take a snap and we’ll be on our way.”

“You don’t want me to--?”

“You may take your break now, Doctor.”

The doctor was confused, but was in no mood to say no to a chance to alleviate the pain in his neck. He dismissed himself as the opossum followed the lion, weasel and rhino into the patient’s room, and the buffalo shut the door for them to give them their privacy.

The mayor hobbled over to the hyena and got a good look at him. To try to describe his present appearance was almost futile, not because it was too grotesque to put into words, but because one could say -- at the risk of sounding insensitive -- the victim’s injuries seemed almost generic at least at first glance. He didn’t quite have his head bashed in concavely, but it had its share of cuts and bloodstains, and some visible bruising under the fur where the light hit his body just right, and the same could be said for his arms and any other segments of his body that weren’t covered by the blanket. At first, the mayor was almost unimpressed by how straightforward the injuries were, seemingly a whole bunch of small, unremarkable injuries working in synergy by their sheer quantity. But as he examined the breathing tube and the precarious way it was perched in his mouth, the mayor realized that the boy’s snout seemed to be bent, which led him to notice that one of the boy’s eyelids was split open, and shortly after that he saw that there was a rip in one of the hyena’s ears, and then he saw that there were two in his other. It was entirely possible that any of these unsightly scenes had been there before his encounter with Elkins and Goldthwaite, but what was the likelihood that all of them had already been present? Maybe he wasn’t such a mundane beating victim after all. The mayor silently chided himself for being so unobservant at the beginning.

“Bloody, bloody hell. Charles, are you seeing this?”

“Yesss , Mayor,” said Hiss.

“How old is this boy, Photographer?”
“Fourteen, I think?” said the opossum. “My name is Russell, by the way--”

“There’s another question; what’s the lad’s name again?”

“Kevin Lafferty.”

“I admire your recollection, Photographer.”

“It’s on his chart right there.”

The mayor stopped scanning his eyes upon the boy’s battered body and stared into space for a moment. Without looking, he could see a shape in his periphery that was likely the medical chart bearing the boy’s name. John took a breath to process his mortification, trying to remind himself that this photographer whose name he didn’t know wasn’t the sarcastic asshole Nutsy was, but rather a simpleton with no filter who didn’t know better than to not disgrace the mayor.

The moment passed, and the mayor took his paw and started stroking the hyena’s cheek gently.

“Alright, take your picture.”

“How do you want to pose for it?”

“I don’t. Take your picture.”

“And we’re probably going to need a few.”

“Then take a good one on your firrst try!” said Hiss.

“Thank you, Charles,” said the mayor, still laying eyes upon the boy and caressing his cheek.

“Do you want to face the camera at least?” asked the opossum.

“That would be ingenuine.”

“Um… okay, then,” said Russell. He raised the camera, framed it up and got the best shot he could with the strange angle of the strange scene. He immediately pulled the image back up on the camera’s screen, and wondered if a shot like that, despite it being the best he could have rendered given the circumstances, would have gotten him kicked out of photography school for poor form. But then he remembered that the art college he went to was a diploma mill, so they probably would have let him stay even if he had turned in a blurry picture of a homeless man defecating into a city fountain for every assignment.

“Are we ready to leave now, Mayor?” asked Rocky.

But the mayor was enthralled by what he saw in front of him. This stupid delinquent kid who had been dumb enough to cross paths with a bunch of cops in a closed forest preserve at night was going to be the catalyst for all the good things to come. This hyena was going to be his Franz Ferdinand, a martyr whose (forecasted) death would be the spark that would lead to a flame of bitter, brutal conflict among statist powers, a conflict necessary for the truly righteous to rise to the top amid the chaos. Prince John only hoped that his cheek-stroking was comforting the unconscious boy, because John would never be able to repay him for his sacrifice. Well, theoretically, he could have a statue built to the kid or do something else to immortalize him, but that would almost be an overpayment of sorts and wait.

“Does this look creepy?” the mayor blurted suddenly.
“What was that, Mayor?” asked Hiss.

“The way I’m stroking him, does that look weird? Inappropriate, even?”

“Why, no, Mayo--”

“It kind of does,” said Russell, ever the honest type.

The mayor turned around sharply. “Rocky, what say you?”

“I, uh… kinda, yeah,” he confessed.

“Show me the picture,” the mayor said to the photographer.

Russell pulled up the image again and turned the camera around for the mayor to see. The mayor didn’t like it. Especially the smile he saw on his own face. If that smile was on Jesus Christ Himself in a Renaissance painting of Him healing a dying child, maybe then that smile would look appropriate, but in any other context, it just looked uncanny. But beyond even that, John simply didn’t like the way he looked without his top hat.

“We can take another picture if you want.”

“Burn the film.”

“It’s a digital camera; it doesn’t use film. I can just delete it--”

“Then burn the camera.”

“I can just delete it, though.”

“Burn the camera.”

“The battery might explode.”

“THEN TAKE THE BLOODY BATTERY OUT!”

“Mayor--” Rocky began, but it was too late. The mayor grabbed the camera out of the opossum’s hand and, wincing through pain, quickly limped over to the window. He tried to open the window with one hand, but it wouldn’t budge. Determined, he stuck the camera in his mouth and used both hands, pushing up with his legs to get more leverage, but to no avail.

“How are people supposed to breathe in this hospital if the windows won’t open!?” the mayor hollered as he took the camera out of his mouth and held it up to heaven to show God what kind of an abomination his people had created.

“Year-round air conditioning,” Russell said. “Can I have my camera back now?”

“Rocky, help me destroy this thing!”

“Sorry, bud,” Rocky said to Russell as he walked reluctantly over to the window and grabbed the savila-soaked camera. He examined it for a second before finding the memory card slot and popping it out. He tossed the camera back to the photographer. “Here you go.”

“No, I want the whole thing destroyed!”

“Relax, will you?” said Rocky as he looked around for somewhere to dispose of the card that was
more thorough than just throwing it in the trash. Eventually, he had found his target. “Uh… eat this.”

He grabbed Hiss around the back of the neck and head and popped his snout open and shoved the tiny memory card in his mouth, sticking it down there deep into the throat with one finger. Hiss was audibly struggling to swallow the thing, quite literally choking it down and reflexively flailing the near-invisible remaining fragments of his arms as the mayor and the photographer-whose-name-the-mayor-didn’t-know stared in amazed bewilderment.

“There,” Rocky said once the job was done, “we destroyed the evidence without destroying the poor guy’s camera. He didn’t do anything to deserve getting his--”

*Cough, cough.* “Ffflllbbrrrgggghhhuuuaaahhh!” Hiss retched, catching everyone’s attention. He caught his breath and observed the mess he’d made. “Well… I don’t ssssee the chip in the… er…”

“Goddammit, I’ll get a nurse,” Rocky said, taking Hiss by the shoulder and sidestepping the puddle on the way out. The lion and the opossum just watched as they made their exit, unsure of what just happened.

After a moment, Russell started examining the puddle of vomit. “Yeah, I don’t see my memory card in here anywhere. Boy, that’s going to suck for him when it comes out the other end.” He gave the mayor a casual look as though they were old friends making witty banter. “Hey, how does he wipe his ass, anyway?”

“Get out of here!” ordered the mayor.

The photographer put the strap of the camera around his neck and gave the mayor a dirty look before making his own exit. “Jeez, he could have just flushed it down the toilet,” the opossum muttered as he closed the door.

The mayor returned to the hyena one more time, now having a moment alone with the one who had helped him so invaluably. Prince John slipped the fingers of his right paw through the fingers of Kevin’s left paw and grasped it firmly.

“Mister Lafferty,” he said quietly, “you may never know how much of a godsend you’ve been. You fell so that I may stand. I’ll stand high atop the highest mountain, exalted up on high, and all the earth will be mine, and in this world where every man thinks the world would be a better place if he were its monarch, I shall be the one to know how it feels to actually have such power, and it will all be thanks to you --!”

*Snap, crack, crunch.*

Prince John’s eyes popped open in fear and he released the boy’s hand from his own, and the hyena’s arm dropped back down onto the bed. The blood receded from the lion’s paw, and it almost felt numb by comparison soon after. He looked hesitantly down at Kevin’s hand and wondered if his fingers were already bent at that angle and he just didn’t realize it. Prince John certainly didn’t mean to do that; he didn’t even know he had the strength to do that.

The room was empty and there were no sounds of anyone approaching. If he left now, he’d be in the clear. The mayor turned to run out of the room, but promptly slipped and fell in the puddle of vomit. He shouted in pain, his knee and ankle twisted and his foot further agitated, and crawled to the door to the hallway, reminding himself that his thumb was dirty with floor- and hyena-germs so as to resist sticking it in his mouth.
Robin and John need to go acquiring some loot to give solace to the poor people of Nottingham, but they might need some solace themselves.

11. “All in a Long Day’s Working Journey into Night”

You could usually tell what side of Nottingham you were on based on the street names at any given intersection. The north-south baseline was Millsboro Boulevard, named for a town that was annexed by Nottingham shortly after the boom in the Fertile Crescent; north of Millsboro Boulevard, the east-west streets were numbered, and south of the baseline, they were given letters, and after the letters ran out, it switched to unalphabetized proper nouns, surnames of early city leaders, until the neighborhoods gave way to the Great Cypress Swamp at the south edge of town. The north-south streets going westward were named after states in order of admission to the Union -- starting, of course, with Delaware Avenue, which served as the baseline. This did create some mildly confusing situations, such as how the Georgetown branch of the Nottingham Public Library system was located at 6500 North South Dakota Avenue, but it was too late to redo all the streets now, and besides, it was quite fitting how the west edge of the city’s limits bumped up against the southern tip of Sherwood Forest and the town of Apple River right around Hawaii Avenue, with territories taking the names of the few remaining streets in the gaps. North-south streets east of Delaware Avenue took the names of major U. S. cities, though since east was toward the ocean, these streets often ran through higher-end parts of town, and carried an air of ritziness about them accordingly; even though the most western of the city-name streets were still not the most well-off places to live, people would still think it was better to live on Boston than seven blocks away on Massachusetts. Of course, there were also some diagonal or meandering thoroughfares that broke the mold, such as the Georgetown-Millsboro Highway and its surface-level counterpart and forebear Sherwood Forest Road, and the streets in the old part of the downtown center were much more haphazard and European in their layout, but once you got out of Old Nottingham, the classic American grid system was reliably navigable, although some English expats might disagree with intuitiveness of a system where every street needed a directional prefix and every block had a value of one hundred.

Priscilla found herself walking along 73rd Street and after turning right from Baltimore Avenue in the Harbeson neighborhood. Harbeson was almost straight north of downtown, and some of its north-south streets were states while others were cities; Baltimore Avenue was the first major city-name street on the East Side, five blocks east of Delaware. Fittingly, it was regarded as a sort of transitional neighborhood, bridging the divide between the upper-class East Side and the lower-class West Side. It was regarded as being a tinge better than Georgetown -- that is to say that neither was necessarily rampant with gang activity, but whereas you were more likely to get your face clocked in by a resident in Georgetown, you were more likely to be mugged by a roving hoodlum (who probably lived on the west West Side) in Harbeson. Nevertheless, it was mostly a quiet neighborhood, though if the residents had one reservation about their area, it was that its geography meant that there were always people from outside the neighborhood passing through. It had Georgetown to its west and the Fertile Crescent beyond that, the college and hipster neighborhoods of Zoar Park and Hollyville to the south and the downtown area beyond that, the well-off neighborhoods of Milton Park, Nassau and Long Neck to its north and east and the beach
towns beyond *those* -- suffice it to say that Harbeson’s reputation as a socioeconomic crossroads was not inappropriate. The locals weren’t morally opposed to the passers-by, though they did have some reservations about the arrangement, like how traffic on the major streets was always a nightmare, and how they had to watch their tongues -- just in case someone within earshot wasn’t in the know -- when speaking of the vagabond vigilantes who acted as their guardian angels.

Priscilla was one of the natives who was in the know, but hadn’t thought much about the Merry Men in awhile. She had only ever interacted with them when she was part of a larger crowd that they were addressing, and hadn’t seen them at all recently (except for the one former member she’d just seen today, but he didn’t count and she no longer consciously thought of him as one). She had more important things on her mind, like trying to add up how she was going to pay to feed her daughter five more meals a week now that school was out and weekday lunches were no longer paid for by the state. The mink was fortunate enough to own her own home, a small bungalow typical of the Harbeson neighborhood that stood out from the row houses of the West Side and the grander homes of the East Side, but homeownership wouldn’t have meant much if she couldn’t pay the utilities. Not only did she not get a refund from her April taxes, but she actually *owed* the state and federal governments money because her employer -- which, incidentally, was the City of Nottingham -- did the math wrong and didn’t withhold enough from her paycheck. Now Priscilla was kicking herself for not realizing that the boost in her direct deposits was a sign of incompetence rather than mercy from above.

For now, all she was thinking of was going to bed. She had gotten off her night shift manning a subway station in Zoar Park, and went straight to mass at St. Ursula’s, which was located at 70th and Wyoming right near the edge of the forest. There were other Catholic churches nearer to her house, but she had been going to St. Ursula’s since she was a little girl and now no other parish seemed right to her. Today the homily was done by Father Tuck, whose past was an open secret among the Northwest Side members of the congregation, whereas the parishioners from the suburbs were none the wiser. Priscilla was going to hang onto the small amount of cash she had on her person, but then Father Tuck went on another fiery rant about the importance of almsgiving, and did a deep dive into that story in the Bible where Jesus tells off a bunch of hypocritical scribes and makes a positive example out of some desperately poor woman who gives the last of her money to a synagogue charity collection, and Father Tuck’s thesis on the passage basically boiled down to, ‘Okay, I get it if you don’t want to be *that* charitable, especially in this modern world where you can’t survive with zero dollars and zero cents in your pocket unless you’re living off the grid (hint hint, wink wink), but always be aware that there is most assuredly somebody out there who’s even worse off than you are.’ That was paraphrasing, of course, but at one point, Father Tuck made incidental eye contact with Priscilla during his sermon, and something about that shook her and possessed her to put what she had in the collection bin -- minus what she needed for bus fare.

She then took that bus fare and took the 70th Street bus -- on the North Side, streets divisible by five were the major streets with bus lines, which were vital because Nottingham’s subway system was poorly designed and you couldn’t take the subway from the Northwest Side to the North Central Side without riding through the city center -- and rode it almost fifty blocks until she got off at Baltimore Avenue, whereupon she walked three blocks north and turned east on the residential 73rd Street toward her house on Chicago Avenue, one block east of Baltimore. And now all she wanted to do was give her daughter a hug and a kiss and then go to sleep.

Priscilla crossed the alley that ran between Baltimore and Chicago Avenues. To her left, she saw that there was graffiti on the side of the garage of the corner-lot house. Priscilla knew the owner of the house, a peaceful elderly woman who probably would rather that her garage wasn’t vandalized, but who also may have been zen enough to just shrug it off with a soft smile and say, hey, it’s not tangibly hurting anyone, and since she was planning to stay there for the rest of her days, she
probably wasn’t too concerned about her home’s resale value, either. The graffiti in question had two parts, seemingly one in response to the other.

First, in white paint on the red bricks, written in all-capitals and just a smidge left of dead-center, with the first word stacked upon the second: *FUCK BUSH*.

Immediately to its right, squeezed between the original graffito and the edge of the wall, was a case-sensitive continuation written in a dirty yellow that probably came from a spray-can labeled ‘gold,’ and similarly formatted with the words stacked, though misaligned enough from the first statement to make it clear it was a sovereign thought: *And Fuck Prince John!*

And as she came to a complete stop there in the mouth of the alley, the mink had mixed feelings about what she was seeing. While she had her reservations about how the old Mrs. Rooney would feel about the graffiti, and while she worried that a similar tag would soon be written upon her own garage, she was mostly conflicted about the message and its methods of communication. Priscilla also harbored a disdain for the two figureheads on their respective macro- and micro-scales, one for impersonal reasons (mostly -- she and many others at 73rd and Chicago blamed him for sending the Taylors’ poor son to die in Afghanistan last year), and one for much, much more personal reasons that need not be elaborated upon. But she didn’t know if she liked seeing it written there on Mrs. Rooney’s garage. What was it meant to accomplish, being written there? It wasn’t like the Mayor, let alone the President, was going to see this graffiti on a random house in Harbeson and suddenly have an epiphany that their public hated them and subsequently have a change of heart about all of their unpopular policies. Yes, she was sure that the original artists would say that it was intended to sow seeds of unity among the downtrodden of Nottingham, but while Harbeson wasn’t nearly as downtrodden as the likes of, say, Hermosa Park on the West Side, it certainly wasn’t as socioeconomically tranquil and self-impressed as a place like Long Neck or Belltown. Who in this neighborhood wasn’t opposed to Dubya and Dingleberry? Of course, there was also the argument that this was vent art, and its creation was its own goal, but then that got Priscilla wondering if somehow, someway, this was Mrs. Rooney’s doing.

Priscilla was so fascinated by the new art installation that she didn’t notice the puma and the porcupine exit the opposite alleyway and calmly walk across 73rd Street right toward her turned back.

“Stay right there,” said the puma.

“Wha--?”

“Turn around slowly,” said the porcupine.

Priscilla obeyed, though the shock had inspired her to also reflexively jut her hands into the air. She just imagined that this was something that the strangers would want her to do anyway.

Her shocked reaction inspired a different shocked reaction in the strangers, who twitched into defensive positions, weapons drawn from their persons and presented to be clearly seen.

“Hey, don’t fucking jump like that!” said the porcupine, who was holding a jet-black pistol.

“Or are you not as harmless as you seem?” asked the puma, who was holding a large knife that was probably manufactured for wilderness survival.

“What are you talking about!?” begged Priscilla.

“You got any weapons on you?” asked the puma.
“Empty your purse and take everything out of your pockets,” said the porcupine. Both of these strangers seemed to be teenagers, two boys most of the way through adolescence but not quite there yet, who were nevertheless trying their hardest to speak in the lowest register possible. The puma was wearing a yellow-on-purple Lakers snapback with its Mitchell & Ness authenticity sticker still intact and a black hoodie, zipped all the way up despite the stifling heat, bearing a white “ZY” logo that people of a certain age might recognize as belonging to a skateboarding company. The porcupine was wearing a t-shirt that read “SYSTEM OF A DOWN” and sandy-tan cargo shorts.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because we’re smart enough to survive, and you were dumb enough to stop moving,” said the puma.

“No, I mean, I live here, do you think I’m not hurting for money too?”

“You’re gonna be hurting for a lot more than money if you don’t drop this attitude,” said the porcupine. “Now the purse and pockets.”

Priscilla slipped the purse off her shoulder, unzipped it, and dumped it out on the pavement. Out fell a small wallet, a hairbrush, some lipstick, some loose change, and not much more than that.

“That’s it?” asked the porcupine. “What about your pockets?”

“Women’s pants don’t have functional pockets!” Priscilla answered. “There’s nothing I could have on me!”

“Goddammit, gimme that,” the puma swore as he grabbed the purse. “Bro, check if she has any bulges on her, and grab the wallet while you’re at it. I’ll see if there’s anything in the other compartments.”

The porcupine gave her a look-around as the puma unzipped the smaller compartments of the purse, where he didn’t find anything of worth, only things like rudimentary and low-quality feminine beauty products and some scraps of paper with phone numbers on them. The porcupine didn’t see any strange shapes under the mink’s clothes to indicate a knife or a gun or a taser, so he decided it was safe to pick up the wallet, his head turned to and gun pointed at Priscilla just to dissuade her from literally kicking him while he was down.

“I knew I should have bought pepper spray,” Priscilla lamented.

“With what money?” asked the porcupine as he thumbed through the wallet. “You seriously don’t even have any cash on you?”

“Hey, we take plastic,” the puma said as he grabbed the wallet. He saw that there were two cards in it -- not much, but it would do. “Are these credit or debit?”

“Green one’s debit, silver one’s credit,” said Priscilla. “There’s hardly anything on the debit and the credit’s almost maxed out.”

“Yeah, that’s what we’d say if we were in your position. Debit card got a pin number?”

“One-one-one-six.”

“ Eleven-sixteen. Is that your birthday?” asked the puma with a self-impressed look.

“It’s my daughter’s birthday,” said Priscilla, who was trying to contain her rage if only for her own
safety. “A daughter I won’t be able to feed if you take my money.”

“Well then, she should start robbing people,” said the puma. “Girls can be muggers, too.”

“Yeah, we’re feminists,” said the porcupine. “That’s why we’re being as rough with you as we would be with a man.”

The puma let out a voiceless chuckle at that. “He isn’t joking, though,” he clarified.

“My daughter can’t start robbing people; she’s six.”

“So start her robbing young. Everyone who’s good at something started at it when they were young. We can offer to teach her now that we know she lives at, uh…” -- the puma slid out Priscilla’s driver’s license -- “…7311 North Chicago Avenue. So, the credit card,” he said as he used his knife to gesture toward Priscilla’s face. “You need to punch in a zip code to use these, right? What’s your zip code?”

“Boy, you must not be from around here if you don’t know the zip code,” came a bass-baritone voice with a vaguely Southern or Midwestern twang not often heard in the Mid-Atlantic.

“Huh?” the puma asked as all three turned to see a rotund grizzly bear casually standing in the alley, one foot planted and the other foot crossed over that, right arm coolly propping him up against a garage and his left arm akimbo with his fist digging into his hip, and a long, thick stick about as long as he was tall stood up along the wall right behind him. He was wearing a green t-shirt, which from this distance one could vaguely see had once been emblazoned with the words “PHILA. EAGLES” along with the team’s old logo from a decade ago, these decals’ former presence betrayed by adhesive residue that stayed after the easily-identifiable markings were carefully removed; he was also wearing a smirk on his face that seemed to say you fucked up, and I’m going to have some fun with kicking your ass.

“Who are--?” -- swoosh, tink! -- “Gah!”

Swoosh, plunk! “What the--!?"

Swoosh, yoink.

In the course of hardly two seconds, an arrow had come from out of the ether, struck the blade of the puma’s knife and knocked it out of his hand, ricocheted into the porcupine’s gun and knocked that out of his hand, and made its way back toward the bear, two grabbed it out of the air and tossed it up to the roof without even looking. Up on the corner of the slanted roof was a lanky fox wearing a polo shirt -- also green, albeit a lighter shade with a slight yellowness to it -- under a quiver full of arrows strapped around his back. The fox held a large bow, which he shifted from his left hand to his right to catch the arrow tossed up to him.

“It’s astounding, really,” said the fox in an English accent that towed the line between refined and folksy; he had a smirk much like the bear did, but being a fox, it just looked so much more fitting on his face. “So often people just don’t think to look up.”

“Is that a fucking bow and arrow!?” shouted the puma; at that point, any earwitnesses in the vicinity would have immediately known what was going on, and would have been very tempted to run over and catch a glimpse of them, but they restrained themselves because they knew it surely wasn’t a situation to interfere with.

“That it is!” the fox beamed. “And I’m good at using it because I’ve been practicing since I was young!” He gave a knowing wink to celebrate his clever callback.
“Wait a minute…” the porcupine mumbled to himself, but nobody heard him amid all of this. He was on the verge of remembering something he had forgotten.

“Although, I must admit,” continued the fox, “I couldn’t have pulled off that trick shot if it weren’t for you boys holding your weapons at precisely the right angles. You two really gift-wrapped that one for me!” He held the arrow to his cheek and stroked it with a forlorn look on his face, looking like a sad child hugging a teddy bear. “And then this poor baby would have hit the ground, and then she’d surely have been damaged, and then I’d never get to use her again…”

“So what’s the deal, boys?” asked the bear as he grabbed his stick and moved toward them. “Why are you harassing the lady?”

“B-because we need money!” the puma stuttered. Meanwhile, Priscilla was feeling a slight uptick in adrenaline as she wanted to see where her saviors were taking this. The porcupine, lost in thought, wasn’t moving a muscle.

“What, and she doesn’t!?” growled the bear.

The fox slid off the corner of the roof and made his way over to the puma, who was presenting himself as the brains of the duo.

“Or is this simply a matter of you not caring about somebody else’s needs because you’re you and she’s someone else?” the fox asked. As tall as this specimen was, he was still at least a foot shorter than this teenage cougar. And yet the puma found the fox strangely intimidating; something about the fox’s air of impenetrable confidence made him come across as one not to be fucked with (of course, having immaculate control of a medieval weapon certainly helped the fox’s intimidation factor).

The puma didn’t know what to say. But then he remembered something: actions speak louder than words.

He ducked down to grab the gun laying at the porcupine’s feet. The bear saw this and wasted no time tweaking his grasp on his staff and holding it up over his head, winding it up to come crashing down.

As the puma stood back up, he saw the motion of the staff coming down upon him, and he dropped the gun and collapsed to the ground with a shriek. The bear, of course, stopped the staff before it ever would have made contact with the cougar’s cranium.

“You see now, children, this is why we don’t even need modern weaponry,” said the fox.

“Wait a minute,” said the bear, and he leaned in to examine the gun, now at his own feet. He examined it for a second before picking it up to get a closer look. After a few moments, he had come to a conclusion: “This is a BB gun.”

“What!? No it isn’t!” protested the puma, still on the ground.

“Okay, then…’’ -- and the bear pointed the gun at the puma’s face -- “Run.”

“Aaahh!” the puma screamed and covered his head with his arms. But he didn’t run.

“I’m from the South, kid,” said the bear, “I know my guns around.”

“Now why can’t you be more cooperative, like your friend over here?” the fox asked as he gestured to the stunned porcupine.
“I know who you are,” the porcupine finally said.

“What!” said the puma.

“Is that so?” asked the fox.

“About damn time,” said the bear.

“Dude, I know who these guys are,” repeated the porcupine to the puma. “These-- I think these are the guys who helped my mom out after my dad left.”

“Wait… these are those guys!?"

“I think so.”

“How do you know!?"

“The medieval weapons. The British fox who’s tall as fuck. It just sort of clicked in my head.”

“Hold up. Are these… are these the same guys who saved Mike’s dad from the police?”

“I think so.”

“A-a-and the same guys who… who robbed the guys in charge of foreclosing on Claudia’s parents’ house!”

“I think so. And I think they’re the ones who steal from rich people and give it to poor people.”

“They do what now!?"

The bear scoffed. “I thought we were famous around these parts.”

“What part of town are you boys from?” asked the fox.

“Hermosa Park,” the boys said in unison.

“Ah,” said the fox, looking like his mood had just gone down the slightest notch. “That explains it.”

Hermosa Park, on the far West Side, was indisputably the worst part of Nottingham, to the point that even Robin and Little John actively dreaded going there. The Merry Men did still force themselves to visit Hermosa Park and deliver assistance to the locals, but not as often as they would have liked. Some would argue that this infrequency just made the situation worse. While most Hermosa Park residents appreciated Robin Hood and Little John’s help, there was a sizable faction in that part of town that were angry that they didn’t show up enough, and another sizable faction who would rather that Rob and Johnny just fuck off since their giving them temporary financial aid wasn’t actually going to have any lasting effects on the residents’ social mobility. Suffice it to say that the reason Hermosa Park got less attention than places like Georgetown or Harbeson wasn’t just because it was the place they’d be most likely to be shot by a wayward bullet (which Little John actually was back in their second summer of duty, but thanks to his thick ursine pelt, he didn’t realize until days later that strange pinch he’d felt on his posterior hadn’t been a bee sting); it was more of a matter that charity excursions to Hermosa Park had the highest chance of backfiring and becoming a waste of time. If Harbeson was home to the “depressed poor” and Georgetown was home to the “jaded poor,” Hermosa Park was home to the “aggressive poor,” for absolute lack of a better way to put it. A visible minority of people in Hermosa Park were enough to make Robin and
John questioned whether their mission to bring joy to Nottingham’s poor was a fool’s errand, and while the boys weren’t going to let that lead them to neglecting the majority of Hermosa Park denizens who would accept their gifts, it was always a hiccup when someone looked them straight in the eyes and said “Explain to me how a few hundred bucks is going to lift me out of poverty forever,” or “Yeah, thanks, this will really make me feel less afraid to leave my house,” or “Your charity isn’t going to stop institutional class warfare,” and shut the door on them. In life, there would always be those who were too proud, or too cold, or too angry to allow themselves to be helped, no matter how much they clearly needed it; a disproportionate amount of those people lived in Hermosa Park. If there were any children raised in poverty in Nottingham who didn’t know for a fact that Robert “Robin” Hood and “Little” John Little were real people, then those children surely would have been raised in Hermosa Park.

“Well then,” continued the fox, “Tell the people back home that we’re sorry we can’t be around their neck of the woods as often as we wish we could be. Of course, we’ll tell them ourselves the next time we’re there. But in the meantime, I must ask... if you knew of us, then why did you rob this poor woman? Why would you victimize someone just like yourselves when you know that we do the work we do so that you don’t have to do such things?”

Neither of the teenage boys had a good answer, so they said nothing.

“If you know about us,” the fox continued, “what are our names, then?”

The porcupine seemed to think for a second, not as if remembering something he’d forgotten, but rather as if he were double-checking his answer before submitting it. After a moment, he said:

“Robinhoodan’littlejohn.” He said it just like it were all one word.

“Very good, young man,” said Robin.

“I think I’ve heard those names before!” said the puma, still huddled on the asphalt.

“Who doesn’t know the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve?” Priscilla piped in.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry to be talking through you,” said Robin, “we just want to make sure these boys are straightened out before we let our guard down.”

“Oh, it’s not an issue, gentlemen,” said Priscilla, “I feel safer already.”

“You call yourselves ‘the Merry Men’?” asked the puma. “That’s a stupid name!”

“Dude, hush--!” said the porcupine worriedly, but Little John needed to say a word to this delinquent little shit cougar kid. It didn’t help that John had a bad history with large-species teenage boys with nasty attitudes.

“Boy, stand up! You look pathetic down on the ground like that!” John barked, and the puma slowly and carefully got to his feet. “We call ourselves that because we’re a bunch of happy-asses who love our work. And because this guy’s from Merrie Olde England,” John said as he gestured to his British buddy. “Most good decisions in life aren’t made for just one reason, kid.”

“I thought there were more than two of you, though,” said the porcupine.

“Honestly, so did I,” confessed Priscilla. “I mean, we all know about-- um…” -- Priscilla made the sign of the cross to hint at which former Merry Man she knew for a fact was still living, and Robin and John understood, while the boys cocked their heads in confusion -- “…but weren’t there others?”
“Things fall apart sometimes,” said Little John. At that, Priscilla and the porcupine both looked bummed out at this revelation, assuming it meant the worst, while the puma was just further confused.

“Though our jobs could be made easier if the youth of this city stopped undermining our efforts,” said Robin sternly. “We try so hard to bring hope to the lowly people of Nottingham, and yet the poor still victimize the poor. Why do we bother, then?”

“It’s pronounced ‘Nottingham’, not ‘Knotting’em’, britfag,” said the puma.

“‘Fag’? But I’m not even smoking a cigarette!” Robin quipped, but the puma clearly didn’t get it.

“Young men, what are your names?”

“Alex,” said the porcupine.

“Why would I tell you my name?” asked the mountain lion. “So you can get me in trouble?”

“His name is Landon, sir.”

Landon tried to smack Alex on the back of his head, but aimed too low and got exactly one quill stuck in his hand. Landon grasped his paw in pain and tried not to squeal, while Alex rubbed the back of his head with only mild frustration.

Little John scoff-chuckled. “Poor bastard.”

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir’, sir,” Robin said to Alex. “Now, you mentioned that once upon a time we gave your mom a hand. Does she need some more help?”

“Uh… I-I guess so…” the porcupine murmured.

“What about you, Land-o?” asked Little John.

“What are you gonna do? Give my parents a check for a million dollars?” the puma spoke up to the bear, trying his best to stand tall and look formidable; it wasn’t working.

“Do you want help or not?”

“...Nah.”

“Alex, you?” Robin asked.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Please. For my mom.”

Robin spotted a scrap of paper and a pen that had fallen out of Priscilla’s purse. “Do you mind if we borrow these, madame?”

“Go ahead,” she replied. “And you can call me Priscilla.”

“Thank you, Miz Priscilla.” Robin picked up the pen and paper and handed it to Alex. “Here; write down your address and we’ll stop by when we have something to deliver.”

“Are you just trying to bust him to his parents in person?” demanded Landon.

“Don’t worry, Alex,” Little John said, “we’ll tell your parents to punish you con structively, not de structively. My dad beat my ass, and now I’m the kind of guy who reminds a couple of kids that I’m being nice to them and I could easily’ve knocked them off the mortal coil after I saw them
robbing a woman at gunpoint.”

“Jesus, John,” remarked Robin, perversely impressed.

“Hey, I’m just giving an example. Maybe a solid argument to their parents can save them from an ass-kicking.”

The example worked and Alex wrote down his address and his mom’s full name, and handed it to Little John, who was closer. Little John went to shove the piece of paper in his back pocket, but surprised himself when he felt something cold and metal under the back of his shirt and pants that he’d forgotten was on his person. Luckily, nobody saw the shocked look on his elevated face, because Robin was saying something:

“Now, don’t tell them that we’re coming; we want it to be a surprise. Besides, we don’t know when we’ll have time. It’s been a slow couple of days for, er, access to redistributable wealth, shall we say.”

“Um… okay,” said Alex.

“And between you and I, Johnny and I’ve promised ourselves to try to speak somebody from our past today; I won’t spill the details, it’s all rather personal, but it’s probably going to be a long conversation. But we’ll make time to see your mum, Alex.”

When Little John snapped out of it, he did so with an observation that seemed completely out of left field.

“Hey, by the way, you kids are terrible robbers if you’re wearing recognizable clothes like that,” John noted.

“Well it’s better to dress like normal people than to walk around wearing black sweatpants and ski masks!” retorted Landon.

“I literally don’t remember the last time I saw someone in Nottingham wearing a Lakers hat. And what’s that logo on your hoodie even supposed to be?”

“What, this? It’s Zoo York; it’s a skate company! And I can just go home and get changed after I rob somebody! Problem solved!”

“And when you’re running from the cops and they know exactly what you’re wearing?”

“I just said, I’ll go home and change!”

The other four exchange looks of incredulity, amusement, disappointment, and confusion.

“I don’t think he gets it,” said Priscilla.

“Maybe it’s best not to give him robbery advice, Johnny,” said Robin.

“Hey, wait, where did you kids even get these clothes from anyway!?” Little John turned to Alex to let him know that he was on the hook for this, too. “The kids in Georgetown don’t usually have trendy hats and -- what the fuck is ‘System of a Down’?”

“A band,” said Alex.

“They can’t usually afford band t-shirts, neither!”
“H-hey, hey, it’s-- it’s cool, w-we, we, we, uh…” Landon stuttered.

“We really did buy these legally, though. We didn’t steal these,” said Alex, speaking much more calmly than Landon was.

“And where did the money come from?” asked Robin.

Now Alex wasn’t looking so calm anymore. The boys’ silence spoke volumes.

“Well, boys,” Robin continued, “do you have anything to say to our friend Priscilla here?”

“Oh, yeah, um…” Alex turned to face the mink. “Uh, s-sorry, ma’am. We won’t, uh… we won’t do it again.” The porcupine then bowed like someone who had only ever seen people bow while practicing karate.

“And Landon?” asked Robin.

The puma looked down at the mink, locked eyes, looked frustrated, and then closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. “...I’m sorry, Miss Priscilla.”

“Well, then,” Priscilla said as she turned back to the Merry Men, “I didn’t think this interaction would end like this!”

“Oh, I know!” said Alex, and he knelt on the ground and started collecting the contents of Priscilla’s spilled purse. “I can help clean up!”

“I like this kid more than the other one,” remarked Little John.

“Now, Alex,” said Robin, “that’s actually a very good idea for an apologetic gesture, but it might be best to let you boys skedaddle and Little John and I will help her clean up.” This was very much a measure to assure the kids didn’t pocket anything they found while the adults weren’t looking.

“C’mon, Alex, let’s go,” Landon said, already making his exit.

“Wait, real quick,” said Alex, “Can I ask you guys a question?”

“What’s up?” asked Little John.

“How do you guys run across town when you’re carrying such big weapons?” the porcupine asked as he pointed at the fox’s bow and the bear’s staff in quick succession.

Little John let out one sharp guffaw. “You’re asking a couple of masters of hidin’ and disguisin’ to just tell you our secrets?”

“It’s just something you get used to, and you learn to adapt,” said Robin. “For awhile I had a second bow that was collapsable, but the string just couldn’t keep its tension. I’ll say this much, though: our travels take us across a bunch of rooftops -- as you may have noticed,” he said as he gestured to the garage he’d been standing on. “That and using our bow and staff with telephone wires, like ziplines and such.” And that was true, although it avoided the full story of how they also utilized sewers, subway tunnels, dirty alleyways, shortcuts through people’s backyards (where they often stumbled and fell goofily over people’s outdoor furniture and garden installations), and waiting sometimes upwards of twenty minutes for a break in traffic to cross a busy street with no other logical concealed crossings -- and even then, they sometimes just got tired of waiting and made a mad dash across the road, avoiding moving cars like Frogger.
“Cool!” said Alex.

“Yeah, but you’re record’s spotty, so you can’t join us,” said Little John. “At least not yet.”

“Well, time to start cleaning up,” said Robin, and he bent over and went straight for the knife and BB gun. “I think we’ll be keeping these.”

“Wait a minute!” said Landon, turning back around to protest. “Those are ours!”

“Well, we steal from the rich to give to the poor,” explained Little John. “You boys have some cool duds, while we live in the woods. I think we’re the poor ones here.”

“Not to mention, you almost walked off without them,” added Robin.

“That, too.”

Landon just glared, and Alex looked conflicted, like he didn’t know who to please. After a moment, Landon walked off toward Baltimore Avenue without a word, and Alex followed after.

As the porcupine left, he walked with his back turned toward the adults, and said, “Thanks for the, uh… thanks.” And he turned back around was gone.

Robin and John got on their knees to help pick up Priscilla’s stuff, which they handed to her and she carefully placed back into her purse.

“Thank you boys so much,” said Priscilla. “How could I ever repay you?”

“Oh, you needn’t repay us,” Robin insisted. “Just keep supporting us and keep resisting the Prince Mayor and his tyrannical idiocy, in whatever way you think you can.”

“Oh, but surely I can offer you something. Wouldn’t you say that would be supporting you?”

“The lady’s got a point, Rob,” said Little John.

“It really isn’t an issue—” Robin began before John had an idea.

“You know, Priscilla, Rob and I were on the fence about even bringing our weapons into town today,” he said. “Good thing we did, but now we’re about to head into enemy territory, and the more we think about it, the more we think the heat’s up on us today and we should have left these at home. So we might need a safehouse to keep our stuff for a few hours.”

Robin let John take the reins on this one.

“But are you sure you won’t need them again?” Priscilla asked.

“The kid was onto something; these things are hard to hide. We’ve survived this long without these things constantly by our sides; we’ll survive a little longer without them now.”

“Not to mention, we’ve got a knife and a toy gun now if we really need them!” Robin added like a giddy little kid hoping to enter a grown-up conversation.

Priscilla thought about it for a second. “I’d need to keep it away from my daughter while I’m asleep -- I just got home from work -- but I can probably find a place to stash them.” She stood with her purse and its contents now again intact. “Would you like to come meet her? I’ve told her stories about you guys a couple of times, truth be told.”
“Really!” said Little John “We’d love to meet her! Lead the way!”

Priscilla walked off toward her house, and Robin began to follow, but Little John grabbed him by the shoulder with an uncertain look on his face.

“Everything alright, Johnny?” Robin asked; he was trying to forget how jarring it was to be reminded that, despite recent events, Little John could still make his own decisions for the both of them without needing Robin’s permission.

Little John started walking to follow Priscilla, but he and Robin were keeping a few feet back.

“Hey, Rob, I’m sorry that I keep acting like an asshole in front of complete-ass strangers,” the bear said in a hushed tone. “I don’t want there to be a bad guy between us.”

“Nonsense, Little John; those kids deserved your tone!”

“Yeah, but… something about that mountain lion, something about-- not just his attitude, but, like, the structure of his face… it reminded me exactly of one kid from back home.”

--III--

The porcupine wasn’t the only denizen of Nottingham who referred to the fox and the bear as though their first and last names were conjoined. Especially among the younger set, these two constant members of the West Side’s favorite band of vigilantes had just sort of always been there for as long as they could remember.

In the very earliest days of the group’s operations, they had made a point to try to keep a low profile; that plan did not last long. But it was all for the best that their devotion to anonymity fell apart exactly when it, as Robin realized that they could connect a lot more with the people they were helping if there were names and faces connected to these mysterious figures who would swoop in and bring them gifts of hope and joy and monetary contributions, and yet they had stayed nameless for just long enough to gain the people’s trust and have confidence that the people would not use their details to betray them. The timing of the change in philosophy was perfect.

So it was that the last two remaining members of the crew were practically mononymous. The kids who were now teenagers had first heard of these characters seven years ago, having overheard their names from the adults, and the legend status of these two was germinated amongst the youth so thoroughly that there were even a sizable number of adults who had heard the names bounced back from the teenagers and now themselves emphasized Robin and Little instead of Hood and John when speaking the names aloud, as opposed to putting the stress on the second names as they would with anybody else’s.

--III--

He didn’t like the sound it made when his car hit that bump. He stopped in the middle of the alleyway and got out to inspect it. Sure enough, he had a flat tire. Upon giving it a closer look, there was a carpenter’s nail sticking out of it. He expected that the alleyways behind his house would be cleaner than this; he wouldn’t have bothered buying a house two blocks from the Inlet if he knew Oak Orchard wasn’t as immaculate of a neighborhood as it seemed.

He popped the trunk of his luxury sedan and moved a bunch of junk that the world was never meant to see. Finally, he uncovered the hatch that contained the spare tire and the emergency tool kit.

The lemur knelt down and tried to make heads or tails of the implements at his disposal. He had
been fortunate enough in life so far as to not have to change a tire before in his life, and now he was wondering whether he could figure it out in a pinch.

“Do you need any help there, stranger?” asked a voice.

The lemur turned to see a pair of scruffy-looking fellas in ratty clothes walking toward him, a bear and what was either a large fox or a red coyote with an extremely thick tail. The look on their faces seemed friendly enough, but their way of dress struck fear in him.

“We can help you with your tire if you want,” said the fox-yote, although something about his accent seemed off.

“I don’t need your help guys,” said the lemur. “Don’t sweat it.”

“What, do we look scary or something?” asked the bear.

“I don’t know you. Don’t take it personally.”

“If something about us strikes you as uneasy,” said the fox-yote, “you can tell us. How are we supposed to know if we offend if nobody tells us?”

“I dunno? Just get the hint?” the lemur said as he turned back to his car.

“C’mon, just let us help you!” the bear begged. “We’ll feel better about ourselves if we can help you!”

“You’ll feel better about yourselves when you get some nicer clothes! What are you two doing in this alley, anyway? You don’t look like you live on this block.”

“Oo-de-lally! Now why would you say a thing like that?” the fox exclaimed.

Oo-de-lally; the codeword that meant go for it. The clandestine communicator for one of the Merry Men to tell any quantity of the others that they were personally certain that they had found an unkind rich person deserving of victimization and that it was conscionable to proceed. The phrase was Will’s idea; on one of his last days as a free civilian, he was watching reruns of cartoons at Marian and Annie’s apartment in DC, and one episode of a show about a boy genius with a secret laboratory ended rather oddly with a short sequence devoid of context where the titular character is having a dream wherein he’s going to town on an infinite pyramid of burgers, only to awaken and remark “Oo-de-lally, I’d better become a vegetarian!”; Will thought that phrase was the perfect balance of plausible enough to be a thing an eccentric might say but rare enough not to be confused with anything else you’d hear someone say, and the others agreed it was a perfect codeword.

If any other member disagreed with the call, and felt that they needed more time to get a read on the subject, they need only reply with “Golly!”; if they agreed with the green light, then nothing more needed to be said.

But the lemur was nevertheless caught off-guard by the phrase. “What the hell did you just say?”

“I said that’s quite a remark to make about a couple of strangers who’re just trying to help!” the fox-thing said.

“We were walking down the street when we heard a pop!” the bear said. “Now, c’mon, let’s get you some help!” he said as he lumbered over, the maybe-fox in tow.
“No, no--” the lemur began to protest. “I-I have a cell phone! I can call the police from anywhere!”

“Oh, there’s no need for that, friend-o!” said the bear as he picked up the scissor-jack. Then he looked to his right, then he looked to his left.

“Buddy, just put my jack down,” begged the lemur.

“Oh, okay!” Then he dropped the jack on the lemur’s head. “Oops! Sorry!”

--III--

One might think after seven years of living off the grid with only each other (and a few others who ultimately fell away) that Robin and Johnny’s social skills would have deteriorated from lack of use, but with all the community work they did, it was almost like they never left. Almost would need to be stipulated -- they certainly had taken some psychological bruises and mild Stranger-in-a-Strange-Land Syndrome from having less than full contact with a rapidly-modernizing society, but not nearly as many as some others might in their situation. They just so happened to live in the woods, but as those woods bent around Nottingham’s Northwest side and captured the communities of Georgetown and Harbeson and Hermosa Park and Piney Grove and Wood Branch and Gum Hill and Hardscrabble and Stockley in a loving embrace, that just made them neighbors to everyone.

And they were neighbors who everybody -- barring the most jaded and militantly hopeless of Nottingham’s lower-class -- was happy to have next door. By the time that second summer rolled around, Robin Hood, Little John, Alan A. Dale, Tucker “Friar Tuck” Brock and Will Scarlett were names that did not need an introduction in Nottingham. Of course, it helped that the face of the gang was the single most compelling fox you ever did meet, a real English gentleman whose oozing charisma and charm were entirely natural -- at least as far as anybody knew. With him at the helm, the boys couldn’t help but to integrate themselves into the community.

At first, the other four thought that Robin was being reckless with how outgoing he was, but when they saw that he was the catalyst for getting two-thirds of a major American city to back them up unconditionally, they said screw it, this kid must know what he’s doing. (Incidentally, it was this revelation that Robin had singlehandedly peopled his way into getting thousands and thousands of people to be their peripheral allies that for the first time caused Little John to consciously wish he could be like Rob, but it manifested itself in admiration instead of bitter self-loathing, further helped by the fact that Robin was simultaneously working his magic on his new grizzly bear friend to help John let his rough guard down and rediscover his inner fun-lover that he thought had been beaten out of him.)

When Will passed that third summer, the people mourned with them. When the Prince Mayor set up an archery contest that next summer to try to snuff out the criminals with a knack for outdated weaponry and it backfired hilariously, the people partied in the forest with them (and what a bizarre, classical period-piece that hoedown was, but nobody was in the mood to be cynical about it). When that fall came and the way of American life was changed forever and Prince John was this close to successfully convincing/bribing the Delaware National Guard to come garrison the city just “in case”, the people lay awake at night with them -- perhaps not in the same space but nevertheless under the same autumn moon, its glow piercing through the cold clouds, not a single airplane in the sky, over a town that was silent save for the rustling of dead leaves being rushed down the sidewalks by the wind and police sirens that always seemed far away no matter where in the city you were -- the people fearing for the safety of the ones they’d come to know less like neighbors and more like family who worked very busy schedules on very odd hours and only got to see them every sweet so-often.
The effect had on the Merry Men’s street cred by Alan getting incarcerated and Tuck tapping out for medical reasons could be the subject of much debate, and indeed there had been several occasions where Nottingham residents would debate the topic during the last four years since the Men had reached their zenith in the summer of that fateful year. Some would say that it gave Rob and Johnny the ultimate sympathy points, cementing their place in the hearts of the true believers. Others would say that the culling of the Men’s numbers had -- through no fault of Robin or Little John’s -- put a mark on them that they would never be able to scrub off. The mark was not that there was anything specifically wrong with Robin or John; the mark was that there was something wrong with the fundamental structure of the Merry Men, something irreparably wrong. With Will, Alan, and Tuck out of the equation, the outlaws of Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve would never, ever be the same as they were. It used to be that there were five of them, all bringing their own skills to the table, they were relatively young, they were running on pure adrenaline and nothing could stop them and their guerilla tactics that confused the NPD to no end. Now there were two of them, one of whom would soon be pushing forty and who was carrying far more weight than you’d think someone living a life of voluntary poverty would, ursine metabolism be damned (and who didn’t have a legitimate medical condition to blame it on like Friar Tuck did), and the other who seemed to be healthy, but who was now also on the wrong side of thirty, and whose impressive vulpine height stopped being impressive and started being concerning -- after all, if a seven-foot wolf or a nine-foot grizzly is fated to have a slew of back and knee problems, then the clock surely must be ticking on the almost-five-foot fox. All of this was still disregarding the advancement of technology that now saw even regular people being able to afford small silver bricks that they could keep in their pockets and purses with which they could summon the authorities in five minutes if they saw a fox and bear making a mess they didn’t like. Imagine how badly the people’s confidence in the Merry Men would be shaken if word got out that between the two of them, there was trouble in platonic paradise.

This is by no means to say that the everyday people of Nottingham had given up on the Merry Men themselves, but there were those who were starting to believe it was too late for them to achieve their ultimate goal. They would still exalt the names Robin Hood and Little John and welcome them into their homes and accept their gifts and offer them something in return and tell them to their faces how grateful they were to have people like them in their city, and they wouldn’t even be lying to say that, but in the backs of their minds they would think that their scheme of the redistribution of wealth wasn’t actually going to scare Prince John off his mayoral throne. They thought that if it were ever going to happen, it would have happened if the events that occurred up the coast four years ago had never happened and the three-and-a-half remaining Merry Men were able to keep their momentum, and maybe then there would be a breaking point where one day you’d just see John Norman running down the streets, bare-ass naked for no apparent reason, pissing and shitting and sucking his thumb all the way out of town and into the suburbs, where hopefully he’d have learned his lesson before becoming some other town’s problem. The people of Nottingham quietly accepted that Rob and Johnny would be there as long as they could to make their lives a little better in the short-term, but there was a stark loss of faith in any results for bettering their lives in the long-term.

It was this complacency that some of the most violently frustrated residents of Nottingham despised. These malcontents hated that people would allow Robin Hood and Little John to carry on their merry way acting like they were going to permanently solve the class conflict and socioeconomic immobility in this town forever; these were often people who also were not great fans of the elder Norman brother’s mayorhood either, wherein Richard genuinely tried his best to care for even the lowliest of his citizens, but -- according to the aggressively cynical -- his best simply would not do, and even what he did accomplish was nothing his idiot brother couldn’t undo. Robin had always tried to ignore these characters and hoped that by bringing hope leading by example, they would eventually come around to his way of thinking; Little John, traditionally the
more cautious one of the two, had tried to push the doubters out of his head, but had confessed to Robin that he had the thought cross his mind on several occasions that maybe the naysayers were right. Such naysayers had always been there since Day One, mostly to be found in Hermosa Park, but there were increasingly more of them in more areas of the North and West Sides. There were also those who had observed this trend and added it to the list of reasons why the Merry Men were on their last legs, but such people were fewer in number.

Most of Nottingham’s poor were still on-board with the Merry Men’s mission, but while they absolutely believed that there was still time for things to turn around and for some new iteration of the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest to come turn the tables on Nottingham’s corrupt political machine, few would say that this ‘could-happen’ scenario actually would.

Of course, the skeptics would have a laugh and say that deep down, the allies had always known the vigilantism was doomed to fail. Their case in point: in the seven years that Robin Hood, Little John, and company have made the City of Nottingham, Delaware, and Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve their own backyard, never once did even one of the many lost, aimless, unemployed, hopeless-yet-hopeful people in the city nut up and ask the Men if they could join the club. That said, there was once one person who tried to gain entrance to the band of thieves, but since his failed attempt happened right around the time of Will Scarlett’s passing, he kept his mouth shut, thinking it best not to speak unflatteringly of the Merry Men in their time of grief. The identity of that person may as well have been lost to history.

--III--

“Shine your shoes, citizen?” asked a bear to the impala. The bear was sitting next to a fox against the wall at the entrance to a luxury high-rise apartment building in downtown Nottingham. They each had a shoe-shine box, the fox with a smaller one and the bear with a bigger one.

“I-I’m sorry?”

“Shoe shine, sir?” asked the fox in a vaguely transatlantic accent, like something out of an old film. “Only five dollars!”

“You’re looking pretty snazzy, mister,” said the bear, “but we can make you look even snazzier!”

“Uh… sure, I’m in no real hurry,” said the impala, and he placed his right hoof on the fox’s shinebox. The fox got right to work, grabbing some spray bottle from beneath the box and moistening his rag.

“We appreciate your patronage,” said the bear. “It’s awful hard to earn an honest living for some people.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it. But at least you two seem to be doing something about it.”

“We know it’s just our lot in life to have to live so lowly.” The bear was making sure to maintain eye contact and keep the conversation going so he the impala wouldn’t be tempted to look over at the fox, whose eyes were sizing up the impala to estimate his worth.

“Oh, what’re you talking about?” asked the impala in a cheer-yourself-up sort of way. “You two are running your own business, aren’t ya? You might be able to make something out of this.”

“But so many people we know say it won’t change nothing, so we might as well not try.”

“Well, fuck ‘em. You’ve got work ethic. I like that.”
“Other shoe, please,” said the fox, and the impala complied. When Robin went to grab the spray bottle, he scared himself when he almost grabbed the chloroform bottle instead.

“Well, I know that some people think us poor folks are nothing but criminals, and we don’t deserve to get ahead in the world,” said the bear, trying to recapture the impala’s attention. The conversation was meandering a bit too much, so he was trying to be more direct with his statements to hear what he needed to hear from the man. “And it sure seems like it’s the people who run the world that think that who feel that way, so who are we to fight it?”

“What, you mean like our dumbfuck mayor?” the man asked; it was exactly the answer Little John was waiting for. “Who cares what he thinks? He’s not even half the mayor his brother was -- Rich had issues, but at least he tried. I don’t know how he got elected to Congress, but I wish he didn’t, because he left us with his idiot brother, who everyone knows just got nepotism’d in.”

“Why, you mean a rich man like you doesn’t support our mayor?” Little John asked, hoping he wasn’t sacrificing too much subtlety.

“Oh, God, no. I’d call the man functionally retarded, but, you know, it’s not nice to mock the actually mentally handicapped.”

John and Robin allowed themselves a genuine chuckle.

“Haven’t heard that one before, sir!” said the bear.

“Well, my closests friends and I aren’t too fond of the guy, but my colleagues at work are in love with him. And I get it -- he makes our lives easier -- but at whose cost?” The impala looked kind of melancholy for a moment. “I’d love to do more to help guys like you, but, hey, I’m only one man. What can I do?”

“Well, golly,” said Little John, “we appreciate the sentiment.”

And he did. A golly without an oo-de-lally meant the speaker thought that the target was more of a good guy than a bad guy, and should be let free to go. The same rules applied for negation: no other codewords meant that nobody dissented. Of course, if anarchy-phase Alan were here, he’d probably oo-de-lally on a guy like this eight days a week for what he would call “malicious neutrality,” a guilty complicity through inaction, but Robin and John thought that victimizing the well-meaning rich folks would just start an all-out class war, and that would be counterproductive if nothing else. And when the impala said ‘What can I do?’ -- they both felt that. Especially recently, the boys were no strangers to feelings of helplessness. They weren’t going to tab somebody as viscerally evil for refusing to fight a war when they genuinely didn’t think that they could win even a single battle; maybe they would qualify such a person as a moral coward, but even then they would prefer to think of such a person as needing help instead of deserving shame -- Robin and John would take allies wherever they could find them.

“Well, there’s a little I can do,” said the impala, and he pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to the fox. “Keep the change, boys.”

Robin and John, maintaining their friendly smiles, just stared at the bill in his hand for a second, then glanced at each other. The impala wondered if he’d done something to offend them.

After a moment, the bear and the fox both stood, grabbing their shineboxes but not touching the twenty.

“You know what?” said the fox; now that he was standing, the impala was surprised to see how
tall he was. “If you really want to help us, keep that for now and give it to somebody who really needs it, more than us.”

“Yeah, we can find more customers,” said the bear, who also surprised the impala with his standing stature despite it not being much different from when he was seated, thanks to a combination of a thick ursine posterior and short ursine legs. “Others worse off than us might not be so lucky.”

As they started walking off, the impala just looked dumbfounded. “Did I… do something wrong?”

“Whaddaya talking about?” the bear turned back to ask. “You did everything right! You passed the test.”

“T-test? There was a test?”

“Yeah, and you passed it. Don’t sweat it.”

“Actually,” the fox said, and he turned and walked back to the impala, “do you have an idea of how to pay it forward for us?” His accent was sounding much more British than it did earlier.

“N-no? What do you mean?”

“Ah, yes, that’s our fault. We should not’ve put you on the spot like that,” the fox apologized, and yoinked the twenty from the confused impala’s hand. “Pardon my curtness; we’ll do it on your behalf for now. But start brainstorming how you can pay forward a different twenty dollars next time.” He shoved the twenty in his pocket, picked his shinebox back up, and walked off with his colleague.

“You take care now,” said the bear.

“Um… alright,” said the impala, who stood there for a few moments afterwards, watching them walk off and wondering what the hell just happened.

--III--

It was probably a good thing that the Merry Men’s mission statement from the get-go was to give their winnings back to the poor, because if they were to have kept their liberated assets to themselves while living in those woods, they may not have survived that first winter.

Nobody remembered exactly who was the first beneficiary of the Men’s exploits. All they remembered for sure is that they didn’t start giving back until about a week after all five of the members had joined that May, because the original plan was to save up a huge sum and dump it on the people of Nottingham altogether at once, but this was later revised to a “give it as it comes” method that would make them look less like the bad guys. Robin could have sworn that the first recipient was the elderly antelope who lived around 44th and Minnesota in a row house with storm door that was falling off, while Little John was certain that it was the beaver who was sitting on his porch on Louisiana Avenue, gently petting his pet parakeet while having a bummed-out look on his face when the bird saw the five strangers walking aimlessly past and flapped over to them, affably perching itself upon high on Little John’s shoulder; John insisted that this was the first recipient of reappropriated funds, because he remembered telling the beaver as much five seconds before Will mentioned that the man should probably get the bird’s wings clipped. But the fact of the matter was that all of those first cases blurred together in Robin’s and John’s memories. It took them awhile to figure out how to approach strangers, often at their front doors, and give them a financial stimulus package with no strings attached and based solely on the way that they appeared to be
someone whose wallet could use a little pick-me-up; even Robin, with all the powers of his natural and nurtured social skills combined, had trouble figuring out the best way to break the ice for such a bizarre proposal.

And for the longest time, they didn’t really figure it out. People would give them side-eyes and tell them in no uncertain terms that they were skeptical; some thought that it was a trap and that the five of them were going to rob them and use their winnings to bait the next victim, some thought that they were troublingly eccentric rich people who were getting some masturbatory high on charity, and some didn’t know what to think. There were some tough customers those first few months. While most people did cautiously accept the strange assistance, there were a few who denied the gifts out of distrust, and others who declined out of pride. There were those who tried to test whether these strangers were really as selfless as they seemed, asking them for specific favors, like yard-work or fetching groceries, to which the Men always replied with some permutation of, *We’ll try, but we might have to take off at a moment’s notice if the cops show up*. Indeed, there was at least one instance where the gang got dangerously close to apprehension when the loud sound of a lawn mower drowned out the approaching sirens until it was almost too late.

There was also a time during a night in the very tail-end of June when Robin woke up abruptly, shooting straight up in his sleeping bag and visibly freaking out in the moonlight, because in his half-asleep state he thought he had heard a very near gunshot. But then he heard another one, and he knew he wasn’t asleep anymore. Then he heard another one, and another. The others awoke to the loud sounds, but quickly reassured Robin that those weren’t gunshots, they were fireworks being shot off by some people who just couldn’t wait a couple of days until the Fourth of July. Granted, they sounded like they were rather close, so they probably were coming from one edge of the woods, but they likely wouldn’t come any closer than that, since shooting off fireworks in a thick forest probably wasn’t the best idea.

Robin had completely forgotten that Independence Day existed. Will -- who as a schoolchild back in England had always agreed with his teachers and other authority figures when they said his improper and irreverent ways would be much more suited to the brash and bratty American culture -- began to explain the story of the holiday to his half-brother, but Robin did not need to be retaught; he just needed to be reminded. After all, he’d been in the States for longer than Will had, and he’d attended a few Fourth of July events in the six years that he’d been a legal resident alien. He knew that there were fireworks; he simply wasn’t that much more familiar with the sound of an M-80 than he was with the sound of a Glock 44. But it did give him an interesting idea.

While the modern tradition is to blow off fireworks on the night of the 3rd and save the 4th for barbecues and other summer activities better suited for daytime, July 4th fell on a Saturday that year. The celebration across the nation was going to be stretched from Friday night straight into the wee hours of Monday morning. This meant all the more opportunity for Robin to meet the people he was trying to help in a neutral, jovial setting. Robin told Tuck to send Pope Gregory a prayer saying thanks for such chronological windfall from the calendar he had created (and then got an ear-full from Tuck about how Catholics don’t pray to saints, they pray through saints, and hey wait a minute, now that he thinks about it, the Pope Gregory who made the calendar wasn’t even the same Pope Gregory who got canonized, et cetera, et cetera).

Robin thought it would be weird if all five of them went, so he implored Tuck and Alan to stay back at the Major Oak to keep watch over their stuff -- he implored Will to stay, too, but Will wanted so badly to come along, and luckily Robin remembered that it was also Will’s birthday weekend before Will had to mortify him by reminding him -- while he and Little John went to go mingle with the townspeople at the various public fireworks shows across the North and West Sides; Robin figured he needed an American with him to help them blend in, and he didn’t just choose Johnny because Tuck was too old and Alan was too crazy and John was the closest in age to
Robin besides Will (although those were definitely factors that did reinforce his confidence in his decision). Even though the bear -- who had done his damnedest to hurt Robin for daring to cross his path when they first met seven or so weeks prior -- was still coming out of his shell, Robin felt a weird click with the guy. He was getting some reads that there was a heart of gold under all that fat and muscle and fur that just needed to be dusted off, and Robin wanted to be the one to clean it, and not just to gain a loyal ally, but to gain a loyal friend. Hey, if he couldn’t bring joy to one of his partners in crime, how could he bring joy to the people of Nottingham?

Robin, John and Will were wearing very basic disguises, nothing too fancy, just enough to get the job done. Their story was that Johnny and Rob were work buddies and Will was Robin’s brother who gelled well enough with the other two to tag along -- which you, Dear Reader, may realize was not very far at all from the truth of their dynamic. They meandered from park to park, chatting up friendly-looking people, saying they were from the far-out suburbs and were looking for livelier festivities than the ones they had out in the likes of Seaford or Selbyville, but not quite as rowdy as the celebrations in the beach towns like Rehoboth or Fenwick. They casually brought up in their conversations that they’d heard there were some weirdos knocking on doors throughout the blighted side of the city, and asked what their interviewees would think and do if such people arrived at their door one day offering to give them an unofficial tax refund apropos of absolutely nothing.

Some of the people they met had heard of the Merry Men, others had not, and at least one person who the trio thought was by himself turned out to be married to a woman the boys had already given a donation to, but by some miracle she didn’t recognize them through their rudimentary disguises. However, the responses seemed to have a common theme: the people would probably accept the gifts, but they would feel weird with it all happening out of the blue. Alright, nothing the boys hadn’t heard before.

But then on that Sunday night, just a few minutes before the final fireworks started in Antonucci Park, the trio were talking to an aardwolf couple who had a young son, a hyperactive little boy who wanted to show all the people in the park his newly-invented semi-improvised dance. Robin had just popped the question of how the aardwolves would react to a sudden donation from a couple of strangers when the son -- whose name was either Tyler or Taylor -- insisted that the three strangers join him in his dance. Robin was not one to say no to such an innocent request, so he played along, soon joined by Will (who was slowly getting over his teenage predisposition for thinking that cheesy things, like dancing with a little kid, were stupid and should be shunned), and finally, after much beseeching from the foxes and the young rug-cutter, Little John let loose, too (and later confessed that it was much more fun than it should have been). While Tyler/Taylor’s parents didn’t join the dance, they did look on with soft smiles as these kind strangers were able to entertain their child, and as Robin and Will eased their way out of the dance -- Little John kept going with the aardwolf, secretly not wanting to stop, and the big bear and the little pup were actually playing so well off each other that it would have been a crime against performance art to stop them -- the conversation got back on track, and after seeing such a heartwarming moment, Tyler/Taylor’s parents had the inspiration to say exactly what Robin was looking for.

The mom mentioned that although receiving help was nice and she would be grateful for it, it might be a tad bit awkward if it came from a complete stranger who had no rapport with her. The dad then put it more bluntly: he’d feel much better accepting such unconditional assistance if it came from a friend, even if it was a friend made just then during the duration of the transfer of funds.

Robin was so flabbergasted to get such a perfect answer that he debated revealing his and the boys’ identities right then and there, but he restrained himself. He hastily mentioned that he and his entourage had other friends to meet at the event, and took off back for Sherwood with Will and
Johnny (after Will and Robin each grabbed one of Little John’s paws and dragged him out of his hedonistic trance). While the rest of Nottingham had their eyes turned to the sky, the three of them made their way safely back to the forest preserve, where Robin hatched a very simple plan to win over Nottingham’s hearts.

--III--

Ding-dong!

The elephant opened the door and glanced down to see a sickly-looking brown bear, seeming aged in a shawl and an old-fashioned flat-cap, and farther down was a fox who also appeared to be advanced in age, holding a cane and sporting thick coke-bottle glasses. She would guess they’d be about her parents’ age. Neither of them seemed to be able to afford a more fashionable wardrobe.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said the bear, “we hate to bother you, but--”

“Who are you?” asked the elephant impatiently.

“Oh, were just two old men who got lost trying to find a detour to the veterans’ cemetery in Lewes,” said the fox. They both had very strained voices, as if speaking was a struggle.

“Well, it’s not around here,” said the resident of the house. “You two aren’t from around here, are you?” The fox and bear noticed that she was dressed rather fancily for a quiet Sunday.

“Oh, no, we’re from Georgetown,” said the bear. “We’re just trying to visit our friend--”

“Your friend doesn’t live here. You two are going to have to leave.”

“Our friend lives in the cemetery!” said the fox. “We’re begging you for directions!”

“Well, we don’t take kindly to beggars in this part of town. If my husband were here, he’d make sure both of you stood off his doorstep!”

“Are you home alone today, ma’am?” the fox asked. “It would be such a shame for a lady like yourself to spend a day like today alone!”

“Excuse me? You think I’m some kind of loner!?” the elephant exclaimed. “I have dinner plans for later this evening! And my husband is on a business trip -- which is something it looks like neither of you’ve ever been on!” Furious, she started to close the door on the old men.

But Little John put his arm out and kept her from closing it. “Now listen here, little missy!” the bear said to the elephant who was larger than him in all three dimensions. “Show some respect for your elders! We fought in Korea!”

The elephant was so unimpressed by the ‘little missy’ comment that she opened the door all the way again just to tell them off. “‘Little missy’? Hardly. I’m fifty-one.”

“Oo-de-lally, you don’t look a day past twenty-eight, young lady!” the fox remarked.

“‘Oo-de-lally’? I’ve never heard that phrase before in my life--”

Hack! Hack!

The bear keeled over and tried to catch himself on the side of the doorframe, coughing horrifically; intriguingly enough, he seemed to be coughing directly into the doorframe itself, and spitting something up in the process.
“Eww!” the elephant squealed. “Get out of my house, you sick old man!”

The bear slowly got himself back up, grasping the door frame to prop himself up, as well as to discreetly shove his fingers into the lock and deadbolt slots, as if pressing something into place. “It’s alright, it’s alright; I’m going to be fine—”

“I don’t care if you’re going to be fine! I want you off my doorstep!”

“But won’t you please give us directions to the veterans’ cemetery in Lewes?” asked the fox.

“No. Now, leave—”

“But our usual route is crowded with traffic going to the luxury mall!” said the bear. “We heard on the car radio that they’re having a sale on plus-size négligées!”

“I don’t--!” the elephant started, but took a second to process what they said. “...I don’t care. You have to leave, or I’m calling the police. And they won’t escort you to Lewes.”

The old men looked dejected, and walked away without saying a word in that slow, silent way that dejected old people do. The elephant watched them walk all the way off her property and shut the door, and went to the window to make sure they kept walking after that.

Twenty minutes later, she locked up the house and pulled out of her driveway in her convertible, her husband’s credit card safely in her purse. Five minutes after that, the old men casually waltzed up to the front door, moving much more spryly than earlier, and took a quick glance to make sure nobody was watching before they gently shook the front door and fiddled with a card in the gap and a bent paperclip in the keyholes until the lock and deadbolt both disengaged. They entered nonchalantly. The old gum trick had worked again.

--III--

For the rest of that first summer, the five of them very slowly eased their way out of the social shadows. When they met citizens for the first time, they subtly communicated amongst themselves to determine who it was safe to open up to, share their names and faces with, and establish a relationship with wherein trust and distrust was not an issue. They were excited, but hesitant; as much as they were itching to have meaningful interactions with people outside their group, they were worried that they were going to be jeopardizing their safety, and that if they built a bridge, they would just have to run right back across it. But Robin promised them that the only way that they were going to get the city on their side is if they stopped being strangers.

By that fall, a fair chunk of Nottingham would consider the five vagabond bandits their friends, even as rarely as they saw them. Such people probably wouldn’t say they knew the five of them inside and out, but they would likely say they felt comfortably familiar with the pious Irish-Catholic badger from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who got kicked out of the Navy while stationed at Norfolk because he couldn’t control his weight (though he swore he tried, and while the navy’s doctors gave him the benefit of the doubt, his commanding officers didn’t) and bounced around homeless shelters in Nottingham for twenty years before he ran into a group of four men; familiar with the kooky coyote from rural Oklahoma who was the closest thing the gang had to an outdoors expert (which is to say that he had been camping and bird-hunting a few times under pristine conditions and vaguely remembered the most basic survival skills that he’d been taught in the military), who had seen some shit in the Gulf War and had nicknamed himself “the Rooster” after the Alice in Chains song that he could just feel was written about himself or someone like him the first time he heard it back in 1994 during a rare moment when his pickup truck’s radio wasn’t tuned to the country station, and who was nomadically driving around the country a few years later
when he ran into a group of three men; familiar with the younger of the British lads, who was a rebel with several dozen poorly-defined causes, rejecting his well-to-do upbringing, and who had harbored a strange love affair with the United States ever since he discovered that he preferred Black Flag, Bad Religion, and the Descendents over The Clash, the Sex Pistols, and The Damned (and although he was aware that the stateside punks probably had mixed feelings about their own homeland, he didn’t think that was a dealbreaker for his dreams of America), and who had run away from his legal guardian in DC to the Delaware forests to join a group of two men; familiar with the lumbering bear from Nashville, Tennessee, who slowly but surely rediscovering his sunny side and overcoming his frustrations with the first thirty years of his life not going quite the way he’d hoped and whose only source of self-esteem at the time was his size, and who decided to try to make a consequential dent in the world around him when he was angrily walking through Sherwood Forest to blow off steam and just happened to cross paths with one man; and familiar with the Englishman who started it all, who originally wanted to be an actor in America alongside the love of his life before deciding that his dreams coming true wouldn’t mean much if he had had the chance to make other people’s dreams come true and chose not to, consequently making the toughest and most selfless decision of his life, and while his origins before that were a tad bit hazier than that of the other four (people faintly understood the Rob and Will to be brothers, and they certainly looked like it, but they had different last names, so was there more to the story than that?), whoever had raised this fox clearly knew how to cultivate a gentleman.

It was just in time for the weather to start getting colder, and for a permanent life in the outdoors to start looking like a bad idea. The Men tried reassuring themselves that if their distant ancestors could survive through the worst of nature back when there were no doors to be outside of, then surely they could survive with modern camping gear, but it wasn’t long before they shook their heads and said, no, that was then and this is now.

It killed them to do it, but they had to start taking up the citizens of Nottingham on their how-can-I-ever-repay-you? offers. It seemed so damned hypocritical and counterintuitive and borderline shameful, and they had already had arguments amongst themselves about how much of their loot money they should keep for basic supplies, but they resolved that they weren’t going to be much help to Nottingham if they died of hypothermia.

They told themselves that they would only accept reimbursement offers that were simple and/or necessary: absolutely nothing that required the citizen to spend money on them directly; it either had to be something that they already owned (and preferably didn’t need anymore) or a service that cost nothing but time.

Splendid, so an agreement had been reached. Now they argued about how to ask. Little John thought it would be as simple as saying “yes” when they asked Can I give you boys some _______?, but Tuck was nervous that that would come across too strong, and thought they should only accept gifts from people who were really insistent that they accept, but Will thought that it was a wee bit urgent and that they should just pop the question themselves while explaining it was quite literally a matter of life or death, because who would argue with that? Then Robin came forward and volunteered to do all the talking.

And just as he anticipated, most of the interactions followed the script to a tee. They would offer, Robin would coyly decline, they would offer again, and then Robin would accept in such a way that it looked like he was accepting to make them feel happy -- which it often did. It was seriously like watching magic happen. This guy could say exactly what he wanted to say in a way that his listeners wanted to hear. You could see the way women’s hearts would melt when he spoke, and how men would feel compelled by his confidence.

Alan and Tuck, who had long since accepted that they weren’t ever going to be so silver-tongued,
were impressed; Little John, meanwhile, was also outwardly impressed, but the seeds of jealousy were in the process of being planted. Long before Robin had to deal with Little John’s rekindled insecurities, however, he had to deal with Will’s.

And Robin sincerely wished that Will wasn’t so jealous of his way with people, and not just because it was counterproductive to have bad blood amongst co-conspirators. Robin actually felt kind of disgusted that the etiquette classes Robert had forced him to take were paying off dividends, the same etiquette classes that Will had defiantly blown off and walked an hour home from mere minutes after Robert dropped him off, every single Saturday, until Mr. Scarlett acquiesced and let him stop going (ironically, this showed a level of chutzpah in Will that Robin was jealous of). But Robin did not want to risk making the mood even worse by bringing up the subject of their father, nor did he want to confess that a fair chunk of his magnetic personality came from a classroom in Sheffield, lest it come across like he was saying all of his charm was artificial. Robin still did privately fancy himself some natural foxlike talent with making friends and influencing people, but he had to confess that the classes did help him hone his craft; indeed, while the idea of taking an etiquette class was rather snobbish, the classes themselves actually provided some rather useful information on how to cordially interact with people of any class or social status, such as how to pretend to politely decline a gift and still manage to receive it anyway. Of course, he also had plenty of practice speaking with adult strangers as a lad, seeing as many of them thought that he was an adult because he certainly was the size of one. There was also the way that he grew up simultaneously inhabiting both the world of the working-class back home with Brianna and Oliver and the world of the aristocracy when Robert dragged him away to do rich-person things as his “project child” or whatever he called him -- come to think of it, Robin had had plenty of help cultivating his legendary personality, but he would be slow to say so. After all, a magician never reveals his secrets.

With the people won over, a supply line was established. Reasonable offers were always accepted. Well-worn clothes and hand-me-down kitchenware, old blankets and leftover food when the residents had accidentally cooked too much and couldn’t possibly finish it all before it went bad. Maybe once in a blue moon they’d accept a ride if the person was driving in the direction they were headed anyway (and had a car that could fit all five of them). And maybe some fresh-baked cookies here and there.

As the weather got worse, the five of them pow-wowed to decide whether it was a security risk to both themselves and their hosts if they were to accept invitations to stay in their homes on a cold winter night. They all came to the same conclusion: hell yes it was a security risk, but it was still better than the alternative. They tried to limit their overnighting to when it was actively raining or snowing, but after they consulted a camping guide that laid out clearly how bad of an idea it was to suck up the cold, they swallowed their pride and started asking for shelter when the nighttime temperatures were projected to drop below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

As the year came to a close, they accepted an invitation to spend their first Christmas with a widower hound dog who ran a modest tool-and-die shop in Georgetown. He wasn’t hurting too badly financially, though a new tax on small businesses in certain areas of town (“to discourage disturbing the peace of a residential neighborhood by bringing commerce to it,” was the lame reasoning the then-fairly-new mayor had given for it) was certainly taking its toll on him. The six of them had a quiet, cozy holiday, chumming around and sharing stories and spinning fantastic yarns while *Miracle on 34th Street* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* played on the television in the background with the volume set to ten percent. Then the hound dog stepped away and said that he was retrieving their present, having been fully cognizant that they had asked for no material possessions but consciously choosing to ignore their polite request, and returned with an enormous rolled-up tent, a high-end model which boasted being large enough for four medium-sized mammals and a grizzly bear, and being impermeable to temperatures down to 15 degrees. He said
it was so that they wouldn’t have to be as reliant on people’s kindness if they didn’t want to.

They shared their thanks before revealing their present to him; although he had similarly insisted several times over that they not bother getting him anything because the only present he wanted was company for Christmas, they were far too gentlemanly to take that for an answer. Their offering was a large painting of the hound dog and his late wife on their wedding day, its detail impeccable and its scope breathtaking, all bounded by a flourishing golden frame; the Men had secretly snapped a Polaroid picture of a small photo of the same scene they’d seen on his mantle two weeks prior, then commissioned an art-school kid in Zoar Park to put it on a canvas, under instruction to add just a touch more flair to it while still keeping it recognizable, and he had done splendidly.

The toolmaker was immediately overcome by emotion, and they waited patiently for him to let it all out, soft smiles on their faces. When the dog looked up again, he said something that shook them: he didn’t want them to stay at his house on Christmas next year. He wanted them to spread the joy to everyone all over Nottingham; he felt so selfish keeping their generosity to himself.

It then seemed so obvious. They agreed to his terms to start spending future Christmases doing the best they could to be modern, real-life Santas; it just made too much sense. In return for the invaluable guidance, they began to regard the hound dog as one of their closest civilian confidantes, and whenever the weather was too dangerous and there was no immediate threat of police -- or when there was an immediate threat of police and they needed a safehouse now -- he was always their first choice to ask for a place to crash. Even when he was at his shop, the men knew where he hid his spare key.

It was a good thing that he had suggested the Santa Claus Christmas routine, because the Merry Men’s new tradition of tossing out flour-bags full of cash to needy people was a highlight of the slower winter months, when the Men couldn’t help but let the inclement temperatures get to them. But when spring and summer rolled around, their activity would be back in full swing; many would say that this is why the merry month of May was the favorite page of the calendar on Nottingham’s West Side. But of course, now it was June, and freezing to death was quite the opposite of Robin and John’s meteorological concerns, and the fact that their favorite month was now freshly behind them was just another thing to add to their list of reasons why they worried that it would be a long while before happy times would return.

--III--

Knock, knock, knock.

“Hey, Otto! You home?” asked Little John as he bent down to peek through the door’s semicircle window. There was a faint sense of urgency in his voice. Otto Smith was not the person they had been planning to surprise with a visit today, but sudden natural urges and geographical convenience had squeezed him onto their list of appointments.

“Do you see any lights on or anything?” asked Robin with a similar voice of urgency. He leaned over the stoop’s railing to see if he could see any signs of life in the diemaker’s house; despite being exceptionally tall for a fox, he was still a member of a smaller species, and Robin was still too short to see into the window on the door. “I can grab the spare key.”

“I’m not going to go into the guy’s house just to use his bathroom, then leave. Let’s just run to the library or something,” Little John suggested.

“No, no,” said Robin as he went over to the other side of the stoop to try to look into the other window. “Then we’d have to do a publicity tour before we can excuse ourselves to the facilities.”
Robin secretly didn’t have to go that badly; what was urgent was that he have a quick moment to speak with Otto while Little John wasn’t around, now that Robin realized this was the perfect opportunity to get an outsider’s perspective.

“Well, now I guess I understand why some people can’t handle being celebrities.”

“Could you make it back to Sherwood?”

“I can not make it back to Sherwood.”

“Can you make it around to his backyard?” This part of Georgetown had the typical mid-Atlantic row housing, so to get to Mr. Smith’s backyard, you had to either pass through his house or walk all the way down the block to the alley and around the back.

“What good would that do?”

“I’ll keep watch for you; just go behind his house. I’m sure he’ll understand--”

“Rob, I’m not gonna take a leak on the side of the man’s house after all he’s done for us!”

“We’ll hose it off afterward--”

“And also I don’t just need to pee!”

“Oh… I see…”

“Goddammit. You wanna find me a quiet alleyway and keep watch while I uncover a manhole and--?”

Just then, they heard the lock disengaging. Otto opened the door and greeted them with a smile that was warm, but a little embarrassed.

“Sorry to keep you waiting boys, I was in the bathroom,” said the hound dog. “You boys alright?”

“We’re so sorry to bother you, Otto, but we were hoping we could--”

“Can we use your bathroom?” Little John interrupted Robin. His voice sounded as pained as every part of his body looked.

“Oh, sure,” Otto said as he stepped aside and opened the door all the way. “Don’t let me stop you--”

“Rob, give the man some money,” Little John said as he rushed in, failing to duck enough to clear the doorframe. “GAH! Jesus lordy fuckin’ Christ!” he swore, putting his paws on his head to simultaneously rub the point of contact as well as keep his head from dragging on the eight-foot ceiling that was just a smidge too low for him. He speed-walked toward the lavatory, instinctively knowing the path around all the ceiling fans and light fixtures from years of navigating around this house built for medium-sized mammals. Robin and Otto watched until they saw him disappear into the bathroom and slam the door behind him.

“Yikes,” said Otto, “is the poor guy gonna be alright?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Robin said as he walked inside the house. “Between you and me, I’d be more concerned about your bathroom fixtures.”

Otto let out a light chuckle as he closed the door and locked it, just for good measure. “Well, you
“Duly noted,” Robin said as they both had a seat in the living room.

“Little John, help yourself to some aspirin while you’re in there!” Otto hollered toward the hallway, then turned back to Robin. “Did you have to go too?”

“Not that badly; I’ll take the opportunity if you’ll allow it—”

“I will.”

“--but I was more hoping to ask you a question.”

“Oh? What’s up?”

Robin had rehearsed the question in his head a bit, but he still wasn’t quite sure of the direction he wanted to take it. “Well, Otto, I feel like I need to qualify this question by saying that you are probably the person we see most often, aside from one another.”

“Really? Me?”

“Well, who else would it be?” Robin asked playfully, but realized it may not have come across that way. “I didn’t mean that to sound so sarcastic, Otto, I--”

“No, no, you’re fine. I just thought it would be Tuck or someone like that.”

“Tuck’s asked us to help him keep a low profile in his new lease on life, and we’re not going to deny him that. We still see him, but it’s very much on an as-need basis.” Robin realized that he didn’t know how long Little John would be in there, so he jumped right into it: “So does Little John seem in any way… different to you?”

“Different’?”

“I know that’s a broad question worthy of a broad answer, but perhaps that’s for the best. Free-associate. Tell me the first thing that comes to mind.”

Otto just looked confused. “Uh… nothing, really. I haven’t been paying that much attention.”

“That’s fair.”

“Why? Have you sensed anything different in him? Is there something going on between you two?”

“You say this like he and I are a couple.”

“Well from what I’ve seen, you two have a better relationship than a lot of married couples I know. But seriously, is something up?”

“Er, there was, but I think it’s mostly passed. I do have my concerns that it may pop up again.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I… I really shouldn’t--”

“Then why did you bring this all up?”
“I was trying to get information out of you, not the other way around!”

Otto gave him a look that said tell me anyway.

“...He’s just been sort of... ‘moody’ might be the right word?” Robin asked himself.

“Well, how so?”

“He’s just starting to lose faith in everything. And I do mean everything.”

“Well, that’s perfectly understandable. You two have been doing this for... what, eight years?”

“Seven.”

“Oh, close enough. All that would take its toll on anybody.”

“Are you losing faith in us, Otto? Faith in my and John’s ability to change things for the better?”

“I wasn’t, until you asked that question.”

Robin and Otto heard the toilet flush, then stop abruptly. “God, dammit!” Little John screamed, the bathroom door only slightly muffling his booming voice. “I knew that would happen. I knew that would happen!”

“Plunger’s under the sink!” Otto called out to Little John.

“I know where the fuckin’ plunger is, Otto!” Little John called back. “You don’t have to remind me!”

Otto turned back to Robin. “You may indeed owe me some money in a few minutes.”

Robin -- much like this narrator -- was starting to get a sense of malaise from this scatalogical turn of events, but it was likely to be expected to happen, and there was nothing to do about it now. But Robin realized that this bought him some more time.

“Okay, for fairness’s sake, would you say you’ve noticed any changes in me?”

“Well, you seem to be a little less confident than usual today.”

Robin’s eyes popped open. “Me? Not him -- me?”

“I mean, you just asked me to reaffirm your faith in yourself. And you’re making less eye contact than usual.”

“B--because this is a strange situation! This is something I’ve never dealt with before. I’ve experience in speaking on all sorts of situations, but this isn’t one of them!”

“Like I said, this isn’t something I’ve been realizing for awhile. It’s basically just today -- hell, these last couple minutes -- that I’m starting to wonder if something’s going on that I don’t know about.”

“Based on?”

“The fact that you felt the need to ask me for an outsider’s perspective to tell you that nothing’s obviously changed about either of you.”
Robin didn’t know what to say next, so he turned his head toward the hallway for a moment and stared into space. He couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe that he was having his confidence shaken by simply having someone else say that he appeared to have his confidence shaken. Then again, he had asked an impartial arbiter for their judgment, and he got it.

“You alright, Robin?” Otto asked. “Something had to have happened that inspired this question; you wouldn’t just ask it out of the blue.”

“I can’t refute that,” said Robin, but he heard the sounds of a struggle in the bathroom finally settling down. “I don’t think I’ll have time to delve into details, though.”

“Do I need to moderate a chit-chat between the both of ya’s?”

“No, no, if anything, make sure Little John doesn’t know I asked this.”

“If you say so, my lips are sealed… Oh! I almost forgot! Have you been anywhere near a TV screen for the last, oh, two hours?”

“Er… no, why?”

“After the County Sheriff and Deputy beat up some kid in Sherwood, they merged the County department with the city’s.”

“... What!? ”

“Yeah, and everyone’s saying it’s to get tax dollars out of the suburbs for Prince John. But it’s probably that, plus he just wants to make it easier to find you two.”

While Robin’s jaw unhinged itself to drop open as dramatically as possible, the sink in the bathroom turned off and Little John opened the door.

“Your turn, Rob,” Little John said. “Uh… if you still want to.”

“I can hold it a bit longer, Johnny. But, er-- Otto, run that by us again? I want to make sure I heard you right.”

--III--

The news had thoroughly ruined their day. As they left Otto’s house, they told themselves that they would feel better when they went out and distributed the day’s winnings, but they really were in just no mood for it.

As they roamed the streets of Georgetown in their street clothes, knowing that they were in friendly territory, Robin and John did not speak to one another, not because there was any sort of tension, but because they would have plenty more time to shoot the shit some other time, and keeping their ears peeled for sirens couldn’t hurt. Of course, this just allowed them time to be inwardly upset by the circumstances.

But while Little John was fuming that the mayor had somehow pulled off an insane move to get another leg up on them, Robin was frustrated about that and the way that Otto had inadvertently given a blow to Robin’s self-esteem simply by alluding to the sheer idea that Robin’s self-esteem could take a blow. It was like unconfidence had been manufactured out of thin air. Or maybe it didn’t materialize out of the ether, and Otto was on to something? The logic seemed clear enough: to need to ask a question would indicate the questioner had a lack of confidence on the subject matter, and since the subject matter was himself, well…
And Robin had a strange awareness that the more he let this bug him, the more it became a self-fulfilling prophecy that he was losing his grip. He tried to remind himself that it was completely normal to have lapses in confidence from time to time, and indeed he did have moments where he questioned his self-worth, especially when thinking about whether he’d ever be worthy of Marian’s love again after abandoning her for a life of crime, or whether he was a bad son for not telling his mum and Oliver what he was doing, or whether there was an inherent evil deep inside of him that he had to confront every time he saw his reflection and observed all the other genetic traits he had inherited which made it clear to everyone back in Loxley that he was his father’s son, or whether in a million eventualities he could have handled the situation with Will so it would have ended less shamefully tragically, or whether he could have done a better job of being a role model for Skippy and Toby, or whether he was born the wrong species in a world that sometimes seemed like it had no place for foxes…

But it was an insecurity about insecurities themselves that had now made his vulnerable confidence visible to the world, and a person who experienced visible lapses in confidence simply was not the kind of person Robin wanted to be. These moments of public insecurity were not just inconvenient to their situation, but they were strange and foreign and alien to him after all these years of being surrounded by people who had nothing but good things to say about his character and ability; Robin fundamentally loathed this feeling of visible diffidence, and if he never felt this way again, it would be too soon. Robin was sure someone would say that he should not strive to never lack confidence, but rather to be able to muster his confidence when he needed it; but that just didn’t match the standards to which he held himself. He had been so good for so long at hiding his moments of weakness; why was this the thing that pierced the veil?

Little John kicked a rock at just the right angle to send it damn-near a football field down the sidewalk, and as he slowly looked up to see it roll along its merry way, he noticed somebody standing at the end of the block.

“Rob, hold up,” Little John said in a harsh whisper, and Robin, who had similarly been walking with his eyes upon the ground, jerked himself to a halt at the strange command.

“What?”


At the corner was a very well-dressed doe who looked like she was trying to pretend she knew where she was and where she was going. But with clothes that nice on a random day in Georgetown, it was clear she wasn’t from around those parts.

“Is that who I think it is?” Little John asked.

“Who do you think it is?”

“The head of the county.”

“Er… I mean--”

Doty incidentally turned her head toward the bandits, and the boys ducked into an alleyway, just in case she saw them.

“I mean, I don’t know her face as well as I know Prince John’s,” said Little John, “but how many other well-dressed does would you see in this part of town?”

Robin thought about that for a second. “Well, if we aren’t sure… we can just ask her, now can’t
“Coming on a little strong there, don’t you think?”

“We can charm her.”

“My question is, do we rob her?”

“Well, if Otto relayed the story of the police merger correctly, then she’s certainly deserving of some retribution…” -- Robin peeked around the corner just to see if she was still there -- “…but she really does look lost out here.”

“You’d feel bad kicking her when she’s down. Or do you think it would be a bad look to rob a woman in the middle of the day on a busy street?”

“Ah… a bit of the former, a bit of the latter, I’d say,” Robin mused. “How about this: we’ll offer to get her wherever she needs to go, safely… and then we guilt her over it until she overpays us for the favor.”

“Ooh, Rob, I like that!”

And just like that, Robin had his self-confidence back.

Commissioner Roe was staring at the street sign at 55th and Nevada, avoiding the glances and gapes and glares of passers-by, trying to remember the order that the states were admitted to the Union to see if that would spark something in her brain to remind her of the way to Bethlehem General Hospital, when she heard a soft-spoken voice with a non-rhotic accent, and not one from up the coast, either.

“Excuse me,” said Robin, “but we couldn’t help but notice that you seem to be lost. Could we offer our assistance?”

Doty was understandably startled by this, and Robin and John were prepared to make themselves come across as non-threatening as possible.

“Sirs, I don’t need any help,” said the commissioner, as firmly as she could. “Please just leave me alone.”

“Ma’am, we understand that it’s a strange thing to offer out of the blue,” Little John said. “So we’ll turn it over to you: how can we prove to you that we have the best intentions?”

“You can’t.”

“We understand it’s a tough sell, ma’am,” said Robin, “but we won’t be able to sleep tonight if we don’t do our best to help you.”

“Do I look like I need your help?”

“Ma’am, we couldn’t help but notice that some people are giving you strange looks,” said Little John, “and although we know this neighborhood and its people and we’re sure that most of them would never want to hurt you, I can’t imagine that’s a risk you’d want to take in an unfamiliar neighborhood.”

“Are you saying that this is a dangerous neighborhood or not?”

“Ma’am, please be frank with us,” said Robin. “Are you County Commissioner Roe?”
Doty merely glared at him for daring to ask the obvious. “You two haven’t even introduced yourselves yet.”

“Alex,” said Robin.

“Landon,” said Little John. “What are you doing out here, Commissioner?”

“It’s a long story and it’s none of your business.”

“But you look like you’re lost,” said Robin. “Are you sure we can’t help guide you somewhere?”

“Where did you come from? Where did you go?” asked Little John with a silly grin. “Where did you come from, Commissioner Roe?”

And Doty was mortified to cough out a little chuckle at that. (Robin didn’t get the reference until it was too late.)

“I-I’m sorry,” Doty apologized for her unprofessional laughter. “My daughter just graduated kindergarten; a few months ago, they had one of those… ‘plays’ where they just dance to goofy music, a-and, that… that was one of them.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to apologize for,” said Little John said with a self-impressed smirk that he hoped to hell came across as friendly and not predatory; he thought he had made a breakthrough. “But really, where are you headed?”

“Bethlehem General. If you have directions, I’ll take them.”

“But are you sure you don’t want us to escort you?” asked Robin.

“I don’t know you guys. I’m not getting in your car.”

“Oh, we don’t have our car with us. We were just going to walk you there, if you’d allow us. It’s not too far a walk.”

“And we’d stick to major streets with lots of people around, where you wouldn’t have to worry about us or anybody else pulling a fast one on you,” Little John added.

Doty looked unsure, and sized up the men making the sudden offer. “What’s in your pockets?”

Robin and John tried to contain their surprise; they hadn’t heard that one in awhile. They were both wearing unfashionable but practical cargo pants -- Robin in shorts, John’s were full-length -- which were fulfilling their intended duty. Their many pockets were filled with cash and cards and valuable-looking knickknacks they had acquired throughout the day, which they had kept on their person because they were getting ready to start knocking on doors at random and dropping them off. But this predicament was nothing that a little quick thinking couldn’t fix.

“Oh, not much,” said Robin as he started fishing through his main pockets, inspiring Little John to follow his lead. “House keys… wallet…”

“I’ve got my Epipen on me in case I get stung by a bee,” said John; they were taking an enormous gamble in hoping that she wouldn’t call their bluff. “Do you want us to empty our pockets, or--?”

“No, no,” said Doty, “it’s fine. Really, I ought to take myself to a police precinct and get a ride from them--”

“Oh, believe us, Commissioner, the cops in this town are creeps.”
“Hey, if you two really do mean well, I’m sorry for drilling you. But if you’re up to something… I just want you two to fuck off. After what I’ve been through in my life, I have trouble telling the difference until it’s too late now.”

“Well, listen,” said John, “let me put it this way: if we were gonna hurt you at a major intersection in a major city at -- what time is it?”

“3.”

“--3 in the afternoon, wouldn’t we have done it by now?”

Doty just looked at the negative space between the two of them. She thought that was a fair observation. Or was that just what they wanted her to think?

“Hey, come to think of it,” said Robin, “we don’t know you either! How do we know you aren’t going to hurt us !?”

“Yeah, uh-- Alex!” said Little John, briefly forgetting Robin’s alias. “I’d bet a face like that could break a few hearts.”

Doty heard that and wanted to feel flattered, but the allusion to relationships made her wonder again if they were looking for something inappropriate. But what ultimately made up her mind was her realization that time was ticking, and Krupa and Ryan were probably confused by her absence. She would have plenty of time during the walk to convince herself that this was as good a time as any to try reestablishing her trust in well-meaning strangers of the male persuasion, and (heaven forbid) to test those self-defense skills she’d been teaching herself. But she had one last question.

“Why do you two want to help me so bad?” she asked.

“Because there have been times when… ahem … Landon and I have needed help from strangers,” said Robin, ready to answer such a question without missing a beat. “Sometimes we were fortunate enough to receive it, and sometimes not.”

“So we figure we might as well pay it back,” said Little John.

Doty shuffled around a bit, checking her watch and adjusting her collar, not looking at either of the boys.

“…Landon, I’d prefer if you walk in front of me.”

The trio exchanged pleasantries and small talk as they walked down 55th Street down to Montana Avenue, then down five blocks to 50th Street, and kitty-corner to Bethlehem General. By the time they arrived, almost all of Doty’s apprehensions were gone; something about these two strangers was boding oddly well with her.
They got to the end of the walkway that lead to the visitors’ entrance. “Well,” said Robin, “I think you ought to be able to find the rest of the way by yourself now.”

“Indeed I shall,” said Doty. “But thank you guys for, uh… joining me on that walk.”

“The pleasure is ours,” said Little John.

“Although -- and it kills us to ask this -- we might have walked a bit too far out of our way,” said Robin.

“You see, Alex and I need to be up early for our jobs at the sanitation works,” said Little John.

“Our shift starts at midnight, and we have to go until the morning crew comes in at eight,” said Robin. “We really ought to be in bed already, but it’s just so hard to sleep when the sun’s out on a beautiful day like today.”

“Besides, a nice long walk gets us nice and tired,” added Little John.

Doty looked justifiably suspicious. “...Oh?”

“Could we trouble you for some cab money back home, Commissioner, after all we’ve done for you?” Robin asked rather loudly, gaining the attention of plenty of eye- and ear-witnesses.

“...How were you going to get home otherwise?”

“We met you before we’d walked so far out of our way.”

Doty glanced around, nervously looking for an out.

“Can I just give you bus fare?” she asked, nodding toward a crowded bus shelter not even twenty-five feet away.

“Oh, with the slow pace of the bus and the transferring between lines, it’ll take forever for us to get home,” Little John moaned. “At least an hour. A cab would be much faster.”

“I don’t have my purse on me; I’d have to find my assistant first--”

“We can help you find them!” Robin exclaimed.

Doty realized the people at the bus shelter were watching, waiting to see what she would do. Those were people who she may have needed to vote for her one day.

“...Goddammit, how much do you need?” she asked under her breath while leading the way into the hospital.

“Well, I’m all the way on the Southeast Side in Frankford,” said Robin.

“And I live in Harbeson,” said Little John. “Which isn’t too far, but the cabs for larger types like myself cost more. I mean, I guess I could squeeze into a medium-sized one--”

“Oh, Landon’s just being modest. Please don’t make my friend feel claustrophobic again, Commissioner,”

“Alex, I’m trying to get over it--”

“And you’ve tried hard enough and you deserve to not have to force yourself to be uncomfortable.”
Somewhere along the line, Doty stopped walking to just glare at them.

“You walked from the Southeast Side to the North Side to the West Side all just for the hell of it?”

“Oh, it’s great exercise, Commissioner!” said Robin.

“Oh, and my brother’s a cabbie back up in Philly,” said Little John, “so I won’t feel right unless I tip handsomely.”

--III--

“I’m telling you, Rob, that bodyguard of hers must’ve been one of my old roommate’s kids!”

Little John and Robin Hood were making their way due south, trying to find one specific home in Hermosa Park. Their pockets were now even more full of loot after their dealings with the county commissioner. They had scored a solid couple hundred bucks in the deal, thanks in part to Little John’s last-minute idea to bullshit something about needing money for insulin after his pharmacy filled an order incorrectly.

“You say that about all the tigers we see. Or at least all the ones our age or younger.”

The guys stepped around a passed-out homeless otter propped up against the side of a small pub; it wasn’t clear whether it was alcohol possessing him or some other substance. This was another reason that the Merry Men were hesitant to give out money in Hermosa Park: if there was anywhere in Nottingham where the rich people were right to say that a poor person would just spend their assistance on self-destructive vices, such helpless addicts would most certainly be found in Hermosa Park. Rob and Johnny both knew that the best option would be to get them help, but getting all the addicts in Hermosa Park to a rehab clinic -- whether those addicts consented to go or not -- was an undertaking bigger than the scope of their powers. Not to mention, they would probably all be kicked out anyway for a lack of ability to pay. Seeing people like that otter just made Robin and John feel powerless all over again.

“Yeah, and the more I think of it, Tom wasn’t as tall as this guy, either. But I swear could just sense a resemblance when I saw his face.”

Someone threw a glass bottle from a third-floor window onto the sidewalk below; it exploded right at Rob and John’s feet, but they pretended it didn’t phase them. They did allow themselves to glance up at the window from whence it came, but whoever threw it closed the window quickly afterward and was nowhere to be seen.

“You really are on a face-hunch kick today, aren’t you, Johnny? But I think he was too old to be your roommate’s son.”

The two of them turned down a side street.

“I’m not so sure. Tom was a lot older than me. I remember him bragging that he’d been fucking around in jazz clubs since the Seventies. And I do mean fucking around. I think he had some kids who were almost my age -- maybe your age. And he was still knocking twentysomething girls up when I met you, sooo…”

They started paying more attention to the numbers on the houses.

“Really? You never told me that about Tom! I thought he was your age, maybe a little older. Why haven’t you told me more about this fascinating character?”
They both set their eyes on one specific house in the near distance, but didn’t say anything about it.

“He wasn’t that interesting. He wasn’t home half the time, and when he was, he was locked in his sex chamber.”

“‘Sex chamber’? Is that what you’re calling it, or did he --”

“I think we’re here, Rob.”

The row house at 1313 North Utah was pastel-blue if you recognized the paint flakes that were still hanging on. Evidently the boys had been here once before, but it wasn’t ringing a bell yet.

Robin knocked on the door; he and John had long ago agreed that Robin should knock on the doors of mammals smaller than the both of them, and John should knock on the doors of mammals that dwarfed both of them; they only had to converse about who should do the duties when it was a member medium-sized species they were calling upon.

The door unlatched and opened tentatively, revealing a timid-looking middle-aged porcupine.

“Pardon us, ma’am, but we’re searching for a Miz Sarah McQuillan; do we have the right address?” Robin asked with a smile, confident of the answer.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she said calmly. “Long time, no see, boys.”

“Y-you have?” Robin’s confidence was once again uncharacteristically misplaced. “Huh. We even told Alex not to spoil the surprise!”

“Alex told me everything. He knew you were coming, so he wanted to get his punishment out of the way. I guess you two put the fear of God in him.”

“I hope you didn’t punish him too severely.”

“Let’s just say that if you two put the fear of God in him, I glued it into place,” she said with a wink; she had interpreted Robin’s sentence as dry wit and didn’t realize she was talking to two people who had rather negative views on corporal punishment.

“Is he here now?” asked Little John.

“No, I sent him to some neighbors down the street. Some old people who need help re-grouting their bathroom.”

“Could these old people use a little pick-me-up?” John asked, rubbing one paw’s fingers together to specify he was talking about dollars and cents.

“Will it cut into my share?” Sarah asked, then chuckled after a beat. “I’m just fucking with you. I’ll take whatever you offer.”

“And so it shall be,” Robin said, producing a small wad of bills from his front pocket, which Sarah accepted. “But Johnny here poses a serious question: are the old couple, er, ‘fans of ours?’”

“You know we aren’t too popular in this part of town,” said Little John, which inspired him to glance around just in case anybody was giving them the evil eye as they stood there out in the open.

Sarah thumbed through the currency and counted it in her head. “Um… they could take you or leave you, I guess. They’re old-school. They probably think that they’ve lived this way for long
enough, they can probably hang on until the end.” She put the money in her blouse pocket. “And thank you, guys.”

“But wouldn’t they agree that things’ve gotten worse under Prince John?” asked Robin.

“Uh… they wouldn’t, honestly. I mean, not saying I agree with them, but… they wouldn’t, honestly.”

“You know how cynical old people can be,” said Little John.

“But yeah, they’re a capybara couple at the end of the block and across the street,” Sarah said, and started walking backwards to close the door. “Thanks again, guys—”

“Wait!” Robin said. “One last question. What about the other boy’s family?”


“The pumas?” asked Sarah, a bit surprised. “…Yeah, don’t-- don’t go looking for them.”

“They won’t take free money?”

“Not from you two. And if they see you, they might get into a fight about it.”

“How so?” asked a curious Robin.

Sarah get out a small embarrassed chuckle. “I mean, it’s not like they regularly have debates about you, but… I did see them have an argument about you two once. She thinks you’re too radical, and he thinks you’re not radical enough.”

“Shit, we just can’t win, can we?” mused Little John.

“Well, it’s flattering that we’re the topic of a philosophical debate among people who don’t even know us,” said Robin.

“Well, good for you that you feel flattered, but it was really uncomfortable to listen to,” said Sarah. “I didn’t actually participate in the conversation; I just was in the room when it broke out. And don’t take this the wrong way, guys, but they both made pretty good points.”

“Oh, really?” asked Robin. “Go on then; convince us that our actions are more harmful than helpful. I welcome a differing viewpoint.”

“C’mon, Rob, let’s go,” said Little John. “I don’t think it’s safe to just be standing on this lady’s stoop for much longer.” He had been watching for the looks that passers-by were giving them; so far he had seen four people who looked pleased to see them, three that looked hostile, one who didn’t seem to recognize them, and five who didn’t even notice them standing on the stoop.

“No, I’m curious.”

“You’ve already heard all the arguments.”

“I’m trying to instill faith in her by putting the dissent to rest.”

“Can I talk now?” asked Sarah.

“Oh! Yes, please! Apologies, Ms. McQuillan.”
“Well, uh -- shit, where do I start? -- I guess, just, Tina was saying you guys were encouraging bad behavior -- like, other people starting robbing, but not for noble reasons like you -- and that you guys were reckless and, uh… just generally that you guys are overkill, I guess.”

“And to that we would say that we do our best to work with the community to make sure they leave the vigilante stuff to us, and that we make a point to try to only rob from people we can prove deserve something to balance their karma.” Robin spoke with a warm smile, confident that he was doing a good job pleading his case to this undecided voter. “And the husband?”

“Greg just plain thought that you guys were pussy-footing around and that if your, uh, ‘vigilante’ shit was ever gonna work, it would have worked by now. He thought you guys should just storm a press conference and--” Sarah switched to pantomime as she acted out popping off a few rounds of a revolver at an implied target. “Y’know, get it over with. You already threw your lives away.”

“Well, if we should ever come up in discussion again, send them our word that we strive for non-violence whenever we can, because while our little forced-charity operation may be a bit, er, agitative, we know for a fact that political violence will cause chaos on levels we could never imagine. And say the same to the people who think we’re too extreme. I hope we’ve done well to put your mind at rest, Ms. McQuillan.”

“Well, that’s just the thing. They basically kissed and made up when they both agreed that you guys were just making everything worse.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty Hermosa mindset, if you ask me,” Little John remarked, and he went right back to keeping watch.

“I have to agree with my friend here, Sarah,” said Robin. “We really do think that life in this city would be unbearable if we weren’t here to help out; we wouldn’t keep doing this if we didn’t. But I have to ask: do you agree with them?”

“Well, the idea was that you guys are just pissing the cops and the government off and now they all hate poor people.”

“Like they didn’t already?” quipped Little John.

“I shoulda mentioned, this was right after the cops shot the shit out of those guys who robbed the liquor store on--”

“Huh?”

“Wait, when did this happen?” asked Robin.

“Oh, five years ago, at least. After I already met you. And the others who were with you. Sorry about what happened to them, by the way--”

“I’m sorry to cut you off, Sarah, but…” Robin tried to find the right words. “...you referred to that botched robbery like it was some major event everyone should know about. Is there something about it we missed? Some important details, I mean? Because otherwise, it would sound pretty mundane to me.”

Sarah didn’t know that they didn’t know. She looked Robin in the eye and took a breath so she could answer the question without hemming and hawing.

“When the police had to publicly answer why they shot him, they said it was because they thought the robbers were with you.”
“What!?” Robin was flabbergasted. “Why did no one tell us about this?”

“We thought you knew. We thought that was why you guys weren’t in the neighborhood for, like, three weeks afterwards.”

“Nuh-uh! No way!” Johnny interjected. “That couldn’t have happened. The NPD’s never publicly acknowledged we exist. We have connections who would tell us if they did.”

“They didn’t specifically say you or anybody else; they just said something about a possible gang of bandits trying to steal for poor people. Coded language and all that.”

Little John just shook his head while Robin kept staring forward. “We gotta wring Otto out for dropping the ball on that one,” John grumbled.

“They… they shot some blokes because they thought they were with us?” Robin choked out, trying to process the information.

“I mean, that coulda been a cover. But I honestly think that the cops have been a lot more… brutal in the last five years.”

“But…” Robin just spit it out without bothering about tact.

Sarah once again didn’t know that they didn’t know, but her sympathy for their unpleasant surprise was starting to turn into impatience. “Again: we all thought you knew. We thought that’s why you don’t show your faces around here as often as you do up north or down south.”

“We’ve been having trouble with this area since the day we started!” Little John protested. “We try our best not to leave you guys behind, but for Christ’s sakes, lady, when half the people would tell us to our faces that they think we’re fuckin’ looney tunes for offering them free money, and the other half wanna spend the money on crack, and when I have a scar on my ass that won’t ever heal that I got from a stray bullet in this very neighborhood, then yeah, it’s kinda hard not to feel tempted to just circum-fucking-navigate this place and stick our fingers in our ears and go ‘na-na-na can’t hear you!’” Little John put an arm around Robin, who at this point was staring into space lost in thought, and pulled him into himself. “Me and this guy’ve lied the fuck awake at night feeling like shit because it really seems like people in this place refuse to be helped. But we force ourselves to do try anyway because we know not everyone in this part of town is like that. So we’re sorry if our best isn’t fucking good enough, but it’s not like we see any of you guys coming out to Sherwood to give us some other ideas! Maybe not leave us alone to be two guys against the world!”

Sarah McQuillan would usually feel terrified being spoken to sternly by an angry brown bear, but since it hadn’t even been five minutes since she was reassured that they were committed to nonviolence whenever possible, she didn’t think she had much to be concerned about.

“Well the fact of the matter is that I know the people in this neighborhood better than you do, and a lot of them think that things have gotten worse here with the police being dicks and the mayor coming up with bullshit laws and taxes to keep us down, and they think it has something to do with them taking their anger with you out on us.”

“Then why would they be doing it here and not the entire West Side!?”

Robin still wasn’t saying a word.

“Are they not? I don’t know how things are in Georgetown or Harbeson or Phillips Hill or wherever the hell you guys spend all your time. Maybe they’re only doing it here because they
think that the worst neighborhood in the city would be the most likely to produce some crazy radical motherfuckers like you two who think that robbing rich people at point-blank range and giving the money to poor people at random is going to solve anything.”

“Well if nothing else, it’s supposed to boost your fucking morale! It’s not our fault you’re all so goddamn miserable that you won’t even give hope a chance when it’s staring you in the face and standing on your goddamn stoop! The people in Georgetown and Harbeson and Phil Hill are broke, too, but they don’t tell us to fuck off because they think our good intentions are paving a road to hell!”

“Well, you’ve got to convince a whole lot of other people of your good intentions, not just me,” Sarah said with a pose that said she was just about done with them and their well-meaning ignorance. “You said you think people around here don’t want to be helped, or something like that?”

“Yeah, I did!” stated Little John.

“Well, you’ve got to convince a whole lot of other people of your good intentions, not just me,” Sarah said with a pose that said she was just about done with them and their well-meaning ignorance. “You said you think people around here don’t want to be helped, or something like that?”

“Fine, suit yourself.” Sarah said as she pulled the wad of cash out of her pocket and tossed it off the stoop onto the pavement below. “I’ll survive without it. And if I don’t, maybe I shouldn’t want to. Apparently my fucking kid can find his own money.” Sarah took a step backward and grasped the door handle. “By the way, they prefer to be called ‘pumas’ or ‘cougars,’ not ‘mountain lions,’ you fucking racist. Get out of my house,” said the porcupine, and she slammed the door shut.

“We’re not in your house!” Little John hollered. “And that delinquent little puma shit straight-up called my buddy a faggot for no reason, so you ain’t gonna convince me I’m an asshole for calling him a mountain lion!” He then realized that he should maybe keep his voice down around these parts. He glanced left and right, and saw a few people on the street staring at him, some angry, some starstruck, some confused, and one elderly rabbit sitting in a rocking chair on the sidewalk, who had not been there when they arrived, smoking a pipe and looking coolly entertained.

Then the bear glanced down at his fox friend, who appeared to pondering something he would rather not have pondered.

“Hey, Robin… you, uh… you okay, little buddy?”

Robin closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths through his nose.

“Rob? Buddy?”

“…It’s been a long day, Johnny.”

“Well, we certainly got our exercise today,” Little John said, relieved to hear Robin speak. He kept his arm around Robin and walked him off the stoop and down the street. Neither of them remembered to pick up the cash Sarah had thrown back at them, nor did they remember to go seek out the elderly capybaras.

“You still want to go to see Amanda?”

“We can wait till tomorrow. Let’s just grab our things from Priscilla’s and head home.”

“We can’t go home, Rob. Remember?”

Robin didn’t say anything. John wished he had phrased that better.

Little John was acutely aware that this was exactly the kind of openness with bad feelings that just
the other day he’d implored his friend to start showing, for both of their sakes. Now Little John was starting to wish he’d been careful for what he’d wished for, because he didn’t know if he could be as helpful to his friend as he thought he could be. Little John was well used to Robin being mildly bummed out about Marian or Will or Skippy or his parents, which was something John could easily cure with a jocular pep-talk, but this kind of hard shut-down was something Little John was ill-equipped to handle. The only times he’d ever seen Robin like this were right after Skippy and Toby got sent to juvie, right after Marian had to go back to DC after she spent the summer of That Fateful Year in town, and in the days and weeks immediately following Will’s apparent suicide; in all those cases, John tried his best to help his friend, but the only thing that seemed to have helped was the passage of time.

“Rob, we aren’t responsible for those guys getting shot.”

“Oh, yes we fucking are.”

“No, we’re not. We’re not responsible for anybody’s actions but our own.” Little John prayed he was being helpful.

“If only it were that simple. And all the other misery we’ve caused… because we were too cowardly to help the place that needed us the most…”

“Oh, don’t say that; we’ve helped this neighborhood plenty. We’ve done plenty more good than bad.”

“I have no patience for myself doing anything bad.”

“You wanna talk to Tuck about it?”

“You know he’s not allowed to see us.”

“You wanna talk to Otto about it?”

“I don’t think he’s equipped to talk about things like this.”

“You want to talk to me about it when we get back to the junkyard?”

“I don’t think so.”

They were back on major streets now, but in light of recent revelations, Little John was keeping an extra sharp eye out for squad cars waywardly patrolling the streets.

“You know you’re the greatest guy I know, Rob.”

“And I appreciate that, Little John.” -- John noticed that Robin didn’t call him ‘Johnny’ like he was expecting -- “But please don’t be so damned jealous of me; you’re doing yourself a disservice.”

“Brother, I’ll stop being jealous when I got everything that you got!” Little John was hoping the light levity would cheer his friend up a little bit. While Robin appreciated the effort, he did little to show it.

They crossed the major street and walked down another side street to give themselves a bit more privacy.

“Just be grateful for who you are, John,” Robin said; his voice seemed to be getting somehow drier. “This is one of those times I really wish I were in your shoes.”
Little John saw that this conversational direction wasn’t going anywhere, so he changed the subject. “We need to recruit. I mean it. We can’t go on like this alone.”

“Agreed,” was all Robin said.

“Hell, we probably should have asked Alex.”

“Too late for that, I guess.”

“Rob, if I lose you…” -- Little John looked around to make sure nobody was watching -- “…I’d be screwed in more ways than one.” He pulled his small friend in tighter and patted him twice on the chest. “You’re really all I got left, man. Don’t take that away from me.”

“I wouldn’t think of it, Johnny.”

Little John didn’t say anything as he waited for Robin to say something along the lines of ‘don’t you leave me alone, either,’ but evidently Rob wasn’t going to say anything else. Little John looked down at Robin and realized that he had not made eye contact with him since they were standing on Ms. McQuillan’s stoop. In fact, he didn’t think Robin had turned his head in any direction away from straight forward, with the possible exception of glancing down. John understood what Robin meant when he insisted he not be jealous, but Little John really wished he could have Robin’s magic right now.

As for Robin, he was wondering if allowing himself to break down in tears and openly weep in the streets of Hermosa Park would inspire its people to forgive him for his sins. But he decided against it; only so many of his sins were theirs to forgive.
Chapter Summary

Desperate for new recruits and thinking that the wayward trio might be up for a little adventure, Robin and Little John ask the cloudheaded Ed, the uptight Double-D, and the money-grubbing Eddy to join them in robbing the rich and giving to the poor. It goes about as well as you'd expect.


Despite being a literal trash heap, the junkyard usually didn’t smell too bad. The vast majority of things in the mountain range of waste were things that weren’t particularly odorous, like discarded packaging or broken machinery, so unless you were standing right next to a cache of rotten eggs or if you stepped on a piece of newspaper that once lined the cage of someone’s pet iguana and got literal shit stuck on your shoe to follow you around all day, one would probably find the scent of the junkyard fairly tolerable -- not pleasant by any stretch of the imagination, but you would need to be particularly fussy to still be complaining about the smell after giving yourself a few minutes to acclimate.

That day was an exception to prove the rule. The temperature was climbing to the upper eighties, and the trash was cooking in the sun, producing smells like an olfactory hell’s kitchen. It was still something most people could probably get used to after a while, but few would want to stay long enough to build up that tolerance.

Of course, some mammals have stronger senses of smell than others. The canid species were famous for it. But as the fox and the wolf winced walking through the junkyard, there was a piece of information to which they would have had different responses if enlightened about it. If someone were to materialize out of thin air and tell them that, statistically by species, the one with the best sense of smell among them was actually their bear friend in tow, Eddy would probably have scoffed and said that Ed must not be a good specimen because there’s no way he could tolerate the junkyard on a day like today, let alone his own entire borderline-unsanitary way of life; Double-D, however, would have replied that he already knew that, but he also knew Ed, and taking all of his observations into consideration, he had deduced long ago that Ed absolutely did have a good nose on him, but simply didn’t find most odors offensive as other people did.

And Ed really didn’t mind the smell of the junkyard. He didn’t mind a lot of things. He didn’t mind the vague conflict happening between his friends, so long as Eddy and Double-D made up in the end. At the moment, it seemed like whatever issues they had had the previous day were now water under the bridge.

And Double-D was hoping that was the case, but he couldn’t get that strong of a read on Eddy one way or another. The fox had been purposefully very coy that whole morning as they rendezvoused to make their way to the junkyard to check on the generators. Edd could tell by Eddy’s terrible acting ability that Eddy was just pretending to feel blasé about the fact that they were still hanging out two days after he had explicitly told Edd not to bother showing his face if he wasn’t going to be a team player. It didn’t help that Double-D was trying to decipher his own emotions about the three’s previous visit to the van-cum-hostel. Would Misters Hood and Little be back? If they were,
would they turn out to not be who they claimed? If they hadn’t been lying, would Ed or Eddy or even Double-D himself commit some sort of faux pas that would cause the men’s high opinion of him to deteriorate? Double-D would have liked to imagine he’d have the mental strength to get through a situation where either the strangers turned out to be violent criminals or where he and Eddy got into a public falling-out, but he couldn’t even pretend that he would be capable if both of those things happened at the same time.

And Eddy didn’t know why the fuck Edd was here, either. He knew that Double-D claimed to be invested in the plan because he had volunteered his house to be the delivery point for the contraband, but Eddy didn’t buy that for a second. Eddy, for one, wholeheartedly believed that Rob and John were gone and weren’t coming back, and thought that any logical person would have come to the same conclusion, so he didn’t know whether Double-D’s musings soliloquies about the chance of seeing them again were some sort of juvenile over-hopefulness or whether Double-D was actually stupid in that “everything-he-knows,-he-knows-from-books,-and-he-has-virtually-no-experience-living-in-the-real-world” sort of way. Eddy didn’t get why Edd wanted to see them again so much -- or at least that’s what he would say if prompted. He understood entirely why Edd wanted to see them again -- the wolf admired them as a pair consisting of a well-spoken, well-groomed, well-educated gentleman and a much realer guy who must have had similar qualities by proxy to win the first guy’s companionship, and he liked that they liked him back -- but Eddy didn’t know why Edd wanted the things he wanted.

On the way to meeting up at Ed’s house that morning, Eddy was struck with the ability to put his big question about the wolf into words: why couldn’t Double-D just be normal? Hell, for that matter, why couldn’t Eddy have any friends who were normal? Sure, abnormal people make life more interesting, but when you have no normal friends, then surely you can’t just be their ‘normal’ friend, can you be? Eddy was starting to wonder if something was wrong with himself that the only two real friends he could call upon were a couple of weirdos. He needed to make some new friends. Not only that, he had to make several new factions of friends. He could keep Ed and Double-D around as his jawbreaker pals, but he needed some regular people to hang out with to keep him in touch with reality; hell, maybe his bad luck at business had something to do with his fundamental disconnect from the normal people he was trying to market to. On that note, he also needed new friends to help with his enterprising new plans. But then again, they always say to never go into business with your friends, and perhaps that’s how he’d gotten into this mess in the first place--

“Eddy?” Double-D asked, breaking the fox’s introspective trance. “Are those our generators outside the van?”

The contents of the glove compartment were removed and shoved neatly under the passenger’s seat, and the compartment was filled back up with all the money and other valuables Robin and John had collected the previous day, but which they had lacked the energy to redistribute at the time. Their personal items were splayed out on the front seats, and their weapons shoved into the space wherever they may -- John’s staff sticking well out of the open driver’s-side window, which luckily was obscured from outside view by the two piles of refuse that bounded the vehicle -- and with the glove compartment occupied, Little John just kept the cold metal piece in the back of his pants, hoping to hell that his butt didn’t accidentally disengage the safety, but still thinking that the risk an involuntary discharge would be less likely than the surefire frustration Robin would present if he found out John was carrying a stolen gun on his person. Little John didn’t want to risk pissing off the only person in the world he was certain still cared about him. At least not now that he had a clear head.

Ironically, it was now Robin whose head was unclear. They had gotten back well before sunset the previous evening, but were up well past midnight as their minds raced, filled with tormenting
thoughts. Robin lay on the mattress, staring at the wall of the van, wondering if all of this -- all of this -- had been one huge mistake; John lay there, facing the other direction, lamenting that he didn’t know what he could do to make his favorite person feel better.

Little John had tried talking to Robin last night as they lay in the van not facing each other, but the conversation just went in circles, with Robin not saying much more than variants of “I feel terrible,” peppered with the exact phrase “I’ve killed people I was just trying to help,” murmured dejectedly to himself -- John picked up on how Robin was saying “I” rather than “we”, but didn’t know what to make of it.

And Little John entertained the thought that he was a bad person for not feeling as bad as Robin did about the liquor store robbers’ fate. Perhaps Robin had a point that they had started a domino effect that had gotten some complete strangers killed -- strangers so strange that they didn’t even know anything about them other than that they once lived, and for all they knew may have been terrible people who Robin and John couldn’t have saved from a life of crime and a violent end by giving them desperation money, and actually fuck it maybe they never even existed and Alex’s mom had gotten her facts wrong or possibly even outright lied to Robin and John just to psychologically torture them. But John really didn’t believe that there was any blood on their hands; maybe it was because he was raised in a very conservative, individualistic environment, but he believed that there was no way they were culpable for some dirty cops they didn’t know using excessive force on some liquor store robbers they’d likely never even met -- and, again, who may have never even existed. If there was a more direct connection between them all, then John would have been more likely to agree that they held some responsibility, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a bridge too far. He told Robin as much, but each time Rob just mumbled something to refute it on the spot. For all of his imploring Robin to be more open about the fact that he sometimes felt bad like a regular person, it had never crossed John’s mind that Robin would so soon be in a place where he’d just lose the ability to communicate altogether.

John didn’t dare look at Robin after their cyclical conversation finally trailed off, so he couldn’t tell whether Robin was crying. Robin certainly wasn’t loudly weeping, but John heard some sounds that he couldn’t tell whether they were teary sniffles or just Robin’s fur brushing along the surface of the mattress as he shifted in place; maybe the sounds were a mix of both. After a few hours of these sounds -- Little John just knew Robin was still awake the whole time, as two people who have to room together for seven years can just kind of tell -- John almost had a breakdown himself, not because he agreed that they had made everything worse despite their best intentions, but because he just didn’t know how to change Robin’s mind. John didn’t enjoy feeling like a fundamentally weak person; he had felt that way for most of his life, and he had been starting to think it was finally over these last few years, but now it all came rushing back, manifesting itself in a way he never could have imagined. That’s why he didn’t let himself start sobbing again. He thought that if he wasn’t smart or wise or agreeable enough to be a leader like Robin, he ought to at least try to be a good follower and prop Robin up when Robin couldn’t stand on his own two feet. If Robin couldn’t be strong for himself, he would have to be strong for the both of them. He just hoped he was doing it right.

At one point, John broke the silence to say that he was still awake and if Robin wanted to say anything more he could just say it, and if John fell asleep he had permission to wake him up. Robin just made a mmhmm sound and that was that. Neither of them knew who finally passed out first, but it was still several hours after that, Robin busy wondering whether he was evil, and John focusing on the silence in case his friend wanted to say something. But Robin never did.

Once they were out, however, they were out like a light, and the sun and the heat and the smell combined weren’t even enough to wake them up as the day grew closer to high noon. In fact, they almost slept through the knock on the trunk door.
“Tap, tap, tap.”

“H-hello?” asked a high-pitched voice through the walls of the van.

“Hrm?” asked Robin.

“Dhrrrrmmhdm,” Little John replied.

“Hrrrrrm, hm,” Robin concurred.

“Rmmdrmm, svrrrrhm.”

“Mmm.”

“Vrrrrrhmm…"

Knock, knock, knock! The sound came harder this time, and from the glass rather than the sheet metal.

“Huh?” asked Robin, this time opening his lips more than an imperceptible fraction of a millimeter.

“Wha’?” mused John.

“Hello?” asked the voice on the other side of the drawn curtains.

“Ahh!”

“Gaht! THUNK. "FUCK!”

“John, what happened!?”

“I hit my fucking head again!”

“I can hear them!” came a different adolescent voice, this one noticeably much raspier.

“I did, too, Eddy!” said the earlier voice.

“It sounded like Future Me and Eddy, guys!” came a deeper third voice.

“John, I think those lads are back!” Any traces of the previous night’s existential crisis were gone.

“Yeah, I can hear ‘em.” Little John had collapsed back onto the waterbed, his giant paws clutching his head, eyes closed and speaking to the roof, making no effort to sit up again.

“Are you gonna be alright, Johnny?”

“I will be when we don’t have to stay in this fucking van anymore!”

“I meant do you need the wolf-boy to give you first aid like he did with me?”

“Just open the doors and say hi. And tell them to give me a minute.”

Robin started to scoot his way over to the trunk, but when he looked back at Little John to ask one last time if he was alright, he realized something.

“Shit! They might see our stuff in the front seat!”
“Well this is as good a time as any to recruit them.”

As Robin processed John’s statement, he could faintly hear the boys talking outside, but wasn’t listening hard enough to figure out what they were saying. “Little John… are you serious?”

“Shit. Jesus. I was serious before you put the doubt in my head! I’m just sayin’, man, you regretted not asking Alex, and these kids seem cool enough. You’ve got an opportunity; take it.”

“I… see your point.”

“Feel them out some more if you feel like you need to. But they did us an enormous favor, so some people would say we owe them the truth.”

“If we told everyone who was nice to us who we are, we would have been found out a long time ago!”

“No shit, Sherlock,” John scoffed. He still wasn’t moving his head or opening his eyes. “Remember, we got the chloroform just in case they don’t take it well.”

In the head of the moment, Robin had not, in fact, remembered that.

“Go on. Work your magic,” Little John continued. He then added as a mumbled afterthought, “Like only you can.”

Robin didn’t hear that last part; he just thought it was John murmuring in mild agony.

“Well… here goes nothing,” Robin said as he grasped the door handle.

He opened it just as Ed decided to knock on the window, and in typical Ed fashion, he knocked right through the glass.

CRASH. “It’s okay, Future Me and Future Eddy!” Ed hollered as he knocked on the first solid surface his hand found past the glass, which incidentally was the top of Robin’s skull. “It’s just Past Me and Past Eddy and Double-D! We wouldn’t hurt you, lest we also hurt ourselves as we are also you also!”

THUNK, THUNK, THUNK. Between the pounding on his head and the glass exploding in his face, Robin was trying really hard to scream. But he was merely a mortal, and he had his limitations.

“God-bloody-fucking-DAMMIT!” he shouted as he grasped his face and head and collapsed back onto the waterbed, being in much the same position as Little John. Robin had faced much danger in his seven years as an outlaw, but he had never been so thoroughly incapacitated by broken glass as he had been these last couple of days.

The sounds of shattered glass and his friend crying out in pain were enough to send Little John shooting up in bed. “Rob, what’s wro--!?" THUNK! “FUUUCK!” John collapsed back into roughly the same position as he had been five seconds prior.

“Ed, what have you done!?” Double-D shrieked as he reached through the broken window to open the door from the inside.

“I just knocked on the door, Double-D!”

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear…” Double-D said as he seemed to dance in place at the end of the van, wanting to tend to his injured houseguests but not wanting to go crawling through broken glass to
Mr. Hood, can you make your way around the glass to the door so I can see what happened?”

“I think some glass got in my eyes!” Robin answered, trying to sit up but collapsing back down onto the mattress. The creeks and rivers of blood running down among the fur on his face weren’t too wide, but there were a lot of them.

“Oh, no. Eddy! Please go to the glove compartment and retrieve the first-aid kit!”

“M’right,” Eddy said as he walked toward the side door in absolutely no hurry; he’d sustained worse injuries from Ed’s idiocy before and had never needed first aid for them, so he genuinely didn’t see what the big deal was.

“Ed! Please brush off all the glass you can--”

“Wait!” Robin said as he shot up all the way this time, hand still over his eyes so as not to irritate them by moving his eyelids -- which he failed to do, compulsively wincing as he sat up. “Errrgh! Er-- don’t go to the glove compartment!”

“Wh-why not?” asked Double-D.

Robin just hoped that their injured state was distracting the boys from seeing the large medieval weapons in the front seat were already clearly visible from the rear of the van; so far, it was working. “B-because we’ve, er, we’ve put a bunch of our belongings in there, and it’s a real mess, everything strewn about, and, er--”

Click. All four of them went silent when they heard Eddy open the door at the side of the van. A moment passed.

“Is that a fucking bow?” Eddy asked. “Like for arrows?”

Double-D looked past the strangers toward the front seat, and indeed there were some very large objects that had been hiding in plain sight. One was indeed an archer’s bow, but the other appeared to just be a big fucking stick.

“And what’s with the big fuckin’ stick?” Eddy continued.

Simultaneously but separately, all five of the characters’ minds started turning.

Eddy was pondering why these very, very old-timey weapons seemed to ring a bell. While it had been him who told Double-D that he suspected these strangers were the infamous bandits of Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve, that suspicion had slipped his mind by the sheer shock that they would leave the van only to come back a day later, and now he thought they were just an odd couple of guys more than anything else, possible criminality being irrelevant. But seeing that bow and that staff put his mind on the precipice of remembering a detail -- a detail that was only rarely brought up when the Merry Men were being discussed by the suburban students of Peach Creek Middle School, who were not as well-versed in the legend as the children of the inner city -- that would give him reason to think his hypothesis had been right the first time.

Double-D, who had never known the detail about the medieval weaponry being a trademark of the forest outlaws, was trying to rationalize where these weapons came from and why they would need to be here. The idea that Robin and John were the legendary outlaws was on his mind, but… a bow and a quarterstaff? Really? In modern America? That would be a strange couple of weapons of choice for career criminals, but would it make any more sense if they weren’t criminals? Was he sure this wasn’t all just a very strange dream? For Christ’s sakes, Ed just knocked through a
window; it was entirely possible that this was all a bizarre dream. But Edd still had a feeling that this was all still too realistic to be confused for a nocturnal hallucinations.

Robin, who was operating functionally blind, was well aware of his uncharacteristic lack of eloquence in his last few attempts at a sentence, but was telling himself that this was symptomatic of getting bonked repeatedly on the head concurrent to having glass explode in his face. He realized he was at a juncture: either keep lying or tell them the truth. What complicated matters was that these boys already knew Robin’s and John’s real names. Robin was kind of wishing he hadn’t told them, but he also thought that if put in that situation again and again, he probably would have told them every time. Part of it was out of gratitude for giving himself and John a place to lay low, and part of it was that he had genuinely thought that they must be fairly impoverished (and therefore sympathetic) kids if they were hanging out in the junkyard, but for the most part, he had historically been able to trust young people with such information; younger children wouldn’t tell the adults because they would be awestruck by his heroic and friendly aura -- almost like he was their cool big brother -- and would be more than willing to keep his secrets safe with them, and older kids and teenagers wouldn’t tell the adults because they were all rebellious assholes who wouldn’t be telling the adults in their lives anything they didn’t have to; so far, the only known exception to this rule was fear-stricken Martin, and even then he wasn’t sure if that kid had actually dropped their names. Robin thought that these three boys would follow the model, but in his blinded panic, he was suddenly starting to think that perhaps kids who lived comfortable suburban lives might have less incentive to keep their mouths shut. Robin had gone seven years without letting the Nottingham Police Department and Municipal Government find out his and John’s real identities (well, TBD vis-à-vis Martin) as a consequence of impeccably good judgment of who to share that information with, and he’d be damned to let that streak break now. All he knew was that the last time they’d spoken, the boys didn’t recognize Robin and John by their names or faces, so unless they asked around, there was a good chance that the reveal might still come as a shock to them. But could he and John afford to go without help for that much longer? Even if they couldn’t, should that help come from a ragtag trio of teenagers they’d just met, at least one of whom they each had a rather low opinion of? Maybe he would have to do as Little John said and just work his magic, but -- and maybe this was the glass in his eyes scrambling his confidence - - these kids might prove to be tough subjects.

Little John was similarly lamenting Robin’s big mouth; he kind of understood why Rob told them their names, but he didn’t understand even more. But beyond that, he was wondering whether he should be proactive and make a decision on behalf of the both of them. In a perfect scenario, he’d have time to talk it over with Robin, but with each passing moment, it was looking less and less likely that they’d get such an opportunity. John wondered how he would even go about making such a decision -- he’d already made up his mind that he was going to invite the boys and if they rejected his offer he’d simply put the fear of God in them so they wouldn’t squeal like Martin did, but how would he make sure that he was making the right decision until it was over? Did Robin always know he was making the right decision, or did he just deal with whatever consequences came as a result of his choices? Aw, goddammit, John was finding himself thinking of Robin as Mister Perfecto again, and he knew it. John felt so embarrassed in so many ways for these thoughts: the way he deified Robin, relegated himself to the background, and not to mention the part where he questioned whether he knew how to make a decision as though he’d never done such a thing before in his life. Though this did beg an interesting question: would Rob be displeased with him if John were to make the decision for the both of them? John wasn’t as convinced that Robin was a clinical narcissist as he was a few days ago in the tree, but he wasn’t completely sure that there weren’t detectable quantities of self-importance inside Rob somewhere -- seven years of being propped up as a hero by the local populace would do that to anyone. Now John was no longer worried about his ability to make a decision; he was now worried that any decision he made would be a negative one by virtue of automatically stepping on Robin’s toes.
Ed thought in pictures and scenes rather than words. He saw the bow and the staff and imagined Future Eddy and Future Himself fighting alien zombies in a post-apocalyptic world where modern technology was gone and all they could rely upon were weapons from a thousand years ago. Deep down, he knew that Robin and John weren’t actually himself and Eddy from the future -- quite frankly, he didn’t think Eddy would ever get to be that tall (or that red, or that British), and he hoped to hell that he himself would never become so grumpy as Mister John -- but Ed couldn’t let go of the idea. He was afraid that his friends’ bond was crumbling, and the idea that he and Eddy would still be friends in the future, fighting monsters and saving the world, brought a bittersweet joy to his heart -- bitter, because he just wished that Double-D was there with them. Not being privy to the legend of the robbers in the woods, Ed had absolutely no idea what was about to unfold with the revelation of the bow and the big-ass stick, but all he cared was that he and Eddy and Eddy were all friends in the end. And if the older fox and bear wanted to be friends with them, as long as they didn’t want to do boring grown-up stuff, he’d be happy to let them in.

“Oh, we had some time to… go back to… our place, and… get some things of ours!” Robin sputtered. After decades of conditioning himself to speak smoothly, the shock of hearing himself trip over his words begat a negative feedback loop and he just got worse and worse. It also bred new anxieties out of thin fucking air: suddenly he was struck by the notion that he had barely visually seen the boys today, and for all he knew they had figured out who they were in their absence and had come back with some weapons (or very quiet authority figures) to make a citizen’s arrest. He knew he was coming up with insane scenarios, but if the knock-punching through the window had been a purposeful attack to neutralize him, it would have been a brilliant strategy.

“Why do you own a bow and a big fucking stick?” asked Eddy as he walked back to the end of the van. Something was on the tip of his tongue, and he was hanging on their response to see if it would make everything make sense.

Robin could feel his hands get sticky from the blood from his forehead. He didn’t know it, but he was looking almost directly at Double-D, who was growing very worried by the fox’s unconfident answer.

“Er, erm, we-we-we… we collect old weapons like that! And we think they’re safer with us than in an old smoke-damaged apartment! Of course, they’ve sustained smoke damage -- and water damage from the sprinklers! -- so we thought it best that they air out here--”

“They looked fine to me,” Eddy said dryly.

“Oh! I, er, erm…” And that was that. The legendarily silver-tongued Robin Hood had successfully psyched himself out using only the fear of psyching himself out.

Any further words from Robin were abandoned with the sound of Little John grunting. The bear sat up much more carefully this time, propping himself up with an elbow that sank into the waterbed. He didn’t know what the hell had come over Robin in the last twenty-four hours, but he couldn’t stand to see his friend struggle like this.

“You boys want to go on an adventure?” John asked nonchalantly, his eyes half-closed and his head still aching.

Once again, a confused silence overcame them all, but this one lasted much shorter.

“‘Adventure’?” Ed asked.

“Oh, God,” Eddy muttered and scuttled off to go find something, not anything in particular, just
something to fulfill a quick and specific purpose.

“Now, Ed, use your inside voice—” Edd requested.

“AVENTU—” Ed was surprised to find a broken microwave shoved into his mouth. He was so overcome with excitement that apparently his nerves went numb, seeing as he didn’t even feel Eddy clamber up his back and stick the appliance in there.

“Ed, shut up,” Eddy said to the air in front of his own face.

As for Double-D, this begat a new moment of anxiety that took precedent over the mystery of the archaic weaponry. “Eddy, get that filthy old thing out of Ed’s mouth! Who knows where it’s been?”

“Can we get some help for this guy over here?” Little John interrupted. “The one with glass in his eyes?” Little John realized that this was the second time in these kids’ presence that Robin had not only been hurt, but had been too damned polite to demand the assistance he needed. This was making John revisit his hypothesis that Robin was too emotionally weak to allow himself to appear weak, even in a situation such as this where it would have been objectively beneficial to do so.

“I mean, I might not have glass in my— aargh!” -- Robin compulsively winced his closed lids again, and something was making that action painful -- “Okay, never mind, I have glass in my eyes.”

Little John turned himself back over and reached for the first-aid kit in the front seat, then turned back over and tossed it out of the van to Double-D, who tried to catch it but just muffed it and watched embarrassed as it hit the ground. He picked it up as John crawled backward out of the van and grabbed Robin to move him around the glass and into the light of day.

Double-D had a lot of questions running through his mind at that moment, but he forced himself to put them aside and focus on tending to Robin’s injuries. John sat himself on the ground and positioned Robin into his lap, holding the fox’s head back so he faced upward and Double-D could get all the light he needed to see what he was going with his patient. Edd put on his gloves, took a breath, and told himself to focus on the task at hand.

“I’m sorry, Future Eddy,” said Ed morosely as he craned over the scene and blocked out the sun.

“It’s, rhgh—” -- Robin seethed in pain again -- “--quite alright, lad.”

“It really isn’t,” said Little John.

“Ed, we appreciate your desire to apologize, but if you’d please give us some space for a moment?” asked Double-D.

Dejected, Ed stepped away without a word, and went back over to Eddy, who was browsing a new pile of trash, seeing if there were any print magazines with nude women of compatible species, completely unimpressed that this heroic type whom he was so bitterly jealous of twenty minutes ago couldn’t handle a little of Ed’s slapstick.

“I just want Double-D to make you unblind so you and Future Me can go back to fighting the Space Outlaws with our sticks and arrows,” Ed said to Eddy.

And that’s when it clicked with him. Something about hearing outlaw and arrow spoken aloud in the same sentence made it all come together. Eddy recalled the few times that the discussions of the Sherwood bandits got detailed enough to stipulate that they were famous for having medieval
weaponry, including the main dude being a badass with a bow and arrow. Eddy remembered, and unless the entire thing was some misunderstanding wherein Robin and John were the forest-dwelling medieval-weapons people in question but the “bandits” part was falsely attributed to them, he had his decisive piece of evidence.

“Ed? Do you... uh...” Eddy was about to tell him, but he thought Ed might overreact as he usually did.

“Yes, Eddy?”

“Can you... do me a favor?”

“What is it, Eddy?”

“So when they’re all done over there, the five of us... we’re all gonna have a little chit-chat. And when we do, there’s gonna be something that really freaks Double-D out.”

“Ohh! What is it, Eddy?”

“I can’t tell you yet, because it’s not my secret to tell. Is those guys’. You get me?”

“I think so, Eddy.”

“So the favor I’m asking of you is that you don’t freak out.”

“But what if I can’t help it, Eddy?”

“Then help it. And I need you to side with me when I tell Double-D I told you so.”

“Hm... But I don’t want to hurt Double-D’s feelings, Eddy!”

“Well if you don’t help me out, you’re gonna hurt my feelings. Do you want that to happen, big guy?”

“... No?”

“Then there ya go.”

Ed and Eddy watched patiently as Double-D used a couple of Q-tips like chopsticks to extract any strange foreign objects from Robin’s eyes, carefully scanning over a second, third, fourth, and fifth time just to make sure nothing was missed.

“Well, Mr. Hood, it appears you got off rather lucky, all things considered!” Double-D announced brightly; he was quite pleased with himself for not only administering attentive and efficient first aid, but for also compartmentalizing his paralyzing fear that his patient and his makeshift nurse both weren’t who they seemed. “Now let’s begin treating your cranial lacerations!”

“Doctor Eddward, I still insist you not call me ‘Mr. Hood’,” said Robin.

“So what’s the word?” Eddy asked as he and Ed walked back over.

“It seems that he shut his eyes at just the right time, Eddy,” Double-D said. “Some shards got into his lashes, and a few chunks got caught between his lids, but there appeared to be nothing tucked under his eyelids nor any visible damage to the corneas.”

“You got lucky again, Rob,” said Little John.
“I supposed I did, eh, Johnny!” Robin said, and in his blind spot Eddy rolled his eyes upon seeing that the elder fox was right back to his unflappably-confident persona. Eddy was honestly starting to think the whole cool-guy act was fake.

Robin sat up under his own power and gave Ed and Eddy a good look for the first time that day. “Ah, now let’s refresh the old memory about who our hosts are. Let’s see, we’ve got Ed… Edd… and--” -- he locked eyes with Eddy and cocked his head with a smirk -- “--now what was your name again?”

“What!?”

Robin let out a deep, hearty laugh, and Little John let out a deeper one.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Eddy my lad, I couldn’t resist!” Robin remarked, and he gave Eddy a friendly smile.

Eddy did not reciprocate, and he could tell in Robin’s face that Rob was surprised Eddy was still fuming over it. Of course, it was not the joke itself, but this guy lording over Eddy again with his excellence at life in general that was rubbing Eddy the wrong way. Robin’s face looked like absolute shit with his eyes red and puffy and coagulated blood clumping his fur together all over his head, but Eddy had a funny feeling that there would still be plenty of people the world over who would find his face compelling in several different senses of the word. Eddy wondered if his brother would also harbor the same hostile jealousy if he ever met this guy. On the one hand, it seemed unlikely, since his brother likewise considered himself a smooth-talking persuader and might even see himself in this stranger; on the other hand, Eddy realized, his brother might be devastated if he realized the one key difference between himself and Robin was that Robin was persuasive inasmuch as he was a well-spoken gentleman and Eddy’s brother was only persuasive inasmuch as he was a successful con-artist, and nobody remembers a con-artist fondly. In that moment, seeing that battered and bloodied smile from the lanky vulpine Englishman, Eddy suddenly didn’t feel so jealous of his brother anymore.

“Now Mr. John,” Double-D said, “if you could hand me the cotton balls and the hydrogen peroxide?”

“Hey, while you do that, we’ve got a question,” Eddy piped up. “What was this adventure you were offering us earlier?” This was the part Eddy still wasn’t sure about. He had no idea what adventure they had in mind, but he had a feeling that it would somehow involve them showing their true colors. And even if the adventure was some sort of trap -- like if they were going to try to rob the three of them -- Eddy believed the feeling of vindication would be worth it.

Double-D, Robin and John were all jarred to hear that brought back up, but Ed had the most visceral reaction. “ADVEN--!”

“Hush,” said Eddy, clearly in no mood for more distractions.

And Ed did. But now Edd needed to say something annoying.

“Eddy, let’s please not think about that until I’ve finished with, uh, Robin’s injuries, would you please?”

“It’s fine,” said Robin, “We can talk as you work.”

“Uh-- n-no, it’s not that I can’t multitask-- no, I’m a good multitasker!” Edd spit out, clearly getting more unnerved with every syllable falling out of his mouth. “But whatever you’re offering may be
too interesting to allow me to maintain my focus on something so important as this.”

Little John decided to push the envelope. “You seem nervous, bud. Something on your mind?”

“Uh, n-no, not really.”

“Well, there’d better be, because if you’re this nervous for no reason, I don’t trust you to operate on my friend.”

“Nonononono, I, um…”

And Eddy was milliseconds away from saying ‘Double-D’s nervous because he thinks the adventure is that you’re going to rape and murder us,’ so as to force Robin and John to say who they really were as a way of refuting Eddy’s accusation, but then he had an idea for a more straightforward approach.

“He’s nervous because he heard a rumor yesterday that there’s two guys running around in the woods with old-ass weapons, robbing rich people and giving the money to poor people,” Eddy said as matter-of-factly as he could while suppressing his self-impressed smirk. “He’s afraid you might be them.”

Double-D’s blood ran cold as he turned around to give Eddy a look. And what a look it was: one of the wolf’s eyes made it look like he was about to tear the big-mouthed little fox limb from limb, while the other made it look like he really needed an adult.

But with his head turned, he didn’t see the nonverbal communication of the adults right in front of him. Robin craned his neck up to look at Little John, who gave Robin a head-tilted-left, lower-lip-out, eyebrows-raised, left-shoulder-shrugging, right-hand-out-interrogatively-with-the-palm-three-quarters-to-the-sky look that seemed to say, ‘What do you think?’, to which Robin nodded calmly a few times with his eyes closed.

“Eddward, young man, you don’t need to fear us,” Robin reassured him. “All we want is to help the poor. And we don’t like using the word robbing.”

Double-D almost snapped his neck from how quickly he turned his head around.

“Yeah, so don’t use that word if you wanna hang with us,” Little John added, then looked up to include Ed and Eddy in his audience. “By the way, did you guys wanna hang with us?”

Eddy didn’t enjoy his moment of validation as much as he thought he would, since he wasn’t as emotionally prepared as he thought he was to hear Robin and John just casually say that they were indeed wanted criminals with a record likely thicker than the dictionary, and the part where they asked them if they just as casually asked if they wanted to join them was, among other things, flummoxing. Ed was more confused than anything, since he had no previous awareness of the urban legend, but in an attempt to please Eddy, he used all of his mental energy to keep himself steadfast, trying to focus his mind on Double-D, who went from looking blankly at Robin to looking blankly at Little John, then to Robin for a bit shorter of an interval, then back to John, and back and forth and back and forth until it looked like he was nodding.

“Is that a yes?” Little John asked half-jokingly, since it really did look like the wolf-boy was nodding.

All of the seagulls, pigeons, and other birds in the junkyard flew away hurriedly at the sound of Double-D’s scream. The poor creatures must have surely thought the world was ending.
“Oh, Jesus Christ,” Little John groaned as he leaned over, picked up Double-D, held him close to his chest like a stuffed animal, and put a paw around his snout to shut him up. “I guess that’s a no, then.” He glanced up and again regarded Ed and Eddy. “Are you two good? Because I only have two hands.”

The younger fox and bear were still thoroughly dumbfounded.

“Uh…” Eddy tried to say something. “Let me get this straight. You want us to--”

“We want some new people to join us in robbing the rich and giving to the poor, until the rich finally give up with being dicks,” Little John said bluntly. “Which might sound like a completely fuckin’ bonkers plan, but we almost pulled it off a few years back before… some shit happened.”

Eddy was going to ask what shit Little John was referring to, but he noticed that Edd looked more uncomfortable than usual in the bear’s grasp. “Uh, I… don’t think he can breathe,” Eddy observed.

John noticed that he had carelessly placed his paw in such a way that it was not only closing the wolf’s mouth but also blocking his nostrils. “Oh! Shit. Sorry, kid!”

GASP. “AAA--!” Double-D wailed in the split second when Little John took his hand off Edd’s mouth to reposition it. John looked down at Robin, who was still sitting in his lap, and gave him a look that clearly said ‘this was a bad idea and I regret it’.

“But why us?” Eddy asked.

Robin felt composed enough to stand again, and stepped a few steps in front of John and Edd. “Because we’re a bit desperate right now, truth be told,” Robin explained, “and maybe our judgment’s been knackered by recent events, but--”

“’Knackered’? What?”

“...Maybe we’re wrong, but it sure seemed like you three could be just the help we needed. For one thing, you were kind enough to give us a place to stay. And the fact that you were hanging out in the junkyard in the first place told us that you boys might be up for anything -- even a crazy proposal like ours. And then there’s the way that you seem like you’re nothing at all alike, and yet here you are, all hanging out together, with a clear bond between you that we could see after knowing you for, what, not even an hour? We need more than one person to join us, but we need them all to be able to cooperate with not only me and John, but each other. Then we see the three of you, all seeming to bring your own skills to the table, and you all seem to already be pretty tight friends. You three are like a package deal!” Robin had prepared for that question while Double-D was tending to his eyes, and it proved to be a great way to take his mind out of his body in that moment. His spiel wasn’t completely ingenuine, but the details he had listed weren’t as impressive as he’d presented them. It seemed better to augment their appeal as a group than to tell them that they chose them out of convenience more than anything else.

Then Ed had something to ask: “You want us to be bad guys with you?” he asked in an unusually small voice.

“Ed, we’re not the bad guys,” said Robin. “But right now the bad guys are in control, and they made doing the right thing wrong and doing the wrong thing right. And they want you to think we’re the bad guys for doing the right thing.”

“I’m confused,” said Ed. “So you’re good guys?”

“I can promise you this much, young man,” Robin said; “We’re doing our best to do what we think
is the right thing. But some bad people made rules and regulations that… let’s just say that right now, we’re in a spot where it seems that doing the right thing requires us to break some rules.”

Robin turned around and locked eyes with Double-D, who was too afraid to look away. “And we have our internal conflicts about what we do. Absolutely! Every single day! But we’ve thought long and hard about it and we’ve come to the conclusion that we’re simply in an unwinnable situation. But again, we’re doing our best.”

Then he turned to the younger fox, the one he regarded as an arsehole and thought going into this was going to be the hardest to convince to answer the call. “And we believe this because we see the effect that it has on the people of Nottingham. All over the West Side, people are grateful that we come by and help them out when nobody else could, or would. People are starving, people don’t have enough clothes, people can’t find jobs, the people who can find jobs can hardly afford to get themselves to work, renters are being evicted because their landlords are greedy and homeowners are getting priced out of their homes because of a mayor who says he thinks he can forcefully raise an area’s land value by jacking up the property taxes! ...But we all know he doesn’t actually think that’s how it works...”

Robin trailed off for a second to get a good look at Eddy. He still looked deeply unimpressed. So Robin tried to pitch the concept in a way that Eddy might like to hear.

“...I know you kids and your comfortable suburban lives might not fully understand the situation on the other side of the forest, but I can assure you that those people adore us for the work we do to make their lives bearable. It’s the most rewarding work we’ve ever done. To them…” -- Robin thought for a moment to carefully pick his choice of words -- “...we’re heroes.”

And that word did indeed catch Eddy’s attention, but he would never show it. He still wasn’t convinced that this guy’s personality wasn’t completely fake. As a way of feeling better about himself, Eddy started telling himself that other people would surely see this British guy acting like a classical gentleman and surely think it was fake, too. But then again, Eddy had very little frame of reference for how well Robin’s personality went over with other people, and if Robin was correct in saying that a large chunk of a major American city loved him, then maybe whether his gentlemanliness was fake or not was irrelevant; after all, it had won over Double-D.

“So long story short,” Little John said, “morality is gray, there ain’t no good or bad people, just people who do more good things than bad things and vice versa.” He then looked down at Double-D and forced the kid’s head up to make sure he looked back at him. “And we thought you boys were smart enough to get that. We’d sure hate to be wrong about that, now wouldn’t we be?” he asked sternly.

Double-D gave him a look much like he gave Eddy. In one eye was a fire of rage at this monster who -- being a million-times-over repeat-offending criminal -- had the iconoclastic audacity to say that he and his friend were morally and intellectually superior to him, a law-abiding model citizen (granted, Double-D clearly heard the part where Little John refuted the claim that they thought that they, or anybody else, was a necessarily good person, but Double-D quite frankly didn’t believe that); the other eye shivered in a blizzard of fear and uncertainty, silently mourning the death of justice.

Little John continued. “We’ve never killed anybody, we almost never give somebody major injuries, we don’t strike first when we don’t have to, and when we get the inkling that somebody’s good enough to be let off the hook, we let them off the hook. How old are you kids?”

“Fourteen,” Eddy answered; he himself wouldn’t be fourteen for another month, but he didn’t think that detail was worth stipulating.
“Yeah, we guessed somewhere around there. We thought that you guys had good hearts inside of hearts of teenage rebels; we thought you guys would hear what we did and would think it was some punk-rock way of saying ‘fuck the world’ while simultaneously improving the world. I… maybe we were wrong.”

Little John found himself getting bummed out over bad memories -- the way John described how he thought the Eds to be basically described Will to a tee. John forced himself to plow through it, drawing attention away from the fact that these same thoughts had compelled Robin to look down at his own feet and focus his eyes on nothing in particular for longer than a confident-seeming person would.

“You kids don’t have to join us if you really don’t want to,” Little John concluded. “But you owe it to yourselves not to squeal on us. We’re just two people trying to do the right thing. We met once, we’ll go find somewhere else to stay, and you stay out of our business and we’ll stay out of yours.”

“Well… hey, man--” -- Eddy was right back to being nervous now that the scary-looking Little John was talking -- “…it’s not me and Ed you gotta worry about squealin’ on ya. It’s Sock-Head who’s all anal about rules and stuff.”

Little John looked down at the wolf in his grasp again. “‘Sock-Head’? Is that what they call you?”

Double-D saw the upside-down face of his grisly grizzly captor. Edd’s fear of germs was quite literally crippling as it prevented him from being physically capable of soiling his undergarments.

“I’ll tell you what, Sock-Head,” said Little John. “If you get the cops on us, you’d better hope they kill us dead, because if we’re still alive, we’re gonna tell them you harbored a couple of wanted criminals!”

“Little John!” said Robin. “Calm down! You’re scaring him!”

“Good! That’s what I’m trying to do! I’m tryna cover our asses, Robin!”

“Hm. Fair point. But you’re giving them a bad impression of how we operate.” Robin turned to Ed and Eddy. “Don’t worry, lads; we only use coercion when we absolutely need to, such as right now.”

Neither Ed nor Eddy knew the word coercion.

“I think Double-D wants to say something!” said Ed.

“Does he now?” asked Little John sardonically. He looked at Double-D. “Kid, I’m gonna let go of your mouth, but you better say actual words, or I’m gonna swing you around by the tail and do my damnedest to send you into outer space. Do you understand me?”

“Mmhmm!” Edd pleaded.

“I don’t like being this mean to you or to anybody else, alright? Because people were mean to me like that before and I know it didn’t make me want to be like them. But when people really, really, really piss me off… I don’t think straight. I don’t think about trying to convince them to be different. I just want to be really, really mean to them. Understand?”

“Mmhmm!”

“And I ain’t proud of that. I wish I could win people over and change them. Which is why it’s all the worse when people piss me off. Because if you put me through a moment of weakness…”
goddammit, I’m gonna try to make you feel even weaker. And right now, you’re pissing me off. You understand?"

“Mmhmm!”

“I’m sorry for the long speech, kid, but if we’re gonna be working together, I need you to know that. I can be friendly if you give me a reason to be friendly, but I can--”

“I thought you said you were sorry for the long speech!” shot Eddy, suddenly emboldened by the revelation that the large bear was currently feeling emotional weakness.

“Hey, you’re next!” John shot back. “Everything I’m saying to him, I’m saying to you, too!”

Eddy was very tempted to call his bluff about the swing-him-around-by-the-tail thing, but he resisted the urge.


He unclasped his hand from the wolf’s snout, and Double-D gasped as though he had been suffocating the entire time. In reality, he just wanted to open his jaw for the first time in as long as his raddled mind could remember.

“Oh, c’mon, kid, I wasn’t squeezing that hard on your nose!”

Double-D took a couple of deep breaths through his mouth, eyes unfocused and staring off into space, and slowly came back down to earth.

“Now remember, if you wanna have a civil conversation, you hafta converse civilly,” said John.

“We haven’t hurt you yet, lad,” Robin said as he walked over. “We aren’t going to hurt you now.”

Double-D looked slowly from Robin to John to Robin again, and tried to think and pick his words carefully. He also glanced over to his friends, pleading with his eyes to help, but it was clear that they wanted no part of this.

Edd, still being held close to Little John’s chest, chose to address Robin first.

“I… trusted you. And you misled me.” Double-D’s voice quivered as he spoke.

“And for that, we apologize,” said Robin.

“Wait,” said John. “We didn’t lie that much, did we? I mean the microwave-fire thing was a lie, but we told you our real names for Christ’s sakes. We don’t usually share that with people we just met.”

“Oh, you told us you were actors!” Double-D protested, his intonation wobbly and flustered.

“Yes, that really wasn’t a lie,” said Little John.

“Oh, really!? Explain yourselves!”

“We dress up in disguises and compel people to give us their money, we don’t stick a gun in their face and tell them fork over their wallets! What the hell do you take us for!?”

“THIEVES!” Double-D’s throat sounded like it hurt as he screamed. “I take you for thieves! Cooks! Criminals! Bandits, outlaws, scoundrels, hooligans, scourges upon civilized society! I take you for
devils, thugs, bullies–!”

“Hey, Rob. Do you think that having the fuckin’ dictionary memorized is a useful skill to us?”

“Oh, does my intelligence make you feel inferior!”?

“Wh- th--!” Little John sputtered as he turned the wolf around to face him. “Holy shit, you actually think I’m stupid, don’t you? You really think you’re a genius and I’m a dumbass, don’t you?”

In the flurry, Double-D didn’t notice the repulsed look on Robin’s face. Said look was not directed at John.

“An intelligent person doesn’t live as a serial mugger!” Double-D said. “And they especially don’t speak as vulgarly as you!”

“Well I’m sorry that you think the culture I grew up in is inferior, you fucking racist!” John shot back, half in jest.

“If you were truly intelligent, you would have abandoned all tenets of your inferior, unintellectual, and quite frankly bigotted backwater culture!” Once again, he was prepared for death at any moment, and standing up against ignorance was a hill he would be honored to die on.

Little John’s eyes burst all the way open, and he almost had the urge to let out a stupefied chuckle. He couldn’t believe how badly this kid was burying himself. “Rob, you hearing this?”

“To my disbelief, I am,” said Robin. At that comment, he and Edd shot each other unimpressed looks, their opinions of one another thoroughly deflated.

“Well, listen, kid,” said John, “I’m not gonna swing you around by the tail. But I am gonna throw you really, really far.”

“What!?”

Little John stood and placed his hands around Double-D as though he were a football. “Fasten your seatbelts, Little John Airlines Flight Ten-Eighteen is takin’ off for Timbuktu!”

“Wait, no!”

Little John wound up to toss him, but never actually let go. He just brought him back around to face him again.

“Chill out, kid, I’m not gonna actually--”

“NO!” came a dopey voice. Thump. “Oof!”

Little John realized he was suddenly staring at the sky. “What the fuck?” He looked down and saw that Ed had tackled him.

“I’m not gonna let you throw my Double-D into space!” Ed cried.

Beyond their huddled mass, he could see the two foxes. The small one was stifling a laugh while the large one just looked confused. John could not, however, see the wolf.

“You ain’t gonna let me throw him, but you’re gonna let yourself suffocate him?”
Ed took a second to process the words before he hopped up to see Double-D flattened on John’s stomach. Double-D clearly had the wind knocked out of him.

“Oops. Sorry, Double-D,” Ed said as he picked up Edd, who looked like he was about to go into shock if his diaphragm didn’t get working again soon.

“But that’s why we asked you,” Robin piped up. “That kind of devotion to save your friends and to do what you think is right, even if it means putting yourself in danger and hurting bad people.”

“Without taking enjoyment in hurting bad people, because we’re not fucking psychos,” John added, himself a bit winded from impact and grateful that the firearm in his pants didn’t discharge. “We had a friend who… over the years, he got more and more enjoyment out of robbing people. Like, too much. It stopped being noble and started being disturbing. But he’s in jail for doing extracurricular stuff we had nothing to do with, so you’ll never have to meet him. Just in case you thought we were like some kind of self-righteous sadistics who want to overthrow the entire country like he did. We want to help people, not start an all-out class war.”

Eddy jumped in: “Are you sure you don’t like hurting people for fun? Because Double-D thought you did!”

John looked at Double-D, who was still catching his breath. “Oh, I love a good brawl! And I hate how much I love it!” He smirked. “You see? We ain’t just criminals; we’re complex!”

“Complex!” Robin echoed. “Perfect choice of words, Little John!”

“Thank ya kindly, milord.”

Robin walked over to Double-D. “How’re you feeling, lad?”

“And you know what? I understand that. When I was your age, I would have reacted in exactly the same way to meeting someone like us.”

“Then where along the line did you decide to dispose of what is clearly a well-bred upbringing and become a scoundrel?”

Robin was tempted to point out that he was only half well-bred, but he decided that either he would have plenty of time in the future to clarify that, or he wouldn’t, in which case it wouldn’t matter. So instead he decided to respond more poignantly.

“I decided that when I realized that this world is far too messy for morality to fit into black and white,” Robin answered. “And I wish that it didn’t have to be this way. John and I both wish we didn’t find ourselves in such a spot where we think a life of crime is the best life we can live. But here we are.”

“You think that victimizing innocent people is going to make anything better?!” Double-D snarled.

“The people we prey on ain’t innocent,” said Little John. “Rob, didn’t I already mention we screen people before we rob them?”

“You did, John,” said Robin, “though he may have been too flustered to pay attention. But Eddward-- or shall I call you ‘Double-D’?”

“I repeat: I do not want you to speak to me at all!” Double-D repeated.
“Double-D,” Robin spoke, “I pray you don’t take this question as some sort of gotcha, truly I do hope, but in all genuineness, I need to ask: what do you plan to do to remedy the rampant poverty and subjugation in the city?”

And just as planned, that shut Double-D right up.

“Maybe you don’t have a plan yet,” Robin continued. “And that’s fine. You’re kids; I can’t expect you to have solutions to problems the adults can’t even fix. But surely you must understand us when we say that when John and I go about stealing from callous, bullying, mean-spirited rich people who seem to be delayed in receiving their comeuppance, and we give that money to some downtrodden soul who…” -- Robin found himself getting upset just thinking about it -- “…who doesn’t know whether they’ll still have food and shelter in a week’s time, and we see the look on their face, their eyes light up, and it’s like we’ve just given them the will to live all over again, and, and… Blimey, where was I going with this sentence?”

“‘You must understand us when we say…’” said Little John.

“Ah, yes! You must believe us when we say that when we do that, and we can see we’re making a positive difference in people’s lives, then in that moment, it would be a tough sell to tell us that we’re simply evil and nothing more.”

Double-D looked like he was trying to stay angry.

“And maybe we’re wrong,” said Robin. “Maybe you’re right and we really are making things worse. Heaven knows the thought’s crossed our minds. But the fact of the matter is that people are hungry and tired and naked and cold and just miserable… until we show up. To us, this is a solution. So I ask again: would you have a better idea? Because we would love to hear it.”

Robin was putting on his patented welcoming look to try to get the best possible answers out of the wolf-boy, but he was prepared for this communication to break down even further, as it looked very much like Double-D was about to start crying self-loathing tears in realization that he was in philosophical checkmate.

But Robin wasn’t looking at Eddy, which is a shame, because the younger fox was visibly intrigued by the tales of being regarded as a bringer of light in a world of darkness. He wasn’t too happy with the part where they were taking money from the rich, which was a demographic that Eddy aspired to one day be a member of. But he really liked the part where -- assuming this wasn’t all complete bullshit -- they had the admiration of the public. All Eddy wanted in life was wealth and acceptance; now he was starting to wonder if he only wanted one as an avenue to the other.

“…Or do you not want to help the starving people in the city?” Robin asked, tired of waiting, and allowing himself to indulge in some passive aggression. “You do know they’re starving, right?”

“Th-th-they can… vote!” burst Double-D. “They can vote for officials who will--”

“Shit, he really doesn’t get it,” remarked Little John. “Kid, voting is great and all, but it doesn’t guarantee that any of the candidates are going to give a shit about the people they serve. In a lot of places, there just aren’t any good options. Hell, in this town, anybody who would want to challenge John Norman is either paid off or scared off.”

This was news to Double-D. Although he could probably list all of the presidents and vice presidents of the United States in chronological order, he didn’t actually know too much about how politics worked in reality. “B-but surely there’s someone who can run for mayor who’s not bound in the clutches of corruption! An everyday citizen could--”
“An everyday citizen? Kid, do you know how much clout you have to have to get taken seriously on the ballot? Do you know how much election campaigns cost? And even if some random guy had a chance at taking on Prince John, they--”

“Prince John’?” Double-D asked for clarification.

“That’s what we call John Norman,” said Robin.

“Because he’s barely a mayor but he’s bratty and whiny enough to be a spoiled little prince,” explained John. “But yeah, kid, there’s too many ways to cheat in politics, and even if there wasn’t, what? You’re gonna wait until November of next year to get elected? And then, like, what? After a year after that to get sworn in? Push some new laws through the city legislature? If the lawmakers aren’t already in your back pocket, that’s gonna take forever, and again, who’s to say it’s gonna pass? Wait, hell, there’s another thing! You’d have to find good people to replace a lot more people than just the mayor! The system’s infected all the way up and down, and you’d have to--”

“Johnny, Johnny!” Robin cut him off. “I think he gets your point. You don’t need to get so worked up over this.”

Little John looked like his rant had made him feel exhausted. “Jesus, kid, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t want to be the bad guy when I’m stealing shit from people, I don’t want to be the bad guy when I’m in a fistfight, and I don’t want to be the bad guy when I’m talking to some kid I only met a few times. But… I need to say, kid. Me and Rob were really putting ourselves out there by asking you guys to join us, because the rich people are getting meaner and we could really use some help. Then you guys respond worse than we ever coulda imagined when we took a risk and asked you, and quite frankly, that made me lose my goddamn mind. And I know how fucked up it is that I put my life on the line every day, running from bullets and shit, and this is the thing that gives me anxiety, but--”

“Running from bullets’!? How daredevilish are your exploits!”

“You see? There ya go. We thought you kids would be up for something exciting -- something fulfilling -- but I guess we got a really bad read on you. And like the poor people downtown’ll tell you, nothing brings out the worst in you than when you really need help and the people you ask for it from tell you no.”

“Can I say something?” asked Robin. “Double-D… going back to the whole idea of fixing everything… John and I don’t pretend to have a long-term solution. What we do first and foremost is a short-term solution to curbing misery. If we find a way to use our tactics to scare all the politicians in this town straight so that they’ll never be corrupt again--”

“Which we almost did a few years back, before something out of our control happened!” Little John interjected. “But you suburban kids probably never heard about it because Prince John was so embarrassed that he paid off all the newspapers and TV stations not to talk about it.”

“So if you didn’t hear it straight from a Nottingham native’s mouth, you probably never heard of it at all. Do you know what we’re referring to, Eddward?”

Edd shook his head.

“Ed, Eddy?”

They shook their heads.

“It’s amazing the difference two sides of a forest can make,” Robin remarked. “But Double-D, in
many ways I admire you. You seem like you would much rather fix this problem from the inside
and without breaking any eggs. I wish -- I wish -- I had the mind and patience to do that, and I’m
sure Little John does, too.”

“Damn straight, I wish I could work miracles like that.”

“But our flaw, Double-D, is that we’re just too impatient. People need help now, and as Little John
said, I just can’t wait for political change to come about organically. You know, Eddward, I was
like you once. I was raised to be studious, straight-laced, polite… but above all, I was bred to be
unrebellious. I was told to always follow the rules, as I could trust that the rules were the rules for a
very good reason.” Robin called upon his training as an actor and put up a dramatic pause to evoke
the feeling of internal conflict and anguish. “But then I saw that that was not the case. And at the
time, it ruined me. It made me wonder if everything I was built up to be was for the wrong reasons,
to keep me a cog in a system that isn’t necessarily broken so much as it is being used for ill-
begotten means. I really do hope you never have such a moment of realization, Eddward. I hope
you can maintain your innocence. Because you’re a good lad, Eddward. And the ferocity you
showed when you tried to defend the straight-laced life you’ve always known? If we could channel
that to defend the poor? Oh, we’d be set! But I can’t force you to do something you’re not
comfortable with if you have good reasons to not be comfortable with it. That’s not who we are.”

“You’re not comfortable forcing me to join your rascalry but you’re comfortable forcing people to
give your their money!?” Double-D shot back.

“A fair point! Imagine if we had your cleverness on our side! Maybe you can be the cunning one
and Little John can be the strong one, and I’ll simply be the one who isn’t the best at anything but
keeping the group’s cohesion together!”

Off to the side, Eddy felt a strange resonance with that statement.

“Double-D, I’ve rambled long enough. I just want to end by saying this: I -- we -- have a moral
compass, and we’re trying to follow it where it leads us. We understand if you don’t agree with it,
but we only ask that you respect that we’re doing our best to be the best men that we can be.”

Edd recognized that there was nothing else he could say to sway them, so he tried to be the bigger
man. “I do not agree with your worldview or tactics, Mr. Hood, though I will dignify that you are
doing what you believe to be the right thing.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we could have this talk.”

“So is that a hard no from all of you?” asked Little John. He looked to Ed and then to Eddy. “How
about you two? You guys haven’t said much.”

“Oh! Uh, just, uh… just listenin’!” Eddy said. “But, uh… I’m kinda still confused about the bow
and arrow and the, uh…”

“The big fuckin’ stick?”

“Uh, yeah, that!”

“What can we say?” said Robin. “We prefer them. They give us a distinct style that nobody else
can copy.”

“Doesn’t that make you stick out like a sore thumb?” Eddy asked.

“In some ways, absolutely, but in other ways, you can’t hear these from miles away like you could
a gunshot.”

“Besides, guns and bullets are too easy to trace, and not much easier to find when you’re wanted criminals,” John added.

“And in the hands of experts like ourselves, a bow and a staff can scare the bad guys, maybe hurt them if we need to, but not quite kill them. We don’t want to do that.”

“Like we said, we’re not evil,” said John. “I actually used to have a bow, too, but it broke and we’ve never had a chance to get me a new one. Maybe we could find one when we’re finding something you guys can use?”

“Oh, don’t worry about us,” said Double-D insolently, “we’re not interested, now are we, Eddy?”

Eddy was lost in thought. He was imagining himself doing such things, robbing people with outdated weaponry and then being exalted as a hero for it. He wasn’t too keen on actually doing it - again, this could all be bullshit -- but it was an interesting thought to ponder. Although he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something ridiculous about running around with a bow and arrow and acting like a hero. Not because it was inherently shameful, but because it was reminiscent of something else that teenage boys would typically find shameful.

“Hey!” Eddy exclaimed. “You guys are kinda like, uh… wha-what’s that story that they turned into a Sidney movie?”

Eddy knew exactly which film from the ubiquitous family-movie studio’s animated canon he was thinking of, but it wasn’t cool for teenage boys to like Sidney movies. According to any teenager in America, the best way to dispel rumors that you like something uncool is to feign ignorance of it altogether.

“Where they’re running around with bows and arrows in, like, Old-Timey Land?” Eddy continued, hoping someone else would fill in the blanks.

Ed didn’t know which Sidney movie Eddy was referring to, because even as a young child, Ed had always preferred watching scary movies and paranormal TV shows on cable.

“And they live in the woods because they’re outlaws?” Eddy continued still. “But they’re supposed to be the good guys because, um, the government is corrupt or something?”

Double-D did know what mythos Eddy was referring to, but he didn’t want to say it. His embarrassment had nothing to do with adolescent insecurities like it did with Eddy, but more-so that he was afraid that having a knowledge of animated films marketed toward young children would conflict with his reputation as the intellectual one. Or at least that’s what Double-D would tell himself. The fact of the matter is that he had a history with that movie and he didn’t dare speak its name.

Eddy was regretting ever saying anything. “And in the Sidney movie they’re all humans for some reason?”

Oddly enough, it was the adults who recognized which children’s movie the children were confused about.

“Do you mean the legend of Adam Bell?” asked Robin.

“Yeah, that’s it!” said Eddy, relieved to be relieved.
“Yeah, who could forget ol’ Adam Bell?” asked Little John. “I mean, I never actually got to see the cartoon movie because my dad didn’t want me watching kid stuff like that, but I remember when it came out when I was a little kid. Everybody knows the story of Adam Bell! A timeless classic, cartoon or not!”

“Of course!” added Robin. “I myself wasn’t old enough to remember it when it was new, but I saw it on re-releases, and a few years after that, I saw it on tape when VCRs started coming about!” While Robin’s nuclear family wasn’t quite moneyed enough to acquire a VCR when they first became widely available in the early 1980s, Robert and his family were, and as a frequent guest of the Scarlett house, young Robin had full access to their collection of children’s movies; Sidney’s *Adam Bell* was one of those movies, probably one of his childhood favorites, and if Robin ever found out that the date that film debuted in Los Angeles was also the date Robin himself was born in Loxley, he would find that to be a very pleasing coincidence.

Now Robin remembered the first few times he sat down and watched a movie on videocassette at the Scarlett house, circa 1982, his toddler half-brother Will sat next to him on the oversized seat under an afghan blanket, and he remembered how the creeping discomfort of being a stranger in his illegitimate father’s house was assuaged by the warm presence of the young boy who had always adored Robin and seemed to know from the second he laid eyes upon him that Robin was his brother. He remembered how so many moments that he shared with Will back home in England were tarnished by Robert’s presence as he shuffled them through no-nonsense aristocratic activities like banquets, balls, low-velocity yachting, highly-supervised sword-fighting practice, the aforementioned etiquette classes that Will refused to even attend, and other activities hostile to the young mind and spirit, and yet he found himself thinking that maybe this made him appreciate more of the rare moments when they just got to be normal kids together, whether that was kicking a football around, splashing around in Robert’s pool, playing unsupervised with plastic toy swords, or just running through the Scarletts’ enormous garden, or even just sitting down to watch a cartoon movie together, unbothered by the adults who didn’t understand them as they sat alone in a spare room, the eight-and-a-half-year-old’s arm around the three-and-a-half-year-old’s shoulder to keep him feeling safe in the room that was dark except for the fantastic technicolor coming from the grainy screen and the light seeping in from the gray English Sunday afternoon outside the window.

Splendid, now Robin was sad all over again, and for the second time today over Will specifically. But this was no time to show it. He made a mental note to stare wistfully into space while pondering whether he should lament that he didn’t have more innocent moments like that with his brother or be grateful that he had just enough to appreciate how special they were. Now it was time to go back to educating a bunch of Yankees on English culture.

“Yes, I may have taken some inspiration from Adam Bell. I confess,” Robin continued. “The stories of him and William of Cloudsley and Clym of the Clough running around Inglewood Forest outside of Carlisle and raising hell for one hell of a good cause… who wouldn’t find that almost romantic? You boys must remember what a strong part of my country’s culture the legend of Adam Bell is, so it mustn’t surprise you too much that the stories of him would always be in the back of my mind!”

“My sister Sarah doesn’t like that movie because she thinks it’s weird that they’re all humans,” Ed chimed in. Meanwhile, Double-D -- still in Ed’s arms for lack of a better place to be -- was trying to avoid eye contact with anybody until the conversation went in a different direction. Suffice it to say that the topic was doing nothing to assuage Edd’s internal conflict about his perceptions of good and evil.

“You guys really run around with a bow and arrow and never get caught?” asked Eddy.
Robin began to reaffirm their story. “Lad, you’d be surprised by how well we--”

And then, an epiphany came to him.

“...You know what?” Robin asked. “I think actions speak louder than words. Little John, tell me if this is a good idea: lads, I invite you all to come witness us in action -- from a safe distance, of course! We aren’t going to throw you into the fire right away -- hell, we’d rather keep you away from the fire for now. We just want to show you who we are, what we do, and what we’re all about. Perhaps that will help to better develop your opinion of us. After all, there’s only so much we can convey with words; there’s so much more we can show you by showing you! Little John, am I crazy?”

“I mean, you are crazy, but that’s a good idea!” John answered. “It’ll be like a ride-along!”

“Precisely! So, are you boys willing?”

And once again, he was met with blank stares.

“Oh, I’m sorry to put you on the spot like that, boys,” said Robin. “I’m just excited to get the chance to--”

“I’ll do it.”

“Huh-- what?”

“I’ll do it,” Eddy repeated. “I want to know who you guys really are.”

“In that case, Eddy, we’d be happy to show you!” Robin beamed, pleasantly surprised that the nastiest one of the boys was the first to come around to their way of thinking.

“Um, Ed? Mr. Hood? May I have a moment to speak with Eddy?” asked Double-D.

“Most assuredly. We’re not the kind to keep friends apart.”

“Um, Ed, could you let me d--? Oof!” Double-D landed with a thump, then made his way over to Eddy, who was still standing coolly in the corner, not making any effort to meet Edd in the middle.

“’Sup, Sock-Head?”

“Eddy, have you lost your mind!?” Double-D said in what he thought was a quiet enough voice.

“You know what, Edd? I didn’t lose my mind. I lost my confidence in our group dynamic.”

Double-D noticed Eddy called him Edd instead of Double-D again, and that the usual franticness in Eddy’s voice was once again absent.

“I get it if you don’t want to take these guys up on their wacky-ass offer, Edd,” Eddy continued, “but I need a change of pace. Let me make my own decisions and see the world outside of this cul-de-sac. If it sucks, I’ll let you know and I’ll come back to you, but we’re gonna be adults before you know it, Double-D, and as much as I don’t want to waste my youth, I don’t want to be unprepared for being a grown-up, either. I want to live now, Edd; I’m tired of waitin’. Join me or don’t.”

And Double-D wanted to knock some sense into his little fox friend, but between all the absurd revelations and traumatic talking points of the day, he just had no mental energy left. In fact, as he often did when his brain was tired, he found himself vulnerable to Eddy’s persuasion.
Ed lumbered over behind them. “What’s going on, guys?”

Eddy didn’t answer. Double-D did answer, but he didn’t answer Ed.

“Very well, then. Where are we off to first?” the wolf asked the elder fox and bear.

“Wait, you!” asked Little John, who was just now standing back up off the ground. “I-I mean, you’re still welcome to come, we just… didn’t think you wanted to.”

“We stick together. It’s an Ed thing,” Double-D replied resolutely. “Your end of the deal is to give us that adventure you promised, and don’t make us regret it.”

“Adventure!?” asked Ed. He didn’t care what path he went down as long as Edd and Eddy were there to walk down that path with him.

“Yes, Ed,” said Eddy calmly, pleasantly surprised by Double-D’s resolve. “Adventure.”

“So again: where are we going first?” asked Double-D firmly.

“Lads, lads, we’re glad you’ve decided to accept our invitation,” said Robin, trying to conceal his own surprise at Double-D’s decision. “But we’re going to need some time to get ready. How about you boys head home, have a nice lunch, and meet us back here in, oh, three hours’ time?”

“And change into some clothes you won’t mind getting dirty,” said Little John. “Not because we’re gonna throw you in a mud pit or something, but because we’re gonna be walking straight through Sherwood. Come to think of it, bring some walking shoes, too.”

“In three hours’ time, we’ll be here,” said Double-D, and he started to walk off.

“Hey, one quick question,” said Little John. “Just in case this one tattle-tales on us --” -- he was pointing to Double-D -- “--what’s his address?”

“What?” asked Edd, his determined countenance vanished.

“201 Rethink Avenue. In Peach Creek,” said Eddy with a smirk, and Edd gave him a dirty look.

“Rethink Avenue?” asked Little John. Robin shared his confused look at the quirky label.

“Yup!” said Eddy. “A block over from to Reimagine. His house is at the corner with Harris Street.”

“...That’s a stupid name, but I won’t forget it.”

Eddy walked past Ed and Double-D, and the other two followed him back to the cul-de-sac.

“See ya later, Future Me and Future Eddy!” hollered Ed.

“See you soon!” bid Robin.

“Later, bucko,” said Little John; as soon as they were gone, he looked at Robin. “Jesus fuck, those kids have issues.”

“As people, or with each other?”

“Shit, both.”

“Well, you must remember Johnny, we were very lucky to find each other,” Robin said as he made
his way back toward the van. “It’s not terribly common for two capable specimens to also be compatible as business partners.”

“And friends,” John added, just in case Robin wasn’t going to.

“And of course as friends.”

Without telling one another to do so, they both started wiping off the glass shards from the mattress.

“...This isn’t gonna end well, is it?” asked John. “With the kids.” And with us two, he thought.

“We’ll have time to plot our course,” said Robin without looking at him. He seemed vaguely morose again.

“Rob, why do people always think I’m stupid?”

“Because people are quick to judge,” Robin answered, still not looking at John. “You needn’t worry; you’re doing everything right. I and everyone else who cares about you knows you’re as smart as they come.”

Yeah, but who cares about me besides you at this point? John thought. “Sure, but is there something I could be doing differently? So people aren’t so quick to judge?”

“You’re doing everything right, Little John.” He still wasn’t looking at John as he shoveled the glass bits off to the side with his shoe.

“Do I need to start speaking like you? Because the wolf kid seemed pretty hung up on the way I talk. Or do I need to lose my accent? But then ya say my accent isn’t even that strong anymore.”

Robin stopped fussing with the broken glass and gave a broken look to his friend.

“Do you remember the other night when I told you that I liked you just the way you are?”

Little John suddenly stopped worrying about his public image. “Rob… you okay, buddy?” Upon seeing Robin’s face, John now felt a tad alarmed, and regretted that he may have come across as whiny in his last few sentences.

“I’m just not completely over last night,” Robin confessed. “And some things said kind of made it worse.”

“Like what?”

“It’s too much to explain.”

“Do you want to talk about it while we go look for breakfast?”

“I actually ask that I can have a few moments alone,” Robin said as he opened the side door and started pulling out his bow and quiver. “I’ll go look for food while you stay here and keep watch over the van.”

“Robin, no, I can’t leave you alone out there.”

“I need to recharge for a moment, Johnny. Usually talking to people makes me feel lively, but that conversation just made me feel… exhausted.”
“Then you should stay here and go back to sleep while I go get food.”

“I recharge well in the presence of nature, Little John, you know that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about anything? Because it kills me to see you like this. This isn’t the Robin Hood I know.”

Don’t remind me, Robin thought. “You won’t have to see me like this if you give me a bit to get this out of my system.”

Little John breathed for a moment. “Goddammit, just be careful, Robin.”

“You know I always try to.” Then Robin went back into the van and retrieved the pencil pouch.

“Actually, I would like to talk, but... with some people I haven’t spoken to in a while. Do you mind if I borrow this?”

Little John understood. “Alright, but just don’t lose it.” Aw, hell, it’s mostly your friends’ stuff in there anyway, he thought.

“Thank you, Johnny. I shan’t be long.”

“You sure you can reach the berries off the branches by yourself?” John asked, hoping to add some levity to the conversation.

“I’ll find a way.” Robin was unfazed.

“Rob, seriously, man, remember: I love ya, brother.”

“And I don’t ever want you to feel like I don’t reciprocate that.” Though I really wish I thought as highly of myself as you do, Little John. “But right now I just need a bit to myself. To think.”

“Don’t do anything stupid, Rob. And if I hear any screaming, I’ll come runnin’! Y’understand?”

“Neither of those will be a worry, Little John. But I appreciate your concern.” And Robin walked off toward Sherwood Forest alone.

As he crossed the Peach Creek and waded his way into the thicket of trees, Robin thought about what to say when he had a moment alone with his photos of Marian to ask for her guidance and forgiveness, and then what to say when he was alone with his photos of Will to ask for his guidance and forgiveness, and then if he felt he had time, he might call upon his mother or Oliver as well. He wanted to think he was asking them for a sign in what to do next, and although he knew he would get no answers, he wanted to at least verbalize his fears and concerns and regrets to the people he wished he could tell them to.

But as he stepped over broken branches and exposed roots, he thought of all the great relationships he had squandered because he was too impatient, or too reckless, or too daring, or too foolish, and he thought that if Woodland’s forces popped out of the wildwood and shot him dead right there, he certainly wouldn’t be happy with that arrangement, but it would be fitting, as it would bring another premature end to his last surviving bond with another living being.
Chapter Summary

Mayor "Prince" John Norman accidentally reveals some of his history with the Merry Men in this leaked phone conversation.

13. “Auxiliary Document 1”

The following audio transcript is from a video of unknown origin. The video is near-exclusively audio with a still constant caption reading “Nottingham mayor John Norman calls me” appearing to have been rendered in Windows MovieMaker. The original title of the video, its original upload date, and the identity of the uploader are unknown, although it is widely believed that the uploader is also the unidentified male voice in the video. Given clues in the audio to the date of its recording, the video may have been one of the first videos uploaded to YouTube; URLs supposedly leading to the video and the uploader’s channel state that the video has been deleted and the account associated with the video has been terminated. It has since resurfaced on LiveLeak in 2011 and DailyMotion in 2013, with the DailyMotion uploader clarifying in the post’s lengthy title that they were not the original creator of the video, nor did they have any connection to or knowledge of that individual.

(click)

MALE VOICE: Hello?

NOTTINGHAM MAYOR JOHN NORMAN: Do you have the results yet?

MV: ...Huh?

JN: The DNA test! Are the results in yet?

MV: Hey, man, I think you’ve got the wrong number.

JN: Ha! Very funny.

MV: I mean, I don’t know you.

JN: Excuse me, sir, but I expect an employee of mine to understand that this is no time for levity.

MV: Hey, all I know is I’m hearing a British accent, and I’d better not be getting charged for a long-distance call for answering this.

JN: Must I repeat myself? I’m in no mood for joking about.

MV: You still haven’t told me who you are.

JN: You don’t recognize the voice of your own mayor?

MV: I’m pretty sure my town’s mayor isn’t British.

JN: What a card you are.
MV: And I think it’s a chick.

JN: Well if you want to live and work in the City of Nottingham, you’d best familiarize yourself to the sound of my voice.

MV: I don’t want to live and work in the City of Nottingham.

JN: Then how unfortunate it must be for you that you already do live and work here.

MV: I don’t.

JN: Well you won’t be keeping your job for very long if you don’t drop this banal ruse and answer my questions.

MV: I’m not fucking with you, buddy, I really think you have the wrong number.

JN: Pardon your French. Did you find any forensic leads from the pig mask?

(silence)

JN: Hello!?

MV: What?

JN: Did you hear me?

MV: No, I took the phone away from my ear for a sec’ to check that you had an American phone number.

JN: Would it matter if I called you while I was visiting back home?

MV: I mean, I don’t pay the phone bill here, so I really don’t want to piss someone else off if I get us charged for a call from England.

JN: Of course you don’t pay the phone bill, WE pay your phone bill!

MV: Pretty sure you don’t.

JN: You’ve examined the pig mask, yes?

MV: No.

JN: Well I’ve waited all weekend for you idiots to come in to the labs and you don’t even get around to your most urgent task? It’s lunchtime already! What have you been spending your morning even doing!?

MV: I actually just woke up, like, twenty minutes before you called.

JN: Oh, so you decide to take a half-day when you have a task of the utmost importance at hand?

MV: Well it’s summer, so--

JN: So you think you can just laze around!

MV: Basically, yeah. That’s the point.

JN: Well whenever you feel like doing your job, get to analyzing the mask.
MV: What mask?
JN: The pig mask!
MV: Uh, okay.
JN: And I will tell you right now that you’re looking to confirm or refute that there is fox hair on it.
MV: Why fox hair?
JN: Because I have a very strong feeling that this criminal is a fox.
MV: And why exactly is that?
JN: Because although different eyewitnesses have claimed seeing different species, the most common claim is that the suspect is a fox. Claims of a coyote with a poofy tail come in a distant second.
MV: Oh. There’s actually eyewitnesses?
JN: Including myself. Several times. I believe he is a fox.
MV: Alright, I thought you were just guessing that some dude robbed some place and it must have been a fox because of course it would’ve been a sneaky fox. Like, from the way you were talking, it sounded like someone left a mask behind at the scene of a burglary and nobody saw him but you were assuming it was a fox. I was gonna say, if you think that way about foxes, you might as well hang up right now.
JN: Are you a fox?
MV: Guilty as charged.
JN: I didn’t know there were any foxes working in the forensics department.
MV: Neither did I.
JN: Oh, you amuse me.
MV: If you have this many eyewitnesses, why do you even need to prove it’s a fox then?
JN: Because to instill trust in the people of this city, I need to be right about everything.
MV: Fair enough, I guess. You don’t have any other details to go on? What kind of fox are you looking for? We ain’t all the same.
JN: A red one, to start.
MV: Alright, then he ain’t one of my people.
JN: Who are your people?
MV: I’m an Arctic.
JN: Interesting. I don’t run into too many Arctic foxes in my city.
MV: I don’t live in your city.
JN: Poppycock.

MV: So how is confirming that it’s a red fox going to narrow it down?

JN: You do your job and see if there’s a DNA match with anybody in our system! Or fingerprints, I don’t care!

MV: In the meantime, you have no other details to go off of?

JN: Certainly we do. He’s described as being exceptionally tall for his species.

MV: How tall we talking?

JN: Witness reports vary widely from four feet to five-and-a-half feet. Likely somewhere in the middle of that range.

MV: Jesus Christ, that’s tall for a fox.

JN: Precisely why some people think he’s a strange-looking coyote.

MV: I can imagine.

JN: He’s also been heard to have a British accent.

MV: He’s British too?

JN: I’ve heard him speak myself.

MV: So you’re having trouble locating a five-foot fox with a British accent? I mean, I don’t want to sell my people out, but that guy seems like he’d stick out pretty well.

JN: And I would be wont to agree, but he’s successfully eluded capture for seven years, so--

MV: Seven years!? 

JN: Have you even read the dossier? This is why we need to turn to forensics to get any clues we can. On the topic, don’t be shy to tell me if you find DNA from any other species. Perhaps we can sniff out one of his co-conspirators. His right-hand man is often reported as a brown or grizzly bear.

MV: That makes sense.

JN: Why does that make sense? Do you know something I should know?

MV: “A fox and a bear make a great pair.” That’s the old saying.

JN: Is it now?

MV: You’ve never heard that before?

JN: Never in my life. Why do they say a fox and a bear make a great pair? Maybe this can give us a clue as to their dynamics.

MV: I mean, it’s just, you know, one brains, one brawn.

JN: Is that it? Because I can think of many pairs of species that could fit that archetype.
MV: Yeah, but it’s like, uh, brains from a species that -- in their culture -- doesn’t value brawn, and brawn from a species that culturally doesn’t value brains. So they’re playing toward their strengths without any fighting over who’s the smart one and who’s the strong one. Operating as a unit and not worrying about who gets to be the better one. That’s the logic behind it, I think.

JN: Fascinating. Now, I do understand that logic, but I still could see several different species filling those two roles.

MV: Plus, you know, “bear” and “pair” rhyme and “fox” just… fits the cadence of the saying well, I guess.

JN: Naturally.

MV: But you’re kind of not supposed to say that saying anymore.

JN: And yet you just did.

MV: Because, you know, in its purest form, it’s stereotyping. I mean, foxes are cool with it, we’ll take “clever” as a compliment eight days a week, but other species think it’s bogus to bears to assume they’re cool with being the stupid ones.

JN: So there may be a power struggle between the fox and the bear after all?

MV: Well, you know, bears could take it or leave it, because for one reason or another they keep hanging out with us. Like, Tim, he’s my boy, we’re tight like no one else. He’s a black bear. He thinks it’s bullshit that people assume his species’ culture is, like, brutish and militantly anti-intellectual, but he doesn’t actually think the “fox and a bear” saying is actively racist, just kind of, like, ignorant in a roundabout way. Well-meaning, because foxes and bears do make good bros and we appreciate each other, but ignorant.

JN: I’m going to remember this in case I have to use it against them.

MV: Plus I know bunnies don’t like that phrase because it reminds them of a fox and a bear who stalked this rabbit and tried to eat him back in, like, 1870s Georgia or something. Like, the Reconstruction South.

JN: Duly noted. So how quickly can you check the mask for DNA?

MV: I don’t have the fucking mask, dickhead.

JN: Then GET the bloody mask, dickhead! Get it and check for a DNA match!

MV: Match to who?

JN: Anybody!

MV: So you said you’ve been looking for seven years for these guys?

JN: Roughly, yes. Please don’t remind me.

MV: Seven years and you don’t have any clue to who they are.

JN: Please… don’t remind me.

MV: Nobody’s overheard them call each other by name?
JN: *(unintelligible)*

MV: Huh?

JN: There was… the boy.

MV: What boy?

JN: The boy from the scene where the pig mask was found!

MV: I am not familiar with this boy.

JN: Then read the bloody dossier!

MV: So what about this boy?

JN: He’s been… he’s been trying to tell us. He was able to get enough out to tell us the culprits were in the woods, but beyond that, we haven’t been able to understand a word he’s said. He’s just babbling and pointing and gesticulating. It’s frustrating because I’ve asked the investigators to simply ask if he heard their names, and they say he perked up and seemed to try to make an attempt at answering but all he could articulate were muttering noises. They say the lad is so shaken that he can’t even keep his mouth closed.

MV: Damn, that’s a bummer.

JN: We’re so close to a breakthrough and yet those monsters have rendered the only eyewitness mute.

MV: What exactly did they do?

JN: It’s in the dossier.

MV: Then send me another copy of it because evi-fucking-dently I lost mine.

JN: Fine, I will.

MV: ...Really?

JN: If I must.

*(silence)*

MV: So… are we good here?

JN: *(unintelligible)*

MV: What?

JN: I’m just thinking that… if it makes it easier for you… I might have a name to guess.

MV: To guess for what?

JN: The identity of the outlaw.

MV: We’re calling him an outlaw now? Is this the Wild West?

JN: No, come to think of it, I mustn’t interfere with your processes.
MV: Well, did you have a suspect in mind?

JN: Yes, but as I mentioned earlier, it’s imperative that my people trust me, so I must be right about everything. I don’t yet feel confident on gambling that my guess is correct. And yet I feel so strongly that it is. But I’m trying to be a man of science about it and disregard my blind guesses. Your end of the bargain is to hurry up and identify the outlaw to prove my hypothesis.

MV: What’s your hypothesis?

JN: I mustn’t be sharing such rumors with employees of the City of Nottingham.

MV: I’m not an employee of the City of Nottingham.

JN: Oh, you. (silence) … He may be… somebody with whom I have a history, and yet whom I’ve never met.

MV: How can you have a history with him if you’ve never met him?

JN: Well, of course I’ve met him now during our close encounters, but we’ve never been… formally introduced, as it were.

(silence)

MV: Don’t leave me hanging here, man.

JN: It may be my… brother’s… goddaughter’s… male friend.

MV: …Really, now?

JN: Again, I’d never met him, I had never had any interest in doing so. But they’re both described as tall English foxes.

MV: I can see how that narrows it down. But does this guy seem like he’d be the kind to moonlight as a criminal?

JN: As I said, I’d never met him formally.

MV: Well if he’s been fucking around in Nottingham for seven years, he must live close by. Go knock on his door, pay him a visit.

JN: He lives in Sherwood Forest.

MV: …Did your brother’s goddaughter hook up with a homeless guy?

JN: He went missing seven years ago.

MV: …What?

JN: My brother’s goddaughter’s boyfriend went missing seven years ago. It lines up perfectly with when the outlaws started to wreak havoc out of Sherwood Forest. Hence my hypothesis.

MV: …Oh, shit. That’s a lot of reasons for your hypothesis.

JN: But he went missing in the District of Columbia.

MV: That’s not that far away. I mean, I don’t want to sell out my kind, but if this guy’s a real
criminal, I think you’ve got your man. What’s this guy’s crime again?

JN: Being a thorn in my side more than anything.

MV: What do you mean?

(silence)

MV: Hello?

JN: You know what? Thank you, sir.

MV: For what?

JN: You’ve helped me make up my mind. I think… I think I now feel confident in saying the outlaw is my nephew-in-law.

MV: I thought you said he was your brother’s goddaughter’s boyfriend?

(silence)

JN: Oh, to hell with it! I’ll say it! I’ve known for years! And I’ve been afraid to confront the fact that this criminal mastermind… that he wasn’t just a stranger. I’ve been terrified to let people discover that the greatest threat to our city is a mere two degrees of separation from myself. And now… now you’re the first person I’m telling this to. I haven’t even told my trusted assistant, for fear that he would lose his admiration of me. You’ve given me courage, good sir, and for that I wish to thank you.

MV: Well, um… I am honored, but immensely confused. Profoundly confused, even.

JN: Four years ago when my niece was in town for the summer, I even tried to use her as bait to draw the bandits out, but I’m afraid that may have just emboldened them.

MV: If you know who the son of a bitch is, why don’t you just tell the police?

JN: Because I didn’t want my people knowing that I’m related to an outlaw!

MV: How would they know? You’re not even a fox, are you?

JN: No, sir, I am a lion.

MV: (muttering) Yeah, you’re a big pussy alright.

JN: I beg your pardon?

MV: So how would people know?

JN: In my paranoia… I simply always thought word would make its way around.

MV: They could have found out even if you didn’t up and tell them.

JN: I’m realizing that now.

MV: Even if they did know, who cares? You’re not responsible for the actions of your… um… whoever he was to you.

JN: I’m realizing that now. You must understand how clouded my judgment has been these last
seven years. Seven years of them trying to kill you would make anyone paranoid--

MV: Wait, they’ve been trying to ASSASSINATE you?

JN: ...More or less.

MV: Man, the way you were talking, I thought they were just serial burglars or something!

JN: Which is why I want to thank you for giving me the courage to make his identity public. But not quite yet. I first need your team and your forensics to prove me right.

MV: You know I can’t do that.

JN: Find a way to make it happen anyway. Again, I cannot afford to be wrong where others can see me. It wouldn’t inspire their confidence in me.

MV: I mean, why are you so hung up on his name at this point? Haven’t you put up wanted posters and stuff that just say “we don’t know who this guy is but he’s a menace to society”? 

JN: We have not.

MV: Why not?

JN: Because I would find it so deeply publicly mortifying if the entire world saw that there was a band of criminals that were trying to oust me, and yet I and all my men were powerless to stop them for nearly a decade.

MV: And you let that get in the way of taking logical steps toward bringing these guys to justice?

JN: You still misunderstand how much this torments my addled mind! It’s psychological torture what they do to me! They’ve ransacked my home numerous times, they’ve ransacked my office numerous times, and on a few occasions they’ve even left me notes mocking me, notes that I can’t show my police because they have the bandits’ names on them, they’ve--

MV: **(distorted from loud volume)** YOU HAVE NOTES WITH THEIR NAMES ON THEM AND YOU DIDN’T EVEN TELL THE COPS WHO WORK FOR YOU!?

JN: And in the notes, they even say things along the lines of, “We know you will not tell even your closest confidantes our names because you don’t want them to know you’re related to a criminal; Marian always did say that you were so terribly worried about your image.”

MV: Marian?

JN: And they were right. They mocked me for being too paranoid to tell anybody who they were, and that made me too paranoid to tell anybody who they were. Yet the most frustrating part is that they seem to think I’m worried of others’ opinions of me, when in reality what I fear is my own opinion of me.

MV: Who’s Marian again?

JN: My niece. Brother’s goddaughter. It’s easier to simply call her my niece.

MV: Oh, they’re the same person. Okay, so... you’ve gotten notes from them signed with their actual, honest to God names on them, and you withheld that from the police working to catch them?
JN: I’m not proud that their psychological tricks worked on me, but they did.

MV: ...You fucking maniac.

JN: In my defense, they haven’t left notes recently! It’s been years! If I had decided several years ago to start showing their newest notes to my police, I wouldn’t have any notes to show them.

MV: You absolute fucking maniac.

JN: Oh, I may as well let it all out! There were times where I could have sworn I’d heard people say their names aloud. Either they themselves or the townspeople who adore them. But I always--

MV: Why do the townspeople adore them?

JN: Some fancy them as vigilantes. I prefer to call them domestic terrorists.

MV: Got it. Continue about how you once a-fucking-gain got hard evidence of their identities and did absolutely nothing with it?

JN: But it was no hard evidence! Voices in a crowd! Noises amid a cacophony of shouts and hollers from a maddening mass! My men and women heard something resembling names, but could never make it out clearly. I only was able to piece together the names from the distorted sounds because I knew the names to listen for. And I couldn’t just tell them myself because I was... I was--

MV: Too broken to live?

JN: ...I know my critics would say that. But they could never understand how... opaque my judgment was in those trying times, and neither can you.

MV: You absolute fucking maniac. Are you even fit to lead?

JN: I’ll have you know that while we haven’t yet quashed the rebellion, we also haven’t yet succumbed to it! Indeed, we have been holding our own for years now. But I cannot let this war of attrition go on much longer. I need to break this stalemate. When one is unsatisfied with the way things are, one must make a change. I plan to do that now. I will tell my assistant and my highest-ranking police the identities of the criminals, and I want to thank you for giving me that courage, a courage for which I’ve been searching for so, so long. But you can make it easier on me by confirming their identities with a DNA match from the abandoned pig mask.

(silence)

JN: Or a pawprint match. I am not picky.

(silence)

JN: Are you still there?

MV: Yeah, I’m just... speechless.

JN: I thank you for everything. I will thank you again when you finish analyzing the mask. Even if you can just confirm the species, that would be a great step forward.

MV: These guys’ names’ve been shouted in the fucking streets multiple times and not a single member of your police force heard them clearly once?
JN: When the bandits show up, things get loud! Can you really hear everything all the time perfectly?

MV: Yes.

JN: ...Well, you are a fox, so you lot are known for having absurdly good hearing--

MV: My dad was right, people in the city are retarded.

JN: What kind of crass language is that to use toward your mayor!?

MV: How do you know that they -- your cops -- that they don’t all know their names and they’re just waiting to see how long it takes you to put the pieces together because they think it’s hilarious that you’re such a raging dumbass?

JN: Because I--! Er…

MV: …Because you what?

*(silence)*

MV: Oh, this ought to be good.

*(silence)*

MV: Whenever you want to speak, honey, I’m listening.

JN: ...Because I…

MV: Yes, baby?

JN: ...What if my officers know… but they haven’t formally recorded it… because they know… that then… they would have to search for them in earnest?

MV: ...Come again?

JN: What if they’re afraid of confronting them? What if my men are cowards?

MV: ...Not where I was going with this, but an interesting thought all the same.

JN: Goddamn you!

MV: Oh, what did I do now?

JN: You give me confidence, and then you take it away.

MV: Oh boy.

JN: You’ve ruined me! Disregard the outlaws, it is YOU who is psychologically torturing me!

MV: I’ve done nothing of the sort, dick-heart.

JN: Tell me: would you think I’m less of a fool if I told you that it’s also been years since I’ve heard their names shouted in the streets!? Perhaps they’ve gotten more careful! Perhaps this was all a plan to trick us into thinking they never actually existed! They’re trying to induce amnesia!

MV: So in other words, they’re getting smarter while you’re getting dumber.
JN: Why do you say such things!? Don’t you want this city to be safe from bandits?

MV: I don’t know at this point, they kind of seem like badasses. Maybe I want them to win. It might make a better story.

JN: You-- My own forensics department is betraying me!? WAIT! What if this goes all the way down?

MV: Down to where?

JN: What if my police are on the side of the outlaws!? (distorted) AND THAT’S WHY WE HAVEN’T CAPTURED THEM IN SEVEN BLOODY YEARS!?

MV: You are damaging your phone.

JN: (distorted) THAT’S WHY THEY’VE NEVER KILLED ONE OF MY MEN!

MV: Wow, you may genuinely be one of the most paranoid people I’ve ever met.

JN: I don’t care about how you feel about me! I only answer to myself!

MV: Then why is it so fucking imperative that you don’t make mistakes that the people of Nottingham can see?

JN: Because I don’t want to be someone who makes mistakes in public!

MV: It sounds like you care a lot about what others think of you--

JN: A lion does not concern himself with the opinions of sheep! Or foxes!

MV: --but you’ve convinced yourself you haven’t because you’re seeing their opinions of you through, like, the lens of how you… want to see yourself? How you actually see yourself? I’m not totally sure where I’m going with this, but there’s like a… dichotomy going on here.

JN: You’re no psychologist! You’re merely a forensicist! Who are you to make such statements!?

MV: I want to see you go to a psych doctor. It’s like, you don’t care that the people trust you, but you care very deeply that you feel that you are trusted by them. There’s gotta be some depth to mine there.

JN: I’ll have you arrested for questioning my competency!

MV: So now you trust your cops again?

JN: I changed my mind! I don’t think they’re actually siding with the outlaws. I think. My paranoia had just run rampant.

MV: Hot freaking dog, you are a fascinating fellow. I’m so glad I recorded this.

JN: I beg your pardon?

MV: Yeah, I’m recording this.

JN: Why on earth are you recording our conversation?

MV: I always record calls from numbers I don’t recognize. You never know where they’re gonna
JN: I don’t recall giving you permission to record our conversation!

MV: I thought you didn’t care what I thought of you? Why does it matter?

(silence)

MV: Are we done here?

JN: I’ll have you arrested for this.

MV: What?

JN: You illegally recorded this conversation without my permission! I’ll have you arrested for this!

MV: No you won’t.

JN: Yes I will!

MV: No. You won’t. I’ve looked it up, it’s not even illegal in Delaware.

JN: What’s your name, forensicist?

(silence)

JN: WHAT IS YOUR BLOODY NAME!?

MV: ...Justin Timberlake.

JN: And where is your place of residence, Mr. Timberlake?

MV: Uh… 69… Back Street. 69 Back Street.

JN: And what part of town is that in, Justin? So we may more easily find you.

MV: For the sixty-millionth time, I don’t live in the city, you enormous fucking retard! I live in Delmar! (under breath) Wait, shit, Justin Timberlake isn’t even from the Backstreet Boys, is he?

JN: Then I-I’ll come to Delmar and have you arrested! No journey is too far in the pursuit of justice!

MV: Well I have a copy of this recording and you don’t, so you don’t have any evidence to show a judge. Plus, you can’t arrest me because I don’t live in your city, so you’d have to take it to the county or the state. For something that isn’t even illegal in this county or state.

JN: Did you not hear the news!? The city police IS the county police now!

MV: ...Wait, really?

JN: Yes! So the Nottingham County Police can--

MV: When did this happen?

JN: Yesterday!

MV: How was that possible?
JN: My assistant looked over the books; it was never explicitly disallowed, so we did it.

MV: Well if nothing else, I can just leave the county then.

JN: What? You’re going to abandon your home forever to evade capture? Just like the outlaws in Sherwood Forest did?!

MV: I don’t have to leave home forever; my house is literally across the street from Maryland. I can just jump across whenever I need to. Now if I lived across the street, then over there it would’ve been illegal for me to record you without your express permission.

JN: Then we’ll just--

MV: Actually, I’m looking out the window and I see the mailman across the street right now. Hold on, let me open the window.

JN: Wait, are you--?

MV: Hi, Mr. Mailman!

MR. MAILMAN: *(distant)* Hello!

MV: Hey, Mr. Mailman, what state are you in right now?

MR. MAILMAN: *(distant, unintelligible)*

MV: Did you hear that? He says he works in Maryland.

JN: Are you… not actually in the lab right now?

MV: Naw, man, I’m at home.

JN: Is this a… is this your mobile phone number?

MV: I mean, it’s a cordless phone, but no, it’s a landline.

FEMALE VOICE: *(distant, unintelligible)*

MV: Hold on, my mom heard me screaming and now she’s probably going to want me to get off the phone.

JN: Your mother?

MV: The very same. But hey, it’s been good talking to ya.

JN: Wait, I’m… lost--

FV: *(distant)* Who are you talking to?

MV: The mayor of Nottingham.

FV: What?

MV: The mayor of Nottingham called the wrong number and he thinks I’m his forensics guy.

FV: No fucking way.
MV: Talk to him yourself. (growing distant) By the way, I’m recording this, so don’t delete anything from the answering machine.

FV: (full volume) Hello?

JN: ...Er… hello…

FV: Jesus Christ, this really is John Norman.

JN: Yes, er… to whom am I speaking?

FV: You called us! Why have you been harassing my son?

JN: Yes, yes, dreadfully, er, dreadfully sorry, I had told my assistant to call the forensics laboratory.

FV: How do you get that number mixed up with anything else?

JN: It must have been a slip of the toe when he was dialing--

FV: His TOE?

JN: Yes, my assistant is a double amputee. He misdialed. It happens every so often.

FV: You chose a cripple for your assistant?

JN: What else is he supposed to be doing for a living?

FV: Evidently something else if he can’t even dial a phone right! Don’t you have your forensics team on speed-dial or something!?

JN: Well, another reason that I hired him was that we both don’t care for such technology.

(silence)

JN: ...Are you still there?

FV: Get a phone from the twenty-first century. Don’t ever call here again.

JN: Are you aware that your son recorded me without my permission, and proceeded to psychologically torture me for his own mad amusement?

FV: You harassed a seventeen-year-old without HIS permission. Now get bent.

JN: I’ll have him arrested! I know you live on the state line in Delmar! This narrows it down for us to find--!

(click)
Show and Tell, Pt. 1

Chapter Summary

On their way to show the Eds what they're all about, Robin Hood and Little John tell them what they're all about... but the walk into town is a lot longer than expected...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14. “Show and Tell, Pt. 1”

On the way into town, they told them everything. It was a long walk and they had plenty of time to kill, so they told them everything.

They knew it was just making all of this an even bigger risk by bringing some random kids along on their exploits -- suburban kids that they couldn’t even assume came from backgrounds that would make them sympathetic to the cause, as they could have reasonably assumed of kids from the West Side of the city. But their entire lives were a risk, and everything they’d done for years was a risk, and the coin came up heads often enough for them to still survive, and they were witty and resourceful enough to deal with the consequences when it came up tails. Besides, they thought that maybe if they gave a more detailed version of their stories, it might make it easier for the three kids to warm up to them. But just to be safe, they kept all the other characters in their story nameless. And they had the bottle of chloroform on their persons just as well.

So they told them everything. They told them how Robin had moved to the States with His Girlfriend about thirteen years prior to attend theatre school in New York with her and support her in her dream of becoming a Broadway actress, and maybe try to cut it himself, as he had grown up with an adult in his life who had instilled an appreciation for acting in him. They told them how the summer after they graduated, they realized life in New York was just too expensive for them, so they reluctantly moved to Philadelphia, but Philadelphia was also too expensive, so the next spring they moved down to Washington right around the time that Robin’s Girlfriend’s Uncle (who was really her godfather and an old friend of her family’s from back home in England, but for the sake of convenience and sentimentality, he was her uncle) was moving from Delaware to DC to begin a new career path; Robin and His Girlfriend received heavy financial support from Robin’s Girlfriend’s Uncle as they shared a two-bedroom apartment with Robin’s Girlfriend’s Scottish Friend Whom She Met at College in New York, as well as Robin’s Half-Brother, who had harbored a weird romanticized image of the United States for most of his teenage years, and who had turned eighteen the previous July and dropped out of his first semester of university a few months after that. In Washington, Robin and His Girlfriend struggled to find work -- they couldn’t get acting roles because they were both too tall to play their own species but too small or misshapen to play any others, and they couldn’t get regular jobs because they had Bachelor’s degrees in Theater. But while they were in that funk, Robin tried to make himself feel better about his predicament by telling himself something: he told himself that he was still better off than a lot of the impoverished people that inhabited the nation’s capital. His strategy to tell himself this absolutely backfired. What started out as a way of making himself feel better about being stuck in life wound up just making himself feel bummed out and even a little bit angry, knowing that there were so many people whose lives were even crummier than his own. He also noticed that here in
Washington, D.C., a notoriously rough town for those who weren’t politicians or their families, the poverty seemed to be even worse than it was in Philadelphia, much worse than in New York, and nothing like he’d ever seen in the major cities back in North-Central England.

They told them, however, that things came to a head when, after about a year of living in Washington, Robin and His Girlfriend and His Girlfriend’s Uncle went to Nottingham to visit His Girlfriend’s Uncle’s Family, minus His Girlfriend’s Uncle’s Arsehole Brother, who didn’t want to see them and who Robin had never even met (the Eds didn’t understand why Robin mentioned this part, precisely as Robin hoped). There Robin saw that the situation in Nottingham was even worse than it was in Washington. Many of the poor people there were two steps past Anger in the Stages of Grief and were now well into Depression. Topping it all off was that it seemed to stem from the Mayor, John Norman; after his beloved brother left office after being elected to Congress a year and a half prior (the Eds still didn’t seem to make the connection to Robin’s Girlfriend’s Uncle), the city’s political machine left his idiot brother as the only viable candidate. In a year’s time, “Prince John” had implemented a bunch of laws that were actively hostile to the poor and beneficial to the rich, the latter of whom Prince John desperately wanted to rub shoulders with. Among many other things, the Prince Mayor’s favorite method of oppression was dicking around with tax rates and coming up with insipid and obscene explanations for how he thought they would make life better for everyone.

They told them how seeing this just made Robin angrier. It got to the point that when they were back in DC, Robin needed to privately confide in His Girlfriend and tell her that it all made him just want to break stuff. That was when she told him that while his anger and frustration were justified, that anger in and of itself was not going to solve anything. Anger toward the bad people was destructive, she said, and if he wanted to make the world a better place, he needed to channel that anger into compassion for the good people being victimized and do something constructive for them. They told them that she couldn’t have known what she had just inspired in him.

They told them that that was precisely when Robin decided to leave civilian life behind and start taking the retribution of karma into his own hands. He told His Girlfriend; she felt like he was abandoning her over a problem he couldn’t solve; he felt like her feelings were valid but that he just needed to try to do what he could to fix things or he’d never be able to live with himself; she conceded that he seemed genuine in having a need to serve his conscience; he pleaded with her to forgive him; she said there was nothing to forgive, and they told them that to this day, Robin didn’t know whether she was truly at peace with his decision. Nevertheless, they said their teary goodbyes, Robin told His Rascally Half-Brother that he couldn’t come with, and he filled up a backpack with all that he needed to survive in the woods for a few days and hopped on a one-way Greyhound bus over the Chesapeake Bay to Nottingham, DE.

They told them that while all of this was happening, Little John was losing his goddamn mind trying to come to terms with the fact that he was now thirty, which was being made harder by the fact that he was now closer to thirty-one. Having left Somewhere Ambiguously in the American South when he was eighteen to get away from his fucked-up family and neighbors, he found himself twelve years later living in an apartment in Harbeson with some older dude who the kids these days would probably describe as a “player”, and only ever having held odd jobs such as fast-food lackey, warehouse sorter, security guard of things and places that weren’t really all that important, budget construction worker, gravedigger, a whole lot of work down by the docks, and other lowly positions that wouldn’t pay the bills if he wanted to live a life strangers would respect. It wasn’t just that Little John didn’t have a fulfilling career; he also didn’t have a fulfilling personal life. Between friends, family, and females, he had none. He had told himself for years that it was because he was always working his stubby little tail off to survive and didn’t have time to develop any kind of relationships with any kind of people, but he was starting to think that something wasn’t right about that -- either that was no way to live, or he was doing something wrong, possibly
both. He was starting to think that his upbringing -- upon which he would not elaborate -- had made him not only cold and hardened, but also kind of afraid of people, which caused him to act even colder and hardened-er so people wouldn’t think he was a pussy. Suffice it to say that whenever His Older Womanizing Roommate would offer to hook him up with one of the large-species ladies he had known-in-the-biblical-sense who was looking for a serious relationship, John would put on an act of being a laconically disinterested brute as a cover for the fact that he had absolutely no idea how to reply. In short, Little John was angry, not just in his perpetual outward attitude, but angry at the factors that had contributed to his perpetual outward attitude of anger. Note that at this point, Little John made deliberate eye contact with Ed, Edd, and Eddy each to make sure the teenage boys weren’t silently laughing their asses off over his inability to get laid; if they were, they stopped when John looked at them. Also note that, in an effort to not look even more troublingly insecure in front of these kids he was trying to recruit, he completely skipped the part where his medically-absurd growth pattern coupled with the size obsession ingrained in the culture of his species (and arguably the culture of society in general) had made him feel like he was a decade behind in life and had done severe damage to his psyche that had healed significantly but not completely and possibly never would; this was certainly one of those times where Little John would agree with Robin that it was best to pretend not to have problems to avoid people losing confidence in you.

They told them how John was blowing off steam one day by walking his usual route through Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve, which was well off the designated path. When he came to one particular fallen dead tree that formed a bridge over the Peach Creek, he saw that there was some fox already crossing it -- an exceptionally tall one, but still a little guy in the grand scheme of things. Already pissed at the world, John was in no mood to wait for this fox to cross, so he started his own way across it as though Robin wasn’t even there. They told them that Robin had just arrived in Sherwood a few days earlier and was suppressing his burning urge to start robbing people until he got a camp set up in the forest because he thought that was the responsible thing to do, but now here along came some random brown bear who looked like he was aiming to fuck with him just for the hell of it, and Robin didn’t need any more obstacles like this, so he didn’t back down. They got within a few feet of each other before they both stopped, and as much as John just wanted to plow this fox over, he instead asked him why he didn’t have the good sense to get the hell out of his way. Robin said he was there first. Their passive aggression escalated into active aggression, and it led to John leaning down and breaking two huge branches off the tree’s carcas. He tossed one to Robin and challenged him to a duel; a few minutes later, John’s ass was in the water, and now the big little fox was looking down at him. The fact of the matter was that while Robin was indeed fairly decent at old-fashioned stick-fighting as a consequence of his upbringing, he had mostly played good defense against a bear who was usually very good at old-fashioned stick-fighting (also as a result of his upbringing) but wasn’t used to going up against someone that much smaller than himself and just didn’t know how to accommodate for Robin’s lower center of gravity.

They told them that despite John being mortified, he could see that the fox was handling his victory rather graciously. He was speaking of it like it had been a cheery spar between friends, and he almost seemed apologetic for John’s predicament. The way Robin was acting would seem condescending and sarcastic coming from most anybody else, but to John, he seemed genuine, or at least damned good at faking it. Robin offered John a hand to help him back up -- not expecting him to actually accept it, fully anticipating the bear would just swat his hand away and knowing damn well that he couldn’t pull this guy’s weight back onto the bridge -- and John took his hand, promptly pulling Robin into the water with him. Little John, moved by how this Englishman seemed to be trying really hard to be kind to him like nobody else in his life had ever tried (especially notable considering that they were in a violent conflict mere minutes prior), remarked that now they were even, and that they probably both deserved to wind up in the water as a price
for their pride. Robin agreed. They got out of the water, introduced themselves, and as soon as Robin got the read that Johnny was a good candidate, he popped the question; Little John answered by asking if he could run back home for a few hours to grab the bare necessities of life before coming back to Sherwood. With John’s help (and some housewares from his apartment), the two finished setting up the camp that same night. Robin and John briefly paused the story to have a small argument over which of them had been the one to invoke the old adage that “a fox and a bear make a great pair,” and which of them had been the one to quote *Casablanca* and say, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

They told them that they knew they needed more people, but didn’t know how to find them. Then they got very, very lucky. First, Robin’s Half-Brother appeared out of thin air, looking completely knackered after wandering all of Sherwood for a day and a half to find Robin. Apparently the little hellraiser had remembered he was an adult now and he didn’t have to stay back in Washington with Robin’s Girlfriend and Her Scottish Friend Whom She Met at College in New York if he didn’t want to. Robin’s Half-Brother was also extremely tall for his species, a genetic gift from their common parent, but Robin still cleared him by a solid number of inches, which visually suited Robin’s Half-Brother’s role as the quintessential rambunctious younger sibling. He was a resolute rascallion whose only tangible goal was to shake things up. He desperately wanted to be a righteous outlaw; it was the perfect combination of the badass he wanted to be with the positive force he wanted to be in the world. Robin -- who wouldn’t even turn twenty-five himself until that November -- really didn’t want to put his newly-adult little brother in harm’s way, but he could see that His Half-Brother wasn’t taking no for an answer. Given the circumstances, Robin figured he shouldn’t want to deny him anyway.

They told them that they next encountered a character whom they referred to as The Rooster; even though he was not actually a talking chicken, they would not disclose his true species. This guy had gotten back from a tour of duty in the Middle East earlier in the decade and his head still wasn’t back on right. He’d had trouble finding a job when he returned home to Oklahoma, so he said screw it and took his guitar and his Ram pickup truck and went off to see the country, making just enough money playing songs and doing odd jobs to pay for food and gas. During this time, his bond with the common people grew and his opinion of the government diminished. When Robin, John, and Robin’s Half-Brother met him, he was playing his guitar while sitting on a log near the edge of Sherwood about a thousand feet from the parking lot. And he was playing well; The Rooster offhandedly mentioned that his uncle was a fairly-well-known country musician, somebody who Robin and His Half-Brother had never heard of but who Johnny the Southerner knew well (Little John noticed when he mentioned this that the three suburban kids didn’t seem curious to know who the country musician was, so he didn’t even offer to tell them). The four of them talked, The Rooster explained that he was feeling lost and disillusioned, and Robin said the magic words. The Rooster accepted immediately, but had qualms about what to do with his truck, which might betray his secret new residence. They tried to navigate the truck toward the Major Oak to use as a multipurpose room and storage implement, but there simply weren’t any gaps in the trees wide enough for it to fit through, so they just ripped the license plates off of it and pushed it into the deepest part of the creek.

They told them that the last major member was a guy they called the Friar because of his religiosity, his tattered clothes like those of a monk who’d committed to a life of poverty, and the unfortunate bald spot on his head; again, they did not clarify his species. The Friar was a homeless navy reject who was walking around the Georgetown neighborhood when he needed to sit down on the sidewalk for a second and rest, seeing as he had some trouble carrying his own mass for long periods of time -- in a world where the old joke is that the hyperobese falsely blame their condition on some ambiguous disorder, The Friar swore that the reason he maintained his size on a homeless man’s diet was because he really did have an issue with his thyroid; this would be confirmed to the
rest of the Men by a doctor years later. But on that day, the four Merry Men stumbled upon him as
they were on their way to the East Side to go get some goodies, and he asked them if they had any
spare change. They told him that they didn’t actually have anything on their person at the moment,
but they were about to go get some, and soon enough they would be sharing it with him and all the
other needy people of Nottingham. The Friar asked how they were going to get it. They told him in
no uncertain terms that they were just going to go rob some rich people. The Friar asked how they
were planning to do that. They told him that they would be more or less playing it by ear: if they
saw a pocket to pick, they’d pick it; if they saw a car to jack, they’d jack it; if they saw a house to
break into, they’d ransack it. Robin and company made it clear that they weren’t proud of their
methods, but they didn’t have any better ideas for how to fix the situation in Nottingham, and that
the four of them agreed that action is better than inaction. The Friar agreed that good action gets
stuff done better than sitting around and complaining, but bad action could make things worse, and
he then asked if they had any weapons on them. They said not really, all they had were a few
pocket knives, though they agreed that bad action was worse than no action and they didn’t want to
preemptively hurt people lest that make the situation worse, and if they had to play defense, they
had fists for punching, teeth for biting, feet for kicking, and legs for running; if nothing else, The
Rooster had a wrist slingshot with him. The Friar suggested they get some weapons anyway, and if
they weren’t comfortable with guns and switchblades, he knew where they could get something a
bit more… classical. He was joking, but little did he know that he was talking to two foxes who
were trained in various classical weapons, a bear who was itching to learn new skills so he could be
more helpful and people would think he was more interesting, and a mammal called The Rooster
who was down for anything. So The Friar told them that, as a consequence of living on the streets
in this city for something like twenty years, he was privy to the fact that there was a rich guy in
Long Neck who liked to collect medieval weaponry, and that the guy in question would probably
be away from home for the rest of that afternoon. They went and loaded up on all that they could
carry; everyone got at least one bow, staff, and sword, but of course everyone had their
preferences: Robin with his bow, Robin’s Half-Brother with a sword, John and The Friar with their
staffs and The Rooster preferring to stick with his trusty slingshot. Maintaining such antique
instruments while living in the elements for seven years would be a challenge, however, and now
the bow and staff that the Eds saw in Robin and John’s hands were two of the four remaining
pieces of the collection -- five if you include The Rooster’s slingshot -- and the other two (or three)
had been taken out of commission for reasons that would soon be apparent. But seven years ago,
the Merry Men were not thinking about the upkeep of their items, only that they may have just
found their dorky-cum-badass calling cards, and since they’d be living in the woods without the
distractions of modern diversionary entertainment, they would have plenty of time to practice their
skills with them. They also told them one more thing about The Friar: it turns out having a guy
with you who’d lived on the streets for two decades without succumbing to the elements in spite of
an ambiguous medical disorder is a big help when you’re making your home out in the wilderness.

They told them that they were then ready to begin their mission. They had a bit of a rocky start as
lots of the people they were trying to help just thought they were weird, but eventually, after a little
charming, the populace warmed up to them, and ultimately fostered a sort of symbiotic
relationship: the Men would give the citizens the means to live under a corrupt city government,
and the citizens would give the Men the means to live in the woods year-round.

They told them that after a year, things were going great. That second summer in their first full
year -- the recollection paused here to resolve some brief confusion over how the math of all of this
worked, but it was resolved that since their anniversary was in May, the Men were now in their
eighth summer after having just completed their seventh year last month -- but that second summer
may have arguably been their best. It wasn’t just that that was the year that they established
themselves as a force to be reckoned with, a guerrilla that struck fear in the hearts of those who ran
Nottingham and its environs; it was also the year that the five of them had the most fun. They truly
put the “merry” in “the Merry Men”. They found joy in their work and fulfillment in their mission, and they revelled in their success; Robin noted that during this time -- and he stopped to stress to the Eds that he had been young and stupid and impulsive and irresponsible for doing this -- they even robbed the mayor’s mini-mansion and left him taunting notes -- on several occasions -- signed with their real names, daring him to tell someone that he had been bested by a ragtag bunch of misfit bandits living in the woods. That first full year, which contained that second summer -- the math was getting really confusing, but Rob and John agreed that it wouldn’t sound natural to state the specific year every single time -- that was also the time that the five of them got to fully enjoy one another’s company. The previous year had been spent slowly growing on one another and working on their group cohesion; that year they finally achieved that true friendship and got to enjoy it. As for the next fiscal year, well…

They told them that the next year was the one wherein Robin’s Half-Brother passed. At this news, Ed looked scared, Double-D offered his condolences, and Eddy simply demanded to know what happened (much to Double-D’s annoyance). Robin said that while he would rather not talk about it, he did allow himself to state that it wasn’t natural, but then he mused aloud that that probably wasn’t a satisfying answer, and it might even scare the Eds off if they assumed that to mean that Robin’s Half-Brother fell in the line of duty, to which Double-D allowed himself to indulge in some impoliteness himself and say that that was exactly what he was afraid of when he heard Robin say that. John offered to say it for Robin if Robin would allow it, and Robin allowed it, and Little John told them plainly that Robin’s Half-Brother had committed suicide over guilt of doing inadvertent harm to a civilian. Robin did not look at anybody or anything in particular as John told them, and he had no more to say on the topic of his half-brother’s demise.

They told them that before that happened, that summer was shaping up to be even better than the previous one. Obviously, that did not turn out to be the case. They kept up their act through the summer and into the fall, but Robin was badly shaken for a good long while. The other four just tried anything they could to help Robin moved past it, but -- Little John told the Eds this part, and Robin didn’t fight him over it -- Robin just maintained a deep sense of personal responsibility for what happened to his brother; while all of the Men were familiar with the concept of survivor’s guilt (and indeed, the other four weren’t too cheerful those days, either), this was the most hardcore case of self-loathing over another’s passing that any of them had ever seen, not because it made Robin unfunctional (which it didn’t) but because of how long and how unflappably it persisted in someone like Robin who was usually impossibly resilient after his failures. At a certain point in the story, Robin asked Little John to move on from this detail, if for no other reason than because it might be boring and/or bumming out the boys; Little John clarified that he was just trying to instill confidence in them that Robin wasn’t one to lose faith in himself, and John was trying to do this by over-elaborating on how shocking the exception-to-prove-the-rule was, but he acquiesced all the same. He wrapped up this chapter by mentioning that it was on Halloween of that year when Robin got his groove back. Halloween was usually a day that the Men took off, both because they didn’t want to ruin the night for all the kids trick-or-treating in the event that the cops actually get a run on them and kill the mood by infesting the city looking for them, and because Halloween fell nicely between Little John’s birthday in late October and Robin’s birthday in early November precisely three weeks after John’s, and therefore Halloween was always used as a joint celebration. That Halloween, some kids from the city -- maybe third- or fourth-graders -- actually wandered all the way into Sherwood, taking advantage of their lack of adult supervision to go and hang out with their local heroes. But they got lost and quickly got tangled with some malicious high-schoolers from the upper-class suburbs who were in the woods to get intoxicated. The Merry Men (themselves a little buzzed from their merrymaking) heard the children screaming from a mile away -- Robin always did have impeccable hearing -- at which point they came running, scared the mean big kids off, got the kids home safe, and by the time the night was over, Robin offhandedly mentioned that he felt like he was “back.” Something about saving those kids refreshed his sense
They told them, however, that Robin’s bouncing back wasn’t going to save the state of the Merry Men. His confidence in Robin’s leadership having slightly wavered that year, The Rooster started reading up on sociopolitical philosophy and ultimately started spending some time on his own to play music and contemplate what he really believed in. Meanwhile, The Friar, for his troubles, got Lyme disease. Evidently a tick had gotten stuck somewhere in his fur, bit down, and never let go. The Men were fortunate to know a few doctors who were sympathetic to their cause, and took him to one when his mysterious symptoms got worse. This was shortly after Robin’s birthday, not even a few weeks removed from Robin’s Halloween rebirth, and the Robin and John both had memories of watching the post-election brouhaha on the TV in The Friar’s hospital room when the doctor walked in remarking that it was a miracle The Friar was still alive, not just because of the unchecked Lyme disease but because of the thyroid thing going untreated for decades, both of which were news to Robin, John, and The Rooster. Speaking of miracles, that winter was spent getting help from their civilian friends to forge some documents saying that The Friar had completed seminary training so he could live a safe life as a priest. The Friar would remain a close associate of the Merry Men, but now was most assuredly an auxiliary member, being too old and sickly to regularly engage in the kind of activities as he had for the last two years. The band was starting to unravel, but they weren’t done yet.

They told them that that next year was one hell of a rollercoaster ride. It all started that May when Mayor Norman had the balls to bring himself to Sherwood Forest for what was advertised to be some press conference on environmentalism but was clearly supposed to be a poorly-planned ambush to get the remaining Merry Men. Not only did his guards fail to capture them; Robin and John (but not The Rooster, who at this point was disappearing to God-knows-where for days at a time) took the liberty of dressing up in drag and robbing the motorcade itself. It was easily one of their best hauls ever, and good timing for it, because the mayor had recently raised taxes again; Robin and John had long ago lost track of the timeline of which tax hikes Prince John had implemented and when, but they agreed this particular one must have been a property tax one, because Prince John was sending his highest-ranking officers around as tax collectors to personally repossess stuff from people who couldn’t pay the new tax and couldn’t afford a lawyer to step up in court and say “Your Honor, there’s no way this shit can be legal.” They specifically remembered a rabbit family -- Robin immediately regretted letting their species slip, but he said whatever and moved on. The Mother Rabbit was a widow with a rabbit-y number of offspring, and when she couldn’t pay up, a cop just swiped her newly-seven-year-old son’s birthday money -- oh yeah, did Robin forget to mention that the cop crashed the kid’s birthday party? In any case, Robin showed up just as the cop was on his way out and decided to make it up to the Rabbit Kid by giving him his bow, arrow, and his bycocket hat; Robin clarified that a bycocket was the kind of feathered cap that they wore in Ye Olden Days and which Robin thought went quite nicely with his choice of weapon, and after picking up some nice green, yellow, and blue ones while restocking on arrows at a Renaissance Faire during the second summer, he and Little John wore them proudly and unironically for a few years before they all either got too tarnished or just sort of disappeared. Robin then apologized for going on a tangent about medieval hats -- God, he loved those things, dorkiness be damned, he really thought he and John pulled them off well for two citizens of the new Twenty-First Century, and he might even go so far as to say that the presence of those hats correlated with the best times for the Merry Men -- but he promised that the part about the gifted bow and arrow would be important later on.

They told them that after the motorcade robbery, Prince John was more hellbent than ever to get the Merry Men. Sometime shortly afterwards, a lightbulb went off in his head, and he decided to capture the criminal mastermind known for using a bow and arrow by setting up an archery contest. (Now Robin mentioned to the Eds that this wasn’t the part where the bow and arrow was
relevant, just in case that made things confusing; Robin was so used to spinning good yarns on the fly that he sometimes got tripped up when recalling the details of real events, and “impromptu nonfiction storytelling” was one of the few skills Little John consciously knew Robin was jealous of John having while Robin himself didn’t.) Prince John spent a few months preparing and organizing the contest to get it the most exposure possible and to guarantee that the bandits would hear about it and be enticed into participating. He also had one of his favorite police lackeys taken off duty to train at archery for hours a day so that when the outlaw did show up, he would have to be at his best to outshine the officer… at which point his extraordinary skills would betray his identity, and then Mayor Norman could capture him in front of the whole populace of Nottingham and publicly declare the existence of the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve bandits for the first -- and last -- time. A rather cogent plan, Robin and John must admit. Prince John, truly proving to the world that he really didn’t understand the value of money, set the grand prize at $25,000, and while getting a chunk like that out of the city treasury was enticing enough, there was another reason why Robin wanted to throw caution to the wind and enter the contest anyway.

They told them that somewhere along the line, Robin and John got word that Robin’s Girlfriend was in Nottingham. And she wasn’t just visiting; she was in town for awhile, living with Her Scottish Friend Whom She Met at College in New York. And to put it bluntly, Robin was lovesick. (Little John remarked to the Eds that Robin that summer would spend more time than usual taking his bathroom breaks, if they knew what he meant, and each of the boys chuckled while Robin silently blushed, silently confessing to himself that John wasn’t lying about that part.) Robin never stopped having feelings for her, but he had long since come to terms with the idea that he would never see her again. Now that he might feasibly see her again… hoo boy, he just couldn’t think straight. He wanted so badly to reunite with her, but he got it in his head that they were done. A woman like Robin’s Girlfriend was just too good to be in love with a vagrant criminal. Not to mention, the idea that she had been in town for a while by that point and hadn’t come to find them when she surely would have known they were still there, well… they didn’t know whether it was because she thought it was dangerous to go out in search of armed bandits, or if it was because she thought no self-respecting woman would go running blindly into the wilderness to find a guy who abandoned her several years prior, but either one was understandable. Just as Robin was about to uncharacteristically lose his composure again, Little John reminded him of something: he was Fucking Robin Hood. He was not only a risk-taker, but a risk-taker who knew how make his risks more likely to pay off. If Robin could handle a life of crime, he could handle speaking to his own girlfriend, and although Little John had never met Robin’s Girlfriend, Robin certainly made it seem like his confidence was one of the things she found the most attractive about him (although, John quipped, Rob’s dashing good looks probably helped; Robin then played up being flattered and they had a moment of playful friend-flirting with one another, which Ed and Double-D found amusing but Eddy found just a tinge uncomfortable to watch, just a tinge). In short, Little John argued that Robin going back to His Girlfriend was well worth the risk, and if his hypothesis was correct, the sheer act of doing it might guarantee its own success. Robin found himself agreeing.

They told them that it was as soon as this conclusion was reached that The Friar came out of the literal woodwork and arrived at the Major Oak to deliver news of the planned archery contest, and that Robin’s Girlfriend, who had some connection to Prince John -- Robin halfheartedly theorized that she may have been interning at City Hall or something but clearly didn’t try too hard to come up with a concrete answer -- was going to be there; in fact, there had been rumblings that Prince John’s wacky ass actually planned to have part of the grand prize be a kiss from Robin’s Girlfriend before some person or people stepped up and told him that treating a woman like a literal trophy probably wasn’t a good idea in modern America. Robin immediately declared his intention to go to that contest and wipe the floor with everybody to impress His Girlfriend, and uttered a curse upon political correctness because he really wanted that kiss to be his prize, and maybe a little bit more, but he would find a way to get it anyway. Little John, meanwhile, cursed his ability to uplift his
friend, now that it had just inspired him to go into a place armed to the teeth just to get some tail. But nevertheless, Robin broke the recollection for a second to express his gratitude to Little John for always knowing exactly what to say to make him feel better and always having the guts to say it, and although they both knew that Little John wasn’t quite so confident in his propping-up skills as of late, they also both knew that those were outliers caused by excessively dark circumstances, and they both knew that Robin would never hold John’s failures in these outlying instances against him, and they both knew that Robin didn’t think there was anybody else on planet Earth who could do a better job being his hype-man than Little John, and they both knew that John wouldn’t protest the compliment. Robin wrapped his arm around the bear’s wide back as far as he could in a show of appreciation, and Little John pulled his big arm out from between himself and Robin and draped it over the fox’s shoulder and pulled it in toward his torso and hip to reciprocate the sentiment, and walking a few feet behind them, Eddy -- who was not offended per se by the goofy platonic play-flirting two minutes prior but nevertheless felt like he was witnessing something he was conditioned to see as taboo, almost like Kevin would materialize out of the ether and punch him in the stomach just for looking at it -- felt a similar malaise as before, but this time it was out of uncertainty that he would ever share such fraternity as he was witnessing now with any other living person. Little did Eddy know that right next to him, Double-D was having similar thoughts about whether he would ever have such a real friend; Ed, for his part, was operating under the assumption that he already had such a bond with Eddy and Double-D, but they just chose not to express it in such ways as the elder bear and fox did.

They told them that if teenagers like themselves didn’t have any recollection of a widely-publicized archery contest in the area a mere four years ago, it’s because the marketing campaign was a flop and not a lot of the citizenry actually cared. Robin and John knew that at least one of their civilian friends theorized that even people who were casually interested in watching strangers shoot arrows at a canvas target would have gotten their fill from the Olympics the summer prior and wouldn’t have much interest in watching amateurs and hobbyists do it to vie for a big chunk of wasted taxpayer money. That said, it wasn’t like the event was abandoned or anything; it was just that the crowd was comprised of a few very specific factions: legit archery fans; the regular Ren Faire crowd; the mayor’s goons who were there to capture the eventual winner; some rich folks -- who were the closest thing Prince John had to friends (and who included a ridiculously-disguised Little John on a mission to butter the mayor up) -- who had a personal desire to see this character apprehended; and people from the West Side who knew who the archer in the skinny panther costume really was.

They told them that the competition was actually pretty competent. A lot of the other entrants were hardcore hobbyists and Ren Faire regulars, and even one guy from New Jersey who had allegedly barely missed the cut for the Olympics the year before. Most surprising, however, is that the mayor’s favorite cop -- Robin and John still weren’t giving any more specific identifiers than that -- was giving the “panther” a run for his money. Apparently all that forced training was paying off, because this guy was routinely making shots within two inches of the bullseye. Robin was planning on sandbagging to quell suspicion, but at a certain point, he saw His Girlfriend in the crowd, and then all his inhibitions fell away; it was time to show off. Robin then made the conscious decision to sink every shot perfectly and proceeded to bumslay everybody. He was so consumed by pride that he completely forgot that this was exactly what Prince John needed to weed him out, despite Little John’s attempts to convince the mayor that it was an unbelievable case of beginner’s luck.

They told them that at a certain point, they held a tiebreaker between the obese cop and the malnourished panther. (Robin let the qualifier “obese” slip, and Double-D briefly entertained the thought that it might have been a certain officer he knew, but he dismissed this, thinking that his uncle surely lacked the discipline to become amazing at archery in a month, and Double-D told
himself to be a polite and attentive listener and to go back to focusing on the adults’ story.) The officer went first and nailed it perfectly; they broke out the tape measure and they literally could not perceive any variance between the point of impact and the geometric center of the target. They then proceeded to not actually remove the arrow from the board. The panther protested, the mayor’s eccentric new pal protested, and even Robin’s Girlfriend and many strangers in the crowd protested, but all were told to be adults and live with it. So Robin went ahead and shattered the officer’s arrow, waltzed over toward the crowd with eyes locked on His Girlfriend (whose intuition made the panther’s true identity no mystery), and asked for his prize while a large chunk of the crowd cheered him on, some even excited enough to be chanting his actual name. His victory lap did not last long.

They told them that it was a shitshow. They sort of glossed over the fine details, but they mentioned that Robin was disrobed and revealed, and the mayor was ordering his cops to shoot him in the head if he dared to move a muscle, but Little John “convinced” the mayor to change his mind with the help of a switchblade at his neck (at this point, Little John turned to the Eds and clarified -- making eye contact with Double-D more than the other two -- that this was an emergency action and that they never had premeditated intentions to kill anyone, and judging by the look on the wolf-boy’s face, Johnny was glad he made that clear), and along with the objections from Robin’s Girlfriend and many others in the crowd that they had precisely no evidence that this panther was a wanted criminal, Prince John actually told his cops to let him go outright. Then the crowd rioted anyway. Amid the chaos, there were many injuries, much broken glass, and a marriage proposal, which Robin’s Girlfriend accepted on the spot. Robin clearly looked very content as he recalled this part, though he did confess that he had no idea if she would still honor their verbal engagement if she met him again today. That said, he did have a ring for her, fashioned out of a soft-stemmed flower, which he put on her finger as he showed her around Sherwood Forest that night, during which time they caught up, took in the moonlight, walked by the small waterfall, and just basked in the wonder of each other’s presence. Robin didn’t look at the Eds as he mentioned that he wished they would be lucky enough to know young love, thinking they were at that age where they may crave sex but couldn’t appreciate romance, but he also avoided looking at Little John, who Robin was afraid might have a moment of intrusive thoughts about how he had not been so lucky to know such a thing and probably was now chronologically disqualified from ever experiencing it.

They told them that their tender moment was pleasantly interrupted by one of the quirkiest parties they’d ever been to. A bunch of people from the city had made their way out to the Major Oak for what they could only think to describe as an “urban hoedown,” wherein a bunch of city dwellers who would typically not care for country and folk music danced, drank, and made merry to the songs played by Little John and The Rooster (who was kind enough to stop being AWOL for a few hours). Little John even sang a song mocking Prince John, which he and The Rooster (when he wasn’t MIA) had secretly been developing in their heads for a few months by that point. This was an important detail because the song was actually a very catchy earworm, with Little John giving about half a dozen encores, and rumor had it that after a week’s time it had spread so much that the mayor heard his assistant and the cop from earlier singing it to themselves in a false moment of privacy and damn-near cracked the officer over the head with his cane when he discovered them. The mayor, by the way, had probably spent the unclaimed prize money from the archery contest -- and a lot more from both personal and private funds -- to pay off all the media entities in town to just pretend the archery debacle didn’t happen. He was now on a warpath, and the Men had to make something happen before something happened to them.

They told them that before they could make the first move against the mayor and his elite, he made a move against the people. Prince John implemented some “emergency tax” to remedy the city’s sewage and drainage systems, which he claimed were still backed up after a tropical storm
had brushed by coast two months prior in June -- and to be fair, the sewers were still malfunctioning two months later… but only in the neglected parts of town. Therefore he only implemented the tax in the parts of town that needed fixing, and when the poor people couldn’t pay up, he tossed them in jail for tax evasion. This included The Rooster, who was mistaken for a regular homeless man unaffiliated with the Merry Men while wandering aimlessly around Georgetown, and The Friar, who was the unfortunate one to answer the door at the clergy house when the tax collector/policeman officer came knocking; John Norman knew damn well that churches were tax-exempt, but he framed it as taxing the clergy as individuals instead of taxing a Catholic Church, just like how Protestant ministers have to pay civilian taxes. In fact, word on the street was that the mayor was trying to get The Friar the death penalty because he had just said fuck it and fought back against the cop at the door of the clergy house, and then they framed it as a much more extreme attack then that; depending on how thoroughly Prince John could talk up the court that oversaw his trial, there was a fair chance The Friar would actually get booked for a lethal injection. There were some rumblings that there wasn’t really any plans to push for capital punishment, and that it was just a ruse specifically to lure Robin Hood and Little John to come bust The Friar out. Nevertheless, Rob and John -- who were starting to come to terms with the fact that the Merry Men would ultimately boil down someday to just the fox and the bear who made a great pair -- decided to stage a jailbreak.

They told them that Prince John’s haughty laziness actually made it much easier for them. Because the city was taking its sweet-ass time processing its offenders, exactly zero of those arrested actually were sent to a full-fledged correctional facility, nor did any of them even see a judge for that matter. They were literally just being kept in the holding pen at the city police headquarters, all of them -- dozens and dozens of men, women, and children whose parents and guardians were arrested (John Norman would later say to the only journalist with the balls to ask him that he thought keeping the kids with their parents was more humane than separating them and throwing them into foster care). Since the Paranoid Prince’s mini-mansion was not even a block from the main precinct (a very deliberate design choice), only separated by the Peach Creek as it ran through that part of town on its way to the ocean, Rob and Johnny decided to perform double duty: Robin would loot the mayor’s house while Little John freed the people. Simple.

They told them that they don’t know exactly where it all went wrong. One moment, everybody from the mayor to the cop guarding the holding tank were fast asleep and it seemed like everyone was going to be home free, the next, everybody and their grandma was awake and trying to kill them. Robin said somberly that that was the closest he’d ever come to meeting his maker, and when he jumped in the creek to escape the guards’ bullets and didn’t come up from the water for what seemed like a solid minute, Little John -- who had been watching from the banks of the creek along with the freshly-liberated Rabbit Kid, refusing to let their friend be left behind -- certainly thought that Robin had finally learned the answer to the old question of what happens to our conscious minds after our bodies can’t continue any longer. Little John had just turned his back to the water, overcome by grief and not knowing what on earth he was going to do with himself now, when the Rabbit Kid noticed some movement in the water. Little John said he had never felt such elation in his life. They all went back to Sherwood with the newly-freed citizens, and although all of them were physically exhausted, they had all found the strength to party for another sixty hours. The only thing that made this party worse than the previous one was that Robin’s Girlfriend couldn’t be there, because as somebody connected to the mayor, she was expected to help clean up the mess her secret fiancé had made. She was expected to leave town soon afterwards, and to date, Robin had never seen her again; the last thing they spoke of was the morning after the hoedown after the archery contest, when upon stating that she needed to get back to civilization, she realized that Robin’s Half-Brother had been nowhere to be seen; Robin, not wanting to ruin their goodbye, sheepishly fibbed that His Half-Brother was captured somewhere along the line and now they had no idea where he was. Robin morosely mentioned that he still kicked himself every single day that
his semi-permanent farewell to the love of his life was not only such a downer, but a lie at that.

As an aside, they told them that they would not expect the Eds to subject themselves to such danger as seen in the jailbreak… unless they really, really wanted to.

They told them that they specifically remembered that the jailbreak happened on a Thursday night going into the Friday morning after Labor Day. The city government spent Friday cleaning up the mess and covering up their embarrassment, took the weekend off to collect their thoughts, and announced on Monday that the emergency tax was cancelled, all the debts tied to it repudiated, and all the people apprehended “let go.” Word around town was that Prince John was just one bad minute away from resigning for his own personal safety. Any day now and all of this could all be over. It seemed as though all that hard work, all the pain, all the sorrow, all the days and years of their lives sacrificed wholly in service of the common people, was about to pay off. And if things had been different, perhaps it all would have been worth it.

They told them that the boys probably remembered that Tuesday. Robin and John sure did. They were making their usual rounds, a bit more casually than usual since they believed their goal was in sight, when they realized that there were a lot of cops out for the morning rush hour, and that there were a few helicopters buzzing around. The first friendly civilian they saw flagged them down and told them in no uncertain terms that they’d best head back to Sherwood and take the day off, and probably a few more days after that. They politely ignored the citizen’s implorations, but after three or four more people told them basically the same thing, they started to get the feeling that something wasn’t right -- not that those people were telling them what was up, because they didn’t know much more than Robin and John did. The two of them went back to the Major Oak, only to find that The Rooster was there too, and he didn’t know much more than they did. He had heard that there was another hurricane off the coast -- but, like, way off the coast, like by Bermuda -- and that the beaches were closed because of some nasty waves, and his best guess was that there was some weather-related mess, even though it had only drizzled a little bit before sunrise that morning. The three of them played cards, took turns reading a book out loud, practiced sparring, attempted writing some new songs, and quite frankly tried to stave off boredom. All the while, they kept hearing sirens in the distance, though the helicopters seemed to trail off throughout the day. Toward the evening, out of ideas for what to do, they just laid down in a clearing and stared at the clouds as they slowly turned orange. During this time, Little John had the thought that he couldn’t see a single airplane in the sky, but Robin and The Rooster were talking about something else and John didn’t know if it was actually that weird, so he didn’t bother mentioning it; maybe he had just never noticed that there weren’t any flight-paths over Sherwood. The next morning, the three of them went to pay a visit to The Friar to find out what the heck had happened. When he told them, they were in such disbelief that they went around to a bunch of their other civilian friends to ask them to corroborate the story. The Merry Men weren’t just scared and heartbroken by the news of the events; they were also worried because they had no idea how this would affect them, and while they certainly didn't want to think such selfish thoughts after such an occurrence, the coming weeks, months and years would confirm their fears that they were, indeed, screwed.

Prince John, the sick fuck that he was, was more than happy to have a reason to kick government security into high gear. He petitioned the governor to send the Delaware National Guard to Nottingham so they could just sort of, you know, hang out, just to be around in case some people with “extreme” beliefs and “radical” values were to engage in behaviors that could be construed as an attack on the city and its people. While he didn’t succeed in getting a militia to patrol the city, he still had plenty of excessive force to go around, and, shockingly, a scared and confused populace found themselves faintly supporting him; they were in no means in love with the guy, but terrible leadership was still better than no leadership, and now more than ever, the people really needed a leader. In this bizarre world where the poor of Nottingham found the tyrant to be somewhat tolerable, and where said tyrant was now justified in acting upon his paranoia in the name of
protecting his people against a newfound evil, the Men understood that they now needed to mind their P’s and Q’s more than ever. What was probably the darkest day anyone alive had ever witnessed had given John Norman a new lease on life.

They told them that, if it wasn’t already obvious, all of their progress was undone, all of their momentum was gone, and all of their hope seemed lost. They kept doing what they were doing, but much more carefully now; no more signed notes to the mayor, and no more of their fans shouting their names in the streets. “They” also started consisting exclusively of Robin and John. The Friar asked politely if he may be excused from service going forward, save for maybe some extraneous circumstances, and Rob and Johnny granted him his honorable discharge. As for The Rooster, it turns out that he really had done some thinking during his times away from the others, much of which turned out to have been spent in Zoar Park and Hollyville with people with big ideas, and somewhere along the line he had embraced no-shit, for-realsies anarchy, and not the “guy who holds radical beliefs and reads a lot of political literature and wears a lot of knit sweaters but is functionally harmless” kind of anarchism, but instead the “robbing the rich to give to the poor is great, but in the interest of remedying society, we can also go about destructively disrupting society in its present state as its own end, which will be effective in and of itself” kind, the “Weather Underground seemed like an upright bunch of kids, but they would have been better to distance themselves from statism” kind, the “liberals get the bullet, too” kind of anarchism. (Robin and John felt the need to spell out Alan’s politics, just on the off chance that any of the boys identified as an anarchist and would be turned off by the insinuation that that was a bad thing to be, not because any of the Eds outwardly seemed like the kind who would, but because they were teenage boys, and Robin and John knew that there was always a chance that any given teenage boy in the United States could be the kind go around proudly calling themselves an anarchist without really knowing what that word meant.) The Rooster thought that the excessive patriotism in the aftermath of those dark days was grossly inappropriate and borderline evil, and he was legitimately pissed at Robin and John for not wanting to start breaking shit to get stuff done. The Rooster was genuinely confused by how they weren’t on board, and he argued that the whole “rob from the rich to give to the poor” schtick was essentially anarcho-communism anyway. And Robin and John didn’t really have a good rebuttal to that, because, as they told The Rooster on several occasions, they had never really thought of their actions through the lens of political theory, only through the lens of Good and Bad; they thought that it was Bad that people were being taxed to death in Twenty-First Century America, and they thought that they had found a way to do Good by toeing the line of “constructive action that will have a positive effect”, whereas The Rooster’s ideas struck them as “destructive action that will just make things worse”. Indeed, when Little John straight-up told The Rooster that, despite the inherently political nature of their actions, he just didn’t give a rat’s ass about politics on a day-to-day basis, The Rooster called him cowardly, a redneck, convictionless, and a fascist all in about three seconds; when Robin cosigned on John’s statement to back up his buddy (not knowing himself whether it was completely true that he felt precisely as John did, but knowing damn well that he wasn’t on board with The Rooster), The Rooster said plainly that he expected the Englishman to be more enlightened. In what became a sort of inside joke between the fox and the bear, they told The Rooster that the last thing they wanted was an all-out class war. But The Rooster just seemed disappointed in them. Robin and John acknowledged to the Eds that they were probably boring them with all this talk of political theory (much like how The Rooster bored them to tears when he wouldn’t shut the fuck up about something-something about bread), but wrapped up this section of the recollection by saying that The Rooster didn’t abandon them yet; he was certainly content to keep his stuff at the Major Oak and had no problem eating their food or borrowing their toilet paper. But he kept growing more and more distant as he spent many days going off and doing his own thing, becoming more like an annoying roommate than a partner in crime, and many nights were spent with arguments going well into the night, with The Rooster doing most of the talking, seemingly to himself. (Little John nearly mentioned the time when Alan seriously crossed the line by telling Robin that Will had basically been a radical anarchist and if he
were still around, Will would side with him in a heartbeat, and John had to break up a fistfight between the two of them, picking Robin and Alan up by the scruff of their necks and making them talk it out while two and a half off the ground, but John bit his tongue, not wanting to remind the prideful Robin that the country coyote had been well on his way to kicking the lanky fox’s ass.)

They told them that they both hoped the boys would never experience such a tragedy as the ending of a friendship; it was a truly gut-wrenching thing, but since there are so many worse things a person can experience, people rarely recognize it for being as tough as it really is. It wasn’t quite like a breakup with a significant other, they posited (not that Robin nor John were experts, since they’d only ever had one girlfriend between the two of them); a relationship could (foolishly) be built upon sexual attraction before anything else, but a friendship just leaves raw chemistry, so for something to interrupt that, something really must have gone wrong. John and Robin said didn’t hate The Rooster; in fact, they still cared about him, and might even go as far as to say they still loved him as a brother after all that time they spent together, but they didn’t really want to hang out with him anymore, and they most certainly didn’t feel comfortable working with him if he was liable to start stirring shit for the sake of it. They knew that the changes he went through were products of his own pain and grief, but that understanding didn’t make it any easier for them to deal with those changes. If they saw him tomorrow, lying on the side of the road and dying of thirst, Robin and Little John would both give him something to drink, and neither would leave his side until he was well again, but they wouldn’t stick around much longer after they nursed him back to health. After all, your brother isn’t necessarily your friend.

They told them that there was virtually zero chance of seeing him tomorrow, however, lying on the side of the road or otherwise, because The Rooster was the guy they had told the Eds they didn’t have to worry about ever meeting. For a while, he continued redistributing wealth his own way, in addition to other extracurricular activities that may or may not have actually been quite as helpful to anyone, but after a few years -- this would have been about two years ago, on Valentine’s Day before the Merry Men’s fifth anniversary -- The Rooster got busted. It turned out that his big idea was to steal cop cars, have them repainted, and give them to the poor of Nottingham. Robin and John conceded that it was actually a rather creative idea, one that they kind of wished they’d come up with themselves, but there was a major flaw in the plan. They didn’t know whether The Rooster just forgot that cars have VIN numbers, or if he just thought they wouldn’t be traced, or if he thought that they couldn’t be traced because it would be too much of a hassle á la the serial numbers on a dollar bill, or if he did try to erase the VIN numbers but just never thought to replace them with fake ones and therefore made it even more suspicious that a Crown Victoria with a dark spot where the “POLICE INTERCEPTOR” badge would be also doesn’t have a Vehicle Identification Number, but in any case, it was easy for the cops to ascertain that the paint shop in Wood Branch servicing a disproportionate number of Crown Vics with no titles or registration attached to them probably got them through illicit means. The authorities raided the operation, and The Rooster had the misfortune of being there at the time. Robin mused that, as far as they knew, The Rooster never actually killed anyone, (though he was certainly booked for several dozen counts of Attempted, as well as a bunch of other charges owing to his sheer recklessness), nor did he engage in many of the extreme behaviors for which he had verbally advocated (they had certainly never heard of him nor anybody else planting IEDs at City Hall), but while his intentions were noble, he seemed too hung up on saying Fuck Tha Police and Other Tenets of the Establishment instead of trying to cut the snake off at its head.

They told them that they fucked up in their recollection and got so wrapped up in their schism with The Rooster that they forgot the payoff to why that Rabbit Kid’s gift of a bow and arrow were important. So backtrack to the fourth summer and fall, four years ago, right after everything got messed up. Apparently the Rabbit Kid and his friend went trick-or-treating that Halloween as members of the Merry Men, with the Rabbit Kid donning the hat and carrying the oversized bow
rubber-tipped arrow. Somewhere along the line that night, the kids -- two seven-year-olds who had just started second grade, perhaps they should have been trick-or-treating with adult supervision at that age -- came across a cop, who told them that he didn’t like what their costumes stood for. The Rabbit Kid pointed the bow and rubber-tipped arrow at the officer, his friend raised the branch that was supposed to be a sword or a quarterstaff (it was whatever he was feeling it to be in a given moment, really), and they both demanded money from the officer to be given to the poor of Nottingham. Several more cops showed up, and instead of dropping the act, the kids just escalated it. Both of them were sent to juvenile hall after a quick trial. Little John quipped that it was moments like that that made him understand why The Rooster had such a hate-boner for cops specifically. In any case, Robin and John weren’t there to save them because they were in the woods, getting drunk alone with each other on their joint birthday (not to suggest they didn’t get drunk fairly often without any special occasion before about two years ago, at which point they decided they needed to cut back on their namesake merrymaking if they wanted to survive). They were telling the Eds this because it was one of their biggest regrets, especially to Robin, who felt like he shouldn’t have trusted that kid to be as mature for his age as Robin had thought him to be. They told them that between the Rabbit Kid and Robin’s Half-Brother, they weren’t ever going to make any more mistakes that would endanger young lives ever again. That meant them.

They told them that they were racking their brains to think of whether there was anything they were forgetting. It seemed like the answer was “not really”. The last four years, and especially the last two, had been a blur, and not in the “time flies when you’re having fun” sort of way, but in the “time flies when you’re worried you’re wasting your life” sort of way. Their progress had been as stagnant as swamp water, and they were stuck in a stalemate with Prince John and his associates, who might win by default simply because there were more of them. And that’s why they were looking to recruit some people like the Eds. There were those who thought the Merry Men were too radical, and some (like a certain Rooster they knew) who thought they weren’t radical enough, but there were even more who beyond all that were just worried for Robin and John because they thought they were doing everything right but just didn’t have the manpower to pull it off. There had been times when the two of them considered going The Rooster’s route, but they saw how well that ended; there had also been times when they’d considered throwing in the towel, but they knew that there was no guarantee that anybody else would step up to the plate and take individual action to make things better for people as they had tried to do. They remembered how they were so close to succeeding once -- so close -- before they were derailed by the most unforeseen of unforeseen circumstances. They told themselves that this must mean that they knew what to do, they just needed help getting that close again, and this time, they would be sure to pull it off. All they needed was help. All they needed was for someone to step up and say that they wanted to be a Merry Man. Or a Merry Woman, or a Merry Boy or Girl, or a Merry Being of Ambiguous Age and Gender, but it’s not exactly like they’d had any luck attracting any one demographic over another in the past seven years. All they knew was that the Eds seemed like cool kids, and now they wanted to share their world with them because they wanted to see whether they’d like to join them there. And they knew it was a risk to show them their world, and they told them as much, but they knew from seven years of doing this shit that nothing new gets done without taking risks -- at least not in this line of work. Once upon a time, some motherfucker somewhere -- maybe it was Einstein, maybe it wasn’t -- said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Robin Hood and Little John were done doing the same shit over and over without making a change, because it was making them go insane. They were hoping that the addition of Ed, Edd and Eddy to their lives would be the change they needed to make. And if they weren’t comfortable joining them, that was fine, because they couldn’t reasonably expect otherwise. But Robin and John had to offer. They needed to show somebody their world because otherwise those new people would never know how rewarding it could be unless they saw it firsthand. And they needed the help, so they needed someone to see how rewarding it truly was. They were taking this stupid risk because it was riskier in the long run to not take the stupid risk.
Does that make sense? Do you understand us, boys? Are you lads still on board with us? That’s what they told them.

"If you kids remember even half that, I’ll be surprised," Little John remarked.

“What, are ya calling us stupid?” asked Eddy.

“No, I’m just saying that it was a lot of information to take in. Chill, bud. We wouldn’t’ve brought ya with us if we thought y’all were too dumb to live.” Little John wasn’t lying, but between Ed’s absentmindedness and the other two’s strangely equal but opposite lack of social awareness, he hadn’t made up his mind yet whether any of them were too dumb to live. He certainly thought that the midgety fox kid -- Little John couldn’t believe he caught himself mentally calling this kid “midgety” considering his own past, but that was the word he thought, and it wasn’t an entirely inaccurate descriptor -- he thought Eddy was definitely a hothead, but perhaps there was still a way to channel that into positive energy. After all, Little John himself used to be full of wayward anger at the world, and he turned that around. Hell, maybe between being extremely late bloomers and harboring anger issues that just needed some guidance, Little John found himself thinking that he might have had a lot more in common with Eddy than he originally thought.

“But just so we can make it clear once and for all,” Robin said as he stopped and turned to the boys, “the three of you are all alright to continue with us? We won’t think less of you if you tell us no, especially after all the information we’ve unloaded onto you three, but we’re about to leave the forest, so this is your last chance to scoot off without making a public scene. Shall we keep going? Can I get three yeses?”

Ed was just going to wait for Edd and Eddy to answer first so he could just go with whatever they said, but Little John was making eye contact with him. John didn’t have any particular reason for looking to Ed to answer first, only that from his vantage point he was the easiest to look at. But Ed was a mere mortal, and his recent concern for the health of his friends’ bond was no match for his long and storied history of making impulsive decisions on his own accord. The little bit of him that felt like he should be the last to answer was outweighed by the part of him that felt that he was in the presence of some real cool characters. These guys might have been presenting him the opportunity for that summertime adventure he craved so dearly. The actual moral and sociopolitical implications of the decision didn’t even cross his mind; Ed was making a very self-serving choice. If he got to dress up in costumes and play around with bows and arrows and big fucking sticks and run around the city back to his home base like one big game of tag, then he was sold, and if they could later convince him that he was an actively good person for doing so, then that would just be icing on the cake. “Take Ed with you!” he said.

For Eddy, it wasn’t a matter of specifically wanting to go last, as he had made his mind up a long time ago. He was just damned curious what Double-D was going to say and wanted to find out as soon as possible; if that meant not giving his answer until Edd was goaded into answering faster, then that’s how it would have worked. But after Ed answered, a brief bout of silence made it clear that Double-D was willing to risk disgrace if pretending to be childishly bashful meant that he got to get Eddy to answer first. Eddy wasn’t too invested in this game of chicken, and if these two weirdos turned out to be two guys he’d like to hang around with -- which, if their purported legendary status could be verifiably proven, might go from being “possible” to “very possible” -- he would hate for them to think that he was too gun-shy to pull the trigger and answer a simple question. He wanted to see what these guys were all about, and he was ready to let them know it. “Sure,” he said. “Let’s check it out.”
Double-D was very nervous. Attentive as always, he had been paying very close attention to the
details of what tales Robin and John told of their exploits as outlaws, and precisely as the Men had
feared, Double-D didn’t feel interested in any of it. Double-D believed that *they* believed they were
doing God’s work, and they certainly painted a picture that they were doing more good than harm,
but his parents had always instilled the names of Law and Order into him, and not even these two
charismatic creatures could convince him to concede his convictions that quickly. And then there
were the uncanny parallels to the legend of Adam Bell and the outlaws of Inglewood Forest,
which… Double-D didn’t even want to think about his feelings about that story and its characters.
And yet here he was. Eddy had challenged him to live his life, Ed had implored him to be a team
player, and he had dared himself to give a chance to these two who had so thoroughly won him
over before he discovered their secrets. Consequently, he was now standing at the far edge of
Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve with two strange adults who were unabashedly proud of their
vigilante methods of social change. Double-D knew that there were people twenty minutes from
his house who were going through situations tougher than he could ever imagine, but he believed
that there must, there surely *must* have been a way to better their lot in life, a way that was much
more composed and civilized, a way that did not endanger anybody’s safety, a way that did not
require deceit, violence, or dirty socks. But because he was raised to be polite to adults, and
because he was raised to think that giving people a chance to make their case -- ludicrous as it
might be -- was the polite thing to do, Edd was allowing himself to partake in some foolish risk-
taking in the name of what Ed might call “adventure.” And if it all went south and these strangers
sought to harm them, well, if this was to be *his* deplorable lot in life, then Double-D would be
prepared for death at any moment.

“Penny for your thoughts, Eddward?” asked Robin.

“Reassure me, if you will: we will not actually be participating in your actions, merely observing
them from a safe distance to better understand how you operate?” the wolf asked.

“Eddward, I reassure you,” said Robin. “Actually, allow me to be more specific: We *insist* you
keep a safe distance during the robbery part. But we *invite* you to join us in giving back to the
community. We promise you that the poor of Nottingham will not hurt you while you’re with us.”

“So they’ll hurt us when we’re *not* with you?” asked Eddy. Everybody ignored him.

“And this is not a commitment to join your band, correct?” asked Double-D.

“No it ain’t, buddy,” said Little John jovially. “All it is, is us doing some show ‘n’ tell.”

Double-D told himself that if all of this was a charade to lure them into some sort of trap, then by
this point they’d put on such a performance that they’d’ve earned the right to trap them. “Then I
will accept your invitation,” Double-D affirmed.

“I like how the guy asks for three yeses and not a single one of you says anything even close to the
word ‘yes,’” Little John couldn’t help but remark. All these thoughts of the way they used to be
had John thinking about whether the recent turmoil he and Robin had gone through was creating
him to relapse into his former perpetually-grumpy self. He still believed that a little bit of sarcasm
in moderation was a nice touch for flavor here and there, but he was trying to monitor himself so
he didn’t slip back into being the snarky, un-fun asshole he used to be.

“Johnny, don’t be such a snarky, un-fun arsehole!” said Robin. “This is a great day! We may have
just made three new friends! Don’t scare them away!”

John really didn’t need to hear that, but he didn’t want to have an extended chit-chat about it in
front of the kids. “Well, hell, if they can’t handle a few remarks, then I guess they can’t handle
“Oh, nonsense! They just happen to have only seen you when you have a good reason to be frustrated. When our fortunes turn up again, then they’ll see the better side of the bear I’d call my brother.”

“Okay, Mister Broken Record Player, that’s literally not even the first time you’ve said that,” said Eddy. “And it wasn’t any less weird when you called him your ‘brother’ the first time.” Now it was Eddy who was kicking himself for his habitual snark. He didn’t want to get on these guys’ bad side. But he also didn’t want to think that he was going to jump from being the leader of his own band of misfits to being in a spot where he was constantly reminded that he was the third wheel to history’s greatest bromance.

Robin just cocked his head at Eddy with a smile, one of those vexed-but-determined looks. “I really feel like I ought to thank you for this opportunity to practice my persuasion skills on a tough customer like yourself. We’ll get you in groove with us yet. And I must say, Eddy, though it might not seem like it, I really like your energy. We just have to channel it into something positive.”

With all his head eight feet in the air and all the others’ attention on the foxes down below, nobody noticed the bizarre wince on Little John’s face. Channeling his energy into something positive … Was Robin reading his damn mind today? It was honestly kind of getting bizarre, and yet if there were actually some telepathy going on, then why would Rob keep stepping on his toes? The more John thought about it, the more he lamented that it would be awhile before he would have a chance to have another extended private talk about it. Of course, all this talk of the past reminded him of all the guys in his life who would chide him for wanting to have a conversation about feelings with another guy, and he now was starting to lament that wanting. He decided that they ought to stop burning daylight, and with any luck, he might have forgotten about Robin driving him crazy by the end of all this.

“C’mon, Rob,” said John, “we’re probably boring them again. Where we gonna head to?” Fuck! he thought to himself as soon as he said that; he realized he had just handed Robin the keys again to make a decision for the both of them, and furthermore was establishing himself in front of these kids to be Robin’s underling. And Little John would have remedied his error immediately by proposing a location himself, but with his head wrapped up in his newfound self-loathing, he just couldn’t think of any place to go. And then he thought that maybe this was why Robin was the one to make most of the important calls and not him.

“An excellent question, Johnny!” answered Robin, who then turned to the boys. “Now, gentlemen, we have a few different strategies for how we go about collecting. Do you boys know Sherwood Forest Road?”

“Yeah,” answered Eddy.

“Since that road is used disproportionately by the rich, we often like to play a bit of dress-up and pretend we’re also some rich blokes who’ve had a breakdown and need assistance, try to flag them down. The rich won’t help many people, but they’ll certainly help their own.”

“And then what happens?”

“We drug ‘em,” said Little John matter-of-factly; he was making a specific point to not let Robin do all the talking. “We don’t hurt them if we don’t have to. We keep them comfortable while we clean out their pockets and the trunks of their cars.”

“I-I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that,” stammered Double-D predictably.
“As we imagined,” said Robin. “But you needn’t worry, lad; we’re not going to be doing that with you today.”

“Besides, we usually save that for nighttime,” explained Little John. “It’s almost rush hour, isn’t it? Too many people out for a targeted… uh… targeted…?”

“‘Operation’?” Robin offered.

“What he said,” said John.

“We also sometimes make house calls, but not as often as we’d like.”

“Everybody’s stepping up their home security systems now. I swear it seems like technology’s jumped fifty years in the seven years we’ve been doing this.”

“Don’t remind me, Johnny; I don’t fear much in this world, but I’m not looking forward to the day one of our donors realizes their new fancy mobile phone has a camera built into it. Now I ask you, when on earth did these come about!? But lads, again: don’t worry, we won’t ask you to come loot someone’s home with us until you’re ready.”

“If you’re ever ready.”

“What he said,” said Robin.

“But when do we get to play with the bow and arrows and sticks and stuff?” asked Ed impatiently.

“I hope not to disappoint you, boys, but these are mostly carried with us for self-defense.”

“Or defending someone else,” added John. “Hell, just yesterday we had to break up a robbery. And I don’t mean a good robbery like we do. I’m talking like a poor-on-poor, winner-take-all robbery.”

“And not long before that, we had to stave off some -- er…” -- Robin realized that there was a slim but real chance that these kids knew the red-capped hyena who had thrown rocks and hollered epithets at them before running afoul of Elkins, Goldthwaite, Woodland, and Nutzinger, and in that event, he didn’t want the Eds thinking they had anything to do with that boy’s fate -- “some crazy bloke who came upon us in Sherwood.”

It took Little John a second, but he realized what apprehension had caused Robin’s hiccup, and thought he could help obscure the connection. “Yeah, he was probably on meth or something,” John added.

“So don’t get the impression that these never get used. And when we do use them, we always aim to scare or incapacitate the miscreants, not to hurt them. We want to make it clear as day that we have no interest in being the bad guys any more than we need to be.”

“I’ll tell you what, kids,” said John, “these weapons are like the hourglass on a black widow. It’s a sign that says to the world, ‘If you fuck with us, we’ll fuck with you, and we’ll fuck with you in a way that we know you ain’t prepared to fight back against.”

“Ooh, Johnny, I like that analogy!”

“I-I-I also appreciate the creativity of the simile,” Double-D said, forcing himself to say something -- anything -- so that the bandits didn’t think he was mute with fear, even if that was true.

“Hm. Thanks, bud,” said Little John. “But, uh, yeah, so we carry these guys with us around
Sherwood and in friendly territory, but when we’re in Rich People Land, we usually store these at a
friend’s house if we’re just out collecting money and not looking for a specific fight.”

“‘Not looking for a specific fight?’ asked Double-D, who was so confused by that statement that
it effectively cured his catatonia.

“Like if we need to loot the mayor’s mansion.”

“Or if we need to save someone on the East Side,” added Robin, “ Doesn’t happen to often, but
when it happens, we’ll be there with our trusty bow and staff.”

“Then what the heck are we doing today, then?” asked Eddy, trying to hide his impatience from
these people he may or may not later choose to impress.

“If it pleases the court,” said Robin, “we’ll be demonstrating the most innocent method of
collecting we do. And I do mean collecting rather than taking.”

“Which is?” asked Eddy and Double-D in unison, but with very dissonant tones.

“What is it!” asked Ed half a second later.

“Swindle the shit outta some rich people,” said Little John.

--III--

“Take it all in, boys,” said Robin as the five of them walked through Georgetown en route to Otto’s
house. “There may come a day soon when you’ll need to be very familiar with this part of town.”

The Eds followed Robin and John through the streets, just a few feet behind them, close enough to
speak but far enough back that if a wise cop turned the corner and recognized the Men, the Eds
could claim their proximity was incidental.

Ed was going through a mild sensory overload as he observed all the minute details of the area
he’d never been to before. The homes and businesses that teetered on the line of simply looking
tired and looking downright ramshackle made Ed think that it was like the junkyard was built up to
be a pretty decent-looking city in itself. The only thing keeping him from running off and getting a
closer look at any little thing that caught his eye was his desire to get the chance to play with the
bow and arrow and the big fucking stick. Ed was showing an unusual level of self-control as he
walked along, and it was really a shame that he wasn’t getting any positive recognition for it. The
only two people present who could have appreciated his impressive restraint were themselves
letting the scenery wash over them.

Double-D, as you may have imagined, Dear Reader, was very, very nervous. He had been told his
entire life that this part of town was a no-go area, a place you would hardly choose to drive through
let alone walk about on foot. He was aware of the irony that he was trusting his association with
two known criminals would keep him safe from the ire of the locals, and he kept thinking about
whether it was a mistake to go out and give this a try; with regards to that question, his mind kept
changing on a minute-to-minute basis. He was also well aware of the fact that the people of this
area were, indeed, looking at him. But their looks were not as foreboding as Edd had anticipated;
the denizens first laid eyes upon the familiar fox and bear, saw that their familiar smiles and waves
were accompanied by gestures to the boys behind them as if to say they’re with us, and observed
the three inquisitively. The locals were trying to get a good look at the trio to try to figure out what
their connection was to Robin and Little John; were they lost outsiders being safely escorted
through a strange land? or delinquents off to be reformed by the criminal masterminds? or some
rich kids being led into a trap to get their parents’ money from them? or some orphaned teens liberated from an abusive foster home? or Robin and John’s illegitimate kids plus… um… a wolf just for good measure? Could it even be that -- despite the unfocused looks on their faces -- these kids were trying to join the Merry Men? Robin and John had specifically told Double-D beforehand that this was Georgetown, not Hermosa Park, and the majority of the locals here aren’t interested in recreationally fucking with outsiders, but instead would merely be confused by the presence of some kids who exude a noticeably suburban aura; and Double-D trusted them as much as he could, but he was starting to feel that being the subject of confused stares wasn’t much better than being on the receiving end of hostile ones.

Eddy was a little bit scared like Double-D, and a little bit overwhelmed like Ed. But he was also a little bit bored. He wanted to see what all the fuss was about. He was already telling himself that if he wasn’t impressed by their methods, he could probably at least steal a few money-making ideas for his scam-plans. He wanted to see how these guys worked that they could live on the lam for years and never be caught even once. Actually, that posed a pretty good question.

“So let me get this straight,” Eddy said. “You don’t want to go mess with people on that road in the woods because there’s too many people out now… so it’s safer to mess with people downtown in broad daylight?”

“The lad’s observant!” remarked Robin. “Just like a fox should be. Eddy, what if I told you that there also weren’t enough people out on Sherwood Forest Road right now?”

“Yeah, kid,” said Little John, “haven’t you ever heard of hiding in plain sight? Even if one of our plans goes belly-up--”

“Which they won’t,” said Robin.

“Yeah, sure. But even if they did, people wouldn’t know us from any other criminals roaming this town. You know, as much as we don’t associate with those types, we’ll gladly blend in with them if it’ll save our asses.” Little John didn’t care too much for Robin’s overly-confident interruption, but he knew for an absolute fact that Rob would say that there was a time for modestly and a time to inspire confidence, and that this was definitely one of the latter times. Then again, John was feeling better with the boys in tow, almost as though he was no longer on the bottom of a two-man totem pole…

...Hey, wait, that kind of made him realize something, albeit something he’d need to talk over with someone other than Robin.

Eddy, meanwhile, still couldn’t tell whether these guys were stupid or geniuses after the ‘hide in plain sight’ comment. Compounding his confusion and his sense of boredom and impatience were the fact that they still weren’t even at the safehouse, let alone the unspecified place where they’d be holding their event. The walk in the city so far had been at least as long as the walk through the forest, if not longer. His little legs were killing him. Eddy was starting to think if these guys were so good at stealing shit without consequences, they would have eventually stolen themselves a car.

Finally, they arrived at the row house on Iowa Avenue between 43rd and 44th, getting close to the southeast corner of Georgetown’s official boundaries. Robin walked up the stoop and knocked on the door while Little John stayed on the sidewalk with the boys.

“Who are we visiting?” asked Double-D.

“Is he gonna give us a ride to wherever we’re going?” asked Eddy.
“Brother, a little exercise is good for ya,” said Little John. Eddy wanted to say that that was rich coming from a guy who literally embodied the notion that ‘pear-shaped’ and ‘bear-shaped’ were exactly the same thing, but Eddy thought nothing positive would come of him saying so.

“This is our friend Otto’s house,” said Robin. “If you’re ever in this neck of the woods and you need help, he runs a tool and die shop at 45th and Florida, although he closes shop on Sundays and Mondays, when you can probably find him here. You’re our friends; he’ll help you.”

Otto opened the door and was opening his mouth to greet Robin, but when he saw John was back by the sidewalk, he saw the three kids at his side.

“Top o’ the morning, Otto,” Robin greeted before the hounddog could get a word out.

“Howdy, Robin,” answered Otto, a bit confused by the sight. “Who’re your boys here?”

“They’re not our boys yet, but they may be soon,” said Robin. “This is Ed, Edd, and Eddy, although the middle one will insist you call him Eddward or Double-D -- it’s a long story about spelling discrepancies. Think of them as Merry Men Cadets, if you will; they’re here to see what we do, and they may soon be joining us on our little adventures if they like what they see.”

“And we know it’s weird that we found three kids with the same name,” added Little John, “but we’re taking it as a sign that they’re gonna work well together. Like they’re a package deal. And by the way, we just told them you live here and that your shop’s around the corner, so if these little shits betray us and use this information for evil, the wolf kid lives at the corner of Harris and Rethink in Peach Creek, so you’ll know where to find him.”

“Excuse me!?” exclaimed Double-D, feeling as though his privacy had just been violated.

“Hey, I told you I wouldn’t forget a stupid name like ‘Rethink,’ and I didn’t,” said John. (That one actually got an amused smirk out of Eddy and Robin.)

“But why *me* !?”

“Man, I don’t know your friends’ addresses,” John scoffed, then broke into a chuckle. “Kid, I’m just messing with you.” He turned back to Otto: “Don’t worry, Otto; I’d be damned surprised if these kids turn their backs on us.”

Otto chuckled himself as he walked down the stoop to greet the boys. “Oh, Little John, you’re gonna hafta be nicer than that if you want these kids to go along with you.” He went straight to Double-D to shake his hand. “Otto Smith, pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Oh, uh… E-Eddward Lupo, and likewise Mr. Smith,” Edd stammered.

‘*Mister* Smith’? Huh, you’re a polite one!”

“I don’t know any other way, Mr. Smith!”

Otto turned to shake with Eddy.

“Hey howzitgoin,” Eddy mumbled. “Eddy.”

“You’re an efficient one.” Otto turned to shake with Ed, but Ed preferred a different greeting.

“Hello, Mister Doggy!” Ed squealed as he pulled Otto into a hug.

“Hey, there, um… you’re a friendly one, aintcha?” Otto choked out.
“Ed, go easy on old Otto!” said Robin half-playfully and half-worriedly. “His old bones aren’t what they used to be! He broke his foot a few years back and it took almost an entire year to heal.”

“Oops!” Ed said as he released Otto from his grisly grizzly grasp. Otto had gone limp in the hug, and collapsed when he was released, falling flat on his posterior. “Sorry, Mr. Doggy.”

Little John helped Otto back up. “Hey, kid,” Otto said as he got back on his feet, “it’s better to love too much than too little, eh?”

“Otto, I’ll be brief,” said Robin. “We’re only here to introduce you to the lads, pick up our disguises, and drop off our weapons before we head downtown. You’ll have to pardon our curtness.”

“Oh, it’s quite alright,” said Otto. “It’s always good to see you guys--”

“Ooh, ooh!” went Ed as he raised and waved his arm like a kid desperate to answer a question in class so he could get those precious participation points and pass with a D. “Can Ed use your bathroom?”

The other four just kind of looked embarrassed.

“Uh, well, uh… I’m not one to deny someone their basic mammalian rights, so… be my guest,” Otto said as he cleared the doorway for the adolescent bear.

“Thanks, Mr. Doggy, I promise I’ll wash my hands real good!” Ed said as he lumbered up the stairs and into the doorway, casually smacking his head on the doorframe as he did.

“It’s on the left,” said Otto, “and be sure to watch your--”

While Ed still had a little less than a foot of clearance to the ceiling, he ran with a bounce in his step, and hit his head on the ceiling light fixture, which shattered with a pop. Ed, dead-set on getting to that bathroom, was undeterred.

“…head.”

“Er, we’ll… we’ll clean that up, Otto,” said Robin.

“I’ll help!” said Double-D, not knowing how to be anything but polite. “A-although, um… may I also use your facilities, if I may?”

“Yeah, uh, me, too,” said Eddy.

Otto stepped aside again to let everyone in. “I hope this isn’t eating into your time too much.”

“Well, at least we’ll have something to do while we wait,” said Robin as he walked in. “Where are your spare bulbs?”

“In the same linen closet as your costumes, top shelf,” Otto answered. “But I don’t think you’ll be able to reach them. No offense--”

Otto felt Little John tap him on the shoulder. The towering bear was still on the outside of the doorway, and Otto couldn’t see his face from where he was standing inside the foyer. Otto stepped back out onto the stoop to see him. “Something up, John?”

“Yeah, uh… You gonna be home at your normal times this week?” John asked in a hushed voice.
“I don’t expect any late nights, but I don’t know what my future’s gonna bring. If I’m not here, you can probably find me at the shop. Why, what’s up?”

“I just need to talk about Robin… and me… to someone who ain’t Robin. And you might be the person who knows us best with Tuck out of the picture now.”

Otto had heard something very similar to this just yesterday, and he was starting to wonder if the Merry Men were both independently trying to turn him into their makeshift therapist. But being who he was, he would try to help them as best he could before he told them to take it to a professional.

“Sure, John, just find me wherever you can and I’ll make some time for ya.”

“Thanks, Otto. I don’t know when I’ll be able to get away from Rob, but I’m gonna try to make it soon. I’m not feeling myself recently, man, and it’s kinda scaring me. Or at least I’m not feeling like the Me I want to be.”

Otto thought he ought to pull Robin aside and tell him that he finally had a concrete answer to Robin’s question about John the day before, but he didn’t want to open that can of worms again; besides, for all he knew, Robin might want to open that can of worms again himself.

“Thanks for having us over, Otto. I appreciate ya.” Little John ducked into the doorway and made his way inside. “I’ll get to work on the broken bulbs. You got a dish towel so I can unscrew them?”

Chapter End Notes

*A.N* Okie dokie, so I saw this chapter getting long, and I was on the fence about cutting it in two. Then I remembered that today was Little John’s birthday (and his brother’s, happy 52nd, gentlemen… Jesus, why do I know this offhand?), and then I saw that the featured article on the front page of Wikipedia was about the Coterel gang, one of the real-life bands of outlaws who messed around in Sherwood in the 1300s and likely heavily inspired the legend of Robin Hood, AND THEN they put up a new billboard on my way home from work advertising Jimmy John’s new Little John sandwich (this chapter isn’t sponsored… but if they wanna give me money, I’ll take it). Okay, fine, Universe, I’ll upload the first part of Show and Tell today, and I’ll try to finish the other half in time for Robin Hood’s 46th birthday in exactly three weeks (again… why do I know this?). Now you know why I did that, Future Readers.

I also owe a shout out to the one known as J-Shute-Norway, who shouted me and this fic out -- several times, actually -- and I said I would reciprocate, and I’m a man of my word (inasmuch as I still believe in my word, which in this case, I do). From the looks of it, it seems like J-Shute’s already known in a certain corner of FicLand, both for writing and (it seems like) curating, so maybe you already you’re already familiar with the name. If not, I encourage you to get familiar with the name.

Ya all take care now, Future Readers.
Show and Tell, Pt. 2

Chapter Summary

Robin Hood and Little John are ready to show Ed, Edd ’n’ Eddy just how rewarding their work can be, but -- as happens so often in life -- the same events inspire different reactions in the different people.

15. “Show and Tell, Pt. 2”

Robin and John left Otto’s house unarmed (save for the knives they always carried, but they didn’t want the kids freaking out about those; Little John also still had the Sheriff’s gun shoved down his pants, but it had been there for so long that at this point even he was starting to forget it was there) and dressed as two scruffy-looking characters, with Little John also wearing a large backpack that contained their extra disguises and would soon contain some cash and other valuables. They told the Eds to still keep within earshot as they walked, but maybe stay back a little bit further than before.

On the way to the city center, Robin and John stopped at a seemingly random spot on the sidewalk. When the Eds caught up, Rob and Johnny pointed out that they were standing in front of a Quiznos Subs. Even though this was all back when the Quiznos brand seemed to be doing relatively well for itself, a large sum of their locations weren’t actually profitable, and this location at 20th and Georgia in Zoar Park was one of those. The place was too fancy for poor folks, too trashy for rich folks, and the college kids in the area just couldn’t afford it. However, the franchisee’s stunning lack of business acumen and refusal to cut his losses worked well for the Merry Men, as the perpetually-empty restaurant made a great hideout for when they messed around downtown and needed to disappear fast; not to mention, since the never-present operator couldn’t afford to hire anybody more, and the current roster of employees couldn’t afford to quit, the staff always consisted of some combination of one or two of the same three or four people, who by now knew the Merry Men well and were sympathetic to the cause (“Because of course they are, they work at Quiznos for Christ’s sakes,” as Little John put it). This would be where the Robin and John wanted the Eds to meet them after the job was complete.

It would appeal to reason that the city’s center would be its oldest part, and as such, it did not conform to the grid system seen in the rest of the city. This part of town, officially known as the Old Millsboro neighborhood after the previous name of the town before some English investors persuaded the locals to change it in the 1890s, was built on the same old streets as the old small town that was here before the Fertile Crescent took off and the shipping ports got their footing (courtesy of the aforementioned investors). High-rises and skyscrapers formed a ring around the Historic District, which was situated right where the Lemon Brook, the Peach Creek, the Cherry Stream, and the Apple River all converged into Millsboro Pond, Betts Pond, and Ingram Pond, which then converged with each other, and then formed the Indian River, which just got wider and wider as it meandered toward the ocean until it became the Indian River Bay. The epicenter of Old Millsboro, and of Nottingham in general, was considered to be the Main Street Bridge over the narrows where Millsboro Pond ended and the Indian River began, with the Historic District on the south bank and the Financial District on the north.

The upscale Lakeland neighborhood was built around the shores of the small lakes immediately
west of downtown, forming a sideways L-shaped footprint. The long part of this L was a long and narrow east-west corridor that saw Millsboro Boulevard run its length, snaking to accommodate for the ponds. This area was often considered to be the only good part of the West Side; residents of this corridor didn’t mind that their neighborhood was flanked by a three-block-wide railyard north of 6th Street and the sunken Interstate 97 squeezed snugly between G and H Streets to the south, as it kept them safe from what lay beyond, although they all secretly fretted that there was nothing protecting them from whatever lay west of Illinois. East of New York Avenue, the boundaries extended north along the edge of the railyard to make room for Millsboro Pond. The area immediately north of Millsboro Pond, where the Peach Creek and the Lemon Brook ran through on their way to drain into the lake, was considered the ritziest part of the Lakeland neighborhood -- save for the addition of the new main-branch police precinct built a stone’s throw from the mayoral mansion shortly after John Norman took power. The Eds all got a bit nervous as Robin and John led them right by these two landmarks, thinking this was their final destination. Fortunately, Rob and Johnny kept on walking, en route to where the Lakeland area and the Financial District blurred together.

The Andrea Jane Oliphant Memorial Library was the main branch of the Nottingham Public Library system, and was named after the city’s first female mayor, who had served in the 1970s and early 80s before her untimely passing of a heart attack in 1982. However, Mayor Oliphant had not been bashful about her heart troubles in her final years, and had said in a public interview a few months before her passing that in the event that she should become unable to fulfill her duties as mayor, she would implore the city council to appoint the young English-born alderman Richard Norman, who seemed to be a political wunderkind. Having come to the United States in 1970 to attend graduate school at Yale after getting his Bachelor’s at Oxford, the lion decided he liked America and chose to stick around, deeming the city in Southern Delaware as a place worthy of his services. Because the immensely popular Mayor Oliphant had made public her desire to be succeeded by Norman, she had basically taken the power out of the hands of the city council, who would very much have liked to have appointed somebody from within their own political machine, but now would make it too obvious that something corrupt was going on if they didn’t appoint the Brit. So Mayor Oliphant’s will was done, and at just the age of thirty-five and not even having been a United States citizen for a decade, Richard Norman was now the mayor of a major American city. He proved to be an even more popular mayor, but he recognized that he had gotten there with a little help from his predecessor. He returned the favor: a statue in her image was erected in the park near the headwaters of the Indian River looking eastward out to sea; I-97 was officially nicknamed the Oliphant Expressway (Andrea J. Oliphant was credited for petitioning the US Department of Transportation to finally put an interstate highway through Delmarva, with Nottingham before the 1970s holding the distinction of being the largest city in America not connected to the Interstate Highway System), and the shiny new downtown library -- which had to be built anyway because the previous main branch was a casualty of the construction of the highway -- became the Andrea Jane Oliphant Memorial Library. The library sat pretty on the shores of Millsboro Pond, right next to the Nottingham Social Club.

John and Robin waltzed into an alley a block away from the two buildings, waving the boys to meet them there in the shadows. They had arrived at their destination.

“Well, lads here we are!” said Robin, who was dressed as a blind man in much the same style of his Glenjamin Glutton getup but without any attempt at appearing to be a different species.

“How’re you all feeling about this so far?”

“An alley?” asked Eddy.

“No, Eddy, not an alley. We’re just--”
“Because this really looks like an alley, Rob,” said Eddy, daring to address Robin by his first name. He figured if Little John was going to be snarky anyway, he might as well follow his lead, just to prove that he wasn’t incompatible.

“Astute observation, lad. But we’re just here to debrief with you before we split up—”

*Thump*.

“Double-D fell down!” Ed hollered.

“*Shhh!*” Robin begged. “Keep quiet, Ed!”

“What’s with him?” asked John.

“Who, Ed or Double-D?” asked Eddy.

“Uh… both of ‘em, I guess.”

“I’m—I’m alright, I, um, I just…” Double-D struggled to get his words out again, but this time it was less due to his anxiety about the situation and more his anxiety from giving his legs too much of a workout. Eddy hadn’t completely been wrong to claim that their journey was far longer than a reasonable walking distance. “My legs are just tired is all.” If any good came of this, it certainly took Edd’s mind off of the criminal activity to which he was about to be an accomplice.

Little John and Ed helped Double-D back to his feet. “You gonna be alright to roll with us, kid?” asked John. “I know that was a long walk, but it wasn’t *that* long of a walk.”

“Are you two fucking crazy? That was the longest walk I’ve ever been on in my life!” said Eddy.

“Ed’s feet hurt,” Ed added.

John and Robin just glanced at each other. “Perhaps we’re to fit for our own good, now aren’t we, Little John?”

“Hell, I wish,” John grumbled as he looked down at his own stomach, for which he had mixed feelings.

“Well, you boys will have time to sit soon enough. We’re going to have you sit up on the patio on the fourth floor of the library, but keep on the east side, because—”

“And you expect us to know which way is east?” asked Eddy.

“Yes. We do,” said John. “It’s the side by the Nottingham Social Club. Stick by the edge closest to that, because we’re gonna be doing stuff right on the street there.”

“The Social Club is the kind of place where CEOs and other high-ranking business people like to congregate instead of going to work,” Robin explained. “They run the companies, so who’s going to stop them?”

Ed was lost and Edd was distracted by the tremors in his calves, but Eddy was intrigued that such a place existed. A club where rich people hung out and lived the life instead of tending to their lackeys? That seemed like a place Eddy would like to gain access to one day.

“So for the first, like, twenty-thirty minutes, we’re just gonna do some basic panhandling,” said Little John, who was dressed in some vintage army veteran’s duds that looked like they were from out of the Vietnam era, probably as old as he and Robin were. “If the rich people don’t give us any
money, you’ll see what we’re talking about, about how much they hate poor people. And if they do, then that’s great, we’ll have some backup cash to give out today if our main plan falls apart.”

“But our main plan won’t fall apart, now will it, Johnny?”

*Oh, not this shit again.* “It prob’ly won’t, but it might.”

“Oh, ye of little faith!”

But Little John had an idea to do something more constructive than just rolling his eyes.

“Allright, boys,” said John. “Real quick. When Rob here says there’s no way our plans can backfire, and when I say there’s a less than one-hundred-point-zero percent chance of success, just to keep things real with you… hm… is he making you trust him when he does that, or is he just making you think he’s crazy? Same idea: do you appreciate me being honest with you, or is it just scaring you off?”

Little John saw Robin give him the dirtiest look he’d gotten from him in a very long time. He only saw it in his periphery, however, because he refused to meet the glare. John was instead looking for answers from the boys.

“Just tell us the first things that come to your minds, kids,” John continued. “We’ve been talking about this between us for awhile now, and we just wanna know.”

Eddy knew exactly what he wanted to say, but didn’t want to risk it coming out shitty; Ed, meanwhile, was terrible at verbalizing when put on the spot like this, and it seemed like Robin and John already could correctly assume this much. Therefore all eyes were on Double-D, who was still being propped up by Ed. Nobody could tell if the trembling in his legs was from overexertion or anxiety again, although it was probably a little of both.

“Well, um…” Double-D gagged, “I-I-I don’t think any of us were specifically, uh, reflecting on the, uh… reflecting on our confidence in you with regards to your, um, phraseology, as it were, so- no, that’s not the right word! Um—”

But Eddy couldn’t let this painful scene go on any longer. He got his pointer finger ready.

“You know what I think? I think you’re seriously stuck-up and full of yourself, and I think you’re really wishing you were in charge, but you know you’re too goddamn angry and you’d just get the both of ya’s killed when you made an angry decision.” Then, to immediately rectify his insolence, he added this: “But you can still change my mind. I mean… we just met, right?” the little fox said slyly.

Robin and John were visibly surprised. They both secretly knew they seriously needed to hear that.

John glanced down at Robin. “Shit, glad I asked.”

“Well, boys, back to business!” Robin said, obviously trying to pretend the previous interruption hadn’t happened. “After the begging, we’ll have a change of clothes and get into the feature presentation. Now we’ll keep that a surprise, so you can just watch without overanalyzing it. But suffice it to say that it’s a tried and true method with a minimal likelihood of injury to anybody involved. We’ll also ask you to pay attention to the fact that we have a method of weeding out who does and does not deserve to be robbed.”

“Yeah, the code word for when we think we should rob a son of a bitch is ‘oo-de-lally’; it’s ‘golly’ for when we think we oughta let ’em off the hook. When we agree, we act accordingly.”
“Aw, those words make Ed feel like Ed is hugging a giant stuffed bunny-bear!” Ed cooed.

“We also got ‘hey, nonny, nonny’ for when we just can not make up our minds on a guy, but we almost never use that one. I don’t remember the last time we did.”

Eddy viscerally rejected the corniness of those code words. “Those are stupid words--”

“We know they’re stupid words, that’s why we use ‘em,” Little John answered with a smirk. He felt like he was starting to get a hang of matching this kid’s energy. “You ain’t gonna confuse ‘em for nothing else you’d hear, now will you?”

Eddy just looked off to the side and nodded slowly.

“Good rich people are getting harder and harder to find,” said Robin, “but they do exist, and when we meet them, we want to spare them, and with any luck, we’d preferably get them to fight back against Prince John and his goons. A Good Rich Person could recognize their powers and use them for good…”

“...just like a Good Cop,” Little John picked up where Robin left him a hole. “It’s not guaranteed -- hell, it’s hardly even likely -- but we don’t want to get on their bad side and turn a possibility into an impossibility. We don’t know if our old pal The Rooster didn’t understand that or just didn’t care, but that’s why we don’t roll with him anymore.”

“And because he’s presently incarcerated.”

“That, too.” And just like that, the fox and the bear were in synch again. Little John found himself thinking that their connection had been very ‘schizophrenic’ recently -- he knew that wasn’t quite the right word, but he thought it got the point across well enough.

“Does it make you boys feel better knowing we don’t just mug people willy-nilly?” Robin asked, looking specifically at -- you guessed it, Dear Reader -- the scared little wolf.

“It-it does… actually,” Double-D coughed. “I-I do admit that I presumed you victimized people indiscriminately.”

“Oh, no! We would never!” Robin scoffed.

“Yeah, uh… I guess that’s good to hear, I guess,” Eddy mumbled.

“But when do we get to play with the toys?” asked Ed, who knew very well that the weapons were not toys but found it dreadfully boring to call them anything else.

“Now, don’t just be watching, be listening,” Robin continued. “We’ll probably only be able to get one donor today, so be ready for us to say, ‘ Long live King Richard! ’ That will be your signal to head back to the sandwich shop to meet us a safe distance away from here.”

“And now who’s this King Richard guy?” Eddy asked.

“Richard Norman. Prince John’s beloved brother, hence the nickname. The previous mayor. You boys don’t remember him?”

“We don’t live in the city, Stretch, and even if we did we wouldn’t care about politics.”

“Y’know, that’s another question we had, how old are you kids exactly?” asked John. “There wasn’t exactly a polite time to ask.”
“Oh. Fourteen,” said Eddy, completely unoffended.

“Oh, no!” said Ed mockingly as he leaned over to pat the little orange fox on the head. “Little Eddy’s birthday isn’t till next month!”

Eddy snapped his jaw at Ed’s paw, completely offended.

“Really? Hm. Gonna be honest, we coulda guessed anywhere from ten to seventeen,” said Little John.

“Oh!” Double-D peeped. He wanted to ask if he was the one they thought was mature for his age, but he realized that such a question would be perceived by many as inherently immature.

“Alright, boys,” said Robin, “I believe we’re ready to go! Head upstairs and take a seat on the patio near this street.”

Robin and John saw the Eds leave the alley before they stepped out themselves.

“I have to say, Johnny,” Robin said as they got into place, “you saw how nervous that wolf boy is, didn’t you? That’s why I wouldn’t gamble their confidence in us by even suggesting that there’s a chance we could fail.”

“And I get that, Rob, but you were doing your whole ‘confidence’ schtick, and it still clearly wasn’t working on the poor little shit. I asked them, and Eddy told you to your face that he wasn’t buyin’ what we were sellin’. And that goes for me, too.”

“It works on most everyone, so he must have a heart of stone. I really can’t tell if he likes us, Johnny.”

“Well, he’s still sticking with us, isn’t he?” John asked. “And even if you can charm any adult you come across, you’re talking to a bunch of jaded fourteen-year-old boys. Do you remember being fourteen? And right now, they’re your audience, so you have to tailor your marketing to them.”

Robin let out a melancholic huff. He knew Little John was right on this one. But that didn’t mean he actually knew how to be anything other than who he’d trained himself for so long to be.

Right before they left the alley again, Little John pulled Robin’s shoulder into his side again. “C’mon, buddy. We can do this.” John wanted to ask if it was that obvious that he was the second-in-command, but they were now back out in the open. Besides, they had talked enough for awhile.

--III--

On a summer’s day like this, the library patio overlooking Millsboro Pond was actually rather crowded, even during work hours. The Eds made their way through the metal detectors at the entrance, up the stairs, out onto the patio, observed the lack of available sitting space near the Castleberry Street side or otherwise, and addressed the fact that this was their first real obstacle as Merry Men Cadets.

“Oh, dear, oh dear, oh dear,” Double-D murmured. “I don’t mean to whine, gentlemen, truly I don’t, but I--”

“But you’re gonna do it anyway?” asked Eddy.

“I fear I’ve overexerted myself, and those stairs did nothing to help the unshakable feelings of instability in my lower extremities!”
“Ed, we’re in a library, right? Grab me a dictionary so I can understand this guy, will ya?”

“Oh, the words I used were not that obscure nor difficult, Eddy!”

“Can I get a dictionary with pretty pictures, Eddy!?” asked Ed.

“Shh!” went a lemur who appeared to be a college student, a notebook open next to a pile of textbooks. “You are in a library!” he said in an ambiguously ESL accent.

The guys looked at one another, then over to the eastern railing. “C’mon, boys,” said Eddy, quieter this time. “If we’re gonna be runnin’ through the woods with these guys, we can’t be too proud not to sit our asses on the floor.”

Double-D wanted to protest the sitting on the floor part, but he had a better question: “Eddy, I must ask: are you seriously considering joining them in their underground exploits?”

“I’m thinkin’ about it. Are you not?”

“Well… I do pride myself on being open to new ideas, so I will not say no definitively, but I am strongly leaning against it.”

“Then why are you even here, Sock-Head?”

“To learn, Eddy. I’m treating this as a learning experience. I’m here to learn.”

The three of them sat down on the concrete by the edge of the patio, with the glass barrier so the smaller mammals could see below as well. Nobody asked Ed how he felt about Robin and Little John.

The three of them saw the blind man and the homeless veteran down on street level, asking for change from anybody who happened by. They could faintly hear their voices. Robin was holding a chipped coffee mug he’d brought with, and John was collecting in an old Icee cup that he’d snagged out of a dumpster on the way over. They were getting coins from a few takers, but clearly not many, and the more well-dressed the passerby, the less heed they seemed to pay the beggars. It wasn’t a very sophisticated method, but it was getting a nonzero result. They were getting just enough to prove that they weren’t getting very much at all.

Double-D had done well to put on pants which -- at Robin and John’s behest -- he was willing to get dirty. He was able to take his mind off the dirt on the ground and the tremors in his legs, but this just gave him more mental energy to focus on his moral dilemma. He really was relieved to hear them say that they had a metric for only robbing “bad” people; he wasn’t lying about that. But that didn’t make it much better; there was no guarantee that he was going to agree with their definition of good and evil. He was waiting for them to finish with the panhandling foreplay and get to the main event, because he wanted to see this litmus test in action. He would believe their virtuousness when he saw it.

Eddy had the opposite problem. Usually the impatient one, he now found himself with a racing mind bouncing and bounding between tangentially connected thoughts. One moment, he was thinking again of how he wished he could be a member of a place like the Nottingham Social Club. Then he was thinking of how if he were a member of that club on this very day, he would have the likes of Robin and John try to victimize him for who he was as soon as he walked out the doors. Then he thought about their so-called perfect track record; was it true? was it possible? Then he thought of his bitter jealousy of Robin, who embodied everything he wished he could be as a fox in society. Then he thought that Robin was a posh, self-praising douchenozzle and he deserved to be
defeated, both as a price for his arrogance and as a price for making Eddy feel bad. Then Eddy thought of how many would say Robin had earned the right to be boastful as a consequence of his accomplishments and his outstanding character, and how if Eddy had his head on right, he should try to emulate Robin, not reject him. Then he thought about how Robin had that bear following him around; it really did seem like it kept flip-flopping between where the two of them were equals and where Robin was John’s boss, but almost never where Little John was running the show. Eddy was starting to get the feeling that Little John also harbored some jealousy toward his own friend, a jealousy that was becoming less and less benevolent as time passed; hey, maybe Eddy and the bear weren’t so different after all. Then Eddy thought of the looks on their faces when he said Robin was a braggart and John seemed like he was insecure about not being in the driver’s seat; they had both heard him loud and clear, and they seemed spooked, as though he had just uncovered their deepest secrets. Eddy thought again of Robin’s pride, and how -- if the legends were true -- the people he helped seemed to love him in part because of his self-satisfaction, not in spite of it. Eddy wished he could go around thinking highly of himself and just have the general public agree. Eddy didn’t doubt that Robin was doing good things with his selfless acts of charity, but he believed in the pit of his stomach that there was a selfish streak in Robin. Fox-to-fox, he could just tell it was there. It was a selfish streak that Robin was able to feed with praise for performing selfless acts, and damned risky ones at that; it was a selfish streak that Eddy was disgustedly jealous Robin was able to feed. It was a selfish streak similar to the one that Eddy held that he had always planned to quell by amassing great riches. While Eddy had always wanted both fame and fortune, he always preferred fortune to fame; fortune could buy its own fame, but fame without fortune was nothing. Or at least that’s what Eddy had always thought. But Robin here seemed to have cracked the code: he had found a fame that had rendered fortune obsolete. The picture Robin and John had painted was one where they weren’t ever going to be world-renowned, but to those who did know them, they were revered; deified by the true believers, Robin Hood and Little John were Jesus Christ and Saint Peter. And Eddy wanted that -- preferably the Jesus one. But this reputation was still hearsay so far. During the walk into town, the civilians had given the Merry Men kindly enough looks, looks that certainly suggested they knew Rob and Johnny personally, though nothing suggesting that they viewed them as their mortal saviors, but it was heavily implied during the walking ‘n’ talking that the Eds would see these feelings in the people of Nottingham after the Collection, during the Redistribution part of the trip. If they could deliver on their promise that they were adored by the populace, that would make their offer a hard bargain for Eddy to pass on. Would Eddy be doing it for the right reasons? Well, was Robin? Eddy thought again about the idea that these two homeless people had an undefeated record spanning several years against the mayor and the barons he surrounded himself with. Eddy conjured a vision wherein he was a rich man, just as he had always dreamed, but Robin and Little John were still running around town, and they were coming for him, and they were going to get the best of him, and they were going to get his money, and there was nothing he could do about it. Eddy considered that even if he decided to be a saint and take his selfish desires out of the equation, accepting the Merry Men’s invitation might be a matter of if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

Ed was quietly disappointed. For an adventure, it sure did have a lot of exposition and not a lot of swashbuckling. He wasn’t quite bored yet; he was more so confused. Was the action coming? Surely it must be. They wouldn’t carry around those big cumbersome weapons if they never needed to use them, right? Little did he know that there would be some action coming soon enough.

After about twenty underwhelming minutes, the boys saw Robin and Little John look up and them and subtly signal that they would be right back. The two of them disappeared into an alleyway, likely to stash their earnings so far and to get changed for the big event. The Eds never actually saw them walk back out.
“Excuse me!” said a shrill voice behind them. The boys turned to look for the source of the voice, only to notice that it was coming from a shrew down below.

“Oh! Uh-- y-yes, ma’am?” asked Double-D.

“What are you boys doing here?” the librarian asked crossly.

“Sittin’,” said Eddy, not seeing what the big deal was.

“Is that all!?”

Ed took a stab at it. “We were just watching our friends downstairs--”

“Yes!” Edd cut in. “Some, uh, some friends who we happened to notice down below as they walked down the street, and we-we-we, uh, we sat down to watch them and, um, make sure it was really them!” Double-D didn’t like lying, but he didn’t like being punished for breaking unclear rules either; why was this librarian angry at them? He stood up and started to walk away. “We’ll be stepping away from the ledge now, ma’am, now aren’t we, gentlemen!? Nothing to worry about here--”

“You’re at a library and you’re not even looking at books or any of our other materials!” said the shrew.

Then Ed had a surprising moment of cogency. “But we were just looking at the pretty water, Missus Mousey!” he said as he pointed southward at Millsboro pond.

“I am not a mouse, I’m a shrew!”

“There’s a difference!?” Eddy said before he realized he was saying it.

“Some children as uneducated as yourselves can’t possibly be up to any good in a library!”

“Children !?” remarked an offended Eddy.

“Uneducated !?” remarked an offended Double-D.

“Be !?” remarked Ed.

The three of them were so fixated on the shrew on the ground that they didn’t even notice the buffalo security guard approaching until the shrew was engulfed in his shadow.

“Guard!” said the shrew. “These are probably the same kids who’re taking books and dropping them on people’s heads!”

“What!?” shrieked Eddy. He then thought to say something that would absolutely crush him to speak aloud, but it might just clear his name. “Well hey, look at me!” He stood and put himself up next to the glass barrier, lifting his arms all the way up. “I can’t even reach over the edge to throw a book over if I wanted to!”

“So you tossed them over!” the shrew accused.

Double-D, usually petrified by an authority figure chastising him, found the absurdity of this situation to be inspiring a strange bit of bravery in him; he didn’t know where in the Sam Hill it was coming from, but he decided to run with it.

“Well I ask you! Where is the evidence that we were doing this!? Were there no video cameras
showing that we’ve been merely sitting here for the better part of half an hour, harming no one? Is the street below littered with copies of War and Peace and The Oxford English Dictionary, dropped like anvils in old cartoons?”

The shrew was about to protest, but before she did, the buffalo stepped over her and peered over the edge. “Yeah, there aren’t any books down there.” He turned to the librarian. “Did you actually see them doing anything, Diane?”

“They can’t be up to any good if they’ve just been sitting here!” Diane squaked. “And even if they haven’t done anything else yet, they can’t be loitering!”

The buffalo looked like this wasn’t worth his time. “She’s right about that one. I’m sorry, boys, but this patio’s crowded enough as it is. You guys can’t just sit here.”

And knowing they’d been beat, the boys went back inside.

--III--

“Oh, excuse me!” said the woman in a green business-y dress leaning on the wall outside the doors of the Nottingham Social Club. She appeared to be middle-aged and had a scratchy voice, though her species was not immediately apparent -- perhaps some kind of petite red-furred she-wolf? In any case, she caught the warthog’s attention.

“Oh, is something wrong, ma’am?” he asked.

“Yes, yes!” said the lady. “As soon as I stepped out of the club doors, I broke a heel on this cracked sidewalk!

“Oh, that’s not good.”

“Yes!” said the woman. “Would you please help me to my car? I’m parked in the garage a block away!”

The warthog noticed that she said the word garage kind of funny, almost like she was blurring the American, English, and other English pronunciations together, and now that he thought about it, her whole accent had a sort of transatlantic thing going on, but this was the Mid-Atlantic and she was clearly wealthy, so maybe she was just brought up in one of those old private schools that deliberately taught the neutral accent.

“Surely I can,” said the warthog, and he let her drape her arm over his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her back; luckily for their leverage, she was only a few inches taller than him. The two of them hobbled along down Castleberry toward the parking garage. “What’s your name, ma’am, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Amanda,” said the rich woman. “And you?”

“Michael.”

“Michael, thank you so much for rescuing me! I’m sure you know how dangerous these streets can be, even outside of Nottingham’s most prestigious social club!”

“Oh, well it’s certainly prestigious, but I don’t know if I would say the most prestigious.”

Robin made a mental note that this guy must be loaded if he thought that the NSC wasn’t even the ritziest hangout in town. “Oh, but it’s still a great place to stay away from those nasty poor
A shoddy-looking lioness heard that as she was walking past; at first she gave the warthog and the wolf-like creature a dirty look, but then she realized who the woman really was, and she kept on walking without saying a word, knowing to let nature take its course.

“You’ve got that right,” said Michael as the two of them started crossing a service alleyway. “Those money-grubbing scrubs would probably’ve mugged you if I didn’t walk out when I did--”

“Freeze, mate!” growled a large brown bear wearing a ski mask as he stepped out of the alley, bearing a switchblade. “Gimme ya purse, Sheila!” He seemed to be going for an Australian accent, but kept sliding into a pseudo-Cockney; regardless, it was still doing a good job of obscuring his true dialect.

“Oo-de-lally, what a day this has been for me!” the woman squealed. “Michael, help me!”

“No... lea-leave us, alo-- um...” the warthog sputtered as he trembled with fear. He saw in his periphery that no shortage of people were walking behind them on Castleberry Street, but none of them were intervening; some of them rejected rich people and didn’t care about their fate, some of them were other rich people who lamented the fate of their fellow barons but dared not to get involved, and some of them would recognize the fox and bear anywhere, but none of them thought that the conflict in the alley was any of their business.

They weren’t even that deep into the alley; if anybody was watching from the library’s patio, they probably could have seen the whole thing.

“I’ll tell you what, mate,” said the bear. “I’ll let the bird go if you gimme ya wallet.”

“And if I don’t!?” asked Michael.

The bear drew the knife closer to the warthog’s face. “We’ll see how I’m feelin’!”

“Aaaaahhhhh!” came a shriek of terror from what sounded like an adolescent boy, followed by brakes screeching and car horns honking. The three of them turned to see Ed, Edd, and Eddy running across the street to the alley; though it seemed more like Ed and Eddy were running after Edd.

“Don’t!” the wolf hollered.

“Double-D!” the little fox begged.

“Oh, goddammit!” Little John swore, dropping the accent. He manhandled the warthog and shoved him up against the wall by the shoulders. “Rob, check his pockets!”

“On it!” Robin said as he knelt to dig through Michael’s trousers as the warthog squirmed.

At the sidewalk, Double-D was frozen as his friends caught up. “Wait, you’re not gonna stab him?”

“Of course we’re not gonna fucking stab him--! AAARGH!” Little John roared in pain. The warthog had squirmed his head around and stuck one of his tusks into Little John’s arms. “He stabbed me! He stabbed me!”

Robin, having found nothing in the hog’s back pockets, got back on his feet to tend to his friend. “Johnny, are you okay!?”
The warthog pulled his head out of the twist and unstuck his tusk, then wiggled out of John’s wavering grasp. He turned to the Castleberry end of the alley, only to see another bear, a wolf, and a little orange-and-black fox blocking the way. The other end of the alley was wide open, but it was a long ways away. Were the boys there to help him? If not, did he think he could outrun them?

“Rob, don’t worry about me, worry about the pig!” Little John implored while Robin inspected how badly John had gotten got. But when they both turned to look at him, they saw him running head-first toward the wall of teenage boys. Michael tried to dive over the fox, but Eddy had other plans.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Eddy hollered. He ducked to avoid the tusks, but grabbed onto Michael’s ankles. Eddy fell backward as the warthog lost his inertia, but he kept his grasp. He wasn’t going to allow someone to just leapfrog over him as though he were so small and insignificant that he might as well not be there.

“You hurt my friend Mister Johnny, Mister Piggy!” said Ed as he picked Michael up by the ankles and shook him out. (Several hours later, when everyone had the time to accurately process what had happened, all four of the others separately realized that Ed was now referring to Little John as a sovereign person and not a future version of himself.)

“Hey!” the hog protested as he was shaken; after about a dozen repetitions, a wallet fell out of his front-right pocket, along with a few pairs of keys.

Ed dropped Michael on his head. “Found it!” But Michael got up on all fours and jumped at his wallet. Before he could reach it, however, Eddy swooped in and grabbed it.

“Double-D, catch!” Eddy said as he tossed it to the wolf.

“Oh--! Dear, oh my!” Eddy yelped as he fumbled the wallet. Michael leapt at him and he swatted the wallet to his bear friend. “Ed, you take it!”

Ed caught it no-problem as Double-D was tackled by the warthog. For the sake of fun, Ed waited until Michael was back up and charging at him to toss it over to Robin. “Hot potato!”

Robin nearly muffed it, but caught it on the bounce off his own paw. “Don’t want to leave you out, Johnny!”

Little John caught the wallet and held it up as high in the sky as he could. Michael stood back up on his own two feet and glared up at the bear.

“Come and get it,” taunted Little John, still not bored of the novelty of exploiting his own size.

“Y-you’ve all made a big mistake!” Michael said as he unbuttoned the breast pocket on his suit and produced a small black rectangle. “My new cell phone has a video camera!”

“Goddammit, it’s finally happened!” Robin cursed as he tried to think quickly of a way to disarm the warthog. It would turn out that he didn’t have to worry about it.

“Smile for one-point-three megapixels, assholes!” Michael dared as he flipped his phone open and pointed the camera at the costumed Robin and John, not even noticing the other bear coming in behind him.

“No!” Ed said as he swiped the phone from the warthog. “You’ve been mean to my friends!” Ed then proceeded to bite off the top half of the phone with the side of his jaw. He chewed loudly, shards of metal and glass debris spraying out of his snout, and swallowed in satisfaction.
Everyone murmured in perverse awe:

“Well, hot damn, kid,” said Little John.

“Good lord, man,” said Double-D.

“Impressive, honestly,” said Robin.

“Jeez louise, Ed,” said Eddy.

“That’s disgusting,” said Michael.

“Want some, Double-D?” Ed asked as he offered the bottom part of the phone to Edd.

“Uh… no, thank you, Ed,” said Edd. “I’ve already eaten.”

Ed shrugged and popped the other half of the phone in his mouth, chewing blissfully. This further enthralled an incredulous Michael, who was grabbed around the neck by Little John. John shoved a pill down the warthog’s mouth, and when it was clear he had choked it down, Robin put a rag over his snout, and Michael went limp.

“What have you done to him?” asked Double-D, really hoping that wasn’t a cyanide pill they had just forced Michael to ingest.

“Don’t worry, lad, we’re going to keep him comfortable,” Robin said as he nodded over to Little John putting the warthog to bed in a dumpster.

John tucked Michael in under a piece of cardboard. “That was just a mix of a heavy sleeping pill and some chloroform. He won’t remember any of this.”

“Heavy sleeping pills?” asked Double-D.

“Yeah, they’re like roofies, but… we don’t associate with people who sell roofies,” said John.

“And you acquired these pills via…?”

“In our exploits, we’ve met a bloke who was in pharmacy school before he was busted for public urination, so now he can’t get a job,” explained Robin.

“Because he’s a registered sex offender,” explained Little John. “Don’t ever get caught taking a leak in public, kids.”

“They booked him as a pervert just for taking a leak behind a bush?” asked Eddy. “I guess this mayor really is a dick.”

“Naw, that’s a federal thing, not the mayor,” said Little John.

The boys all silently thought to themselves that they would hereafter purposefully dehydrate themselves just to make sure such a fate should never befall them.

“If you boys are up for it, we can take on Bush after Norman, but, you know, first things first,” said John.

“But to wash away any uncertainty, we can confirm that our supplier is a good man and not some drug lord,” said Robin. “As for the pills, he personally formulates them for us so they’re strong enough to erase their memory a few minutes before dosage, not just afterward, but still not too
strong as to do any neurological damage.”

“Yeah, that’s another reason we don’t fuck around with roofies,” said Little John. “They don’t work retroactively. Don’t worry, kids, we’re not date rapists. We just want to make sure as much as we can that they don’t remember our names and faces.”

To Little John’s final note, Double-D was relieved, and could agree that that was a fairly tolerable way to deal with their donors, while Eddy secretly seethed inside his mind, thinking that the perfect vulpine specimen and the living ursine embodiment of masculinity could probably get any woman they wanted the legitimate way anyway. As for Ed, he didn’t understand any of what John or Robin were talking about, not from an inability to comprehend but from an inability to pay attention to that which he found to be boring.

“But what are you lads even doing here?” asked Robin.

“I-I’m so sorry, Mr. Hood, I… I really thought Mr. Little was going to stab him,” Double-D said. “And I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“And you know what? Good on you, Eddward. You stood up for what you believed in and you confronted the people you believed were doing wrong!” If Robin was at all frustrated or disappointed with the wolf, he was doing a great job of hiding it. “If we could only channel that resolve into our work, we would love to have you in our band any day, good sir. I think we can use this lad to keep ourselves from going overboard, don’t you think, Johnny?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s all well and good,” Little John mumbled, “but I think what Robin meant was -- and what I wanna know is -- what’re you guys doing down here? What happened to staying up at the library?”

“They kicked us out because they thought we were throwing books over the edge and Wile E. Coyote-ing people,” said Eddy.

Robin and John looked at the Eds confused, then at each other confused, then looked across the street to the library, still confused.

“...That is a design flaw, now isn’t it?” said Little John.

“But we do appreciate you boys helping us out there,” said Robin. “We couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Are you sure we didn’t just make everything more complicated?” asked Double-D. “I feel as if our presence was what caused your plan to go off the rails.”

In a moment of the universe being in perfect synchronicity, the first cycle of a distant police siren timed up perfectly with Little John’s stomach growling, with neither sound drowning out the other.

“We’ll discuss this over dinner!” Robin said as he started running off down the alley away from Castleberry Street. “You know where to meet us, 20th and Georgia!”

“Remember, don’t follow us!” added Little John as he ran off to catch up to Robin, drops of plasma flying into the air as John’s arm continued bleeding like a sieve.

“And I almost forgot!” Robin hollered as he ran. “Long live King Richard!”

--III--
“Hello?”

“Hello, Mother, it’s me, Eddward,” he said, leaning over the counter to use the phone at Quiznos. The llama behind the counter let him use it while the other four were at an ATM down the block trying to plug in significant digits until they cracked the warthog’s PIN number.

“Is everything alright, son?” asked Sammantha.

“Yes, yes, I, um…”

“I don’t want to sound alarmed, but you almost never call me on my cell phone, and now you’re calling me from a Quiznos?”

Double-D’s heart skipped a beat. “How-how did you know that?”

“I paid extra for the caller ID, Eddward.”

“Ah, yes, I… I see. Um… I just wanted to call you to let you know I may not be home until… very… very late tonight.” This was Edd’s way of saying that he felt he had survived the day so far on borrowed time and that he wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t going to die on the walk back home through Georgetown and Sherwood, so he was calling his mom so she wouldn’t be too alarmed if he never made it home at all.

“How late do you mean?”

“Perhaps well past sundown. Perhaps not until even after you and Father come home.”

“Do you need a ride home?”

“Oh, no, no, I… I can likely use the exercise.”

“Eddward, I’d rather you exercise your mind over your body.”

“Ah, but I’m exercising both, Mother! I, uh… I’m currently downtown, uh… with Ed and Eddy. We’re conducting a, a, a, an anthropological extra-credit project! Ed and Eddy want extra credit going into the ninth grade, and I’ve decided to help them with this independent project.”

“You’re not in a bad neighborhood, are you?”

“Oh, nonononono, um… have you ever seen a Quiznos in a bad neighborhood, Mother?”

“Yeah, I suppose that chain is too snooty for that. But good for you for helping them. Is one of their parents giving you a ride?”

“Oh, no, this is actually a surprise to their parents that they’re, uh, that they’re trying to get extra credit. Please don’t tell them I told you.”

“Don’t tell Ed and Eddy, or don’t tell their parents? Your language is imprecise, Eddward.”

“Oh, apologies, Mother, I meant… well, all of them, really. Though you may want to let their parents know that they’ll also be home late, if you should be able to tell Mr. and Mrs. Browne and Mr. and Mrs.”

“Eddward, I’ll call them as soon as we’re through here.”

“Thank you, Mother. Shall I also call Father, or…”
“Oh, no. You know what? I call him before I call the bears and the foxes. You boys get back to your project. I don’t want you to be home even later if I can help it. I’d hate to waste your precious time.”

“And I do apologize for interrupting your work day, Mother, I just--”

“Nonsense, son; it’s actually a rather slow day at the lab. Actually, I have a few more minutes to talk if you do, too.”

“Oh, I’ve said all I’ve needed to say, Mother. Unless there’s something you wanted to say to me.”

“There is, actually. I was going to just leave you a sticky note telling you this, but I might as well tell you now. I got a call from Gramma this morning.”

“Did she say something of interest?”

“You wanted to know about the whereabouts of your Uncle Ward?”

*Oh, lordy.* “Uh… y-yes?”

“Apparently somewhere along the line he became the Chief of Police for the city of Nottingham?”

His heart skipped another beat. “He… he did?”

“Oh, it gets better. Evidently just yesterday they made him the Sheriff of Nottingham County.”

At this point, his heart was simply beating irregularly. “But… how--?”

“It’s to my understanding that when those bullies beat up your friend Kevin the other night, the mayor of the city got together with the county board and they just decided that the county police were too corrupt, and mutually agreed to merge the departments. Since the County Sheriff and Deputy were the ones responsible for the, um, *incident*, they just dismissed them and gave the reins to Ward. Did you know that the city’s Deputy’s been a squirrel this whole time?”

Double-D had thought about the possibility of running into his uncle while tagging along with the criminals, but since he had assumed Ward was still a lowly officer, he was able to tell himself that it was unlikely and that he need not worry about it. But he was the *county sheriff*? As in, not only could Edd run into his uncle at any time, downtown or in the suburbs, but his uncle would be imbued with great power? The kind of power that would probably make his presence necessary if the cops got a lead on the whereabouts of the infamous Robin Hood and Little John?

“Eddward, are you still there?” asked Samantha.

“Oh, ye-yes, Mother, I’m just… processing the information.”

“Shocking, I know. So if you run into him, be careful.”

“Well, uh, um, wo-would he even recognize me, Mother? It’s been awhile.”

“Edd, how many wolves are running around wearing a hat like yours in the middle of June?”

Double-D was so used to his hat being a part of his person that he didn’t even think of it was a distinct part of his wardrobe anymore. “I… suppose you’re right.”

The electronic bell dinged as the door of the otherwise-empty store opened. Robin and Little John walked in, *woohoo*-ing and *all right!*-ing, sharing high-fives with Ed and Eddy as they followed
in. Ed was also excited by their accomplishments, while Eddy seemed like he was faking excitement for the sake of sociability. Robin and John were back in their street clothes, the pockets of their cargo pants seemingly filled to the brim.

“S-sorry, Mom, gotta go!” Double-D said as he panickedly pressed the disconnect button, then handed it back to the llama on duty so she could hang it back up. He wasn’t looking forward to the stern sticky-note demanding an explanation for his curt exit, but it was a better fate than having her overhear the others speaking.

“Emily!” said Little John to the employee. “Two, no, five, no, ten of everything on the menu! Courtesy of some guy who never read the little sticker in the bank window saying the FDIC only insures up to a hundred K!”

“You don’t have to make ten of every sandwich, Emily,” said Robin, “but as many as you can make at a comfortable pace, if you’d please.”

Emily would gladly fulfill the request; it wasn’t like she had anything better to do. “Comin’ right up.”

“Jeez, how much are you gonna eat?” Eddy asked, looking at Little John specifically.

“Man, it’s not all for us!” John answered. “We’re catering for the West Side tonight!”

“Speaking of which,” said Robin, “would you have any boxes we could take, Emily?”

“For the sandwiches?” she asked.

“Among other things,” Little John said as he started unstuffing his pockets and throwing all the Jacksons on the floor. “The ATM only gave out twenties.”

Robin started unstuffing his pockets, too, as did Ed. Eddy felt the pressure and reluctantly started unloading the cash from his pockets as well. He hadn’t said a word in a while because he was salivating so much in the presence of cash; if he tried to speak, everybody would have wondered why he was drooling. Eddy was having a lot of internal thoughts weighing his love of money with the enticing offer of hero status, and the only reason he was unloading his pockets was because he knew that he was expected to. A little bit of him wanted to just run back home with what must have been a few thousand dollars shoved into his britches, but he was trying to force himself to think in the long-term. He wanted to puke. He wanted to cry. He really wanted to get to the part where he saw regular people idolizing Robin and John, because that would make it that much easier to put his visceral infatuation with health on hold, if only for a moment. For now, however, he still wasn’t sure that they were going to deliver on their promise of showing that they were revered, so Eddy kept a few bills in the deepest depths of his pockets, just in case he wouldn’t get anything else out of this journey; again, he was trying to think long-term.

“We can keep the money under the sandwiches,” Robin said, “so if heaven forbid someone peeps into our property, they’ll just see we’re delivering food.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Little John as he and the others started straightening out their money. “Double-D, how was your phone call? Your parents alright with you spoiling your dinner?”

“Oh, uh… yes, they… they usually don’t get home until late at night anyway,” said Edd.

“None of our parents do,” said Eddy. “I don’t know why he needed to call ‘em.”

“I was trying to be polite, Eddy!”
“Hm. Latchkey kids, I see,” said Little John. “By the way guys, sorry again that we thought you were… like, homeless orphans living out of that van, but we’re kinda glad we did, because we wouldn’t’ve asked you otherwise.”

“By the way, Eddward, how are you feeling?” asked Robin. “Feeling more confident in us? In yourself?”

“Um…” -- Double-D couldn’t for the life of him start a sentence without hemming and hawing right now -- “…Are you two certain that we didn’t complicate things further with our arrival upon the scene?”

“I mean, honestly?” said John. “Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t, but we found ourselves in a tough spot, you guys were there, you helped us out. Y’know, maybe it was more complicated when you showed up and spooked us, but honestly… that was fun. That was more fun with you guys around.”

“I’d have to agree,” said Robin. “Perhaps we could have handled our friend Michael without you, but when you were there, you three were invaluable assets. As they say, there’s power in numbers.”

“You know what? I say Wolfie here gets the MVP award, because that wouldn’t have happened like that if he didn’t step up and run over.”

“Hear, hear!” exclaimed Robin. “Genuinely, Eddward, you seem to have made much progress just through today alone.”

And Double-D appreciated their praise. But this was just going to make it harder when he told them that he was a definite no. It would be easier to break it to them if Ed and Eddy were to tell them at the same time; Edd just hoped his friends were on the same page.

Ed was happy for Double-D’s accomplishments, but Eddy was silently miffed that he wasn’t getting such recognition. But Eddy tried not to let it show on his face; they wouldn’t want to have him join their fold if they found out he was too insecure to watch his friend receive praise without getting any himself.

The guys stuffed the money into cardboard boxes that once contained meats and vegetables and chips and bread and soda cups. When they were done, they grabbed some of the sandwiches Emily had already made and went to town on them as Emily made more (and they stressed to her that she ought not worry about hurrying or even about making the sandwiches correctly). The Merry Men had a special arrangement with the employees of the restaurant: the employees gave Robin and John servicemen’s discounts, and the Men tipped the employees handsomely. Despite the discounts, the money still added up, and if the franchisee ever found out that thirty-four percent of his store’s monthly profits came from wanted criminals, he’d probably shit a brick.

As the five broke bread, they further discussed their future, both short-term and long-term.

“So yeah, if you guys wanted to join us, it would be like that, except… more,” said Little John.

“And increasingly wild as you boys grow more comfortable with the work we do,” said Robin. “And we won’t always eat dinner at Quiznos.”

“Yeah, we got a similar arrangement with a Burger King in Hollyville where the only money they make is from us and the drunk college kids who roll in around midnight.”

“I don’t think that was their chief concern, Little John--”
“And an Arby’s in Hardscrabble.”

“We only eat junk food when it’s convenient for us, lads, in case you were wondering.”

“Can we go to McDonald’s?” asked Ed excitedly.

“Ignore him,” said Eddy, “he’s just excited about the toys in the Happy Meal.”

“Why aren’t you excited about the toy in the Happy Meal, Eddy?” asked Ed defensively.

“Speaking of toys, Ed,” said Robin, “you boys are on summer break, correct?”

“What’s that have to do with toys?” asked Eddy.

“Well if you boys are free all day, we’ll have time to come teach you our weapons. When you’re proficient, we can probably find you some of your own as well. I do need a refill on arrows soon.”

Ed’s face lit up. “Toys?”

“Toys, Ed.”

“I mean…” -- Little John swallowed a huge mass of food with a gulp -- “…we know you kids have lives, families, shit like that, so we don’t expect you to, you know, drop out of school and live in the woods with us.”

“Not gonna lie,” said Eddy, “I was wondering about that.”

“Oh, nonononono,” said Robin, “we don’t expect you to completely sacrifice your comfortable lives for some blokes you’ve just met. We would just like to be some friends of yours who you hang out with whenever you can.”

“Will we be able to do anything about your arm?” Edd asked Little John, whose open wound had mostly crusted over.

“Eh, we’ll get it cleaned up at Otto’s place,” Little John said as if it were no big deal at all. “So we’re gonna head back there, pick up our weapons, then start passing out the goods on the way back to Sherwood. That sound good, boys?”

“I gotta question,” said Eddy. “Won’t they be able to DNA the blood in the alleyway or something?”

“Good question!” said Robin.

“Damn good question,” said Little John. “They might, but they won’t. I ain’t in the system. I never committed a crime before this all happened, so they don’t just have the stats on my blood offhand.”

“And perhaps they could cross-reference it with blood samples from everybody who’s ever lived in Nottingham, but they won’t. It’s not worth their time.”

“There’s probably a few samples of my blood in hospitals around town or something, but yeah, they’d probably never bother checking the blood to see if it matches with some random guy who went missing seven years ago.”

“Um… there’s a question, if I may,” asked Double-D. “What is your… legal status, as it were?”

“My status?” asked Little John. “Single and available, depending on who’s asking,” he said as he
chuckled and elbowed Robin, who smirked jocularly along.

“I-I mean… you said missing…”

“Yeah, we’re legally missing,” Little John said as he stuffed his mouth. “I mean, it’s weird…”

(Dear Reader, this narrator is transcribing this as though John’s mouth wasn’t full, because while writing it out phonetically would be more faithful to the story, it would be way too much of a pain in the ass.) “…So, the authorities don’t know who we are. Except they kind of do, but not really. Some of ‘em probably know our names, but they can’t do anything with that information, because, what the fuck are they gonna do? They’ll get reprimanded if it turns out they were withholding information, and even if they don’t, they’ll get sent off to face us, and none of them want that. They’d shit their pants.” He finally swallowed. “Besides, it’s not like the public is gonna squeal on us. And knowing our names won’t make us easier to catch.”

The Eds all nodded as if they heard it all loud and clear.

“Same with me,” said Robin. “They don’t have any records of me ever breaking a law in Delaware or anywhere else on Earth. We told you we were good guys. You know, it’s funny; Johnny and I’ve discussed multiple times whether we should have faked our own deaths, just to be safe.”

“We shoulda, but we didn’t, because we were stupid and young and impulsive and stupid.”

“It’s not too late, now is it, Johnny? Drop a few fake corpses by the side of the trail and really confuse them.”

“We’ve got better things to do with our time. Unless one of you kids is really good at arts and crafts. God knows we have some ratty old clothes we need to get rid of.”

“Johnny, I don’t think there’s enough fabric in the world to make a fake you.”

Little John chuckled, always ready for a size-related compliment. But then another intrusive thought entered his head: what if Robin was just giving him these mundane compliments as a tool to put the brakes on a conversation and reroute it in the direction of his choosing? Jesus, Little John didn’t know why this strange contempt and distrust of his friend wasn’t going away after he thought he solved it. He had unraveled the part of the mystery where he realized he felt bad being ‘the follower’ in a group of only two, but now he had to figure out how he was going to remedy that. Was he going to have to come to terms with his position, or was he going to have to try to change who the entire world -- including, evidently, himself and Robin -- perceived him to be? Little John tried to think about whether they knew anybody else besides Otto who he could feasibly use as a makeshift therapist, but he didn’t think he and Robin had that many close friends in the civilian world.

Sure enough, Robin changed the direction of the conversation: “Ed… Edd… Eddy… pardon my impatience, boys, but the curiosity is getting the better of me. May I pick your brains and ask how you boys are feeling so far? About our proposal?”

“Proposal? But you’re already engaged, Rob!” Little John joked, mostly for his own benefit to take his mind off his disruptive thoughts. He chuckled and Robin chuckled along, and the boys smiled politely to acknowledge that a joke had been said despite them not thinking it was very funny.

“But have you boys made up your minds?” Robin pressed. “I’ll respect your decision either way, and I trust Johnny will, too, as it is a tough sell. But it would mean the world to us if you would come along with us, and the anticipation is killing me.”
And none of the three of them were ready to give a solid answer, but luckily Little John gave the best answer for the three of them.

“Rob, don’t pressure them,” he said. “They’ve got a tough group decision to make, and the work’s not even over yet.”

“Y-yes!” Double-D jumped at the chance to affirm. “Even when this day is done, we’ll surely need some time to think about it.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Eddy, “let’s, uh… let’s see how rewarding it is to… give back to the community, eh?”

“I want whatever Eddy and Double-D want!” said Ed.

Robin sulked just a little bit. “Ah, I suppose you’re right, Johnny. I’m jumping the gun. Apologies for talking out of turn, lads.”

Little John playfully nudged him as he addressed the Eds. “Ol’ Rob can be too daring for his own good sometimes, boys. Just in case you thought he called all the shots around here, I’m the one who keeps him in check!”

Robin put on a tired smirk. “No man rules alone, I suppose.”

Hm. No man rules alone… Little John didn’t like that. But then again, he did set himself up for it by the way he framed himself as the sidekick. Once again, Little John was pondering how much he should insist he not be treated as a sidekick and how much he was responsible for other people viewing him that way. So much for dismissing the intrusive thoughts. He didn’t want to be a bad friend, but he didn’t want to waste his energy being a good friend to someone who didn’t see him as an equal. Because if Robin saw him as a loyal sidekick instead of a friend… then did anybody see him as a friend? And he really didn’t want to let this conflict prevent him and Robin from making three new friends.

--III--

The five of them loaded up five boxes full of cash and piled the mediocre sandwiches on top of that. They tipped Emily enough to buy a car from the first Bush administration, and they each took a box on their way to Georgetown. They took a discreet shortcut along the banks of the Peach Creek, which zigzagged diagonally northwest through the city’s grid. They stopped at Otto’s, gave him some grub, watched in horror as Little John screamed like a banshee while the blacksmith dumped basically an entire bottle of hydrogen peroxide on his arm, grabbed Robin’s bow and quiver and John’s staff, and went off to go find some benefactors.

“All right, boys,” said Robin, “just pick anyone. See someone on the street? Talk them up. See a house that gives you good vibes? Knock on the door. Be the person you wish would talk to you if you were in their position.”

“Let’s start with this chick,” Little John proposed.

As they walked down Minnesota Avenue, they saw a skunk smoking a cigarette on her porch half a block away. And she saw them, but pretended not to for a bit until they were within speaking distance, just so she didn’t give them an awkward stare-down. She knew who they were, and she knew what they were going to offer, and she knew that they were about to make her day a lot better, but she didn’t want to look like she was begging for their gifts.

“Hello, ma’am,” Robin said when they were close enough. “How are you doing today?”
She smiled. “Well… could be doing better, could be doing worse, I guess.”

“Ah, so you say you could be doing better? Perhaps we could help you with that.”

She chuckled nervously, not knowing how to gracefully welcome their aid. “I… had a funny feeling you’d say something like that.”

“And what would ever give you that impression, ma’am?” Little John asked, trying to match Robin’s suaveness, not quite getting to his level but certainly giving Rob a run for his money.

The skunk kept chuckling under her breath, knowing the good fortune that was coming. “Pardon me if I’m mistaken, but… would your names be Robin Hood ‘n’ Little John?”

“Why, that they would be!” said Robin.

“And yours, ma’am?” asked John.

“Rachel,” she said. “I-I’ve seen you guys in crowds before, stuff like that, but… I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting you personally.”

“Rachel, the pleasure is ours,” said Robin with a bow, and John bowed with him, both still holding their boxes of sandwiches and money. The boys in the background just watched nervously, not knowing whether they should join in.

“Seven years of this and we’re still meeting new people in this big ol’ city,” said Little John as he stood, facing Rachel at first but then glancing at the boys halfway through his sentence.

“I gotta say, I don’t know your friends, though,” said Rachel. “Wait, are they with you or are you guys just blocking the sidewalk?”

“Oh, these friends of ours are with us on a, er… what did you call it, Little John?” asked Robin.

“A ride-along,” he answered. “These bright-eyed kids wanna see how rewarding our work can be. Don’t quote us on this yet, but you might be seeing more of them soon.”

“Boys, why don’t you introduce yourselves?”

“I’m Ed!”

“I’m… Edd?”

“Hey, I’m Eddy.”

“Hi, guys,” said Rachel, walking down her stoop to meet the gentlemen at street-level. She dropped her cigarette on the sidewalk and stepped on it with her flip-flop. “You boys want to help these two make the city a better place?”

“Uh… w-well, sure, um, doesn’t everybody?” Double-D said.

“Evidently a lot of people,” said Rachel. “These two are amazing, but they need all the help they can get. Hell, I’d help you myself, but I just couldn’t manage with the hectic lives you guys live.”

“Miz Rachel,” said Robin, “we’re sure you can manage much more than you think. You seem like a lady who doesn’t know her own strength.”

“We don’t want to force the issue,” said Little John, “but if you ever change your mind, we’ll have
you in a heartbeat. Anyone who’s willing can join the Merry Men.”

“And life would probably be more fun with a few Merry Women,” Robin said with a sly smirk.

Rachel chuckled. “Well, if everyone were a hero, nobody would be a hero. Hey, aren’t you spoken for anyway?”

Eddy zoned out for a second as the adults discussed Robin’s complicated relationship. *If everyone were a hero. A hero.* That was precisely what he’d been waiting to hear. He had confirmation that there were regular people -- strangers to the Merry Men, even -- who regarded them as heroic. Eddy liked the sound of that. It was funny: right before he heard that word, Eddy was thinking that all of Robin’s smooth lines were actually kind of dorky and that they would sound stupid coming from anybody else, and that Robin was kind of a haughty twat for being able to pull them off without sounding like he was trying too hard. But with the arrival of the *h*-word, Eddy still thought those lines would sound inauthentic if he or anybody else tried to say them, but now he was considering that instead of hating Robin for his talents, he should try to learn from them. Would that be the mature decision? Or was Robin’s supernatural charisma an inborn trait that couldn’t be learned, and attempting to emulate it would merely be a waste of time? Eddy had some time to think about it.

“Care for some dinner, Rachel?” Little John asked as he presented her the top of the box in his hands.

“Oh, no, I-I couldn’t, I just ate,” Rachel said. “Besides, someone else might need it more.”

“Conscientious!” said Robin. “My kind of girl! But can we interest you in some… dessert?” He lifted the sandwiches in Little John’s box to reveal the oodles of cash that lie beneath.

“We’ve cooked up plenty to go around!” said Little John.

“And we insist that we skip the part of falsely declining our offer for politeness’s sake,” said Robin. “We have many people’s days to brighten, and not much time to do it!”

Rachel clenched her fists on her mouth, overcome with emotion. “Oh--! Yes! Yes, oh my god, thank you! Thank you so much, guys!”

“Don’t thank us, thank a warthog named Michael.”

“But… how much should I take?”

“As much as you need and not a penny less.”

Rachel could feel the tears coming, and everybody could see it. Little John put the boxes down and put an arm around her, and she didn’t hesitate to turn and give him a hug as she broke down weeping for her serendipity. After a moment, she went over to hug Robin as well. “Oh, god, **thank you!** You don’t know how much this is gonna help!”

“We’re not gonna know…” started Little John.

“...but we think we have a pretty good hunch,” Robin finished.

“Can Ed have a hug, too?” asked Ed.

Rachel didn’t see why not, these were the Merry Men’s friends so they must have been good. She went over to give Ed a grateful embrace (though the moment was slightly tarnished by -- ironically
the skunk thinking the bear had a funky scent to him, but Rachel wrote this off as the ambient and unavoidable odor of a pubescent boy. She then gave Edd and Eddy their thank-you hugs, as Robin and Little John watched, then glanced contentedly at one another, both knowing they had hit the jackpot for the perfect first recipient to show the boys.

Double-D and Eddy were too shocked by the emotional embrace to even think about hugging back, but Rachel wasn’t offended. As she stood out of her hug with Eddy, she couldn’t help but remark, “Hey, you’re a cute little guy, aren’t you?”

But before Eddy could protest the words cute and little, Rachel continued, looking into Eddy’s eyes for the first clause of her sentence:

“I really do hope you boys choose to stick around with them. The world needs more people like Robin and Little John. But it seems like nobody’s got the guts to do it. What part of town are you boys from, anyway?”

“They’re from Peach Creek, actually,” said John.

And Rachel winced at that, almost disappointed to hear that they were from the comfy suburbs.

“We implore you not to judge them yet,” said Robin. “They may be more compassionate to the urban plight than you’d think a couple of suburban lads would be!”

She laughed gently to herself. “You’re right. Sorry, kids. I caught myself jumping to conclusions.”

They didn’t mind. They had other things to think about. Eddy was tempted; Double-D was feeling trapped; and Ed was hoping there would be more hugs.

They gave Rachel a sum of money and were on their merry way. As they walked, Robin couldn’t help but ask.

“First citizen helped, what do you think, boys?”

“Do we get to hug more people?” asked Ed.

“Damn straight, we do,” said Little John.

“Yes, yes, uh, I-I-I can see how, uh… how you guys can… truly make a difference in these people’s lives,” said Edd.

Robin said, “That’s exactly what we want to hear--”


“Shit, shoot,” said Little John.

“So… I’m just thinkin’. If you were to knock on my door, and my parents answered. My mom? My dad? Doesn’t matter, either of ‘em. You said hey, seems like you’re flat broke, take some money, no strings attached. My dad’d probably slam the door on your face. My mom? She’d tell you to your face that she didn’t want your charity. Then she’d slam the door on your face. So… why doesn’t that happen to you?”

“Rob, you gotta admit, this kid asks good questions.”

“I agree, Little John,” said Robin. “But to answer your question, Eddy? I think I know what’s different between us and Rachel and us and your parents.”
“And what’s that?” asked Eddy.

“Your parents don’t know us. Rachel did.”

“Am I deaf? Did she not say she’d never met you?”

“You ain’t deaf, bud, you’re just not seeing the forest for the trees,” said Little John. “She didn’t know us personally, but she knew of us, and she knew of us so well that it was almost like she just plain knew us.”

“Our reputation precedes us,” said Robin, “and that reputation is as friends of the community. And we had to work on that when we first started out! People were too hesitant, too cautious, too proudful to take charity from a bunch of strangers. But after a little public-relations campaign, now they’re receiving gifts from some old friends.”

Eddy nodded pensively. “And you just told her to take as much as she needed out of the box? You didn’t think she would take more than she needed?”

“And that’s a risk we take,” agreed Little John.

“But Eddy, again: we’re their friends. They’re not going to betray their friend’s trust, especially when they know that their friends can help them again in the future.”

“*You* wouldn’t take advantage of your friend’s kindness, wouldja, Eddy?” asked Little John.

...Well, what the fuck was Eddy supposed to do? *Yes, I would?* “Naw. No, I wouldn’t,” he squeaked.

“Exactly.”

Double-D would have rolled his eyes if he weren’t focusing on every little detail in his environment, worried that at any time his uncle might jump out of the shadows, guns blazing. (Come to think of it, Double-D was only a few feet away from his uncle’s gun, but even its present possessor kept forgetting that fact for hours at a time.)

The five of them meandered through Georgetown en route to Sherwood Forest. They met a bunch of colorful characters, most of whom were ecstatic to find out that there were some Merry Cadets in the wings. There were hugs, high-fives, fist-pounds, and handshakes; there was crying, laughing, and even a few isolated moments of impromptu elated singing and dancing. There were even a few who denied the gifts, but even then, they didn’t say *Fuck you, I don’t want your charity;* they said *I’m good for now, give that to someone who needs it more, I’ll see you next time.* It all went exactly as planned.

Eddy was feeling hopeful. He was liking where this was going. He wasn’t committing to it yet, but he wanted to enjoy the ride while it came. He was seriously digging the residual fame he was getting just standing in Robin’s and John’s literal shadows. But he didn’t know if it would be worth it if the price were giving up his pursuit of money. He wasn’t sure the ends justified the means.

Double-D just wanted to get the hell out of town. Everything single cell in his body was uncomfortable. It wasn’t that he didn’t like being in a sketchy neighborhood. It was that he was afraid that the authorities would materialize out of nowhere at any moment. It was that he was compromising his proud identity as a pacifist. It was that the parallels to the legend of Adam Bell kept crossing his mind every two minutes. It was that he had always believed that there was a better way to make things better than... *this.* It was that he didn’t think Robin and John would take *no* for an answer. Edd was starting to regret all the praise they’d given him for conquering his fear,
as it seemed like he was getting their hopes up that he’d be a sure yes. If they were to remark at any
time during the Redistribution that he was still showing his bravery and conquering his fear with
the sheer act of being there every passing second, he just might have told them to their faces that
he’d much rather be a coward if he weren’t so far from home. But they never did make such a
comment.

Ed would have been heartbroken to find out that Edd and Eddy were having completely opposite
thoughts about staying or leaving. Ed really did want a swashbuckling adventure, and he was down
for anything that involved more hugs, but his primary concern was keeping the Eds together. The
concept of assuaging institutionalized poverty was not completely lost on him; Ed wasn’t stupid, he
just didn’t like dwelling on things that didn’t actively interest him. But if you were to sit him down
and force him to journal out his thoughts, eventually -- it might take awhile, but eventually -- he
would scribble down a surprisingly lucid thought about how the Eds wouldn’t be much of a help to
the people of Nottingham if they were fractured.

Little John was silently paying very close attention to how people treated him in relation to Robin.
To his dismay, it was a totally mixed bag: some acted like Little John was the equal second half of
the equation; some tacitly treated him like he was the was the second fiddle to Robin’s top banana;
and some zigzagged between one and another from sentence to sentence. The only consistent thing
was that virtually nobody treated him like he was the head honcho; the only exceptions were a few
bears and other large mammals who specifically were extremely and obviously size-conscious, but
even then, most large mammals besides these few erred on the side of treating them equally. In a
way, John would almost have preferred that everybody treated him like he was the sidekick; at
least then he would be able to set a clear goal on how to remedy his situation. He thought that
maybe it was just a matter of different people seeing him and Robin in different ways, and he’d just
have to accept that. But he couldn’t shake the inkling that he wasn’t getting his due credit. He
didn’t necessarily want to be known as the leader of the duo, especially if that meant that his friend
would now have to feel subjugated; he just wanted to be seen as Robin’s equal.

And Robin really needed a day like this to feel better about himself. There was nothing like seeing
people's smiling faces to reassure him that he was indeed making a positive difference, no matter
what Sarah McQuillan and Alan-A-Dale and Amanda Foote all those daft bitches and bastards
might say. And things seemed to be going rather smoothly with the Eds. Robin wasn’t playing coy
earlier; he genuinely couldn’t get a read on whether they were interested in joining the gang. But he
was hoping the Redistribution part of the day would push them in the right direction.

All five of their feelings were augmented when one peculiar incident happened. The guys were
taking a shortcut down an alleyway behind some factories and warehouses, several of which were
abandoned. And yet in this den of rust and decay, nature found a way to persevere.

“BUTTERFLY!” Ed screamed, echoing in the empty alley. He ran off chasing it, and the others
ran after him.

The butterfly flew over a ten-foot fence. Ed ran right through it; it first bent under his weight as he
started running up it, then a hole gave in and Ed was home free. The others were right on his tail as
they ran through the newly-formed hole, begging him to come back.

The butterfly flew right into the open doorway of an empty warehouse. Ed’s inhibitions were
nowhere to be found, and he ran straight in to find his new friend. He chased it through a series of
enormous storage rooms with ceilings dozens of feet high.

When the others finally found him, Ed was staring straight up, looking like he was about to start
bawling.
“What’s wrong, Ed?” asked Double-D, saying one of his first non-stuttery sentences in awhile.

Ed simply pointed up at the butterfly, almost invisible as it perched itself on a high banister.

“She doesn’t like me!” Ed wailed. “And she was such a beautiful butterfly!”

“There, there, Ed,” said Double-D, patting the bear on the back.

“There, Ed, there’s plenty of other fish in the sea,” said Eddy sardonically.

Robin and Johnny weren’t bothering to say much at all; they knew this was probably something the Eds were best suited to sort out amongst themselves. The adults led the way back as Double-D consoled Ed, and Eddy, embarrassed by his proximity to this moment, brought up the rear.

To take his mind off the awkwardness of the situation, Eddy took a good look at the walls as they found the exit. There was graffiti everywhere. It was a mixture of positivity and negativity, tasteful and tasteless, and a whole bunch of stuff that could be argued one way or another. There were your standard tags of words in big bubble letters that were almost impossible to read; gang insignias and erect phalluses; and many stray words, forming strings such as “HAIL SATAN”, “KILL YOURSELF”, and “FUCK PRINCE JOHN”. There were a lot of cartoon characters, some of which were stereotypical urban reinterpretations, others not: one was SpongeBob SquarePants with crossed arms and a flame-design bandana, giving the viewer an intimidating smirk, and right next to him was Johnny Bravo redesigned as a black panther rather than a snow leopard, adorned with a pan-Africa pendant on a gold chain, who was nevertheless recognizable as Johnny Bravo thanks to his trademark black shirt, sunglasses, flexing pose, and stylistic lack of a mouth; about thirty feet down that particular wall was a faithful depiction of that chipper aardvark Arthur Read gleefully holding up a library card and clearly having fun, and fifty more feet down, Clifford the Big Red Dog was standing with his pants unzipped and urinating on a tiny maneless lion wearing Victorian clothing and a top hat, who didn’t look like he was having very much fun at all. There were many memorials to fallen friends and neighbors, ranging from scribbles of birth and death dates on the walls, to illustrations of gravestones with illegible epitaphs, to elaborate wall-wide murals that were impeccably drawn. There were even many pieces that seemed to have nothing to do with media, socioeconomics, protest, self-serving vulgarity, or anything; just drawings of muscle cars and beautiful trees and stuff like that, seemingly done for their own artistic merit and nothing more. There were even a few splendid recreations of the Georgetown cityscape and the Nottingham skyline. And there was one graffito about the community that stopped Eddy right in his tracks.

“Uh, Rob? LJ? Boys? You might wanna see this.”

Robin was drawn in prominence, zoomed in so far that you could only see him from the waist up. He was drawn about forty-five degrees to the right of straight ahead, so one would see his left side half in-profile. His right arm held his bow and his left arm was bent, his fist digging into his side, and the strap if his quiver went diagonally across his Lincoln-green polo. He wore a devilish grin on his face and his dark-yellow bycocket hat on his head.

To the left was Marian in her pink button-down blouse, a little further in the background, looking longingly at the one she adored, drawn beautifully, her eyes so wide with love that you could see their hazel-brown irises. She was the only one whose body was turned straight toward the viewer. Her hands were clasped before her, as if praying that God Almighty would see Robin well though the battle.

To the right of Robin were the boys, all turned a bit to their right just like Robin, each a little further back than the last. First was Little John, holding his staff and also sporting a bycocket, his a forest-green one the same color as his Philadelphia Eagles shirt. Then came Tuck, wearing his ratty
tan-brown pullover hoodie and holding a rosary in praying hands, a shorter staff than John’s tucked into the crook of his arm. Finally was Alan, his tan fur colored a bit darker brown than in reality (probably the same paint used for Little John’s fur), wearing his thin sea-blue cotton vest over his sky-blue t-shirt, strumming his guitar while presenting an open-mouth grin on his face, with a slingshot sticking out of his back pocket, albeit a Bart-Simpson-esque twig-and-rubber-band one rather than his real wrist-mounted hunting piece.

Then, in his own little orb of light two feet to the right of Alan, was Will. He was also turned about forty-five degrees but drawn full-body, from the long tufts of hair spilling over the American flag bandana wrapped in a band across his forehead, to his crimson-red zipper-down hoodie that was just a tinge lighter than his family’s namesake scarlet-red fur, to his torn and well-worn blue jeans. With both hands, he held a flaming sword before him down at his waist and at arm’s length, and gave the viewer a determined side-eye smile that suggested he was ready to use it. Two white, feathery wings flourished from behind his back, and a ring-shaped halo peeked over the top of his head. There was just enough space on the wall beneath his sneakers for the letters “R. I. P.”

“Well…” said Little John, “I guess you met our friends.”

Everybody was silent for a moment. None of them knew what to say. After a moment, the silence was broken.

“Pretty picture,” said Ed in a surprisingly respectful tone.

“She is pretty, isn’t she?” Robin said. They turned to see he was locked in a staring contest with the visage of Marian. He stepped forward and slowly raised his hand to touch her face. “No-- she’s beautiful…” He ran his finger down her cheek, then when he reached the bottom of her face, he traced its outline slowly and deliberately, careful not to miss a single curve.

Little John turned to the boys and put a finger to his lips. They understood.

“Someday…” Robin murmured as he finished tracing her face, and moved on to tracing her lips. “Someday soon, I pray…”

The others could see he was blinking back tears. His breathing didn’t suggest that he was about to start weeping, but the other four were all listening for the first respiratory hesitation so they would be ready when the rain came.

But instead, Robin held his head back for a second with his eyes closed, as if forcing the tears to drain back out of his eyes. When he opened his eyes again, he slowly stepped along the wall, taking in the fine intricacies, and feeling that these images were realized with as much love from their artist as Robin felt for the people in the mural.

He didn’t stop as he walked past his own image, only jesting, “Heh, who’s this good-lookin’ guy?”

Little John and the boys laughed gently.

Robin stopped for just a moment at the painting of Little John. “Heh, never mind the first one, who’s this good-looking guy?

They all laughed a bit more at that.

Robin took in the portrait of Friar Tuck. “John, do you reckon we would have survived that first winter if not for Tuck’s help?”

“I reckon we wouldn’t’ve.”
Robin nodded stoically and peacefully. “He may have been frustrated that we didn’t share his faith in God, but with him around, it was like the Lord Himself was with us. I only hope he’s feeling fulfilled and enjoying his retirement.”

“I’m sure he is, Rob.”

Robin took a long time analyzing the portrait of Alan-A-Dale. There was something off about it that he couldn’t put his finger on, not just the fur color. He finally figured it out. “This must have been drawn the same year as the archery contest and the jailbreak.”

“How do you know?”

Robin leaned over and pointed to Alan’s tail sticking out from behind him.

“Oh! You’re right!” said John. The Eds didn’t get it, and were too afraid to ask.

Robin kept looking at the image of Alan. “It’s a shame you and Alan never did get to start a real band. You two made such wonderful music together.”

“Heh, we coulda, but he wanted to be the lead singer, too.”

“You two ought to have taken turns. He could sing the country and western tunes, and you could sing the party songs and everything else.”

“Then what would you sing, Rob?” Little John smirked.

Robin chuckled. “Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. If I had a voice like yours, Marian probably wouldn’t have let me leave.”

Now John chuckled. “Your voice ain’t that bad yourself, Robin!” he said in a voice that he was clearly trying to make sound even deeper than usual in a way that was a bit too obvious to everybody.

“You see? I’d love to sound just like that… with an English accent, of course.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

Finally, Robin moved on to Will. At first, he just seemed to stare blankly at him, as if watching static on a television set. Then he nodded his head down for a second, closed his eyes, and stayed like that for a moment, just breathing. The other four were surprised to feel surprised when he threw his arm up on the wall and buried his forehead into it, pounding the wall with his other arm and leaving it there.

“I’m sorry!” It was muffled against the wall, but the others could make it out as he wept. “William, my brother, I’m so sorry! I’m sorry…” He sniffled. “You-- you deserved so much better than this…”

Little John raised a finger to the Eds. *Gimme a second, boys*, he mouthed as he walked over to Robin.

“What?” asked Ed, who legitimately couldn’t read lips. Double-D and Eddy both kicked him in opposite ankles for this, and Ed bit his tongue to keep from yelping.

Little John pulled Robin off the wall and sucked him into a hug against his stomach. “I miss him, too, Rob.” He stared at the mural of Will as he spoke to Robin, and although his voice wasn’t
breaking, the boys could see that Little John was getting pretty glassy-eyed himself. “He knew you loved him.”

“God… dammit, Johnny! How am I supposed to help all these people if I can’t help my own brother?”

“Robin, you were the best brother I’ve ever seen somebody be.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“Don’t you ever think Will wasn’t lucky to have ya. I wish I had a brother like you, Robin.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him…” Robin repeated directly into the bear’s stomach.

“And now I do have a brother like you, Rob, and I’m grateful to be so lucky.”

“I didn’t want to hurt him--”

“You didn’t hurt him.”

“Yes I did!”

“No, you didn’t. He hurt himself because he hurt someone else. You couldn’t have known he’d do that. You did nothing wrong.”

“You couldn’t have known--!” But Robin stopped right there.

“I couldn’t a’ known what, Robin?”

Robin pulled his head away from Little John’s torso and stared into space for a second, blinking away the tears as he looked a bit confused.

“I couldn’t a’ known what?” John repeated.

Robin breathed for a second, regaining his composure. After a bit, he said, “That bastard Robert ruined his childhood… but I stole his adulthood from him. How can I make up for that, Little John?”

“You didn’t steal nothin’ from him, Robin.”

Robin looked morosely up at Little John. John clearly wasn’t getting it, so Robin wasn’t going to force the issue. Remembering the kids were there, Robin thought it was probably for the best anyway that he didn’t.

“Thanks for having my back, Little John.”

“Anytime, buddy. Any time at all.”

Robin stepped out of the embrace. He looked over at the boys, who were all visibly confused, both by what was happening and how they were supposed to feel about it.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, boys.”

“Oh, um… it’s quite alright,” said Double-D. “I’m-- we’re sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, boys. I hope this hasn’t shaken your confidence in me.”
And just like that, Little John was back to being annoyed with Robin. Well, it was fun while it lasted.

Robin turned back to the wall and walked his way back down to Marian, to whom he said, “Soon, my love. I will see you soon. Or my name isn’t Robin Hood!” He snickered to himself for a moment. “I’m doing this for you, my love.” Then he looked to his right and walked over back to Will. “And I’m doing this for you, too!” He backtracked and looked at Alan. “And for you!” To Tuck: “And for you!” And instead of addressing the effigy of Little John, he turned to face the real thing. “And for you, Little John. I’m going to make your seven years of service worth your while!”

Fucking asshole. Little John knew exactly how he wanted to respond to that: “And I’m gonna make seven years of service worth your while!” I love ya Rob, but really? “Seven years of service to ME?” Fucking asshole.

“I like the sound of that, Johnny!” He started off toward the exit and motioned for the others to follow. “C’mon, lads! Time’s a-wastin’!”

Everyone took one last look at the mural as they left, knowing exactly what they got out of it. Robin, for one, found a reaffirmation of his sense of purpose in the mural. Knowing that he had done such good that people wanted to immortalize him meant that he must have been doing something right. The unexpected visit from people he never expected to see again did shake him for a moment, but seeing the people he was fighting for only strengthened his drive.

Ed was the next to leave. He liked this idea of heroism that involved people painting him on a wall. He imagined being like a space explorer who comes home from the void to the applause of the public, being lauded for his accomplishments when he was really just enjoying himself and doing cool things. He could get used to this, but he didn’t want to do it alone. A mural like that wouldn’t be the same if it was just one person.

Double-D did not care for the mural. He admired it from an artistic standpoint -- and how do they ever get such fine lines with spray paint? -- but he didn’t like that Robin Hood and Little John were the kind who would attract people to commit vandalism as a method of honoring them. Furthermore, as much as Double-D would love to have been regarded as a hero, he wanted to be a hero of something like math or science, not of reckless vigilantism. He certainly didn’t want to be immortalized on a wall in an abandoned warehouse, showing forever to the world that he was a filthy criminal. Perhaps he shouldn’t say filthy; he really believed that Robin and John’s hearts were in the right place, and that touching moment of Robin’s remorse confirmed that they were indeed fully-feeling people. But he also believed that the road to hell was paved with good intentions; he didn’t know how Robin and John slept at night, and wasn’t just thinking that with regards to the discomfort of their living situation.

Eddy was the opposite. He wanted to be the subject of the graffito. But he didn’t just want to be in it; he wanted to be front and center. How did Little John sleep at night knowing that the fox was getting all the credit? Eddy liked what he saw and he knew then that he wanted it. But was he going to get it by being like Adam Bell, or by being like Al Capone? If he joined their crew, would he ever emerge as the leader, or would he always just be known as the guy who followed Robin, just like Little John? All Eddy knew was that he wanted what Robin had.

And Little John wanted it, too. He was the last to leave by a solid few seconds. He stared at the image of himself. He didn’t know if it was unflattering on purpose or if the artist just didn’t know how to draw him. Whoever made this drew him too goddamn chunky, for one; the bear community was largely fine with the stereotype of always being severely overweight because they thought they carried their weight well, but this rendition didn’t make John look like he was
carrying his weight well. They drew him like a fucking circle. Then there was the perspective issue: Tuck was supposed to be standing vaguely further back but John was only drawn as about a head taller than him. But the look on Little John’s face. It just looked so... stupid. Goofy. Dumb. Ditzy. Unintellectual. Were his eyes crossed? Well, hell, if this was made during the year of the famous hoedown party, he sure had been making some funny faces while he sang of Prince John being a false monarch, but was that what everyone remembered? Little John had a scary thought: if he wanted people to think of him as a strong leader like Robin, he might have to unlearn how to be a party animal, which was a lesson he had taken thirty years to learn in the first place. No, no, he was overthinking this... but seriously? He’s literally a background character? Okay, if this were four years ago when there were still four of them running around and when Robin was still clearly making a disproportionate share of the decisions, then he could understand that they portrayed Robin as the foremost member of the pack. Robin started the club, after all, and many would say John ought to be flattered to be drawn second out of four (if you weren’t counting Marian) when this image clearly depicted the Merry Men as having places in a hierarchy. But if this were drawn today and it was just the two of them, and John saw himself being portrayed as a literal sidekick of a two-man tandem, he’d track down the artist and bite their jugular out. At this point, Little John would hope people didn’t care that the Merry Men were Robin’s brainchild; John had given up seven years of his life to help these people, too. He got plenty of respect from Robin -- sometimes more than others, but Robin had his own issues upstairs these days, so John would let him off the hook for his blemished record -- but unless he got a comparable amount from the people he was busting his ass to help, it wouldn’t have been enough to make Little John feel okay with himself. He loved Robin and he loved the people he was saving, but he wasn’t sure he was getting the same amount of love back. He knew some people who would tell him to be zen about it and be happy to give love without receiving an equal amount, and he knew some people who would tell him that he was in an unfair relationship if he wasn’t getting due credit for all the work he was putting in and that he should stand up for himself. He didn’t know which group he ought to listen to, but he did know that he hadn’t put his life in danger every single day for seven years just to stand in the background and let his friend take all the glory.

“Coming, Little John?” asked Robin.

“Yes... yeah, I’m comin’.”

--III--

Weapons drawn, Robin and John took one last long look around the clearing before they stepped out into the open.

“Alright, lads, I think the coast is clear.”

“Do us a favor though and don’t touch anything, will ya? We gotta keep everything in its place.”

“What Johnny said, boys. We have to make it look as if we were never here.”

The five of them walked slowly out of the thicket and stepped around clothes, kitchenware, books, more clothes, toiletries, nonperishable food, still more clothes, sleeping bags, and assorted garbage as they made their way toward the Major Oak.

“This is it, boys,” said Little John. “This is home.”

“We’ll never expect you to abandon your homes and families to live the life of vagrant outlaws…”

“...but if you wanna run with us…”
“...then this spot will be a safehouse where our enemies would be hard-pressed to enter, and knowledge of its location will be invaluable.”

“Or at least it was a great safehouse before those motherfuckers tracked us down.” Little John was tempted to ask the Eds whether they incidentally knew a rich family named the Von Bartonschmeers with a shy kid named Martin, but he knew that was highly unlikely, so he didn’t bother.

“You live a treehouse!??” Ed asked, his eyes wide with wonder.

“You know,” said Robin, “it’s funny: we actually were thinking of building a proper treehouse in our early years, but with all the hustle and bustle, we just never found the time.”

“All the future lies ahead of us, now don’t, Rob?” said Little John.

“I suppose it does, now doesn’t it, Johnny? Perhaps we can build one if you boys ever want to have a sleepover.”

“Hey, Queen Elizabeth,” said Eddy, “is it a normal thing in England for a couple of lonely guys to invite a bunch of teenage boys over for a sleepover?” Eddy was trying to ask the question playfully, but as he thought about what he was saying, his own disgust with the image in his head caused his tone to sour as the sentence progressed.

Robin just looked confused at that. Little John leaned over and nudged him, murmuring, “I toldja, Rob, it’s not just a matter a’ me being paranoid.”

“I suppose so,” Robin mumbled.

Double-D was still at the edge of the clearing, almost afraid to step inside. First they had been warning them all the way in that the cops had recently discovered the location of their safehouse, and now he had to bear witness to this… filth.

“You… actually live in this squalor?” After assessing the scene for a while, Double-D couldn’t help but ask, shitty attitude be damned.

“Hey!” Little John barked. “It wasn’t squalor before the cops trashed the place!” He himself looked about, disgusted by the mess the Chief-turned-Sheriff and his lackeys had made. “By the way, boys, we were saving all the trash for taking into town and disposing-of properly. Just in case you thought we were total slobs.”

“And if you’re curious, those beer bottles have been accumulating since March!” said Robin. “I told you we’d cut back!”

Double-D looked at all the trash and wondered to himself what kind of officer of the law would make a point to tarnish such an encampment for the sake of it. He didn’t have to think very long before he realized he knew the answer. He knew the answer personally, or some would even say familially.

Eddy was about to ask what the point of coming here was before he realized that he was about to step in what appeared to be someone’s undergarments. Upon closer inspection, it looked like an adult legged onesie. It was either an off-white or an extremely pale blue, and it was splayed out in such a way that he could see parts of both the front and the back. He could see that it buttoned down a bit from the collar but stopped at the chest, and the way it was folded over, he could also see that it had one of those ass-hatches that children’s pajamas have for the wearer to get in and out. Eddy had never seen an article of clothing quite like it.
“Eew, whose are these?” he asked, initially thinking they must have belonged to one of the Merry Men by geographic proxy, but then he realized that it was too long and wide to be Robin’s, too short and skinny to be Little John’s, and the tail-hole in the back was far too narrow for either of them.

“What, those?” answered Little John. “Aw, those are just the mayor’s.”

“What? But why!? And what the hell are these things?”

“That is either some old-fashioned piece that he wears under his old-fashioned suits or some old-fashioned night-clothes he wears to his old-fashioned bed,” said Robin. “And having seen his bedroom a few times, it is dreadfully old-fashioned.”

“Do they button down all the way, or is it the onesie?” asked John.

“Uh… a onesie?” said Eddy.

“Okay, yeah, those are PJ’s peejays,” said Little John, and almost without looking he shoved his arm into the hole in the Major Oak and pulled out an extremely light pair of button-down long-johns roughly the same eggshell color as the onesie. “Here’s his underwear!”

“Y-you just have the guy’s underwear lying around?”

“Don’t worry, we washed it.”

“Multiple times,” added Robin. “And if you knew about Prince John what we knew, you’d want us to wash it a few more times!”

“What, does he got IBS or something?” asked Eddy.

“Naw, more embarrassing than that,” said John.

“Do you boys know what a ‘pox’ is?” asked Robin.

“Ooh!” went Ed. “Is that the alien from the movie--?”

“No,” said Little John, “a ‘pox’ as in ‘a pox upon the phony king of England.’”

The boys all just cocked their heads in confusion.

“Shit,” John grumbled, “all these years, Alan and I thought that was a clever line!”

“It was a clever line, Little John,” said Robin, who then turned to the boys. “We’ll explain when you boys’ve passed a secondary-school health class.”

“This still doesn’t answer the question,” asked Double-D. “Why are you in possession of his undergarments and his pajamas?”

“Because it’s the ultimate power move,” said Little John as if there was absolutely nothing weird about it.

“You keep your enemies’ undies as a trophy?” asked Eddy.

“Of course!” said Robin with a wink. “Doesn’t everybody?”

Eddy took mental notes. **Break into Kevin’s house. Steal his jammies. Assert dominance.** Eddy
would have to write that one down so he didn’t forget; he thought it would be more poignant to save it for when Kevin was home from the hospital.

“Well, boys, even though we only had one donor today, he proved to be one of the biggest jackpots we’ve had in quite a long time.” said Robin. “I must say, today was quite fun!”

“Yeah, it’s always fun to have new people around,” said Little John, who went over to Robin and pulled him in by the shoulders again. “Hey, I love this guy like a brother, but we can’t be left alone with each other and no one else twenty-four-seven, or we’d lose our fuckin’ minds.”

“That we would. You boys might just be our good luck charm.”

“If you kids could just stop getting this guy involved with broken glass.”

“It seems I have a new weakness, Little John. I hope this doesn’t make you think less of me!”

“Oh, I could never!” Like hell I couldn’t, Rob!

“But why did we need to come see this… tree?” Eddy asked, catching himself in time before he said this stupid tree.

“A few quick things,” said Robin. “One, to familiarize you with this environment, because if you should ever choose to come along with us, it will be imperative that you know where this place is. Secondly, to show you a bit more of our lives, so that we’re not just some strangers asking you on a mysterious journey. And thirdly, to make it clear to you why we need to still stay in your van for at least a few more nights. If you’d please.”

“This is the biggest run the cops’ve had on us in a while,” explained Little John. “Rob, does this place look any different than it was when we last left it?”

“No, sir.”

“Exactly. We don’t know if they’ve been here and just didn’t touch nothin’, we don’t know if they’re waiting until we’d’ve probably come back, we don’t know if they’re gonna check this place every week for the rest of time--”

“We don’t even know whether they’ve forgotten how to find this place! They may never see this spot again, and we may be worried for no reason!”

“But still: we’re worried.”

“And that’s a very unfamiliar feeling for us. And we don’t fancy it. Between giving us a safe place to stay and agreeing to come along with us for a day, we are severely indebted to you. I only hope we’ve made it worth your while.”

Little John cleared his throat. “So we gotta ask…”

“...have you lads made up your minds yet?”

The three of them all just looked at each other a bit awkwardly, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

“I’m afraid we’ve put them on the spot again, Little Jo--”

“ED HUDDLE!” Ed shouted, hop-skipping over the debris the best he could (and failing miserably) to Double-D and Eddy, picking them up, and carrying them over to the opposite side of
the clearing. They got their faces close and made a circle. “What are we going to do, Edd and Eddy?” asked Ed.

Ed looked at Double-D, who was still too afraid to say his mind, so he looked at Eddy, inspiring Ed to look at Eddy, too. The wolf and the bear stared down at the little fox, but he just pensively stared into the space between their faces. He was being tasked with making a leadership decision. And he knew what his decision was.

“I need more time to think about it.”

“EDDY NEEDS MORE TIME TO THINK ABOUT IT!” Ed hollered to Robin and John as he stood from the huddle. The trees shook and at least a few birds were startled out of their nests.

“Shh!” Robin and Little John both begged them.

“Oops! Sorry!”

“Dumbass,” Eddy grumbled.

“Well, I’ll tell you what, boys,” said Robin. “When you make your decision -- even if it is a no -- if you can’t find us at the van, try to find us here. We might be out and about for the day, but if you miss us, keep trying. We’d like to see you boys again no matter what.” Because we’re just that bloody lonely.

“And you know what? Even if you don’t wanna rob people with us... hell, just come hang out. All our other friends are either in jail or in the ground. Or in church. Not a lot of people would have the balls to come and spend time with us out here. You kids got guts, and we respect that. We like you guys.” Because we’re just that goddamn lonely.

“I thought everybody downtown was your friend?” asked Ed. Robin and John looked at one another, knowing that Ed had a very good point.

“Sometimes friends aren’t able to make the time to see their friends,” said Robin. “It’s a sad part of growing up. Savor your youth, boys.”

“And I’ll just cut the shit,” said Little John. “Things just ain’t as good as they used to be for us. We used to win every fight we started. Back then, there were parties in this very spot basically every weekend, and anybody from in the city who was on our good side knew where the party was at, and they knew they were invited. But then things changed and... shit, it just killed the mood. There hasn’t been a good party here in a while.”

“Maybe that’s why you’ve been so grumpy lately, Johnny: you haven’t been to a good party in far too long!”

“God knows I could go for one.”

“But those parties won’t be coming back unless you three can help get us back on track.” And then Robin let out a melancholy chuckle. “I’m going to be honest with you lads, you’ve gotten my hopes up. And I stress that you are free to make your own choice, we will not take that liberty away from you, but please... if you can help it... don’t break my heart?”

Little John kneeled down next to Robin and put his arm around him like a professional athlete posing for a photo with a child. “Yeah, don’t go breaking the guy’s heart! Look at this face! Can you break the heart of a face like this?” Then Little John clamped a paw on the back of Robin’s head and another on his lower jaw and turned the fox (who was fine to go along with the ride) into
a singing puppet, his head tilting side to side like a slow-motion metronome: “Don’t go breaking my heaaart, oh don’t go breaking my heaaart, I won’t go breaking your heaaart, so don’t go breaking my heaaart!” At a certain point, Robin added some leg-kicks to his little puppet-dance.

The boys didn’t think it was unfunny, they were just preoccupied, dwelling on the thoughts of the tough decision they had at hand.

Undeterred by the way that their act had gotten such cold reception, Robin snapped out of John’s clutches. “OH! Speaking of hearts! There is one more thing I want to show you! This way, lads!” He walked out of the clearing toward a slight embankment to the northwest, and the rest followed.

The boys were surprised by how quickly they got to where Robin was leading them. It was like they had just stepped into Narnia; they magically transported to another world in too short a distance for it to have been real. It couldn’t have been even a football field away from the Merry Men’s camp, maybe not even fifty yards.

“Boys, if you ever want to take a girl somewhere beautiful, I recommend you take her here,” said Robin as he walked up the mount to the top of the twenty-five-foot waterfall. “And we’ll be right next door to keep you safe when you do.”

“*This* is where it’s been this whole time!?” asked Eddy incredulously.

“Yes, this is the same spot from the part of my story where I spent a wonderful night with the love of my--”

“Nonono, you don’t understand,” Eddy interjected. “This… *this* is the waterfall? It’s real!? And it’s right next to your camp!?”

“Convenient spot, isn’t it?” asked Little John.

“I think Eddy’s referring to how our this waterfall is something of an urban legend among our student body at school,” said Double-D. “There have been rumors of its existence, but nobody seems to have ever been able to find it, at least not among our generation.”

“Hm. Is that so?” asked Robin.

“Yeah, we’ve heard that kids back in my brother’s day knew where to find this place, but then the older kids were like, *nyeh, we’ll never tell you, little kids!* , so we don’t actually know anybody ourselves who’s found it,” said Eddy. “My brother says he used to go here all the time to take chicks, but I don’t believe him.”

“How old’s your brother?” asked Little John.

“Shit, what…?” Eddy counted on his fingers. “…Twenty-two? He always said he couldn’t tell me where this place was because some dangerous homeless people showed up in the woods and that’s why he had to stop going there. He says he was trying to protect me, but I know my brother, he was just holding out on me.”

“How old’s your brother?” asked Little John.

“Shit, what…?” Eddy counted on his fingers. “…Twenty-two? He always said he couldn’t tell me where this place was because some dangerous homeless people showed up in the woods and that’s why he had to stop going there. He says he was trying to protect me, but I know my brother, he was just holding out on me.”

“There’s dangerous people in these woods?” asked Little John facetiously. “What? Where!? These are our woods, I’ll keep ’em safe!” He started taking swings at the air in front of his face. “Lemme at ’em, lemme at ‘em!” Then he stopped abruptly, gave Eddy a knowing look (which Eddy returned with a look of confusion), and took a bow along with Robin. Oh. Now Eddy got it. Heck, maybe his brother wasn’t bullshtting him after all.

“I see our legend has extended to the suburbs after all,” said Robin. “But let’s not forget to show
“...which nooks to squeeze around.”

Indeed, there was plenty of light still peeking out from behind Ed, who wasn’t even that heavyset for his species -- if anything, he was probably less than typically bear-thick. If he had known all the nooks like Little John did, he probably could have made it through with plenty of room to spare.

“Don’t worry, Rob, I got ‘im,” they heard Little John say.

“As we said, we just want to share our world with you. We’ve taken you straight through this forest; we can’t miss the major landmarks, now can we?”

“I must say, the topography that forms such a natural wonder is quite fascinating,” Double-D said, just to say something.

Neither of the foxes knew what to say to that, but Robin did know that recent events meant that sunset was bad news in Sherwood Forest.

“Now I’ve shown you the back door; might as well show you the front door, eh?” He exited via a narrow path to their left that flanked the water and the mound. Double-D silently wondered why they couldn’t have just entered this way.

Meanwhile, Little John and Ed were getting themselves off the ground after John had painstakingly yanked Ed free.
“Hey, listen, kid, while we got a moment alone, let’s you and me have a chit-chat,” said Little John as he stood up and helped Ed get to his feet. “Bear to bear, man to man.”

“Yes, Mr. Johnny?” asked Ed.

“Listen, Ed, I don’t know you too well, but I know two things: one, society thinks we’re dumb.”

Ed looked heartbroken. “Oh, no! I’m sorry, Mr. Johnny. Why do they think you’re dumb, too?”

“Nonono, not just you and me. Our species. They think we’re a buncha dumb brutes. And it doesn’t help that a buncha people like us are a buncha dumb brutes. But here’s the other thing I know: I don’t think you’re stupid.”

Ed’s look changed to what one might call a delighted confusion. Little John saw it and assumed (correctly) that Ed had never been told such a sentence in his life. Little John continued:

“Now, I’m gonna say: I think you act stupid, but I think that might be because the world hasn’t given you any reason to want to be smart. God knows it didn’t give me and my brother one. Hey, don’t mind me asking: is your dad still in the picture?”

“You wanna see a picture?”

“No, I meant--”

Ed reached into an inside pocket of his jacket and produced a waterfall photo book, which he let unfurl to reveal a bunch of pictures of the Browne family and the Eds.

Ed pointed to the first one, which showed the Browne nuclear family at Christmas, standing in front of the tree. “There’s my mommy and daddy and my baby sister Sarah!”

_Hm, Sarah, just like that bitch porcupine from yesterday who made Robin want to kill himself_, Little John thought. But then he started seriously observing the photo to see if they looked like a happy, loving family. It looked like Ed and his mom were the only ones smiling in earnest; the father and Sarah were clearly faking it. Not the best sign, but at least the family was intact. Hopefully there was nothing going on between the father and daughter specifically that made them both so sour-looking, but Little John thought he was overthinking; the papa bear may have just been a classic grumpy papa bear and the daughter looked old enough to be a typical prickly pre-teen. Then John had a question he couldn’t help but ask:

“How old’s this picture, Ed?”

“It’s from last Christmas. Santa got me a bunch of new comic books, video tapes, an Evil Tim figurine…”

Little John stopped listening as he observed the picture. This photo was about six months old and Ed looked like he was the same height as his parents -- who, curiously, were about the same height as one another. Heck, maybe that’s why Ed’s dad looked so grumpy. It looked like Ed must have gotten some good physical genes from his mom if he wasn’t even done growing; John could see that Ed was already the size of an adult, albeit one a bit on the short side. Then Little John made a weird observation that made him think a funny thought. The rest of the Browne family’s fur was distinctly shiny, bordering on a dirty blonde, kind of like the golden brown you want your toast to be. Ed’s fur looked like the color of the peanut butter you’d slather on that toast. Maybe the Ed was like him where his fur got darker in the winter and spring, but come summer would be markedly lighter from the sun’s photo-bleaching. Or maybe John’s hunch was right that this kid was adopted and his new parents were regretting it.
“...a yo-yo, a new toaster, a--”

“Alright, bud, I asked because our people have a problem with dads either being dicks when they’re around or not sticking around at all,” said Little John. “I mean, ethologists or whatever you call them, they’ll tell you that for the longest time, our ancestors treated it like a cultural thing for a guy to knock up a chick and amscray. Like they think the ones who came before us were obsessed with independence as a virtue, so that arrangement was forcing the man, the woman, and the kids to all be independent. So they didn’t see anything wrong with it. And that went for bears all over the world: the Grizzlies, the Europeans, the Eurasians, the Syrians, the Japanese... a-a-and not just us brownies, either; the black bears, the pandas, the polars... I guess it was something in our DNA. And a lot of us never unlearned that, I guess. Hey, uh, by the way, do you know what your, uh... do you know what your ethnic background is? Just curious.”

“...No?”

Little John reached around and felt Ed’s shoulder blades to see if he could determine himself whether Ed was more Grizzly or more European or more something else entirely, since the Native American Grizzly peoples were known for their pronounced shoulders. Ed had kind of a hump in the back, but not enough to suggest full Grizzly ancestry, and yet he was still on pace to be much bigger than your average one. “Shit, kid, you might have some Kodiak in you. That would explain a lot.”

“My mom says I do.”

*Does she say that because you’re her son or because she knew your real parents?* “Well, listen, kid, what I wanted to say was... don’t let people underestimate you. I’m gonna tell you right now, there’s gonna be a lot of people who think you’re dumb just because you’re a bear. Just like how there’s gonna be people who think you’re a crook because you’re a predator. You don’t have to be a genius, but you gotta show these people you’re not dumb. I didn’t do good enough of a job at that and now everyone thinks Robin’s the brains of the operation. But you know what? I don’t think you’re stupid. You’ve let some profound shit fall out of your mouth. I think your issue might not be intelligence, it might just be a matter a’ focus. Do you get what I’m saying?”

But Ed was having trouble focusing on Little John’s boring speech. “What’s your brother’s name, Mr. Johnny?”

“And you know what? Maybe I’m an idiot for thinking you’re not just plain dumb and that there ain’t anything more to it than that. But I’ve got a feeling that ain’t the case.”

“Is your brother’s name Big John?”

“Shit, kid, it might as well be. You know what? If I’m right about you, you’re just like my brother. People thought he was an idiot, too, but he just didn’t see the fun in being smart.” That’s when Little John saw the foxes and the wolf come around the bend from the front of the waterfall. “Hey, kid, we’ll work on you the next time we see each other. Because honestly, I see a lot of myself in you.”

“Are you sure you’re not me from the future, Mr. Johnny?”

“Kid, if you were me from the *past*, you’d be about three feet shorter. You wouldn’t even be Robin’s size.”

“Really? Can I see pictures of you when you were little, Mr. Johnny?”
“I hope you two lads didn’t feel too left out,” Robin said as he approached.

“Meh, it’s our place in the world,” mumbled Little John.

“Well, gentlemen, the sun is setting and those boys in blue may be sniffing these woods soon. We’d best be headed back to our motel room.” And they all headed back to civilization, ready to bring this long day to an end.

--III--

“I believe this is our stop,” Robin said as they turned the corner and saw the van. “Thanks again for coming along with us, boys. Remember, no matter what you decide, please come find us, either here or at the Major Oak.”

“If you can find it again,” added Little John.

“Remember, it’s right next to the waterfall.” Robin turned to the younger fox. “Eddy, I like your spunk. I want that on our side. In some ways, you remind me of my brother. In other ways, you remind me of Little John. In still other ways, you remind me of myself.”

“Hm,” went Eddy. “Th-thanks, uh… yeah.” He had no idea what to make of it. He just wanted to get home to investigate how much money he still had in his pockets and to ruminate on whether these guys’ offer was too good to pass up.

“Ed,” said Little John, “I like ya. I think I see something in you nobody else does. I think our work can bring something outta ya that nobody’s bothered looking for before.”

“Does that mean I can play with the toys?” Ed asked. Little John’s speech earlier hadn’t gone over his head for an inability to understand the words he was saying, but rather from an inability to understand why he should want to understand.

“Fuck yeah, you can.”

“And Eddward -- Double-D, if I may,” said Robin, “I want to stress that I’m very impressed by your bravery. You may seem timid and bashful, but I believe I’ve seen you make great strides today alone. I won’t lie, you may be behind the pack at the moment, but at your pace of progress? You may be lapping us all soon. And as we’ve told Eddy and Ed, I think coming along with us will be an excellent opportunity for growth that you may not have known yourself capable of.”

There was no way in hell Edd was going to say yes. Oh, so they thought he was brave? Fine, Double-D was going to be brave. He wasn’t going to be brave enough to tell them off to their faces, but he was going to be brave enough to quell a curiosity that he otherwise would have forced himself to live with.

“I have a question,” he said.

“Ah, yes, what is it, lad?”

“Um… do you gentlemen know a police officer who’s… a wolf? A gray wolf?”

Robin and John shot half-nervous, half-intrigued looks to one another. They didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, so they asked some questions of their own.

“Well…” Little John began. “Buddy, gray wolves are one of the most common predator species in this country. You’re gonna have to be more specific than that.”
“He’s big.”

“If he’s an officer, he’s likely to be big, since police departments like hiring big blokes,” said Robin. “Do you mean big as in tall, or big as in… er…”

“Yeah,” said Little John, “are we talking big like me, or big like…” -- Little John looked down at his own stomach -- “…also me?”

“Both,” said Edd.

“Does he have a Southern drawl that puts Little John to shame?” asked Robin.

“…You know him.”

“Chief Woodland,” said Little John.

“Oh, remember now, Johnny, he’s the County Sheriff now,” said Robin with a bittersweet bit of snark.

“…You know him.” Double-D would have normally collapsed onto the ground into a ball of anxiety, but because his blood had stopped pumping, his muscles had turned to stone and he couldn’t fall apart even if he wanted to.

“The man himself,” said Robin.

“That son of a bitch is the one who trashed our house,” said Little John. “What, is he your uncle or sumthin’?”

Ed and Eddy’s eyes pursed open as they turned their heads to Double-D. But then Double-D did something very brave of himself: “No,” he lied.

“Oh,” said Robin, “so you just… know of him?”

Nobody noticed Eddy smirking to himself in amusement, nor Ed’s look of incredulity at the fact that Double-D had uttered a mistruth.

“Yes, um… he pulled over my parents once when we were, uh, driving through the city. I-I-I’d rather not go into too fine of details, but, uh… we distinctly remember a point where, uh, my parents told him that he was a poor reflection of our species, and he told us he could say the same thing to us. Then he, uh, threatened to assault my father for his remark.”

“Good lord,” murmured Robin. “I was going to say though, you seem too educated to be directly related to someone like him.”

Phew, Edd thought to himself.

“You want us to go look for him and fuck him up for you?” asked Little John.

“Oh! Nonono, um, please don’t do anything that may jeopardize your safety!”

“Ah, you’re right, kid. You see, Rob, he’s keeping us in check!”

“Indeed,” said Robin. “And it may jeopardize your safety as well if he finds out we were acting on your behalf.”

“Which he would, because we’d tell him as much while we’re beating his ass.”
“Oh, please don’t cause any trouble over me!” Edd implored.

“Don’t worry, bud, we won’t. We’ve already got enough trouble on our hands.”

“But we will pay him back extra next time he’s in our sights,” said Robin.

“Oh, well I appreciate it,” said Double-D. “But, uh…”

“I think Double-D’s gonna get his ass kicked if he’s home late for dinner,” said Eddy, looking for any excuse to go home and count his money.

“What!?”

“Your parents beat you, too?” asked Little John. “You said 201 Rethink, right? We take house calls!”

“Nonono, Eddy’s exaggerating. They will be very cross with me, however. They won’t raise a hand to me, but they may leave me some very strongly-worded sticky notes.”

“Sticky notes?” asked Robin.

“Double-D’s mommy and daddy talk to him with sticky notes because they don’t know how to talk with Double-D,” said Ed in another one of his passing moments of brilliance that shocked everybody.

“Y’know, next time we see you, we’d like to know a little more about your stories after we told you basically all of ours,” said Little John.

“Yes, some may even say we’re the foolish ones for asking people we barely know to join us,” added Robin. “But we don’t have to be strangers.”

“Oh, I do agree! But on that note, I think I’d best be going!” said Double-D.

“Uh, yeah, me, too,” said Eddy, who then started walking off. Then he remembered he probably ought to say goodbye. “Oh, uh… we-we’ll see you soon. Fersure.”

“Likewise, Eddy,” said Robin, waving. “You boys have a good night now!”

“And don’t let that mean old sheriff hurt you now that he’s got reign over your neck of the woods!” added Little John as he waved along.

Robin and John watched Ed, Edd, and Eddy walk out of the junkyard, out into town and into the sunset. They couldn’t hear the faint conversation they were having amongst themselves.

“So what are we gonna do, Eddy?” asked Ed quietly. “Are we gonna be friends with them?”

“I need time to think, Monobrow,” was all that Eddy replied.

Robin and John watched until they couldn’t see the boys anymore. They were about to have a long talk themselves about how they felt that day went and whether they really wanted to hang out with a trio of teenage boys, but their first two lines could have likely summed the whole conversation up:

“We’re never gonna see these kids again, are we?” asked Little John.

“Honestly, Johnny, I’m not too sure myself,” Robin confessed. “The more I think about it, the
more my mind keeps changing.”

But Dear Reader, surely you don’t think this story would have been worth telling if it were to end right there?

*A.N.* Well hell I’m glad I cut it in two, then. Happy 46th birthday/anniversary to Robin Hood (the character and the movie); I almost didn’t make it in time. Of course now I have like the next five chapters all planned out perfectly in my head but no idea when I’ll be able to make time to write them. But they’ll be coming eventually. Idk, if I’m afk for like a year, call the police. (“Hi, dispatcher, there’s a cryptofurry on the internet who hasn’t updated his bizarre crossover fanfic in months and I’m worried about him.”)

*UPDATE 11/9/19*: HOW COULD I FORGET that November 8th was also the 10-year anniversary of Ed, Edd 'n' Eddy's Big Picture Show finale? I guess I got so wrapped up with my epiphany that 10/18 and 11/8 were exactly three weeks apart that I forgot that there were other significant dates. Brb doing my penance.
Young Love

Chapter Summary

A young woman wrestles with the internal conflict of whether waiting to reunite with the flawed man she adores would be worth her time, her energy, and her self-respect.

16. “Young Love”

And for a moment, she just closed her eyes and sat there in the dark, thinking about the one she loved. She thought about how brave and yet how foolish he was, so chivalrous and yet so blind. She believed he thought loved her, but he didn't know how to properly show it. Why did he run off like that? What was he trying to prove? What did he think he could change? Now she feared she would never know. Would she ever again hear his voice? Would she ever again know the touch of him putting his arm around her shoulder? Would she ever again look him in the eye and see her reflection in his pupils as the light refracted through his smiling chestnut irises?

And what of herself? Was she a fool for waiting on him? Would a self-respecting woman sit and wait for the unassured return of a man who had left her side to go and blindly fight something he didn’t fully understand himself? Could he even know she was waiting? There were some who she respected who would say yes, and there were some who she respected who would say no. She would have liked to imagine both parties would agree that this was a lamentable situation. Where was the line between watching out for her own best interest and simply being heartless? She told herself that she was not waiting on just any man, but a specific man; there were few other men she would wait on as she waited on him. And though he had abandoned her there in a flurry of well-intentioned naiveté, she believed that he would only get better if someone who loved him very much showed him the way. Perhaps that would be her, perhaps not. Therefore she decided that she would wait for him to return to her world until the moment that something possessed her to not want to wait on him for even a second longer, and when such a feeling did come, she would not fight it; but for now, she wanted to wait for him, and so she did.

She opened her eyes, just to make sure he was still there. It wasn’t that she thought he would be able to go anywhere in his present state; it was that recent events had been so traumatic, and in such a bizarre way, that she wouldn’t be surprised if she had opened her eyes to find the inside of an examination room in a psych ward. Nazarene, you’ve been in a car accident, and you’ve suffered a brain injury that has caused you to experience wild, fantastic, elaborate hallucinations. In some ways, she would almost prefer that. At least then her recovery would be in her own hands. She couldn’t fight for him. She couldn’t wrestle with whatever thoughts were going through his comatose mind; she couldn’t just will for him to wake up. She could only sit there and wait and hope that he had the strength to pull through. And she believed he was strong enough to do it, but she didn’t believe he was strong enough to make it a certainty. Nobody’s strong enough to make a guaranteed recovery from something like this. She knew he could; she didn’t know if he would.

If she did wake up in a mental hospital, she hoped it would be a nice one. When her mom told her that her little cousin from Lemon Brook had wound up in a psychiatric facility after that incident (whatever it had been) had left him virtually catatonic, it opened up a discussion between the two of them about the state of modern American mental hospitals. While neither of them had never been admitted to one as a patient, her mom nevertheless had some insider information via one of
her ex-boyfriends and one of the guys from the shop. She had told her that even though all the old-
school hospitals were closing, their archaic attitudes were making the jump to the modern facilities,
and while contemporary medical etiquette was slowly but surely taking over, the medieval ways of
old were still clearly visible. Whether you were treated like a sapient person or a thoughtless
anomaly was entirely a case of luck of the draw: which hospital was closest to your house, and
which doctors were on staff that day? And then there was the gray area; for example, apparently
mental hospitals still used electroshock? In Twenty-First Century America? And they were
allowed to do it because… it actually kind of works? Fuck that. She would rather see constant and
eternal visions of the apocalypse than let someone stick jumper cables on her head, even if it did
make any yet-unseen demons go away. And for one calendar day, her chief concern was that her
cousin would get lucky with how he was treated during his stay. But he was a cousin she didn’t see
very often, since his parents and her mom didn’t get along very well, and as much as she cared
about him as a person, she didn’t have much more of a connection to him than that. Blood be
dammed; the kid was an acquaintance she’d met a few times. Therefore when the clock ticked past
midnight and Saturday melted into Sunday, and she witnessed someone with whom she shared a
more intimate connection be tested for his life, her concern was redirected toward her boyfriend
instead.

Martin would probably be fine; once his wealthy parents were done with their own stay in the
hospital, they could probably see to it that he be transferred to a top-of-the-line facility, assuming
he wasn’t already in one. But Kevin would not be receiving such support. A mere thirty-six hours
after the incident and Nazz and her mom were the only ones in his hospital room with him, and
even Mercedes was standing in the hallway to give her daughter room to breathe. Mr. and Mrs.
Lafferty both had some rank at their jobs -- they weren’t CEOs, but they had middle-class middle-
management roles, and they probably both had the leverage to miss a few days of work without
penalty, especially for a situation like this. And yet they were nowhere to be seen. Martin had a fair
share of Nazz’s sympathy, but Kevin needed more, because evidently he wasn’t getting it from
anywhere else.

Did they blame her? She had had thoughts in passing before that Kevin’s parents weren’t the
fondest of her, but while she used to be able to dismiss such thoughts, it may have been that now
their opinion of her had a tangible effect. She thought that there was a fifty-fifty chance that the
Laffertys secretly held something against her for being a bobcat, or for being lower-middle-class;
in the case of Mr. Lafferty, Nazz had had the slightest inklings that he didn’t like her for being a
girl. It wasn’t anything that his parents had said or done that had given her the thought that they
had a problem with females, felines, or the financially-behind; it was what they hadn’t said. They
had always been perfectly polite to her; perfectly, stoically, disinterestedly polite. The kind of
inauthentic politeness one would put up go get an unsavory social situation over with quickly. It
could have also been the politeness of someone who felt too awkward to stray from the beaten path
of politeness; it could have also been the politeness of someone who was just genuinely bored with
the person they were conversing with but pretended not to be for politeness’s sakes. When she
would tell them anything about herself, they would listen attentively, nod along and ask the most
basic questions, like “How do you like that class?” or “Are you enjoying playing on the softball
team?”, but they would never dig beyond that. The Laffertys were the family that all the other
families on the block hated because they were brash and boisterous and prone to guffawing at the
most inappropriate of moments, and yet here they were, completely dull and straightlaced when
she was in their presence. Maybe they didn’t like her, or maybe they just felt awkward around the
girl that they knew was having relations with their son. It used to be that she didn’t care that she
couldn’t get a read on them, but now it suddenly felt important that she figure them out.

The thing that probably inspired her original suspicions that they weren’t fans of hers was when
she put the pieces together that Laffertys had made the jump from blue-collar to white-collar lives -
- or, rather, they had wound up with lives that blended them together: Karin was a manager at a comedy club downtown, where she had many working-class wait staff and ushers in her charges, and Patrick was a manager at a literal factory. Something about their story blending elements of a gritty hard-working life and a pampered money-focused life just gave off the suggestion of trace amounts of social conservatism. The “I’m fine with felines, but I don’t want my son marrying one” kind -- not that they had ever said anything like that to her knowledge, but it just seemed like something they might have said once over the years. They had given her so little to work with that if they said that in front of her, she wouldn’t have been surprised, because there wouldn’t have been anything else that she would have expected them to say instead. Of course, it could be that they were some of those people who acted awkwardly around people of other races not because they were racist, but because they were aware that racial tensions did exist and therefore were too paranoid to say much for fear of stepping on toes. That was also a possibility. This was all just getting more confusing.

As she thought about it, Mr. and Mrs. Lafferty as individuals probably would have other issues with her before the canine/feline thing. (Hyenas were canines, right? Nazz was pretty sure they were, but now was certainly not the time to ask.) Karin seemed like the kind of woman who was proud of her work ethic but also liked being financially comfortable, and therefore would probably not have liked how Nazz’s mom had relinquished the wealth she was born into in exchange for a blue-collar tomboy career which she simply enjoyed more despite it paying less. Nazz didn’t think Karin wanted to be a pampered princess, per se, but rather, she seemed like she would have thought Mercedes blew a great opportunity to build higher from an already-high starting spot. Karin seemed like she saw Nazz and Mercedes and just saw a living embodiment of wasted potential. Never mind that Mercedes was one of the higher-ranking mechanics at the shop (which, fittingly enough, did service Mercedes-Benzes among other high-end European imports) and she made enough money as a single parent to live comfortably on Rethink Avenue, but Mercedes wasn’t raking it in like Karin and Pat were. And Patrick? Well... again, it wasn’t that he had ever said or done anything blatantly chauvinistic, it was just that he seemed like the kind of guy who would be. A domineering macho-man who always pushed Kevin to be a good physical specimen and commander of men; a fifth- or sixth- or seventh-generation Irish-American with enough of a drinking problem to call it a problem but not enough to justify entering A.A.; a guy who liked the Flyers and the Eagles and the Phillies and -- because of the Irish connection -- the Boston Celtics. Just a guy who seemed like he had less than zero interest in challenging traditional gender roles. A guy who seemed like if his beloved son got his ass kicked by the cops while trespassing in the woods at night, he’d probably say it was the chick’s fault for leading him into the forest preserve with the promise of a story with a happy ending. And she was aware that she was implementing her own prejudices as she pondered their thoughts on her, and it made her uncomfortable to confront that she was doing that, but… was she wrong to do so? With such little information to go off, it was another tough situation. If she posited that there was prejudice occurring when there really wasn’t, it would make her look unreasonable and tarnish the reputation of her judgment for long afterward; if she dismissed her hunch that there were some prejudiced thoughts being harbored when said hunch was actually correct, she would be risking letting them get away with their bigotry toward her unabated. She almost wished they would do something egregiously racist just so they could give her some clarity, but she knew better than to wish for such a thing.

Okay, here’s a question: if she decided once and for all that they had an issue with Trash-Lite bobcat girls, what would she do then? Confront them and yell at them for it? And then what happens? They magically feel bad and repent? Or do they think she’s a malcontent bitch and double down in their hatred? The second one seemed more likely and wasn’t worth the risk. But what else could she do? Try to win them over and dissolve their hatred that way? Would that be being the bigger person, or would that be bending to their rules until she was presentable in their eyes? She couldn’t use Kevin as an intermediary because, well…
She didn’t want to spend her time at Kevin’s beside ruminating on how it seemed like there was no foolproof way to remedy bigotry or undo prejudice; she already felt helpless enough staring at his lightless body laying before her.

Oh, and speaking of prejudice. She had complicated feelings about Kevin’s insistence on using that word he used when he came upon the strangers. For one thing, unless she was completely deplorable at communicating her feelings to him, he ought to have known that she wasn’t a fan of such epithets. He ought to have known that because they’d discussed it at least a few times. She had told him that she didn’t like him cavalierly using that word, whether it be derisively describing his enemies like the Eds, matter-of-factly describing sensitive males like Jimmy, or even playfully describing his friends like Rolf; she made clear that she thought that was a homophobic and hateful word that had no place in anyone’s mouth. He responded that it was just a guy thing to speak in such a way, and that there was no homophobia involved, citing that there was no controversy over the term *cocksucker* even though to call a man that would effectively be the same thing as calling them the other thing. She said she disagreed with his argument but conceded that she couldn’t understand male social circles any more than he could understand female ones, and she told him to either stop using that word or stop using it around her. He said he would, but he never said which one. For the longest time after that, she never heard him say it, and she had thought he had agreed to the first option, but now it seemed like he had meant to promise to the second one. And to be fair, he had kept his promise; he hadn’t used it around her, and even that night in the woods, she wasn’t really *around* him when he was using it.

But it just sounded so seethingly hateful when she heard him say it -- no, *scream* it. And those sounds she heard, like the splashing of large objects… was he throwing stuff at them? Literal sticks and stones with the intent of breaking bones? Granted, it sounded like whoever he was confronting eventually started fighting back, but it also sounded like Kevin started it. She had no idea who or what Kevin saw there; maybe it was really two adults actually copulating, maybe it was two older boys having a secret moment together for the world to never see… or maybe, considering where they were heading, it was the crazy crew of homeless people who lived near the waterfall, in which case Kevin might argue -- he had never said this, but she knew him well enough to know that this just *sounded* like something he would say -- that throwing rocks at them and calling them the three- and six-letter F-words regardless of their actual orientations would likely be an effective strategy to scare them away. But even if he really was using that word independent of bigotry as a tactic to disperse some shady characters… did that make it alright? She truly believed that he had the best intentions, but dammit, where does credit for good intentions end and responsibility for consequences begin?

The thing wasn’t that she was surprised he had a negative side to him; it was that she thought he had erased much more of it by now that it seems he had. She had been working on him -- *they* had been working on *each other*, she would say to others -- for quite awhile and she was hoping by this point she’d made more progress on him than this. She knew Kevin was a dominating personality, sometimes to the point of being troublesome, but she did not know that he *may* have been the kind of guy to see two guys alone in the woods and immediately think to start hurling rocks and slurs at them. But again, she didn’t know what he saw.

This might be a good example of the way she understood Kevin to be: some regarded him as a bully. If the sample size was restricted to Ed, Edd, and Eddy, she could understand why someone would draw that conclusion. But -- it absolutely destroyed her to think thoughts that vilified the victims, but she just couldn’t shake the feeling -- the Eds kind of deserved it. They were always running shifty schemes to swindle the kids of the cul-de-sac out of their money and then had the gall to wonder aloud why they didn’t have any other friends besides one another. Eddy was troublingly insecure to the point that it made him an asshole, Ed (who may or may not have had the capacity to know better) had severe issues understanding social and physical boundaries, and
Double-D, poor sheltered thing that he was, was on the hook as well for the sheer fact that he didn’t seem to grasp that guilt by association was a rule that society practiced, for better or worse. Indeed, many times that Kevin assaulted the Eds were prompted by their scams victimizing himself, herself, or any number of people on Rethink Avenue; he always painted it as defending his, her, or their honor, and -- was it primitive to think this about a guy? she was honestly afraid to ask -- she kind of found that heroic about him. Furthermore, Kevin had never outright beat up anybody else except for those three guys after they did something to instigate conflict -- at least as far as she knew about him, which she was starting to worry wasn’t as much as she thought it was. Her understanding was that Kevin was a jerk, but manageably so, and only at his worst when duly provoked.

But this was the same guy who could charm her like no one else. This was the same boy who bought her flowers and begrudgingly painted her claws for her pleasure. This was the same man who wrapped his arm around her and made her feel safe as they sat on lawn chairs in his backyard staring at the summer night’s sky, talking for hours about the nature of life and how they wanted to spend theirs together. This was the same person who was accompanying her to find a legendary waterfall in the woods when he sensed a call to duty to protect his love. This was the only individual who time and time again fought to defend her honor.

She knew well that he had character issues. But she also knew that she had seen enough of his good side to think he was more than worthy of her time to help him overcome those issues. And she also knew that she had been warned by women and men alike to not waste her time trying to fix a guy; the men always told her that a woman trying to fix a man showed the woman in question misunderstanding the male psyche and how the vast majority of men are too prideful to change until they themselves decide that they wanted to, and the women always told her that a woman trying to fix a man was a waste of time because men were too stupid and a man who needed fixing in the first place was completely lacking self-awareness at best and quite possibly dangerous at worst, and men and women alike always told her that a woman trying to fix a man could lead to the man becoming possessive and entitled and using the woman like a crutch for his flaws. She heard all of these warnings and said to them, I acknowledge your warnings, but I want it this way. Her personal idea of a perfect romance was a story wherein two flawed but fixable individuals get together to learn from one another and make each other better. She didn’t think she was a saint; she thought she was just another flawed individual looking for someone whose hand she could hold as they walked down the road to self-improvement. She’d help him prove to the world that he was more than just a tough guy and he’d help her prove to the world that she was more than just a pretty face. She wasn’t doing this as a woman trying to fix a man; she was doing this as Nazz trying to fix Kevin, and hopefully getting some help for herself from him along the way to assuage her own flaws. She would never claim that her goals and dreams represented anybody else except for herself. And she wouldn’t be doing this for any old boy who came along, only this one boy who had a long and proven history of pouring his heart out for her and no history of behavior that would suggest he didn’t respect and dignify her as her own person. If anybody would have deserved her loyalty, it would have been him. And perhaps she may still decide that his character wasn’t improving enough and that he was no longer worth her time, but until that doubt arrived and overshadowed her hope, she would stay steadfast by his side. In a world full of unique individuals, she had never quite met anybody like him, but as she stared at him unconscious in his hospital bed, his head bandaged and his limbs in casts, she became afraid that he would never have the chance to do so.

The same boy who had risked his own safety -- and ultimately lost it -- to forge ahead alone and protect her from mysterious entities was the same boy who used language which he should have known she found repugnant, probably initiated violence against strangers, and possibly even harbored thoughts of hatred and disgust against an oppressed demographic that in all likelihood had
never hurt him in any way. What was she supposed to think of a person like that? She really wanted to know what he saw in the woods before he ran into the cops. She needed to know; it was driving her insane. Was it an actual gay couple that inspired hatred in him, or was it just some people doing non-intimate activities who he thought he could disperse by playing the part of a violent bigot? The context was going to make a big difference in how she thought of him. It wouldn’t be the first question she asked when he woke up, but it would certainly be toward the top of the list.

She didn’t want to be thinking these thoughts. Not now. She didn’t want to be thinking ill of someone who had just been brutally harmed by people sworn to serve and protect him, and she definitely didn’t want to think about whether she should be forcing herself to think these ill thoughts of him anyway as a consequence of his character. Heck, maybe she did need this. Maybe she needed this moment to think critically about him and her relationship with him. Maybe she needed to know that such a side to him existed. If he really was as evil as she was afraid he was -- but he never directed that evil toward her -- would it be worth it for her to try to guide him on the right path, or should she just abandon him anyway as punishment? Again, there were people she respected who would say yes to one and people she respected who would say yes to other. Suffice it to say that she was usually alright at making tough decisions, but not decisions quite this tough, and she was hoping that strength in times this trying would be one of the skills she could learn from him.

One tough decision she could make, however, was that it was about time to get out of there for the day. She had been sitting there in silence for nearly a couple of hours; she couldn’t conceive of what might be accomplished by staying there any longer. All she was doing was making herself feel hopeless and miserable.

Of course, there was the one reason why anybody stays at the bedside of an unconscious loved one: to be there for them the moment they woke. But she was fairly certain that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. The morose attitude of the doctors and nurses that would come in every so often wasn’t inspiring any hope in her; they didn’t even say much more than “hello” and “excuse me” to her as they came and went. Really, it would be for the best that Kevin didn’t awaken just yet; his parents should be there for it, too. Part of her worried for how afraid he might be if he awoke in a hospital room just to find he was completely alone, but she worried even more that if it was just her, it would draw more attention to the fact that nobody else was there. At least waking up in a hospital room alone might seem in some way normal, considering the circumstances.

As she did when she left him yesterday, she went to hold his hand in hers. She wanted to believe that even though he had no way of communicating with her, he would be able to feel her fingers laced through his. She imagined him trapped in a dark void with nothing around, nothing to see or hear or smell or taste or touch, absolutely no stimuli anywhere, but then him feeling a familiar touch and sensing her warmth pulsing into him to bring warmth to that cold, dark emptiness. No matter what she thought of him, or what he had done, or what she was supposed to think of him with regards to what he had done, she believed that he deserved some compassion in a moment like this, and if nothing else, it would give her comfort to give him comfort.

...Wait a minute. This didn’t feel right. She remembered stitching her hand through his fingers the day prior and holding his hand like that for a few minutes. She remembered how it felt. This didn’t feel the same. She would have remembered if the bones in his hand and fingers had felt so… jagged. And upon closer inspection, she didn’t remember his fingers looking that… huh?

Years later, the doctors, nurses, receptionists and janitors at Bethlehem General Hospital still tell new employees the tale of that one time that the bobcat girl visiting her comatose hyena boyfriend shrieked so loud that a brain hemorrhage victim down the hallway woke up out of his own coma.
She really shouldn’t have been driving. While her daughter was shaken on the passenger seat, Mercedes was fuming on her behalf. And she wasn’t faking it. It was the kind of pissed where you remember how they tell you in Driver’s Ed that you really ought not drive when you’re feeling particularly emotional, but then you remember that everyone else on the road is ignoring that advice so you throw it in first gear and wish good luck to everybody else. How does a hospital just miss that the kid had his hand crushed? She knew that Bethlehem had a reputation of being another one of those crappy inner-city hospitals, but that was just ridiculous. And then it took a fourteen-year-old-girl to make the discovery, surely traumatizing herself in the process.

She turned right off of Peachtree Parkway onto Grove Street, rolled through the stop signs at Bedford and Harris Streets, and went straight ahead as Grove Street turned into the Rethink Avenue cul-de-sac. She wheeled the cherry-red GTO into the driveway and came to a complete stop before pressing the button on her sun visor to open the garage, having been too consumed by frustration to remember to press it from further out. But as soon as the car lurched to a halt, her daughter unbuckled and started making her way out of the car.

“Hey kid, where you going?” asked Mercedes. “I’m putting the car in the garage.”

“Oh… y-yeah, I know,” said Nazz, having mostly regained her ability to verbalize thoughts. “I just, uh… want some fresh air, if that’s alright?”

“Hm. Sure, honey. I’ll unlock the front door for whenever you’re ready to come inside.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Nazarene. I love you,” she stressed, worried that her daughter needed to be reminded at a time like this.

“Love you too, Mom,” said as she closed the door. “I’m not going to be long. I just need to breathe.”

“Alright,” Mercedes said through the open window. “Love you.” Just once more for good measure before she let her foot off the brake, crawled into the garage, and pressed the button again to close the door behind her.

Nazz just tried to focus on all the little details she could see to take her mind off of it. She felt she had wasted a day of her life yesterday being sad, so now began the process of weaning herself back into reality. She wanted to support him, but she couldn’t stop living for herself altogether, so she needed to remember life without Kevin, starting with assessing this Kevin-less world. Baby steps. She looked at the blades of grass and took in how they collapsed upon one another. She looked at the patterns on people’s roofs and observed how they were all unique despite being the same. She looked down the street and saw that Karin’s car was still in the driveway.

Wait, shouldn’t she have left for work by now? It was late afternoon, arguably early evening, and the comedy club would usually be setting up for their Monday night show by now. The Monday night shows were typically low-profile affairs, usually just showcases of local talent playing to a quarter-full crowd mostly consisting of people who got free tickets, but a show nevertheless, and Karin should have been at work by now. It was understandable why her car was in the driveway when Nazz and Mercedes left for Bethlehem General, because Karin often slept until 10 or 11 as a consequence of her line of work keeping her up until 3 or 4 in the morning, but now the sun was setting. Was she taking a grievance day off work anyway and just… staying home?
No, no; again, Nazz knew she didn’t know the full story. For example, Patrick’s blue SUV still wasn’t there; maybe he left the jawbreaker factory early, picked up Karin, and they both went to see their son, just missing Nazz and Mercedes. Or maybe Karin skipped work but Pat didn’t, and Karin just couldn’t bring herself to go to the hospital alone. Or maybe after the Laffertys went yesterday, Karin picked up some gnarly disease (it’s a hospital, after all) and just couldn’t leave the house today. Nazz was trying really hard not to jump to the conclusion that they were just refusing to give a shit about their son. But it would have made too much sense.

As she was staring down the street at Kevin’s house, she couldn’t help but see Ed, Edd and Eddy turning the corner down by Harris Street. At first, she didn’t regard this as significant. But then they saw her and she saw that they saw her, and she realized that they would regard seeing her as significant, considering the circumstances. When they were close enough for her to see their faces, she waved them over, and they seemed intrigued by the fact that she wanted to talk. You know what would have really made her feel better? Extending an olive branch.

And a brief wave of anxiety pulsed through her for just a second. It seemed like the same thing that inspired her to converse with them gave her pause. She knew that they didn’t get along with Kevin, and she knew that they all had the hots for her (although most boys did). Something struck her that there may be a one-in-a-million chance that they might want to take advantage of this opportunity. Heck, maybe the odds were even slimmer than that. She knew these guys well after all these years, and while she had their issues with them, she didn’t hate them by any stretch of the imagination; she liked them in the way people like their neighbors, not wanting to be their best friends or anything, but finding them perfectly amicable when they wound up in close quarters at neighborhood-wide events (at least when Eddy didn’t have a money-boner, or a regular boner). They had seen her without Kevin plenty of times before and had never done anything to take advantage of that situation before -- whatever “taking advantage of that situation” may entail, be that boorishly hitting on her in Kevin’s absence or something far more severe. But this wasn’t quite the same situation: Kevin was going to be out of the picture for a while, and they surely must have known that. An instantaneous spark of internal light gave her some clarity: she wasn’t nervous because Kevin wasn’t there to protect her from people she didn’t have any reason to believe would do something inappropriate to her; she was nervous because finding out that there was a side to Kevin she’d never known opened Pandora’s Box of mistrust as she realized that anybody she knew less-well than Kevin could have many sides to themselves that she didn’t know about. Ergo, the Eds hadn’t given her a reason to distrust them... yet. And she still didn’t think they would, but here we are.

Nazz maintained a soft smile as the trio approached, silently cursing Kevin for giving her newfound trust issues with men -- actually, scratch that, remembering that she’d also found a renewed paranoia regarding the intentions of Kevin’s mother as well as his father, she could say that Kevin had made her skeptical of pretty much everybody on planet Earth besides her own mom. This would need to be another thing they needed to discuss when he woke up. But for now, she knew that if the planets aligned in the worst possible way, she could easily take the stunted fox and the candidate-for-clinically-low-testosterone wolf; the giant bear might be a bit tougher, but he was a clumsy oaf and she still liked her chances. She didn’t work her way up to a black belt just to never use it.

“Hey, guys,” she said as they got within speaking distance. She sounded emotionally exhausted, which may have been expected, but perhaps not for the reasons the boys would think.

“Uh, he-hey, Nazz,” Eddy choked out. Nazz regarded his abundant bashfulness as a good omen.

“Hi, Nazz!” Ed beamed. He still didn’t seem like he was capable of premeditated evil.
“Oh, hello, Nazz, I, uh, we, um…” Double-D sputtered, clearly lacking the confidence to pull any fast ones. “If-if you don’t mind us asking… how are you?”

“Oh, I… don’t mind you asking, Double-D,” she answered, “thanks for your concern. I…” -- she sighed dejectedly -- “…I’m hanging in there.”

“Oh, uh… we ca-can imagine that this must be a… a difficult situation for you to, um, deal with,” said Double-D. “I-i-if there’s anything we can do to help, to, uh… assuage the, uh, negative emotions, please don’t hesitate to ask of us.”

“Uh, yeah,” squeaked Eddy. “What he said.” (Nazz had a funny thought: if anything, she should be worried about Eddy being cruel to Double-D rather than her, seeing as Eddy was making the poor wolf do all the talking when it clearly looked like he was about to drop dead of an anxiety attack.)

“Thanks, guys,” she said. “I appreciate it.”

“Y’know, uh, it’s funny,” Eddy piped up, suddenly seeming a lot more (benignly) comfortable in Nazz’s presence. “W-we were just talking about how we’d like the idea of trying to, uh, trying to be there for our neighbors, but, uh… y’know, some people might be suspicious of us.”

Nazz saw Double-D give Eddy the strangest look. Nazz didn’t know what the heck to make of Eddy’s statement, but it seemed like Edd wasn’t on the same page, either.

“Hey, uh, if I could tell you guys something? About Kevin?”

“About Kevin?” asked Double-D and Eddy.

“Yeah, he--”

“What about Kevin?” asked Ed.

“…I think… I think you guys ought to know that…” -- she couldn’t make eye contact with them, instead keeping her eyes pointed toward the ground -- “…Kevin had been talking to me… about you … all of you… and…” -- weird, why were their shoes and pants so muddy? -- “…and I think he’s sorry. I mean, he didn’t say the word ‘sorry,’ you know how Kevin is, but…” -- wait, Double-D was wearing long pants? Was this a special occasion or something that they’d just gotten back from? -- “…all those times that he hurt you… he didn’t-- he wasn’t proud of it. He’s told me he has trouble controlling himself. And he’s trying to get better but he doesn’t know if he’s getting better fast enough. He regrets his actions, and, well…” -- she looked back up at them and jeez, the fur on their faces was ragged and they looked like they had all been walking for six straight hours -- “…if he never gets the chance to tell you himself, I wanted to tell you for him.”

And she was glad that she told them that. Hopefully it would not only make them feel better about the years of pain they’d suffered at Kevin’s hands, but also make them stop hating Kevin, which may in turn inspire them to stop trying to get their money at every turn if they started to see him as a stand-up guy capable of remorse. Of course, now she had to hope Kevin never found out that she told them that, lest he come back and kick their asses twice as hard for daring to believe that he in any way regretted kicking their asses, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

“…Oh!” Double-D was clearly flabbergasted. “”Uh, well, uh, if that’s true, then I must say--”

“Then he’d better start controlling himself!” Eddy interrupted.

“Eddy!” barked Double-D. “You’d best control yourself!”
Eddy glanced up at Nazz, who was clearly shocked that he didn’t accept the apology. Maybe she was hurt, maybe she wasn’t, it was hard to tell, but she was clearly shocked.

“Uh-- I’m sorry, Nazz, but… I’m gonna be straight with you,” said Eddy. “I ain’t gonna accept no apology from him until he wakes up, gets on his knees, tells me himself that he’s sorry, and then starts treating me -- treating us -- the way we want to be treated. I--” -- he was getting more and more flustered by emotions as he went along -- “…I respect you enough to keep it real with you, alright, Nazz?”

Nazz glanced over at Double-D, who had a troubled look on his face that seemed to indicate that he basically agreed with Eddy but didn’t have the nerve to say so. Which was fair; Nazz didn’t have the nerve to tell them that she still thought they were always cruising for a bruising, nor would she tell them that the apology was completely fabricated.

“Well, I appreciate that, Eddy,” she said. She believed that Eddy was trying to be gentlemanly in his own way, even if she didn’t care for his idea of it.

“Does this mean Kevin wants to be friends?” asked Ed.

“Maybe, Ed.”

“Does this mean he’ll give us jawbreakers from his garage?” asked Ed, his speech deteriorating as his mouth flooded under fountains of saliva.

“Maybe, Ed.”

“Ed, now you control yourself,” Edd chided.

“Guys, let me just say, I appreciate you asking how I’m doing, but… don’t just treat me like Kevin’s grieving girlfriend, okay? Just treat me like I’m Nazz and I’ll let you know if something’s bothering me about Kevin.”

“Oh, dear, I’m sorry, Nazz, if we’ve ever given you the impression that we haven’t been dignifying your individuality!”

“Oh, no, no, you guys haven’t been, you guys are fine, it’s… I almost haven’t been treating myself as myself. My own person. I think I’m gonna have to use this to try to remember how to exist without Kevin.”

And she saw Eddy’s eyes light up when she said that, and she was afraid then that she had said too much. But when the fox opened his mouth to speak, it was nothing she would have expected.

“Well, uh, if you say so, Nazz,” Eddy said, “there’s a question you can help us with. Nothing to do with you, nothing to do with Kevin, just… something we’ve been discussing among ourselves and we can use another opinion on.”

...what? Double-D and Ed didn’t look like they knew why Eddy was saying this, either.

“Uh… sure, Eddy. What’s up?”

“So we been wondering -- debating … is it ever okay to break rules in the name of doing good?”

“Wh-what Eddy means is,” Double-D jumped in, “uh, for example, would it ever be justifiable to engage in duplicitous behavior if you knew with certainty that it would bring about positive change, and that any negative repercussions would only befall people who are guilty of even more
egregious sins, often with cruel intentions?"

Now, Nazz got pretty good grades in English class, but she still hadn’t memorized Webster’s. “Uh… ‘duplicitous’?”

“You know,” said Double-D. “Deceitful.”

“Fakey!” said Ed.

“Full a’ shit,” said Eddy. “Basically, is it okay to lie, cheat, and steal if it’s a good guy lying, cheating, and stealing from a bad guy? And for bonus points, let’s say playing by the rules isn’t working to get back at the bad guy.”

Nazz briefly wondered if they knew she was lying about Kevin’s apology and were trying to drop enormous hints that they were on to her, but she resolved that their methods were too aimless to be anything like that. She kind of wanted to ask for a more specific example, but she thought she kind of had a grasp on what he was saying.

“I-I mean… maybe?” said Nazz. “I-I mean, like… ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ are pretty subjective…”

And Double-D gave Eddy a look that said I told ya so and Eddy looked clearly annoyed.

“...but, honestly?” she continued. “If I agreed with the person who was lying and cheating and stealing, and I hated the person they were lying and cheating and stealing from, and I could see that the lying and cheating and stealing was working when playing by the rules wasn’t… then, yeah, sure, why not?”

And Eddy gave Double-D a look that said I told ya so and Double-D looked clearly annoyed.

“Well, there’s your answer, Double-D,” Eddy said with a smirk.

Edd turned back to Nazz: “B-b-u-but, would you say that you would feel, in some way, bad for lying, cheating and stealing, even if it were in the name of good? Especially if you weren’t sure that the lying, cheating and stealing was a sustainable long-term solution, and indeed may only embolden the antagonizers and just make the conflict worse?”

Nazz had to think about that one. “But we know that playing by the rules isn’t helping, either?”

“Well, maybe--”

"Yes ,” Eddy cut in.

“Well… would I feel bad?” she pondered. “I mean, I might not be too proud of it later, but if it was working just as well as playing it safe, well, I mean… I feel kinda shitty saying this but, sometimes lying, cheating, and stealing is… it’s just fun sometimes. Isn’t it?”

And Ed gave Eddy and Double-D a look that said I told ya so and Eddy and Double-D looked clearly annoyed.

“I mean, that’s why games like Monopoly exist in the first place, right?” Nazz was confused why the neighborhood con artists were philosophizing on the ethics of bending the rules for the greater good; she had thought to herself I shouldn’t have to tell you boys how fun it is to lie, cheat, and steal , but it seems like the three of them were too preoccupied with shooting each other self-congratulatory looks to pick up on her subtext.
“By the way, where’d you guys get all dirty?” she asked, pointing at their feet and ankles.

The boys looked down at the dirt on their persons, and Double-D let out a shocked gasp.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Why did you gentlemen not alert me that I was acquiring such filth on my legs and feet!?”

“Chill out, will ya?” said Eddy. “This is why we wore crappy clothes in the first place!”

“Did you guys just come out of the woods or something?” asked Nazz.

“Yeah!” said Ed. “We were playing with our new fr--”

“PLAYING!” Eddy interrupted. “Playing, uh, Treasure-Finders! You know that waterfall they say’s in the woods? We went looking for it.”

Nazz looked heartbroken.

“Are you alright, Nazz?” asked Edd.

“Uh… yeah, it’s just… me and Kevin were trying to find that waterfall when... it happened.”

“Oh, shit,” mumbled Eddy.

“Oh, Nazz, I’m so sorry--!” Double-D began, but Nazz put up a hand.

“No, no, you’re fine, you’re fine, it’s just… I can live with it,” she insisted. “We were stupid to be going there at night anyway. But… hey, did you guys find it? I’ve heard that there are some really wild homeless people who hang out around there.” (She didn’t feel the need to mention that Kevin may have encountered such characters right before he encountered the cops.)

“Uh, th-that’s the thing!” said Eddy. “We heard some angry voices -- didn’t see ‘em, but we heard ‘em -- and we just high-tailed it outta there. Ran in the wrong direction and wound up in the swampy part!”

“Yes, the wetlands, on the opposite side of Sherwood Forest Road!” said Double-D. “That’s where we acquired these blasted stains… though I surely didn’t realize the severity of them until you pointed it out just now.”

“Oh, uh, sorry about that, Double-D,” said Nazz, knowing the wolf’s germophobia well.

“Oh, no no, it’s quite alright. I’ll manage,” he insisted.

Nobody else had very much to say, and the sun was beginning to set, and considering how close they were to the summer solstice, that meant it must have been very late indeed.

“Well, it was good talking to you guys!” Nazz said, reflecting that they had not done anything underhanded to her.

“Ah, yes, likewise, Nazz!” said Double-D. “And please, if you need anyone to talk to, we can make ourselves available to lend an ear!”

“I appreciate it guys, and hey, if you guys ever have any… tough questions, hey, y’know, we can talk. As friends.” She felt the need to add those last two words.

“Uh, okay,” said Ed, nervous all over again, and Eddy didn’t look much better.
“We’ll see you soon, Nazz!” said Double-D. “Come, gentlemen; we can wash off at my house!” Double-D led the way off.

“Uh, bye, Nazz,” Eddy said as he reluctantly followed the wolf, not turning away from the bobcat.

Ed, meanwhile, just stared at Nazz for a second before extending his arms. “Bye-bye hug?” he asked with a face like a child asking for candy.

“Oh, sure, big guy.” Nazz couldn’t deny him. She reciprocated his embrace. It was like hugging a seven-foot teddy bear that was so well-loved that the child who owned it wouldn’t let their parents put it in the laundry for even an hour. She believed this creature meant well. She believed all these creatures meant well -- even Eddy, duplicitous as he might be (Nazz would never forget that word again). She simply believed that they didn’t know how to do the right thing, and much like Kevin, they were never going to get better unless someone loved them enough to show them the way. But unlike Kevin, they had a history of tangibly doing her wrong, so she knew many would say not to jeopardize herself by taking it upon herself to be that person for them. She hoped someone else out there in the big wide world would be able to give them guidance, because she didn’t know if she had the strength to do it herself.

Ed ran off to join Edd and Eddy, Eddy fuming at Ed for getting a hug from Nazz. She watched the three of them walk all the way down to Double-D’s house at the corner; they never looked back at her. When they disappeared into the Lupo house, her eyes couldn’t help but wander back to Karin Lafferty’s silver Oldsmobile Aurora sitting in Kevin’s driveway, shrouded in shadows from the setting sun.

Seriously, fuck you, Kevin, Nazz caught herself thinking. It wasn’t just that she felt betrayed that he may have been harboring deplorable thoughts, because he still might not have; it was that by even making that a possibility, it had instantaneously annihilated her trust in people. It wasn’t fair to the Eds that she had to consider that they were going to do something out of line to her when they had never given any past indication that they would, and it wasn’t fair to her that she felt the need to worry about the intentions of people she’d known for nearly her entire life. She almost wished she had followed after him when he ran off, just so she could have known who or what he was yelling at.

Should she go and knock on the Laffertys’ door? Nah, the timing would be terrible. Even if Karin was home, she probably wouldn’t be in any mood for a confrontation about her opinions on Nazz, and Nazz would rather save it for when Patrick was home too. She turned around and went into her house. She had still more thinking to do.

“She’s gone, Karin,” Patrick said, finally feeling safe to draw open the curtains in their upstairs bedroom window. He had been on the fence about going to work today for fear that the people at the factory would mock him for being the father of the dumbfuck who got his ass kicked by the cops; his mind was made up when he lost control of his emotions and kicked the door of his Axiom, leaving a pretty good dent in it. So he took it in to Butch’s Body Shop down in Cherry Stream, his wife following in her sedan to drive him back home, and told them to take as long as they needed to fix the dent; if anything else, it might make the neighbors think he wasn’t home.

Karin was laying on the bed, hugging a pillow and feeling sorry for herself; she likewise couldn’t bear to show her face at work that day. “Was that ditzy little bitch just standing on the lawn and staring at our house?” she asked.

“For a bit. But she was talking to those kids who keep harassing our son.” He sat down on the bed. “Course, now everybody’s gonna think they’re the good kids and our son’s the fuck-up.”
“Do you think it was her idea to go into the woods?”

“It better not’ve been,” Pat grumbled as he glared at his feet. “I raised him to be a leader, not a follower. This better’ve been his own goddamn fault.”

“Maybe we should have raised him to be a follower. Then maybe he’d’ve followed the goddamn rules.”

For a second, Patrick didn’t know what to say. Finally, he said, “I thought I’d done a good job with him.”

“I thought you’d done a good job with him, too,” said Karin. “I thought I’d done a good job with him! Where did we go wrong?”

And again, Pat struggled to think of what to say, but eventually he said this: “You know what? Fuck it. You’re right. We shouldn’t’ve taught him to be a leader. We made him too self-confident. You know… when I told him not to be afraid to beat the shit out of those retards who keep fucking with him and his friends, I told him that it was because he was the one who had to step up and protect the neighborhood from their stupidity… I guess he was just too stupid to get the hint.”

“And then he was the one being stupid, and he got the shit beat out of him,” Karin murmured.

“By the people protecting the neighborhood from his stupidity. We didn’t raise a leader or a follower, we raised a fucking idiot,” Patrick cursed at the arrangement of whiskeys and brandys on the dresser; he would fix himself a drink or two when he felt like getting up, but he didn’t feel like getting up just yet. Then he let out a hyenic chuckle of confused frustration. “Ha, ha! ...And we’re idiots -- I’m an idiot -- for not realizing that if I told him he was an authority figure in this neighborhood, he’d soon forget there were authority figures over him!”

At approximately the same moment, one town over to the south, an impala was making his final rounds as he was getting ready to leave his shift at the body shop. They had been closed for about an hour by then, and they were all just about ready to turn in for the night. The impala regarded an ultramarine Isuzu that he understood to be at the back of the line for service. He noticed that the rear license plate had a plastic frame that read, split between the top and bottom, “WE SUPPORT” / “OUR LOCAL POLICE”. The impala wondered for a fleeting second what the owner of this car thought of the recent incident where some cops came across a teenager in the woods at night and beat him half to death; because the impala only worked in the back and didn’t deal with customers himself, he did not know who dropped the Isuzu off, and therefore he did not make the connection.

*A. N.* Btw idk why this site formats it so that italicized letters add an extra space before and after but that ain’t me doing that. I’m tryna clean it up as much as possible when I ctrl+V it into AO3 but I am only human... writing about talking animals. OH and TIL that hyenas AREN’T canines. So let the record show that I know that but Nazz doesn’t know that. This is canon. -Doby
Chapter Summary

On his first full day as the Sheriff of Nottingham County, Ward Woodland and Deputy George Nutzinger get ready to get ready to get themselves ready to go and get ready to go seeking the outlaws of the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve.

17. “A Wolf in Sheriff’s Clothing”

And to be fair, their original plan made a lot more sense: lure hooligan-looking teens into buying a fake ID, actually produce one and sell it to them, find out where they’re using it, arrest the kids there to prove they were tough on crime, and extort the shit out of the store or bar that was selling to them under the threat of shutting them down for being too stupid to recognize a fabrication, thereby pocketing even more money. And their backup plan also made a lot of sense: find some shady character who actually knew how to make a fake ID, sell it to them for a large one-time profit, then come back the next day in-uniform and demand a bribe immediately as well as regularly-scheduled bribes in the future, ad infinitum, under the threat of arrest with a moderate-to-severe asskicking. But then they got promoted, and now Sheriff Woodland was suddenly worried about how he was going to cover for the fact that he lost his gun several days prior and never told anybody. Therefore, in his infinite wisdom, Ward decided that they weren’t going to take the time to learn how to make fake IDs nor seek out someone who’d be willing to buy their goods wholesale; they were going to get creative with the resources they had at their disposal. Then Ward could buy himself a new gun.

“We ain’t foolin’ nobody, Ward,” George said as he stood on the table, leaning on the box of supplies with its edge in his armpit and his right foot crossed over his left.

“What’re ya talkin’ about?”

“They don’t know us and they don’t have any reason to trust us. Unless they do know us, in which case, they really have a reason not to trust us.”

The two of them were standing about a block away from Gunning Bedford, Sr., High School in the 5500 block of South Houston Street in the Roxana Village neighborhood on the city’s extreme southeast side. This location was chosen for a few reasons: it was far away from Sherwood Forest and those pesky outlaws, and the neighborhood was moneyed enough that the kids could probably afford fake IDs but not rich enough to have an ear with Mayor Norman; for example, Roxana Village had the reputation of being the neighborhood of choice for city employees who had to live within the city limits, but not very high-ranking city employees, mid-level police officers and firefighters and the like. And while many would say that they ought to just take their business to the suburbs, they would still have to deal with every town’s municipal police asking what the fuck they were doing. So there they stood, in the middle of a residential area, with a folding table and box of laminates and plastic sheets and literally nothing else, hoping a teenager would come by and come buy.

“Nutsy, yer givin’ these kids too much credit! Teenagers are stupid! They won’t care who they’re gettin’ these from, they’ll just wanna get ‘em!”
“Man, you’re not giving them enough credit! Teenagers are stupid, but they’re not dumber than all fuck. If they wanted an ID, they’d find someone they know to get them a connection. It’s like buying drugs; you’d have to be really desperate and stupid to get it from a complete stranger.”

Indeed, they’d made their pitch to a few teenage-looking characters in the last hour or so, and they’d all given them odd looks and walked off without a word.

“But we look cool enough, don’t we, Georgie?” asked Ward, who gestured to the torn blue jeans and ratty old band t-shirt he was wearing. “Skynyrd’s still cool, right?”

“Maybe if you drove an hour outta town,” Nutzinger scoffed, “then they’d tell ya that you were only ten years behind the times.” He pondered for a moment whether Ward would be less insufferable if the two of them weren’t born two decades apart. George himself was just in his street clothes; not too formal, but not trying too hard to look hip either.

“I’ve heard enough of you city-slickers always joking that us country folk are twenty years out-of-date, and I’ll have you know that out in the sticks, we only enjoy things that’re still good after twenty years! We’re waitin’ on ya to weed out the bad shit.”

“Hey man, you asked a question and I gave you an answer.”

“Well, it was a shitty answer!”

“Jesus, Ward, if you think Redneckistan is such a goddamn cultural mecca, why don’tcha just move back there?”

“Oh, fuck that! Ain’t no jobs back home…” Ward muttered as his eyes caught a glimpse of movement in the distance. “Hey, who’s this now?”

Turning the corner down the street was a teenage-looking spotted jaguar. He seemed to be shooting dirty looks in every direction; was he up to no good? Or was he simply suspicious of the people who were suspicious of him, a young predator teenager walking through a quiet neighborhood? In any case, Ward’s eyes lit up.

“Do you think he’d be interested in what we’re selling?” Ward asked as he realized the panther had seen them.

“Well, he’s not crossing the street to avoid us like everyone else is.”

“Watch and learn, Nutsy!” the sheriff beckoned quietly as the panther grew nearer. “I’m gonna work my charm on him by talking to him in his language.”

“Oh, this oughta be good,” Nutzinger scoffed. He had no idea.

The two of them turned to the jaguar as he approached. As they were not yet within speaking distance, they exchanged respectful head-nods with pursed lips and disinterested eyes. After a moment, the kid was within speaking distance. He glanced at the table and the box from the sides of his eyes as he seemed to be content to breeze right on past them.

“’Sup,” he said without turning his head.

“’Sup,” Nutzinger replied.

And that’s when Sheriff Woodland said, “Wassup, my tigga?”
The jaguar stopped in his tracks, in sheer disbelief that he had just heard that, and Nutzinger nearly snapped his neck from how quickly he turned to give his superior a look that matched the jaguar’s. Ward was about to comment on the sudden awkward silence when George beat him to saying something.

“Jesus Christ, Ward! What the--!?”

“The fuck did you just say to me!?” the jaguar demanded, his look of shock quickly dissolving to one of anger.

“What? I just said ‘what’s up, my tigga,’” Ward replied, not knowing what was wrong.

“Jesus Christ, Ward!” Nutzinger repeated, any sense of eloquence failing him.

“Where the fuck did you get the idea that you could call me a tigga to my face and expect it to go over well!?"

“Don’t you guys always call each other that?”

“Why do you think The Sidney Company banned that movie around the world decades ago!?"

Nutzinger asked, searching for sanity. “Go into any Blockbuster in America and ask for Winnie the Pooh and they’re gonna think you’re fucking nuts! G-go to the Hollywood Video down the street, right now, go and ask for Winnie the Pooh and they’re gonna think you’re fucking nuts!”

“Of course they’re gonna think I’m nuts if I walk in by myself and ask for a kids’ cartoon movie.”

“That isn’t what I fucking meant!”

“They really banned it because of Tigger’s name?”
“Jesus Fu-- Yes! Yes, exactly! And because of the stereotype that bears were gluttons, and because of the stereotype that donkeys were creepy dangerous loners on the outskirts of society, but mostly because of the T-word. There was a lot of antiquated thinking in that movie! But let’s stop talking about an old Sidney movie for a second; haven’t you lived in the city for long enough to know that you don’t just go around tossing that word around wherever?”

“You don’t go tossing that word around nowhere ever!” the jaguar amended. “You know what, Squirrelly? Who are you and why are you hanging out with this guy?”

“He’s my boss. I’m only here for the money. I wouldn’t choose to hang out with this guy.”

“Well I suggest you get another line of work, if you know what’s good for you! What the hell kind of work are you two even doing?”

“You wanna fake ID?” asked Ward.

The jaguar made a quick series of confused and disoriented faces in quick succession, each more puzzled-looking than the last. “Fake IDs… you’re out here standing on the street calling people tiggas to sell fake IDs?” He leaned over to take a glance at whatever was in the box next to Nutsy.

“Yup! Want us to whip you up one?” the sheriff reiterated.

“You really think I’m gonna give you my money, man?”

“What, you won’t buy off us just because I called you a tigga?”

“What!”

“GODDAMMIT, WARD!” Nutzinger hopped onto Ward’s arm and started climbing.

“Nutsy… what’re you--?”

CHOMP.

“AARGH! NUTSY! LET GO! STOP! STOP BITING ON MY EAR! LET GO A’ MY EAR!”

The sheriff flailed and twisted, trying to shake the squirrel off, but Nutzinger stuck on Woodland like an infected earring. The jaguar kept glaring at the two of them as they went at it, not wanting either one of them to get out of this situation feeling good about themselves.

Eventually, Ward snagged a hold of George and yanked him off his ear with a pained “Gah!” He clutched the squirrel in his paw and confronted him. “What the hell was that for, Nutsy!”

“Why did you refuse to stop saying the goddamn word!? Do you want to get us killed!”

That’s when the jaguar stepped in, grabbing the back of Ward’s hand and turning Nutzinger toward himself. “Oh, what’s that? You think I’m gonna kill you because I’m some big scary tigger!”

“No, it’s because you’re a big angry tigger!”

“The fuck!”

“Nutsy, now you said it!”

“Whaddaya mean-- oh, god dammit!”
“You fucked up, Squirrelly!”

“Hey, man, between the two of you, you both put the word in my head!”

“Well it wouldn’t have come out so easily if you didn’t use it that often, now would it?”

“...What? No! I’m always hearing this fat asshole saying it! That’s why it came out so easily!”

“What? No I don’t! I don’t even think about jungle cats that often!”

“Oh, nice. Nice to know my people are that easy for you to ignore!”

“Besides, he’s always saying it, too!”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Ward, what the fuck are you saying!?”

“You got a problem with jungle cats, too, Squirrelly?”

“You realize he’s lying to cover his own ass, right? Why are you believing him two minutes after he dropped a T-bomb?”

“Because I don’t think he’s smart enough to come up with a lie like that!”

“Yeah, I’m a dumbass! Really it’s him lying to cover his own ass!”

“At least I would be smart enough to do it!”

“So you were lying, Squirrelly.”

“What? No!”

“You were lying about him lying. So you do love using that word when there ain’t any tiggas around!”

“I refuse to believe this is actually happening right now.”

“So did you want a fake ID to buy booze and cigarettes with, or no?”

The jaguar shot back up and looked like he was about to have a brain hemorrhage from the sheer stupidity he was witnessing. Then he went back to being pissed. “What the fuck is preventing me from kicking both y’all’s asses right here, right now?”

And for a moment, Ward and George didn’t know what to say to that. Then they saw a familiar type of vehicle approaching behind the jaguar.

WeeeeeeOOOOOOoooooo...

“Uh… that,” said Nutzinger meekly.

The squad car pulled up in front of them, and as luck would have it, a black panther stepped out. She immediately recognized two of them and looked tremendously bored.

“I got a call about two sketchy characters trying to sell stuff on public property without a permit,” she said, looking Ward specifically in the eye. “What the hell are you two doing?”
“You know these two racists?” asked the jaguars.

“Racists?” the officer asked with a wince.

“Yeah, these two both called me a tigger to my face!”

She turned back at her superiors with a look that was equally repulsed and confused. “Is this true?”

The looks on their faces answered that question well enough, but they knew that they were still expected to verbalize it.

“Uh…” Woodland began, “y-ya see--”

“Yes,” said Nutzinger flatly, believing that owning his actions would be less-bad than dancing around them. “First Ward used it to try to be cool, then they started arguing about it, then Ward wouldn’t *stop* saying it, and then everyone was saying it so much that I didn’t realize I said it once, too. By accident. Heat of the moment. That’s what happened.”

The officer looked further unamused. She then turned to the jaguar to see what he had to say.

The jaguar looked like he was slowly starting to simmer down. “I don’t believe that squirrel didn’t realize he was saying it, but everything else he said was right.”

She turned back to the undercover cops: “What *are* you dumbasses doing here?”

“Uh…

“Well…”

“So you know these guys?” asked the jaguar. “They been doing this before? You gonna do something about it?”

She thought carefully about how to handle this. “What’s your name, son?”

“Francisco,” he answered with an augmented Spanish pronunciation.

“Francisco?” asked Ward without even thinking. “You from South America? My bad, I thought you were from Africa-- GAH! Nutsy!”

As Ward tried to unclamp George’s mouth from the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, the officer stepped over to the teenager. “Officer Viviana del Bosque, Nottingham Police Depar-- excuse me, Nottingham County Police Department.” She gestured toward her badge, which bore the now-defunct municipal department logo; the new badges were to be ordered and distributed soon, with the costs of hiring a graphic designer, having the badges manufactured, having the badges shipped to Delaware from China, and paying extra cops to be on duty for a few hours while the county’s officers were temporarily badgeless during the transition period all to be paid for by a generous donation from the taxpayers of Nottingham County.

“Oh, really? ‘Del Bosque’? ¿Es usted también de Sudamérica, señora?”

“I dunno, kid, ask my parents. But hey, be straight with me: did they do anything in the way of physically assaulting you?”

“What? ...N-no, not physically, but they called me a tigga to my face. The fatass wolf said it like half a dozen times!”
“And I believe that. Especially from the dumbass who thinks jaguars are from the savannah. But I gotta ask, did they-- WARD! Will you stop fucking screaming!? I’m trying to have a conversation!”

“But he won’t let go!”

“George, let go!”

“Hrmhrmhrmhrmhrhmhr!”

“I don’t care, George!”

“You know them by name?” asked Francisco.

She knew she couldn’t just out them as the two highest law-enforcement officers in the county, lest she immediately compromise any remaining trust this kid had in the police, so she had to be vague about it. “Two guys I keep running into who keep doing stupid stuff but nothing I can arrest them for. Stuff that’s not technically illegal, even if a lot of people think it should be. And speaking of -- this is gonna sound like a stupid question, but I have to ask -- do you think they meant to hurt you or do you think they were just being stupid?”

“I think they were so busy being stupid they didn’t stop to think whether it might hurt me!”

“And I get that. But jaguar to jaguar, be real with me: do you think they were consciously trying to verbally assault you?”

“I don’t think it should matter.”

“And I get that, Francisco, but--”

“Are you going to arrest them or not!?”

“...Arrest them for what?”

“Sister, whose side are you on!?”

“Listen, Frank, I can arrest them, they can go to court, the court can find out that there’s no evidence of an actual crime, the case gets thrown out, everyone’s time and money is wasted, I look stupid, and nobody learns anything. You tell me, Frankie, do you want to spend hours and days of your life in a courtroom testifying against them when there’s a very, very small chance they’d be convicted of anything?”

“So you’re just gonna let ‘em get away with it!?”

“No, I’m gonna try to talk some sense into them. As much as I’d like to kick their asses too, they’re not gonna learn anything that way.”

Francisco winced and twisted his head in a way that made his disapproval clear.

“Look, kid,” continued the officer, “I had a call like this just a month or so ago. Some buffalo called a rabbit ‘cute’, rabbit flipped his shit, sunk his choppers into the buffalo’s leg. Had to arrest the bunny. Even though I totally got why he did it, you can’t just--”

“Man, what the fuck is wrong with the cops in this town!?”

“Hey, you just swore at a police officer! That’s verbal assault, too! If I really wanted to be egalitarian, I’d either have to arrest none of you or all three of you.”
“Man, even the jungle cats on the police force don’t care about their own kind!”

“Kid, I’m gonna recommend you move past this, not because they deserve your forgiveness, but because you’re gonna lose your fucking mind if you don’t.”

Francisco looked like he was going to burst with profanity again, but he realized Officer del Bosque wasn’t budging.

“This isn’t easy for me, Frank,” said the officer.

“...They're trying to sell fake IDs.”

Viviana found that curious. “Are they now?”

“Yeah.”

She puzzled again about what to do now. “...Get out of here, Frankie.”

“You’re not gonna do anything about them?”

“I’ll do all I can do. I can’t do anything more than that. Imagine how this makes me feel, Frank.”

“...It’s Francisco, lady.”

“And it’s Officer Fucking del Bosque to you, kid, not ‘lady’! Now get out of here so I can handle these idiots.”

Francisco turned back toward where he came from and stormed off grumbling loud enough for del Bosque to hear him loud and clear: “Man, cops in this town don’t care about their species, don’t care about their culture … ’see a tigger, pull the trigger,’ we all know that’s how y’all think!”

Viviana watched him walk off and turned back to the Sheriff and the Deputy, who apparently somewhere along the line stopped fighting, got bored, and started playing rock-paper-scissors while waiting for del Bosque to wrap it up.

“So,” she began, “you two seem pretty relaxed after causing a racial incident.”

“Hey, Ward kept shooting rock-paper-scissors at me by himself like, twelve times before I gave in,” said Nutzinger; Woodland did not protest this claim.

“Well the fact of the matter is I just made at least one more kid think the police’re full of racists and race-traitors, just so I could cover y’all’s asses.”

“And we appreciate you sticking up for us, Viv,” said Woodland.

“I wasn’t sticking up for you, I was trying to make it extremely clear that you two were being stupid assholes in a way that wasn’t technically illegal. Don’t ever put me in this position again or I’ll beat your asses myself.”

They didn’t have anything to say to that, so del Bosque continued.

“So, this is how you’re spending your first full day as the new Sheriff and Deputy? Selling fake IDs and calling random teenagers racial slurs?”

“Oh!” said the spooked wolf. “Uh, it’s a, it’s a whatchamacallit...”
“A sting operation,” said the squirrel flatly.

“... Really?” said del Bosque.

“Yeah, I don’t know why he sounded so nervous, because that’s actually what this is.”

“Hey, I forgot the word!” the wolf barked at the squirrel, then turned to the jaguar. “Yeah, so, we get kids to try to buy fake IDs, we make them pay up front, and then we arrest them! Pretty clever, huh?”

Viviana wanted to say that such a plan sounded ridiculous, but the more she thought about it, she thought that it sounded exactly like a plan that Ward Woodland would come up with: not inherently illogical, but highly unlikely to work. She was tempted to look inside the box on the table next to Nutzinger, but she didn’t care that much; she thought it must have just been the box they kept their money in -- if they had made any, which they probably didn’t. “Don’t you guys have bigger fish to fry?”

“Hey, we’re psyching ourselves up!” Ward protested. “We’re practicing our strategery for smaller criminals to help us brainstorm how to take on the big dogs!”

“Aaand all your years working as the Chief of Police for the city didn’t already prepare you for this?”

“I know! Isn’t it ridiculous? I’m just as disappointed as you are that we were never given formal training for dealing with dangerous bandits!”

Absolutely none of this was worth her time. “I’d mention how embarrassing it is that this city -- wait, fuck, no, this county now -- has a police department run by complete idiots, but I expect you to say something back about how I’m the idiot for not knowing how to finagle my way into outranking you.”

“I can tell you that for Ward, it was a whole lotta ass-kissing,” said George. “And I was a diversity hire who kept getting lucky with promotions because everyone hated everyone else in the city department more than they hated me. I have no qualms about this.”

“Viv, if you’re so well-put-together, why don’t you go out to Sherwood and find them?” asked Ward.

“Because I need to keep this neighborhood safe from lowlives whose get-rich-quick scheme is based on screwing over random teenagers and calling jungle cats tiggers,” she retorted as she walked back around to the driver’s door of her squad car.

“Hey, will you stop lumping me in with his stupidity?” Nutzinger protested. “You can say it’s guilt by association all you want, but that’s not how adults see the world!”

“Well, I’m an adult, and that’s how I see the world, so that’s that,” she said as she stepped into her car, started the engine, and rolled the passenger’s window down. “Newsflash, George: nobody broke your arm to be a cop. And if you really don’t care for the accepted definition of adult behavior and values, then you can go work at McDonald’s.” And as she rolled her window back up and put the car in drive, they heard her add, “Or maybe I’m the one who needs a new job.” And she drove off; they watched in silence as she turned the corner and was gone.

“So… can we go now?” asked George, but Ward had a question to settle.

“Nutsy, why did you keep biting me?”
“I don’t know, motherfucker, why did you keep saying the word!”?

“Nutsy, when your boss is talkin’ to ya, ya don’t answer a question with a question.”

“Hey man, telling you to stop wasn’t working, so I tried something else, but apparently that didn’t work either. So here’s a question for you: what did I have to do to get you to stop using that word?”

“Oh, Nutsy, Nutsy, Nutsy…” Ward cooed as he shook his head at the little squirrel. “When are you going to realize that I’m above you and I ain’t never gonna do what you tell me to do?”

“Well you’d better start, because I’m right!”

“Georgie, if you were really right, then I da already agreed with ya.”

And Nutzinger just turned his head and glared into empty space for a second, thinking about how if he did quit the force and apply at a fast-food joint, they’d likely tell him he was overqualified.

--III--

After getting changed back into their uniforms, their next destination was even farther in the wrong direction from Sherwood Forest. Bayard was a small suburb bordering the extreme eastern edge of Nottingham’s Roxana Village neighborhood. The sleepy burgh was further bounded by a swampy inlet of the sea that buffered them from the excitement of Bethany Beach and Fenwick Island, and its suburban neighbors of Bunting to the south and Clarksville, Millsville, and Ocean View to the north provided enough hustle and bustle to suit their needs. Some joked that Roxana Village was just West Bayard, seeing as most people who lived in Roxana Village would have much preferred to live in the suburbs if given the option, but at least Roxana was on the terminus of the Transit Authority of Nottingham Green Line subway. Bayard just looked like a small town that incidentally bumped up against the biggest city on the Delmarva peninsula. Bayard was fundamentally a small town which got encroached by suburban sprawl, and it showed to everyone who passed through it.

When Ward Woodland was himself a young officer living in a shoddy row house in Roxana Village, his favorite place to get blitzed was a place called Lucky’s on Janus Street in Bayard. When he got promoted and was rewarded with nicer digs closer to the mayor’s coop, he didn’t find himself back in that part of town anymore, so he hadn’t been back to Lucky’s in years.

“Did you want to set up the sting in Roxana so badly just so you could go to this place afterwards?” Nutzinger asked as he pulled the squad car into the parking lot, having just heard the Sheriff’s recollection of why he was fond of this place.

“Ya see, Nutsy? I’m not as dumb as you think I am!”

“Yeah, well a broken clock is wise twice a day.” the squirrel muttered as he reluctantly clambered onto the wolf’s shoulder as they stepped out of the car.

Ward swung open the door and made a sweeping duck as he passed through the doorway -- he was a tall son of a gun, but he still would have cleared the door frame easily, maybe his ears would have brushed the top, but he wasn’t wearing his hat or anything, so he was very much doing it so he could make a production out of standing upright as he entered, rising like a phoenix, drawing attention not only to his size but to the fact that he was back to his favorite haunt.

“It’s just like I remember it.”

“Oh, just give me a copy of your fucking memoir, will you?” said George.
The place was fairly busy for a Monday afternoon. It wasn’t packed by any stretch, but it was still populated enough for someone with selective hearing to have trouble participating in a conversation. There were some retirees, some unemployed locals, some employed locals who just didn’t feel like going to work that day, some tourists from the beaches who had been recommended this place by the hospitality workers at their hotels for its homier feel (and its cheaper alcohol), and even a smattering of schoolteachers who were starting to enjoy their own summer break.

One such schoolteacher actually wasn’t a patron. A high school physics teacher by trade, Dick Leland was one of those older guys who got bored easily and needed to keep busy for the sake of his own sanity. Therefore when Gumboro High School let out for two months, he took a gig tending the bar during day shifts at Lucky’s in Bayard just to get himself out of the house (not to mention, his paltry teacher’s salary could use the boost, too). He considered himself pretty good at building rapport with the patrons -- cynically telling himself that he had plenty of practice since most of his colleagues at Gumboro High were also alcoholics -- and had been doing it for well over a dozen summers by this point, although there were some regulars he would rather never see again. And since the antelope hadn’t seen the wolf in almost a decade by this point, he was starting to feel comfortable thinking he’d never see him again. Imagine his shock when, on his first day back at Lucky’s that summer, he glanced toward the entrance to see the big fat hick stretching toward the ceiling, wearing the county sheriff’s regalia.


“Hey, there, Big Dick!” Ward answered as he waltzed over to the bar. “How’s it crackin’?”

That nickname was one of the reasons why Dick didn’t care for Ward Woodland -- okay, granted, ‘Big Dick’ was a better nickname than ‘Little Dick’, but Ward should have had the social wherewithal to know that he wasn’t welcome to slap risqué nicknames on people he barely knew (and for Dick’s part, he was too far into life to rebrand himself as Rick, Rich, Ritchie, or Richard). Dick also didn’t like how he would always choose him to complain to when he had a rough day on the force, blubbing like a baby, all the while talking loudly and profanely and not caring who heard. Dick was also personally disgusted by the vast quantities of bar food he consumed, his food bill easily rivalling his drink expenses, leading Dick to wonder if the wolf’s massive gut contained a gigantic mass of sodium from all the peanuts and pretzels and mini microwave pizzas he ate. Dick also wondered how often the guy bathed and would have bet his bottom dollar that Ward didn’t wash his paws after taking a leak. But Ward was not only a paying customer, he was a punctually paying customer. He never kept a running tab; he always paid the day of, and he actually tipped fairly decently. Dick and his fellow bartenders had actually brought Ward up to the boss, Lucky himself, and while they all said they didn’t care for the guy, the head horse in charge reminded them that the wolf had done nothing worthy of being banned, and in some ways he was actually better-behaved than many other regulars. The staff all privately theorized that Ward was just a courteous patron because he didn’t want to jeopardize his rapport with his favorite bar, but regardless of his motivations, he was good to them nonetheless. Within the context of Lucky’s bar, Ward Woodland had never been a particularly offensive personality, he was just someone whose presence made everybody vaguely uncomfortable.

“Oh, uh… nothing much, Ward. Still teaching high school. What’ve you been up to?”

“Oh, well, my little buddy here and I just got promoted to the sheriff and deputy of the county!” Ward answered with a self-aggrandizing gesture.

“Hi,” Nutzinger murmured as he waved meekly, hoping to convey to the antelope that he wasn’t trying to be rude and sarcastic to someone he just met, but he also really didn’t want to be there right then.
“Y— you !?” said Dick. “I-I-I heard that they merged the departments, but… I didn’t hear it was you !”

“Yep!” said the sheriff as he slid onto a barstool that creaked under his weight. “And to celebrate, let me get an MGD!”

“Celebrate?” asked Dick. “Just the two of you?”

Ward gave him a sideways look, one that said you’re my friend and I really don’t want to be angry with you, but I really don’t know why you thought it was a good idea to say that out loud.

“Uh-um… sure, draft or bottle?”

“The D in MGD stands for ‘Draft,’ don’t it?.”

“Can I just get a Coke or something?” asked George. “I gotta drive.”

“S-sure, coming right up,” the antelope said as he slinked away to the spigot.

“So let me get this straight, ol’ Wardy ol’ pal,” Nutzinger mused as he hopped off Woodland’s shoulder and onto the counter. “You’re going around bragging to people you haven’t seen in years that you got a promotion instead of going and doing the thing you were promoted to do?”

“Nutsy, don’t act like you’re not afraid to go into those woods.”

“I’m not. The fuck they gonna do? Kill me? These guys fuck shit up, but they don’t kill anybody. And even if they did, it’d be better than being stuck with you.”

“You’re just acting brave because you know you’re too small of a target for them to hit! Ain’t that right, little guy?”

“Keep calling me ‘little guy,’ Ward, it’s not gonna make me curl up and start crying. My people are used to being small and we’re not as retardedly size-obsessed as you big motherfuckers.” George snuck a glance down the bar at the antelope, who clearly was trying to pretend he wasn’t hearing their conversation. “You know, Ward, I used to think you were just stupid, but now I’m starting to think you’re a coward. Which is worse than being stupid in many world cultures.”

The sheriff crossed his arms on the counter and leaned forward like he was about to bestow upon him some invaluable wisdom. “You know what, Nutsy? You’re right, and you ain’t wrong, I am a coward. And I’m here to get some liquid courage to work up my nerve to go and take on those outlaws! And I will freely admit this to you, Georgie-Porgie, because I’m not ashamed to say that I’m trying to make myself better.” Then he leaned back out of his wisdom-bestowing position and said something in a much deeper and projecting voice than his usual shrill timbre: “I, the Sheriff of Nottingham, am not so much of a coward to be afraid to admit that I’m a coward, and that I’m doing what I can to be less of a coward, because I’m not ashamed to say that I’m getting better, which a coward would be too afraid to do!”

Everybody in the bar heard that. Some whispered among themselves, wondering if they had just heard that correctly. Others had other plans.

Ward leaned back into his paternal chit-chat position and reverted to his regular voice. “Therefore, Nutsy, I ain’t a coward because I can admit when I’m being a coward, and a coward couldn’t do that. Whaddaya think a’ that, Georgie?”

The deputy glanced back over at the bartender who was bringing their drinks over. He couldn’t
wait for that soda, because he needed the caffeine to assuage his budding headache.

“Uh… here you go, boys,” Dick said as he delivered the drinks, still flabbergasted by this blast from the past. “You need anything to eat, Ward?”

“Get me some pretzels, Dick.”

“Need cheese or mustard?”

“C’mon, Big Dick, is this even a question?”

“Both. Right. Got it.” He glanced down at the squirrel standing on the table, who was already taking a long swig of an appropriately-sized glass of cola. “What about you, man? Actually, do you need a chair or something? I can probably get you one.”

“Naw, they won’t be staying long.”

George spit out his soda on Dick’s shirt when he heard that voice. He and Ward turned to see two figures standing behind them. One was a slight, svelte bobcat who was known to make up in sheer nerve what he lacked in muscle. Looking further up, one could see the face of an elk who was the source of the voice that lead to the antelope’s shirt being soiled.

“Oh, uh-- T-Tommy, Matty, h-heya, how’s it going, guys?” Nutzinger stammered.

“H-heya, there, Elky, Goldy, um… funny seeing you here!” Woodland similarly stammered.

“Ain’t very funny to us,” said Goldthwaite.

“We’re unemployed and unemployable, jackass,” growled Elkins. “What do you think we’re doing with our time, knitting sweaters?”

“Uh… maybe?” was all Ward could come up with.

“Wait. Matt, Tom. There some issue between you guys?” the bartender cut in.

“Don’t worry, Dick, they’re not sticking around much longer,” said Tom.

“But we just got here,” said Ward. “We ain’t leavin’ yet just ‘cause you’re here!”

“Well it would be awful fuckin’ rude of you to force us to make an even bigger scene when Dick and Lucky and all the people who work hard to maintain this nice business,” Tom said, realizing as he said it that in his flustered state he had completely botched that sentence, but maintained his poker face all the same, certain that he had gotten his point across anyway.

“When they do what?” asked Ward, not getting Elkins’s point.

“Goddammit, Ward, we’re gonna fuck you up if you don’t get the hell out of here!” Matt snapped.

“Gentlemen!” said Dick sternly. “I don’t know what the hell these guys did to you, but you can’t threaten them inside my bar and expect me to just roll with it!”

“You really don’t know what they did?” asked Elkins.

“We’re the old sheriff and deputy, they’re the new sheriff and deputy,” said Goldthwaite. “They screwed us over, you dumb motherfucker, use context clues!”
“Hey! Don’t you fuckin’ speak to me that way!” shot the antelope.

“The fuck are you gonna do, spit in our drinks!?”

“You want us to be nice?” said Tom. “Then get these assholes out of here--!”

“Hey! Matty! Tommy! Tommy Tommy Tommy! Chill!” said George as the deposed sheriff and deputy spoke, finally getting his voice heard after a moment. “Aggression isn’t gonna solve anything! You can kick Ward’s ass but--”

“We’re gonna kick your ass, too, you fucking midget!”

“Goddammit, Tommy, will you stop lumping me in with his dipshittery!?”

“Then stop following his fuckin’ lead, dipshit!” said Matt.

“If you kick our asses, you’ll just be proving them right for firing you! Good sheriffs don’t go starting bar fights!”

“Well, your sheriff instigated this the second he walked in here, knowing goddamn well that this was our spot!”

“Actually,” Ward squeaked, “I completely forgot that--”

“Because you’re a fucking dumbass!” hollered the elk.

“Tommy, if you assault us unprovoked, we’re gonna arrest ya, and then your lives’ll really be over,” said George. “It’s that simple.”

“GOOD!” Elkins growled; it sounded like he did permanent damage to his vocal cords when he did, and at this point, everybody in the bar had their eyes on the unfolding altercation. “Matt and I aren’t ever gonna be able to get a job ever again anyway! Go and lock us up! Three squares and free rent sounds hunky fuckin’ dory to us!”

“Gentlemen!” Dick repeated. “I will repudiate your bar tab if you guys just get the heck out of here and don’t come back until I don’t work here anymore.”

“We’re pretty comfy here, thank you,” sneered the bobcat. “We’d be more comfortable if these two guys left and quit bothering us, though.”

“Or if they want us to leave so bad, they can just arrest us for threatening a police officer,” the elk mocked. He leaned in toward the wolf’s face. “But they’re not gonna do that, are they? Because they’re cowards. And they know they are. They even said so, and they think they’re brave because they say so, but deep down they know they’re not. Isn’t that right, you fatass fucking hick?”

“Get out of my face, Elky!”

“I’m not IN YOUR FACE, RETARD!” Elkins reared back his head and looked like he was about to headbutt Ward square in the snout, but just as Ward flinched and yelped, Elkins stopped in the air. “Pfft. Pussy.” He shoved Ward hard by the shoulders into the counter of the bar, then did it a few more times as he said. “Go on. Fight me. Do it. Shit, you really are a coward, aren’t you?”

“Boys!” Dick barked. “You have one more chance to get out of here before I--”

Thwack.
“G wahhh!”

Thump.

“Aaarrgh!”

Goldthwaite used the same arm he used to smack Nutzinger off the counter to make a half-shrugging gesture. “Before you what?”

“Alright!” the antelope said as he reached under the counter, not breaking eye contact with the disgraced lawmen, and produced an aluminum baseball bat from under the counter. “No more Mister Nice Dick! You’ve been war--”

And in perfect synchronicity, Tom and Matt both produced handguns from the backs of their pants and pointed them at Dick’s face.

“GAH!” Dick yelped as he threw his hands up, dropping the bat in the process.

“For the record, Dick, we didn’t plan to do this, but the opportunity presented itself,” said Elkins. “Jail is the only thing we’ve got to look forward to!”

“LUCKY, GET OUT HERE!” Dick screamed at the air in front of his face.

“W-wait,” said Goldthwaite as he and Elkins looked toward the door to the back area. “Lucky’s here--?”

“AAARGH!” Ward howled as he leaped out of his seat with his arms spread and clotheslined the elk and the bobcat, tackling them both to the ground. The sound of metal clanging made it clear to everybody that at least one of them dropped their gun.

Elsewhere, a door burst open. “What the fuck is going on here, Richard?”

“LUCKY, GET YOUR SHOTGUN!”

Ward propped himself up to see that Elkins still had a grasp of his gun. He went in to wrestle it away from him, but had to relinquish control of Goldthwaite to do so.

Seeing his opportunity, Matt scrambled, half-crawling half-running toward where his pistol lay, but right before he could grab it, he was immobilized. “GheeAAARRRGH! He bit me! The little shit bit me!” He writhed in pain on the floor, just inches from his weapon, trying desperately to shake the squirrel off his ankle, fearing how numb his foot suddenly felt.

The struggle for Elkins’s gun continued, the two wrestling on the ground, neither keeping their arms in the same spot for more than a fraction of a second.

“Get off me, Fatass!”

“I’m not ON you, Skinnyass!”

Elkins moved the gun down by his stomach in an air pocket between his body and Ward’s gut. In a moment of clarity, Ward realized what Tom was trying to do, and he rolled off of the elk’s body as quickly as he could.

PPPPPbbbbb!

“AAAAAAAHHH!” the patrons screamed at the sound of the gunshot. The bullet lodged itself into
the backboard seat cushion of a booth.

“Everyone hit the dirt!” Dick pleaded, having picked up the baseball bat but not knowing what to do with it.

Ward tried a new strategy for incapacitating Elkins. He leaped back on top of him, sideways this time, smothering the elk’s face with his stomach. He tried to also crush Tom’s arm under his weight, but Tom held it out too far, and Ward found the gun sticking straight up from Elkins’s hand in the space between Ward’s own head and his left arm. Panicked and suffocating, Tom let off three shots at whatever they would hit.

**PPPPPbbbb!** A pitcher exploded.

**PPPPPbbbb!** A window shattered.

**PPPPPbbbb!** A ceiling fan’s mechanism jammed before the whole thing shook loose and fell from the ceiling, landing right on Ward’s head.

Sensing a sudden lack of resistance, Elkins had a brief moment of composure to gather his strength and toss the obese wolf off of himself. He hurried to try to get back on his feet before someone tried to take him down again.

**Thwack!**

“**GAH--!**”

**Thump!**

**BrrrrINGGG!** the aluminum bat rang as it landed on the ground right next to the elk who had just been speared in the head by it.

“Somebody call the police!” begged a patron.

“Those guys are the police!” another answered.

“Then call the other police!”

Matt squirmed enough to shimmy back toward his gun, and he raised his foot to the sky to get a better look at the squirrel hanging onto him by his teeth. George saw the bobcat point the gun at him and dropped immediately before Matt let off a shot.

**PPPPPbbbbbb!**

“Gwah!” Dick hollered as he dropped himself to the floor to avoid the bullet. He got out of its way in time, but the inanimate objects on the shelf behind him weren’t so swift. A glass bottle of Jack Daniels exploded with enough force to take out the neighboring bottles of rum with it, and the shower of glass rained down upon the antelope. “GUHuhUHuhWAAAAHHH!” screamed the bartender as the shards pierced his layer of fur and embedded themselves into his flesh, the insidious force of broken glass finally finding a victim who wasn’t a vulpine Englishman.

Lucky returned from the door to the office with his trusty shotgun. “Who’s got the gun!?” he demanded.

Despite having lost all sensation in his right leg and feeling troublingly lightheaded, the bobcat managed to stand up shakily and aim his gun in the horse’s direction. “SEND ME TO HELL!”
Lucky was in no mood for theatrics, so he wasted no time shooting at the space above Matt’s head, with no intention of actually hitting him. But as luck would have it, he didn’t even need to.

*Squeak.*

*Snap!*

“*Aaaaahhhhhh!***” Matt screamed as he collapsed in the pool of blood that caused him to slip and bend his leg in the worst possible way. “*My ankle!***

“Oh, my aching head…” Ward muttered as he slowly got to his feet.

“Guys, I think Matt needs an ambulance, he’s bleeding from his ankle really bad,” said George.

“Yeah, because you bit him there!” hollered a muskrat hiding under a table.

“Man, he was gonna kill us if he didn’t!” argued an ox hiding under a larger table.

“Oh, like these two are so much better!? Do you even know anything about Woodland and Nutzinger? Do you even read the newspaper!?***

“Are you calling me stupid, stupid!?”

And as the argument began among the customers, Matt was writhing in tearful pain and Tom was out like a light, and Ward saw his opportunity to get the hell out of there.

“Do we have any medics around-- HEY!” Nutzinger protested as Woodland grabbed him and carried him off out of the bar.

“Hey, wait!” Lucky, still holding his shotgun, ran after them, jumping around the pool of Goldthwaite’s blood and Elkins’s unconscious mass. He ran out the door just as he saw Ward and George get back into their squad car. “Where you going? We need you to sort this all out!”

“We ain’t cleaning up this mess!” said Ward. “Call the police!”

“Wha--? You *are* the police!”

“Then call the other police!” Ward screamed as he slammed his door shut. George threw it in reverse and backed out of the parking spot, and as he switched it into drive, Ward rolled down the window to say one last thing as they took off back downtown: “And I didn’t get to drink my beer, so I’m not paying for it!”

--III--

“Yes, yes… the house will be on the street that straddles the state line, that should greatly narrow it down. And if his mother answers the door, apprehend her, too! She spoke curtly to me!”

The mayor was working from home today, bedridden with the ankle he sprained the day prior when he slipped in Charles’ vomit. As for Charles, he had already received his admonishment for dialing the wrong number, which he did because his mind had been elsewhere. Since he couldn’t perform his regular clerical duties outside of the office, and was instead tasked this day with waiting on Prince John hand and foot, the mayor gave him an opportunity to make a quick run to the library so he had something to occupy himself with during his downtime. When Hess misdialed the number, he had just gotten back and was itching to crack open the book to start learning about the peer-reviewed psychological facts about experiments with hypnosis. He was also a tad bit
frustrated when he made the call, thinking of an unfriendly interaction he had had at the library: he had gone up to the help desk and asked the shrew at the counter whether there were any staff that could help him collect the book he needed, to which the shrew looked up from whatever she was reading, stared him right in the eye, and asked if he’d even attempted to try to collect the book himself. After a five-second glaring contest between the two of them, her brain registered that there was an incongruity with this weasel visible in her periphery, at which point she glanced down and only then recognized his handicap. To this, she apologized profusely and bashfully summoned a buffalo security guard to grab the book for him and put it in his over-the-shoulder backpack. Yet a little bit of him was glad that incident had happened; it had been the first time in years when his disability wasn’t the very first thing someone noticed about him. At present, Hess was sitting on the ground, engrossed in his book, turning the pages with his feet, trying not to get distracted by the mayor’s phone call.

“Again, I believe he’s an arctic fox… His name? Now, I’m not too certain, but I believe his name may be-- Oh, please do excuse me, I’m getting another call.” John reached over the edge of the bed to the phone’s console on the ground (for Hess’s ease of access) and fiddled with the buttons to get the other caller on the line. “Mayor Norman speaking… What!? No, I don’t know where they are! I am their superior, not their zookeeper! Whatever business they needed to which they needed to attend, I trust it was of the utmost--!”

DING-dong!

“Charles, please get the door.”

“Yes, sss ire!”

“Do pardon me, but it seems as though I have some houseguests… Yes, houseguests, I’m injured, remember!?… So what if I haven’t told you, you should have found out anyway! You should always be seeking to know the current health and welfare of your mayor!... Why, I ought to--!”

The door opened and Hess led the sheriff and deputy into the mayor’s bedroom.

“Hiya, mayor!” said Sheriff Woodland. Nutzinger just waved disinterestedly.

“Woodland! Nutzinger!” the lion growled as he hung up the phone. “Why am I getting a phone call that you two were consuming alcohol while on duty, were involved in a bar fight, and then proceeded to abandon the area?”

“Because you called us over here!” the wolf said confidently.

“I… I did?” He did not.

“You sure did!” Surely he didn’t.

“...Did I?” He hadn’t.

“Yes, you did, Mr. Mayor!” He had done nothing of the sort.

“I… I don’t recall summoning you to my quarters…” He didn’t remember doing it because he didn’t do it.

“Whaddaya mean? You wanted to call us over to give us an update on how you’re feeling about catching the bandits!” Ward smiled brightly, pleased with the brilliance of his fib. “Why, Mayor, you call us to meet with you so often -- most every day -- you must be startin’ to forget when you do it! It’s like tyin’ yer shoes: you don’t remember doin’ it, but you musta done it!”
Nutzinger was absolutely dumbfounded by how that plan of Ward’s was succeeding.

“Hm…” the mayor thought to himself for a second. “I do suppose that makes sense. I do indeed have something I would have liked to have bounced off of you, as it were, though I was under the impression you were currently preoccupied with plotting against the bandits at this very moment. That’s why I called for other, lower officers to handle a menace I just had to deal with instead of consulting you about it.”

“What menace?” asked Nutzinger.

“Oh, disregard, the other officers are already taking care of it. No menace who is attached to these outlaws, at least I don’t think, suffice it to say.”

*Yeah, suffice it to say you don’t think, alright*, George thought to himself, suppressing a self-amused laugh.

“But more to the point, gentlemen,” said the mayor, “I have a question that I feel I should present to you. Now, I ask of you, don’t read too deeply into this. This is merely a thought exercise. A hypothetical. Feeling out our options before we--”

“Yo, Mayor?” said Nutzinger. “Ward’s too afraid to admit it, but the suspense is killing him. Can we just get to the point? For his sake?”

“Nutsy,” said Ward, “do you want me to smack you off my shoulder harder than that bitch bobcat smacked you off the bar counter--?”

“How would it do you any help to know the suspect’s names?”

George and Ward turned away from the other and glanced at the mayor. Charles also looked up from his book, unaware that the mayor was already trying to commit to this strategy.

“Uh… what was that?” asked Nutzinger.

“Their names. Would it help you if you had names to attach to the mysterious entities living in the woods?”

“Well… yeah, sure!” said the sheriff. “Then we could find their criminal records, where they live, who they’re--”

“They live in Sherwood Forest, Eddward,” John stated sternly. “I remind you they’re off the grid. They have no home address we can simply go to and apprehend them at… well, they do, but it’s a dark and mysterious forest that they know every square meter of, a place we cannot just go crashing into with the expectation of victory.”

“…Oh. Yeah, I-I guess that’s right.”

“Which is what makes this such a tough, almost philosophical question: would it help you to know their names? If they’ve no home addresses, no criminal records, no stable lives we can intercept… would it simply be frivolous information that would clutter your head? Or! Yet! Would it actually detract from the goal? Would it mortalize our enemies, make us start to ponder that they are after all real people, creatures with names and stories which we’re trying to destroy? And what of all those peasants who support their illicit deeds? Would it have the same effect on them? Would their love of their antiheroes deepen if they had names to attach to them, if they could know that these were real people and not just legendary beings?”
“Well, uh, for that last part, Mayor,” Nutzinger squeaked, “I’m preeetty sure most of the people they give money and shit to already know them on a first-name basis.”

Prince John cocked his head at that; it wasn’t completely surprising, but he didn’t know that they knew. “Is that so?”

“I mean, I’d imagine. I mean, there’s some names that I’ve heard floated around by other cops and civilians alike, but I can’t, like, prove them or anything.”

And Prince John was afraid to ask, but he was even more afraid of not knowing. “And, er… what names have you heard?”

“Robinhood’n’littlejohn,” Nutzinger said without even thinking about it.

“...A-a-a-and where, pray tell, have you heard these names being said?”

“Man, I dunno, around? Like I said, sometimes I overhear it from civilians, sometimes I overhear it from other cops talking about why they stay the hell away from Sherwood.”

“Wait, why haven’t I ever heard those names?” Ward mused aloud.

*Because you’re a fucking asshole, Ward, and nobody wants to talk to you.* “Because you’re the boss, so nobody’s gonna spit out a bunch of conjecture when you’re trying to tell people what’s what.”

“Hm. Makes sense. So yer tellin’ me that the names of these assholes are Robin Hood and Little John? So which one’s the Little one, the fox?”

“I actually think Little John’s supposed to be the bear because, you know, everybody loves irony.”

“And the fox’s name is literally Robin? As in robbin’? Ain’t Robin a girls’ name?”

“That’s why I’m kinda thinking it’s just a joke name like ‘Little John’ -- Robin Hood, robbin’ the neighborhood --”

“STOP!” Mayor Norman cried. “Stop saying those names!”

Ward and George glanced at him like they had just witnessed him have a premonition of his own death.

“...I-I-I mean… don’t, er… don’t get too attached to those names, boys. Er, erm, not, not attached, that’s not the right word, erm… but we have no proof that these are the correct names, ergo, we mustn’t get it in our heads that they are! Erm… though I must ask, George, how long ago did you hear those names?”

“Oh, I’ve been hearing those names on and off since basically Day One. But those are just the most common ones I hear; I’ve heard a few of them. I’ve heard that one’s called Will or Willie or Billy Scarlett -- maybe that one’s the fox, ‘cause y’know, scarlet, red, maybe there’s a second fox, I don’t know, maybe there was a second fox but he drowned in the creek or something, I don’t know, and Billy’s a pretty generic name, just like John, so again, this could just be a nickname… and apparently one of them goes by ‘the Rooster,’ but God knows which the fuck one of them that belongs to. Uh, there’s also--”

“Th-that—that’s quite enough, George, thank you, thank you for elucidating me. But, er, I-I must ask, though… why haven’t you told me or the department these names if you knew them this
whole time?"

"Because like you said, Princey, these nicknames are all hearsay. You don’t want to muddy the waters with information that might not even be accurate."

The mayor breathed some breaths to come back down to Earth. "Hm. You’re right. Quite right."

Just as all of this was happening, Hiss was starting to get a wee bit bored of watching his boss have a panic attack as people regurgitated information that he already knew. Unable to look at the awkward sight, he turned to look out the window instead, and who should he see across the street but a tall, slender fox dressed up as a blind pauper and a plump, towering bear dressed like he had just gotten home from ‘Nam?

I mean, it had to be them, right? For one thing, the fox’s abundant tail was sticking out from under the shawl, and just as always described, it was even bushier than most foxes’ and brilliantly vermilion without a trace of black or white highlights. So that already raised a red flag (quite literally a red one). But to seal the deal, Hess assessed the creatures’ sizes relative to one another and their surroundings. The fox and bear seemed to be the correct proportions to match the descriptions -- the fox was more than half the bear’s height, so either this was an extremely tall fox or an extremely short grizzly. Then there was the matter of the youths who just happened to be walking down the sidewalk about twenty-or-so feet behind them. Judging by their dress, they were very suburban-looking adolescents who likely didn’t even know the legends of the evil whose footsteps they were treading in. Hess could see that among them was another red fox -- definitely a red one, not one of the smaller species -- who nevertheless looked extremely stunted. If the fox dressed as a blind man was even close to normal-sized, it would mean that the younger fox would have been even tinier, bordering on medically-unable-to-live short. Furthermore, if the adult fox was normal-sized, that would mean that the wolf in the stupid beanie was also undersized, and possibly even the young bear (who Hess noticed looked more like the adult bear than the young orange fox looked like the adult red fox, but Hess knew that all brown bears basically looked the same to him, so he dismissed the fleeting notion that the two parties on the sidewalk were in any way connected), and it would mean that the street lights were oddly low, and it would mean that that fire hydrant was miniscule… sod it, it was the outlaws. Out in the open, brazen as ever, walking right past the mayor’s place of residence in paper-thin disguises in broad daylight. It had to be them.

But it was the strangest feeling. Charles wasn’t alarmed to see them because he was afraid they were coming to break into the house -- nonono, they were clearly in disguise to go collect some loot and their eyes were focused on the path ahead, not the mansion, they clearly weren’t coming to pay a visit right now; Charles was alarmed because he was overcome with a deep and unshakable sense of shame.

He could have been ready by now. He should have been ready by now. There they were, waltzing right on by, probably unaware that Mayor Norman wasn’t at City Hall today, seemingly not even armed, and Charles could pipe up and alert the sheriff and deputy and have them arrested faster than it would take to microwave a frozen dinner; his seeing to their demise was part of his endgame, but these daft bastards wanted to put him in the catbird seat now? Did they know his plan? If he didn’t know better, he’d think that they were doing this to mess with him specifically. And it would have worked: if Hess had just gotten his arse in gear instead of kissing his boss’s one too many times, he could have been ready for this moment. But he didn’t, so he wasn’t.

As the idiots argued behind him, not noticing him stare out the window, certainly not seeing the figures walking on the other side of the street, Charles took deep breaths and tried to reassure himself that this would not be his only opportunity. There would be more, surely there would be,
and one day he would be ready. He glanced down at the book he had picked up from the library today. He was taking steps forward. He was getting better. He was doing what he needed to do to set himself up for success. He couldn’t ask any more of himself. Slow progress was still progress, and spending his energy lamenting his lack of preparedness wouldn’t accomplish anything now.

And the thought did cross his mind that Prince John and/or the Department might have a moment of genius and do something to capture the criminals before he was ready for it, or that the criminals may make a rare mistake that leads to their own destruction before he was ready for it, ergo, his slow progress might not be fast enough. But Hess had faith in the incompetence of the powers-that-be, the competence of the Sherwood Forest bandits, and the everlasting power of the status quo. If the tide seemed to be turning against the Merry Men, well, he could probably do something to right the ship; if anything, that might give him the practice he needed to exert the power he strove to have. Charles lamented the weird reliance he had upon these outlaws, but the more he thought about it, this moment proved it was actually a sort of interdependence; they needed him just as much as he needed them. Though Charles Hess was not a particularly pious man, he had been raised in a church back home in England, and this moment made him remember a time as a child when he asked his religious parents why God allowed Satan to exist if God was all-powerful and could destroy Satan if he so desired; his parents were at first flustered by this troublingly philosophical question, but they eventually came up with an answer that, after all these decades, finally made sense to him: the presence of an enemy serves to better prove one’s own glory.

Charles would one day soon get that infernal pocket watch. Or perhaps in his readings, he may discover that he didn’t even need a pocket watch. Maybe he could continue using a glass of wine, or perhaps even just his toe, swung back and forth. For all he knew, maybe there was something in that book about how to compel someone just by looking them in the eyes.

He watched as the fox and the bear walked further down the street, eventually completely invisible from the angle at which he stood. Hess had overheard every word of the debate occurring behind him over name-dropping Robin Hood and Little John. Charles knew that the Merry Men knew that Prince John and those in whom he confided already knew their names but dared not speak them for a plethora of reasons, ranging from fears of legitimizing them to fears of appearing to their peers as knowing too much; Charles also knew that the poor of the city largely knew their names, as they well should, as back in their heyday they would address themselves by name and the commoners would cheer their names right back to them, which many of the laymen police officers surely heard but pretended not to, lest they be saddled with the task of going to find them. Simply put, Charles knew that publicizing the names of the Merry Men would change fuck-all, and if anything it might embolden them by feeding their egos, cementing their status as local legends; but he also knew Prince John didn’t know that.

“Mayor?” said Hess as he turned from the window. “Perhaps it would be best, pardon my lisp --” (he was still embarrassed from letting his seductive for-Prince-John’s-ears-only hiss out in front of the sheriff and deputy yesterday, though to be fair, having that hat over his head had understandably blurred his judgment) “-- it may be best to begin publicizing the names of the bandits! Think of it this way, Mayor: surely they think we’re incompetent after all these years. Discovering that we have a new lead on them may indeed jar them, frighten them even, and may indeed start to wear on their seemingly-impenetrable self-esteem!”

The other three all forgot what they were talking about; Hess had made his point quite well.

“I… I beg your pardon, Charles?” asked the mayor.

“Not to overstep my boundaries, Mayor, but I truly believe that if we were to put up wanted posters bearing their names, it may start to sew the seeds of doubt in their heads, letting them know that
they are not beyond our reach!"

The lion stared pensively into his lap for a moment, not saying a word. The other three simply looked at him, waiting for an answer; the sheriff and deputy didn’t have a horse in this race, and Hess was itching with anticipation to see whether he had just had his way with the mayor’s mind without the help of psychological sleight-of-hand.

After about ten seconds of silence, the mayor finally spoke: “...it’s just like chess.”

“Uh… what was that?” asked Woodland.

“It’s just like chess!” the mayor beamed. “We may not be capturing their king, but we’re moving our pieces in place to do so! We’re setting a chain of favorable events in motion! They see us move a pawn one spot forward -- not even two spots, just one! What could it mean? They don’t know! Are we up to something, or are we simply playing it by ear, running blindly into the battle without a plan? They don’t know! They may see us make such a small step forward, and they may start to question what plans we have in place that would lead us to make such a bizarre move! It may indeed drive them crazy as they try to figure it out! And if instead they think so lowly of us that they decide we must surely be throwing ideas at the proverbial wall to see what sticks, I say let them! Let them underestimate us! It will make it all the more satisfying when we have the last laugh! I see no way that telling all the world what their real names are will benefit them! Either our minor little move will send them into a panic attack, or it will set them up for an unpleasant surprise. So therefore I do decree, let us move this pawn one step forward! For you see, gentlemen, it’s just like chess!”

“Uh… sure! Yeah! Right!” said Ward, who barely understood the rules of checkers.

“Cool. Got it,” said George, who was thinking about one time his eleventh-grade English teacher made him rewrite a persuasive paper just because he took way too long to argue his point.

“I’m glad you like the idea, Mayor!” said Charles, knowing exactly how John would reply.

“Glad I thought of it!” replied John. “Gentlemen, I thank you for your time. Of course, we cannot start printing the wanted posters yet. We must first prove their identities beyond the shadow of a doubt, and I am working with our forensics team right now to see to it that the names we have attached to these characters in our heads are either proven or refuted to be accurate.”

“Cool. So can we go now?” asked Nutzinger.

“Yes, officers, I don’t wish to further distract you from your task of seeking to capture the outlaws. Of course, we may soon have some help in our endeavor, but in the meantime, please take what steps you can to make progress each and every day until then. We’ll rendezvous each day to discuss what you will have done the previous day toward this end. So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Uh, sure. Let’s dip, Wolfie.”

Ward didn’t answer, just rolling his eyes at the thought that he now had to present his homework every day. He began to turn toward the door.

“Wait!”

Ward stopped in his tracks, and the sudden change in inertia nearly threw George of his shoulder.

“Uh… yeah, Mayor?” asked the sheriff.
The mayor looked nervous and a tad constipated as he worked up the courage to ask what he was sure would be an embarrassing question. “Er, gentlemen, a question that just crossed my mind, a question I would ask anybody but myself, quite literally the first person I saw I would ask this, so please don’t be offended by it if it seems odd, and also please don’t inquire about what inspired this question, for it is rather, er, a tad, erm, out there, as it were. Furthermore—”

“Mayor, you’re making the poor old boy nervous again,” said the deputy. “Please just spit it out.”

“...Do you boys keep up with the, er… popular culture?”

Woodland and Nutzinger glanced at one another from the sides of their eyes, not really knowing what to make of that.

“I—I mean…” George stumbled, “I mean, not particularly, but, you know, we are citizens of the world, so we get exposed to stuff. Why?”

“Er… to your knowledge… is Justin Timberlake an arctic fox?”

“...”

“...”

“...why on God’s green earth do you ask?”

“Please just answer the question.”

“Well, shit, I don’t know what the guy looks like,” said Ward.

“Uh, no, uh… I’m pretty sure he’s one of his people,” George said, pointing at Ward.

“Heh! Looks like li’l Nutsy knows his boy bands pretty well!” Woodland teased, poking Nutzinger in the stomach with his fat finger.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Ward! You could probably stand to know more about pop culture, Mister “Oh-Lynyrd-Skynyrd-Are-Still-Cool-Right?” Like you still think the entire world is bumblefuck Virginia in the fucking seventies. Shut the fuck up, you stupid hick.”

“...You mean they’re not still cool?”

“Gentlemen?” the mayor interjected.

“Actually? Wait. Fuck it. Ward, where were you when the wardrobe malfunction happened during the Super Bowl last year? Even if you didn’t see the halftime show, did you not see his face in the news for months afterwards?”

“Excuse me?”

“Wait, it was him who got his shirt ripped off?”

“Boys—”

“NO!”

“GENTLEMEN!”

That shut them up.
“Er-- gentlemen, you misunderstand my question! My apologies, I phrased it poorly. What I meant to ask is, er… would ‘Justin Timberlake’ be a name that would plausibly belong to an arctic fox? Not the Justin Timberlake, of course, but, er… there exist both timber and lakes in the arctic, no?”

“Uh… I-I mean, I guess,” said Nutzinger, “but, you know, if I think timber, I think--” (and he pointed to Woodland again) “--or some other people who aren’t from… that far north. Plus, you know, adoption… exists.”

“Oh. Excellent point, George. I must say I had completely forgotten that was a possibility.”

“Why do ya need to know this, Mayor?” asked Ward.

“I’ve already asked you kindly once not to ask.”

“We’re asking anyway,” said George.

“Perhaps it is best if you two leave so the mayor may rest his leg,” Charles threw in.

“He ain’t hurtin’ his ankle by talkin’ to us, is he?” asked the sheriff.

“But you are hurting my sense of leadership and authority by not doing as I say!” growled the mayor.

Nutzinger and Woodland just stared at him for a second, wondering if he understood the subtext of what he just said. After a moment, the look on the lion’s face changed from one of anger to one of uncertainty, and the sheriff and deputy did him a favor by walking out of his room and leaving his house without saying another word.

--IllI--

After leaving the mayoral mansion, Woodland told Nutzinger to head to a different bar along the shore in Long Neck. Then he fell asleep in the passenger seat.

“Ward, wake up.”

“Hrmmnrhmmh… five more minutes, Momma…”

“Ward, you pissed your pants.”

The sheriff shot up in his seat and went to inspect his crotch, looking for discoloration and feeling for moisture, but he couldn’t find any.

“Nutsy, what the hell was that about? I didn’t-- Nutsy, where are we?”

“Well, that woke you up.”

“Nutsy, where the hell are we?”

“Where we need to be to prove we’re doing our jobs.”

“I thought you didn’t care about this job?”

“No, but after running into Tommy and Matty at the bar today, it really reinforced my fear that if I ever lose this job, I’m S. O. L. for getting a job for the rest of my life. I don’t give a shit about being rich, but I need some source of income.”
“Nutsy, you realize we can just lie and say we were here, right?”

“We’re already hoping nobody realizes we were asleep during the press conference yesterday, bucko. If we keep lying for absolutely no constructive reason, we’re gonna get busted eventually and then we’re gonna be deadbeats like Tommy and Matt. Laws of probabilities and stuff like that.”

“Oh, so you’re afraid of getting busted? You pussy.”

“You’re calling me a pussy when you don’t want to do your job and go into those woods.”

“Like I said earlier, Georgie, I acknowledge I’m a coward, so now I need some beer to help me get over it!”

“Jesus, did you just use the word acknowledge?”

“What, did I surprise you with my smarts?”

“And how.”

“Let’s get outta here, Nutsy.”

“And also I just don’t want to go to a bar with you ever again after that place in Bayard.”

“What, you have more fun going home and reading a book like a little girl?”

“...”

“...”

“...Fine, motherfucker, you drive.”

“What?”

“Here’s the keys.” Click. “Go for it.”

“Nutsy, I can’t drive with that little steering wheel and gas pedal!”

“Well this car was specially modified with taxpayer money you helped collect, so unless you want to admit that that was a total waste of time, get out of this car and stop wasting mine.”

“...Your what?”

“My time.”

“Oh.”

“And my breath. C’mon! Let’s go!” Click.

“Do you have a death wish, you dumb son of a bitch?”

“Ward! Use your fucking head! If that camp was theirs, then they probably knew we were there since you fucked everything up around there, and they’re probably not dumb enough to stick around that place when they know we could just come there with a fucking army? And if it’s just a place where a bunch of homeless crackheads and smackheads live, then what the fuck are you afraid of? Besides, it’s broad daylight on a beautiful day, they’re probably out around town right
now! ...Th-the outlaws, I mean. The heroin addicts are probably asleep right now and the crackheads are probably, like, slamming their heads into brick walls or whatever the hell they do all day.”

“So what you’re saying is that we should patrol the city and try to find them! Uh, the outlaws, I mean, not the, uh, junkies and crackheads.”

“Jesus! Just c’mon and go check out the camp with me so we can say we were there! For Christ’s sakes, Ward, your brain is probably as big as my entire body, and you still don’t seem to have an intelligent thought in there anywhere!”

“...Nutsy, I still don’t have a gun.”

“Well I have mine.”

“You really think you can deal damage with that little pea-shooter?”

“That won’t be an issue. And ya know what else I got? I got the fuckin’ car keys! Now let’s go!”

_Slam._

--IllI--

Between Nutzinger's tiny legs and Woodland’s hesitant pace, it took them nearly forty-five minutes to get from the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve parking lot to the site where they had discovered signs of life. Nutzinger made a point not to stand on the sheriff’s shoulder for this, partially because in the unlikely event of an ambush he would be a smaller target to hit, but mostly because it was hard to stand on Ward’s shoulder when the wolf was shaking like a leaf.

“Jesus, Ward, get yourself together,” Nutzinger said around the time when he started to get the inkling that they were getting close. “You’ve been in here hundreds of times, haven’t you? You weren’t this nervous when we went in here after the call with the bobcat kid in the SUV, you weren’t this nervous when we went to ambush them with Matt and Tommy in the dead of the frickin’ ass night --”

“We had safety in numbers then, Nutsy… and I had a gun.”

“Holy hell, if I heard someone say that in a book or a movie or something scripted like that, I’d think it was some heavy-handed political commentary.”

“What was that?”

“Nothin’, man… Okay, screw it, I’m actually kinda worried about you now. Are you gonna be alright?”

“I’ve been in these woods alone before, George. That’s a mistake I’ll never make again.”

“You’re not alone now.”

“You’re a squirrel.”

“Well, hey, man, make another comment like that and you’ll wish you were alone.”

“Nutsy, I think deep down you that I’m really your best friend. You might bite me like a tick, but you would never really hurt me.”

“Whoa. Ward. Whoa. I’m the one who has a gun, remember? Say something like that again and I’ll
blow my own brains out. And then you’ll really be alone. And you wouldn’t want that, now would you?”

“No…”

“Didn’t think so.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“Wait… did you… did you run into the outlaws when you were here alone before, or--?”

“*There!*” Ward exclaimed as he pointed through the trees toward the clearing littered with clothes and housewares.

“Finally!” said George, who couldn’t actually see it from his angle but trusted that Ward wasn’t completely useless.

“Wait!” warned the sheriff. “Tread slow! There might be booby traps in these parts… heh, ‘booby,’ that’s funny…”

They tiptoed into the clearing, which they could see was not visibly occupied, but they wanted to get the closest look they could. Soon, they found themselves right in the center of the clearing at the base of the tree. They looked around and assessed the sight, and…

“It looks exactly the same,” remarked the deputy.

But the sheriff, who looked five minutes ago like he was about to start crying, now looked furious.

“They think they’re so smart.”

“Wh-what are you talking about, man?”

“They think they’re two steps ahead of us, don’t they?” He turned his head violently left and right to see if there was any obvious detail he was missing. “They knew that if they *did* leave a booby trap, it would prove that someone who’s got sumpthin’ to hide lives here! So they didn’t set a trap so we *can’t* prove that! They’re just waiting for us to think this is some abandoned meth camp and give up on it! They’re just waiting for the trail to run cold!”

“Hey, Ward, Ward, chill out,” Nutsy pleaded. “Maybe there’s more evidence here than we think. Like… the scene investigator took photos, right? Let’s check how the debris looks in the photos to see if it’s really been untouched. If something’s missing or something’s been moved, then maybe we can prove signs of life!”

“That would actually be a pretty good idea, Nutsy!”

“Cool! So-- wait, *would be*? You… you left the photos in the car, didn’t you?”

“Uh, no, uh… I… I never picked them up from the lab.”

“Goddammit, Ward, *this* is why the bandits think they’re smarter than us! Uh… you wanna go digging in that hole in the tree some more to see if there’s any evidence of a crime you missed last time? Like something stolen?”
“Nutsy, look around you. I already cleared that hole out.”

“...Well, Jesus, man, don’t say I didn’t try to give you ideas.”

“I won’t, I won’t…” the sheriff mumbled. He looked around one last time, almost disappointed that the outlaws weren’t jumping out of the woodwork with bows and arrows and big fucking sticks, because at least then he would get some feeling of vindication, some feeling that this journey was worth the time spent. “We’ll be back here soon, Nutsy… either I’ll have my gun with me or I’ll have backup with me, but we’ll be back here, and we’re gonna put the fear of God in those goddamn commies!” He then looked straight at the Major Oak and kicked it as hard as he could. “GAH! My toes!” he cried as he held his foot and jumped in pain, while Nutzinger laughed loudly, knowing the only person around to hear him was presently incapacitated.

But in that moment of rash frustration, the seed of an idea was planted, though it would take a bit for the sheriff to put the pieces together in his head.
Chapter Summary

Two unnamed brothers discuss business, motivation, self-esteem, social stigmas, societal issues, family history, and traumatic memories.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

18. “Auxiliary Document 2”

The following recording was provided courtesy of the National Security Administration’s Record Everything Indiscriminately (REI) program. It was acquired by our editors at great expense and inconvenience and was transcribed on October 7, 2019.

Little is known about the two individuals in the recording, who refer to one another solely as “Bro” and “Pipsqueak”, although inconclusive hints toward their identities are given throughout their conversation. The call was traced to a payphone operated by BellSouth at the corner of Peachtree Parkway and Grove Street in Peach Creek, Delaware, and a disposable cell phone purchased and activated at a Circuit City in Zootopia Heights, Oregon.

(call begins)

“BRO”: Why, could this be my little brother, Pipsqueak?

“PIPSQUEAK”: Bro, it’s been one sentence and you’re already on the Pipsqueak shit?

"BRO": (gasp s) Pipsqueak! Watch your language! Where did you ever learn a naughty word like that? Somebody’s been watching too much cable TV and not enough PBS!

"PIPSQUEAK": And you think you’re so fucking suave because you gave up using swear words?

"BRO": ‘Hey, in business, you gotta present yourself as friendly, confident, and intelligent, and for better or worse, swearing makes people think you’re none of those things. Ask Mom and Dad and they’ll tell you the same thing.

"PIPSQUEAK": I still think you just did it because you have a thing for ‘good girls’ who don’t swear.

"BRO": What can I say? The best decisions are made for more than one good reason.

"PIPSQUEAK": But seriously, how did you know it was me?

"BRO": Because the number that popped up on my screen was the same one that called me half an hour ago, with a robot lady asking me if I’d like to accept a collect call from my baby brother, to which I thought, oh, I’d love to talk to my baby brother for the first time in, what, a year? But I really wish he loved me enough to pay for the call himself! After all, he’s a big boy now, he doesn’t need his big bro paying for everything for him--
"PIPSQUEAK": Well, now I am paying for this call, Bro, and time is money. The more you talk, the more you’re wasting my time.

"BRO": But why oh why would you call me if you didn’t want me to talk?

"PIPSQUEAK": For you to listen. Then tell me your thoughts about what I have to say. Capiche?

"BRO": Si, signore.

"PIPSQUEAK": Huh?

(approximately two seconds of silence)

"BRO": So anyway, I thought, okay, half an hour, that’s about how long it would take for Baby Bro to walk his widdle wags back home, steal some quarters from Mommy’s purse like a naughty little fox, and walk back to the pay phone by the --

"PIPSQUEAK": I didn’t steal from Mom’s purse, Bro.

"BRO": Oh? Is that so? You’re spending your money on a phone call with me instead of overdosing on jawbreakers? Aw, Pipsqueak, you must really love me--

"PIPSQUEAK": Goddammit, Bro, will you cut it out with the Pipsqueak shit?

"BRO": You’re using naughty words again, Pipsqueak!

"PIPSQUEAK": Stop calling me Pipsqueak!

"BRO": What’s the magic word?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Please.

"BRO": Very good, Pipsqueak!

"PIPSQUEAK": What the hell, Bro, I just said please!

"BRO": Indeed you did, but unfortunately your request has been formally denied by the board of directors.

"PIPSQUEAK": Get fucked, Bro.

"BRO": See? You’re not calling me by my real name, either!

"PIPSQUEAK": Because it feels weird to call you by your real name! That’d be like calling Mom and Dad Antónia and Terrance.

"BRO": Well, it would feel weird for me to call you something besides Little Bro, Baby Bro, or Pipsqueak. Take your pick!

"PIPSQUEAK": You can just call me ‘Bro’ too, you know. It’s not like that could refer to anybody else when you’re saying it.

"BRO": No, no, ‘Bro’ is me, we can’t share a title. That simply won’t do.

"PIPSQUEAK": As long as I’m not Pipsqueak.

"BRO": Actually, wait. Didn’t you get that care package I sent you two years ago with the baby
rattle and diapers and stuff in it? The one addressed to “Pipsqueak”? Didn’t even have your real name on it anywhere?

"PIPSQUEAK": Aw, Jesus, don’t remind me--

"BRO": Well, if it’s good enough for the United States Postal Service, it’s good enough for me! And Pipsqueak you shall be, now, always, and forever!

"PIPSQUEAK": ...oh, brother.

"BRO": Yup, that’s me, alright! So tell me, Pipsqueak, what inspired you to call me? Are Mom and Dad making you do it?

"PIPSQUEAK": Mom and Dad don’t know I’m calling and I don’t want you to tell them I did. That’s why I’m not calling you from the house phone.

"BRO": My lips are sealed, Pip.

"PIPSQUEAK": So… I may… have… recently… come into some money.

"BRO": Really! Congratulations, Pipsqueak! How much and how’d you get it?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… what’s seven times twenty?

"BRO": Pipsqueak, you landed a hundred and forty dollars?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh, y-yeah, I… guess I did.

"BRO": Look at that. A little pipsqueak who doesn’t even know intermediate multiplication can get ahead in this country! And a fox no less! God bless America!

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, shut up-- uh… wait, why’d you have to mention the species thing?

"BRO": Hm? Oh, sorry, Pipsqueak, I just… you know, as much as this town I’m in was definitely the best place to set up my business, I’ve gotta say, there’s an undercurrent of racial tensions here that they just don’t have anywhere else. This city thinks it’s so progressive and diverse and accommodating, but… this is gonna sound terrible to say, but it’s almost like having all these species crammed into close quarters just brings out the ugly side of the mammalian class that we still haven’t solved, and nobody has the balls to confront it because nobody wants to admit that these ugly thoughts exist in all of us to some extent… I’m sorry, Pipsqueak, this’s just been on my mind a lot recently. Am I boring you?

"PIPSQUEAK": Yes and no.

"BRO": Well long story short, a fox is probably one of the worst things you can be in this town. An entire species of trickster predators? Oh, hoho, no thank you! I swear, I could be walking down the street here, and a, I dunno, a sheep wearing a t-shirt that says ‘I molest children’ could be walking down the other side of the street in the same direction, and if a bunny and her kid were walking down the street toward me, they might still cross to the other side. The prey kids in N-Town might’ve dogpiled me and beat me silly, but I could swear on a bible that I don’t think some of the ridiculous things that happen here would happen back home.

"PIPSQUEAK": Jesus Christ, Bro… so why do you stay there, then?

"BRO": Diverse market means diverse money-making opportunities. Makes the day-to-day
discrimination worth it, honestly. You’ll understand when you’re older.

"PIPSQUEAK": Oh… kay…

"BRO": Plus the powers-that-be in this town are so wrapped up in keeping the peace that they haven’t noticed that I haven’t paid my taxes.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Oh.

"BRO": At all.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hm.

"BRO": Ever. No one’s recording this, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, you know I don’t know how to record this. That’d be more Double-D’s bag. Who else would be recording this? The government?

"BRO": Hm, well, you never know, Pipsqueak. If they are, hopefully they don’t think we’re interesting enough to be worth listening to, eh?

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro… now you got me thinking that that little shit bunny Jimmy might be even more racist than I thought he was.

"BRO": Whoa! Pipsqueak! Remember, assuming people are prejudiced is still prejudice! We’re supposed to be better than them! ...Jimmy was the little snow-white bunny whose stepdad was a moose, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": His stepdad’s not around anymore. I heard from Ed’s sister that he got into a fight with Jimmy’s mom because he forced Jimmy to start practicing hockey and it made the little shit cry like a baby. And because the guy barely fit in their house.

"BRO": Jeez, that’s rough. But I’m thinking of the right kid, right? Hutchins or Hutchinson or something?

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, same bunny.

"BRO": Pipsqueak, I only remember that bunny being a little kid, and even then I got really bad vibes from him. Don’t assume all bunnies are racist, but fuck Jimmy as an individual.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hey! Now you said a cuss word!

"BRO": I indulge sometimes. But back to the buck-forty. Where’d you get it?

"PIPSQUEAK": So, uh, that part ain’t so important.

"BRO": Oh. I get it. Don’t worry, Pip. Lips are sealed.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Hush. Anyway, I got the money yesterday, then I went down to the candy store this morning with a giant garbage bag, I bought three of the Japan-flavored jawbreakers and one of each of all the rest of the flavors they had--

"BRO": Wow, somebody’s ballin’!

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, but it’s a small store, so they only had a couple dozen flavors. I’ll go online later and find more.
"BRO": Have fun buying stuff off the internet without a credit card. Does The Candy Store still carry those super-sour Chernobyl-flavored ones? Those were my favorite as a kid.

"PIPSQUEAK": Actually, they stopped selling them, like, last year I think. I think they were so sour they were making kids’ mouths bleed.

"BRO": Aw, that’s a bummer. And the name probably wasn’t good PR, either.

"PIPSQUEAK": So the cashier rang me up, and he was lookin’ at me like he thought I was completely nuts, but then I handed him a twenty and I asked him if he could give me quarters for change.

"BRO": Ballin’ indeed, Pipsqueak!

"PIPSQUEAK": And he hands me a few, and I think, this can’t be enough, but then he says to give him a second and he goes under the counter and just hands me one of those rolls of quarters. Like, the ones they give you at the bank. He doesn’t even unroll them, he just gives them to me.

"BRO": You stumped him, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": So I head home, and I have one of the Japan-flavored ones as I think about how I’m gonna ask you what I need to ask you, and then I have the London-flavored one because I still don’t know how to ask you what I need to ask you… and then I have the Texas-flavored one because I still don’t know how to ask you--

"BRO": What do you want to ask me, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I’m tellin’ ya, Bro, I still don’t know.

"BRO": Well, Pipsqueak, while I would normally tell you that time is money and I hate wasting my time, I think I’ll make an exception since I so rarely get to talk to you. I’ve got all the time in the world, Pip; take your time and maybe the words will come to you.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, I walked over to the payphone, and I tried calling collect first because I forgot the fuckton of quarters at home--

"BRO": Forgot. Sure ya did. It’s alright, Pipsqueak, frugality is a virtue.

"PIPSQUEAK": No, seriously, I just forgot them at home.

"BRO": Alright, Pipsqueak, I’m just trying to save you from sounding forgetful.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Fuck you, Bro. So yeah, I have the quarters in a Ziploc baggie, and I’ve already had to feed the phone a few times since we started talking, and these quarters aren’t gonna last forever.

"BRO": And I have a finite quantity of minutes on this prepaid cheapie cell phone, Pipsqueak, so I guess that makes us even. So let’s not waste another minute of our precious quality time together. What’s happened to you since I last saw you, Pipsqueak? What are you up to?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… nothing much, I guess, I just graduated middle school--

"BRO": Aw, Pipsqueak’s growing up! But is Pipsqueak growing up? You didn’t tell me what you were up to, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… y-y’mean--?
"BRO": Like how Dad always used to say, *what are you up to*?

"PIPSQUEAK": (*faint sounds of nervous breathing)*

"BRO": As in height-wise.

"PIPSQUEAK": Man--! FUCK YOU! Fuck you, Bro! Fuck you!

"BRO": Aw, chill out, Pipsqueak! I haven’t *seen* you in years! I need help envisioning you! Did you finally hit that growth spurt we were all waiting on?

"PIPSQUEAK": (*flustered muttering*) --yes. Yes, I did, Bro.

"BRO": Awesome! I’m happy for you, Pipsqueak. So what are you up to? Did you finally hit three feet?

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, I did! And now I’m only four inches away from normal, and only nine inches away from Dad!

"BRO": So you mean two inches away from normal.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...No, four.

"BRO": Normal for a guy is three-two.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...No, it’s three-four. Three-two is women.

"BRO": It’s three-two. Women’s average is three even.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...We-- we’re talking about just us reds, right? Not the smaller foxes?

"BRO": Indeed we are.

"PIPSQUEAK": Then why the hell do I specifically remember overhearing Mom say it was three-four for guys and three-two four women?

"BRO": I dunno, Pipsqueak, why do *I* remember overhearing Mom on the phone with her friend about how much of a bummer it is to be a tall girl and that she would only date guys three-four or taller? She slid the numbers in her own head until she believed them herself. Mom’s secretly extremely particular about her guys, Pipsqueak. There’s a reason she married a giant like Dad.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...GODDAMMIT!

"BRO": What’s wrong, Pip?

"PIPSQUEAK": If the average is lower than I thought it was, then that means that it’s even more unlikely I’ll ever get to be as big as you or Dad since apparently you two are even more freakishly tall than I thought! Like, seriously, where the hell did you two get your genes from?

"BRO": Pipsqueak, don’t sweat the small stuff -- no pun intended. You’re a fox, Pip. You can be head and shoulders taller than all the other foxes you know and you’re still gonna be a short guy in the eyes of society. Our people got a reputation for being shifty hucksters because that’s who we *had* to be; how else can a tiny predator get ahead in the world?

"PIPSQUEAK": (*breathing*)
"BRO": ...I’ll tell you what, Pipsqueak. This is some dead-serious life advice right here: size only matters if you let it matter. I don’t care if you’re trying to prove your leadership, or if you’re trying to get in a girl’s pants, or if you’re just trying to get people to dignify you as a fully-fledged person. If you carry yourself well and exude confidence, no one’s gonna care how tall you are. Like I always told myself, Pippo, never let them see that they get to ya.

"PIPSQUEAK": (breathing)

"BRO": You run out of quarters, Pip?

"PIPSQUEAK": You just reminded me how I met a fox who was five feet tall the other day.

"BRO": ...Oh, no, you didn’t.

"PIPSQUEAK": I did, though.

"BRO": I’m having trouble believing this, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": So did I when I met him, but he’s real.

"BRO": Was he a basketball player at one of the colleges?

"PIPSQUEAK": No, he was… he was just a regular guy.

"BRO": Did he have a cane or a walker or something like that since our bodies aren’t meant to be that huge?

"PIPSQUEAK": No, no, he was… just a regular guy.

"BRO": Because I remember reading a book in the elementary school library that was just little biographies about the tallest people from every species to ever live. I remember the blurb about the tallest fox because his was a little longer. His name was McLeod or something and he was five-eight, but he couldn’t get any circulation to his legs so they lopped them off and gave him metal prosthetics. And apparently that prevented him from joining the Army to fight in World War I, so he joined the first-ever group of fighter pilots instead. Then the Red Baron shot him down. Apparently even Snoopy couldn’t save him. Come to think of it, our people and people in general really ought to do more to remember him as an American hero, seeing as he circumvented a massive handicap to achieve his goal, only to die for our country. But my point being that he was handicapped, because our people aren’t built to be that big.

"PIPSQUEAK": (silence)

"BRO": I really doubt this person you’re talking about exists, Pippy.

"PIPSQUEAK": He did though!

"BRO": Then why are you telling me about him? Even if you did see a tall, lanky guy like this, what’s so important about him?

"PIPSQUEAK": It just… seemed like an interesting thing you’d find… interesting?

"BRO": Is this the reason you called me?

"PIPSQUEAK": What!? No! I-I called you to talk about something else. I-I just remembered the guy because you mentioned that we could be giants and we’d still be midgets to everybody else, a-and I met the guy when he was, uh, hanging out with bigger guys, so, like, exactly what you said,
big to us is small to them, and… I dunno, it just went perfectly with what you said about, like, the
dichotomy of being a big fox--

"BRO": Waaait, wait, wait, Pipsqueak… did you just say ‘dichotomy’?

"PIPSQUEAK": Huh? Yeah. Why?

"BRO": Where on earth did my little Pipsqueak learn a word like that?

"PIPSQUEAK": Double-D was trying to help me with my vocab homework and the piece of shit
laughed for five minutes when I mispronounced it ‘dick-uh-tome-ee’. So I made myself learn it
just to shove it in his face for thinking I’m stupid.

"BRO": That’s the spirit, Pip! Channel your frustration to make yourself into a better person.
Attaboy.

"PIPSQUEAK": ( silence )

"BRO": …Jeez, though, dichotomy?

"PIPSQUEAK": Will you let go of it already?

"BRO": ‘Kay. I will. Let’s go back to this really tall fox you swear you met just… walking down
the street the other day.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hey, Bro, he was real, and you can believe it or not, but that’s the truth.

"BRO": And that’s how you clinch it when you’re spinning a yarn! I’m proud of you, Pippy.

"PIPSQUEAK": Gee, thanks, asshole.

"BRO": If he was real, Pipsqueak, then what was his name?

"PIPSQUEAK": His name? I-- Jeez, I don’t know, Bro! I didn’t get the guy’s name! I didn’t
really… talk to him.

"BRO": You said five pages ago that you ‘met’ him.

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, well… you can meet someone and talk… to them without really talking
with them.

"BRO": A solid argument. One point to Pipsqueak!

"PIPSQUEAK": I just brought him up because… because it was like, jeez, how can anybody be
this perfect?

"BRO": I’m sure he wasn’t perfect, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": He sure seemed perfect to me, Bro.

"BRO": Jesus, Pip, you really seem kind of bummed about this. You really are hung up on the size
thing, aren’t you?

"PIPSQUEAK": It wasn’t just the size thing, Bro, it was--

"BRO": Well, hey, you said you finally hit three feet a few minutes ago, so you’re doing all you
can do for yourself! You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of!

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I did?

"BRO": Did what?

"PIPSQUEAK": I said that?

"BRO": That you did! Now let’s prove it!

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh…

"BRO": Go to the fridge.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...What?

"BRO": Go to the fridge. Grab the parmesan cheese that Dad always keeps on the highest shelf. Shake the can in front of the phone so I can hear it.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Bro--

"BRO": The sound of parmesan cheese being shaken is a sound you can’t confuse for anything else in the world. Play that instrument for me, Pipsqueak, and I’ll believe the story of your growth spurt wholeheartedly.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Bro, I’m at a phone booth two blocks from our house.

"BRO": ( silence )

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Remember?

"BRO": Ah! That’s right! Looks like Big Bro scored an own-goal! One more point for Pippy Longstocking!

"PIPSQUEAK": Shut the hell up, Bro.

"BRO": You haven’t actually had your growth spurt yet, have you?

"PIPSQUEAK": ( silence )

"BRO": I hear you loud and clear, Pipsqueak. So what did you want to tell me?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I guess I wanted to talk business.

"BRO": Aw, wittle Pipsqueak wants to talk business with Big Bro? Pipsqueak wants to be like me! That’s so cute!

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro--

"BRO": I’m flattered, Pipsqueak, but I gotta ask why you aren’t taking this to Mom and Dad first.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...You know what, Bro? How flattered are you?

"BRO": Beyond words.

"PIPSQUEAK": Really?
"BRO": Mmhmm.

"PIPSQUEAK": Really really?

"BRO": Cross my heart, hope to die.

"PIPSQUEAK": Then cut back on the baby talk or I will take this to Mom and Dad instead of bothering to ask what the hell you think about this. You want me to admire you? Then act like somebody I should fucking admire. Alright?

"BRO": ( silence )

"PIPSQUEAK": Alright?

"BRO": You’ve stood your ground and I respect that.

"PIPSQUEAK": Good.

"BRO": So what’s up?

"PIPSQUEAK": ( deep breath ) ...I do want to be like you, Bro. Or, wait -- let me rephrase that: I wanna be like who I think you are, Bro. So that’s why I wanna talk business. And life. I wanna know more about you so I can know if I should wanna be like you.

"BRO": ...You really wanna be like me?

"PIPSQUEAK": I think so, Bro. And maybe I should, or maybe I shouldn’t. Depends on how you answer these questions, Bro.

"BRO": Sounds like you’re putting a lot of pressure on me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Just be real with me, Bro. Don’t lie to me to make yourself look better. I need to know who you really are for once in my life.

"BRO": Don’t lie to you? Sweetheart, we’re foxes, lying is what we do!

"PIPSQUEAK": Okay, fuck it, I’m hanging up. Later, Bro.

"BRO": Wait, Pipsqueak, no!

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I’m listening?

"BRO": ...So... you want to be like me.

"PIPSQUEAK": I’ve always looked up to you, Bro. Didn’t you ever notice? Or were you two busy making money and trying to move out early to notice your little brother? I mean, for fuck’s sakes, to this day -- to this day , Bro -- when someone around here isn’t giving me the respect I deserve -- in the cul-de-sac, at school, wherever -- I remind them who my brother is and they get their act together. You’re a legend around these parts, Bro. There’s only one person I could want to be like when all I can see is that I’m living in their shadow.

"BRO": Um… wow. I really… I really never noticed. But hey, Pipsqueak, this means a lot to me--

"PIPSQUEAK": So you were ignoring me all these years while I idolized ya?

"BRO": Hey, kid, I’m sorry. I had my own goals and Mom and Dad were pissed that I was making
"PIPSQUEAK": They’re more pissed that you moved out when you were still in high school. Like… Mom said once that she felt like it was a slap in the face, like you were telling them they were shitty parents.

"BRO": Well if those two idiots say that again when you’re around, remind them that I was saving them money by moving out. And for the record, Pip, when I moved out, I just quit school and got my GED, which was legitimately the easiest test I’d taken since sixth grade. But hey, seriously, it means a lot to hear that right now. That you idolized me. I’m not gonna lie, Pipsqueak, this… I was just thinking recently that I was hoping to be further along by now.

"PIPSQUEAK": Further along?

"BRO": Yeah, you know. With business. With life. It’s been five years since I moved out and I’m still only a couple steps past square one.

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, what the hell are you talking about?

"BRO": I guess after running the suburbs like a well-oiled machine, I just thought I could move to the big city and work the same magic. Instead it took me something like a dozen tries to find a city I could do business in, and it’s one where people are more judgmental than they are anywhere else I’ve ever been in my life. But they want my products enough to put their hard feelings aside for two minutes, and they didn’t do that anywhere else as much as they’re doing it here. And I’ve had more luck finding business partners here than I have in other places, so I can’t complain. But I was hoping to have gotten my footing a lot earlier than this; maybe if I had, I would have made something of myself by now.

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, I would literally chop my own dick off and rub a hot pepper on the wound to be in your position. Especially at your age.

"BRO": And I know, I know that you’re not supposed to be rich when you’re twenty-two, but… goddammit, my goals for my life entailed that I would be rich and famous by twenty-two. That’s the price of setting your goals high, kid: you disappoint yourself when you don’t accomplish what nobody else expected you to do except yourself.

"PIPSQUEAK": But Bro, you’re your own boss. Mom and Dad can’t--

"BRO": Well, not all the time.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Huh?

"BRO": There’s a, uh… ‘businessman’ who lets me do some extra work for him when I need some extra scratch.

"PIPSQUEAK": But you aren’t fully employed by somebody else like Mom and Dad are, right?

"BRO": Um… technically … no…

"PIPSQUEAK": And that’s why I always looked up to you, Bro. You are your own boss! Mom and Dad can’t say that. They wheel and deal just to make commission while someone else gets the bulk of the money. You’re a free man. A real maverick!

"BRO": I… I guess you’re right, Pipsqueak.
"PIPSQUEAK": Do you wanna know what one of my earliest memories is, Bro?

"BRO": I wanna know if you want to tell me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Okay, so… okay, maybe it’s not one of my earliest memories, I was, like, six or seven. So you would’ve been, what? Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen?

"BRO": Was I in this memory of yours?

"PIPSQUEAK": The memory’s about you, Bro. So Mom and Dad were out at a party or something that night, and you were supposed to be watching me. But you were in your room with the door closed.

"BRO": Ohhh… kay. Not ringing a bell yet.

"PIPSQUEAK": And I was, y’know, a little kid, and I’m bored, and I’m lonely, and I’m sad that my big bro doesn’t wanna play with me. And I’m standing in the hallway outside your door, and I can hear through your door that you’re watching something, but I can’t tell what it is. But I can hear the VCR keep rewinding every few seconds, and it sounds like I hear the same chick’s voice talking, saying the same things over and over, and her voice is just a little bit sultry. But not too much; appropriate for, say, a children’s movie.

"BRO": ...Wait.

"PIPSQUEAK": But then I hear Mom and Dad pull into the driveway and I run to the front door to say hi, and even though I don’t say so, I hope they put the pieces together and realize you’re not playing with me. Pretty sneaky, huh, Bro?

"BRO": Please don’t tell me this is going where I think it’s going.

"PIPSQUEAK": So Mom and Dad are about to flip their shit that you left a first-grader all alone, so they head over to your room to give you a good talking-to. And I’m right behind them. But I can hear that there’s no video sounds coming from your room anymore.

"BRO": Oh, Jesus Christ--

"PIPSQUEAK": And Dad busts the door in and you’re watching Space Jam.

"BRO": Oh, lordy--

"PIPSQUEAK": Except you’re not really watching it because you’ve got it on freeze-frame, and there’s someone on the screen with creamy-yellow fur.

"BRO": Pipsqueak--

"PIPSQUEAK": And Mom and Dad are freaking out. Meanwhile, nobody ever explained to me what the hell you were doing in your bed, so I didn’t put the pieces together until… eh, just a few years ago?

"BRO": ...Holy shit, Pipsqueak, you remember that?

"PIPSQUEAK": Hey, Bro, I coulda used this to ruin your reputation in this neighborhood years ago, but I didn’t. And not just because I benefit from your reputation. And also not just because I didn’t understand what was so embarrassing about that until after you moved out.

"BRO": ... Wow! You remember that...
"PIPSQUEAK": And I will ’till my dying day, Bro. And for the record? After inheriting your mag stash, my states are just as diverse as yours now. So I don’t care that she was a bunny; I’m more worried because she was a cartoon bunny--

"BRO": Hey, Pipsqueak, none of this would have happened if the animators just chose not to draw her that well. Really, because they possessed me and caused me an embarrassing moment, I’m the victim here!

"PIPSQUEAK": Hey, Bro, like I said, no judgment. Because that’s not the part I remember most. What I remember most is what you did next.

"BRO": You remember what happened next, too?

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, hey, man, maybe I remember wrong! You tell me! So dad’s threatening to kick your ass, Mom’s swearing at herself in Hungarian, the works, and at a certain point they’re both saying that they’re gonna ground you and take your TV and VCR and stuff away. But then-- forgive me, Bro, I was a little shit, I don’t remember the exact words, but you said something along the lines of… ‘No. No, you will not take away my TV and VCR, Mom and Dad. I paid for that TV and VCR, with my own money, money I earned by working, myself. Same with the VHS tape itself. Same with the TV stand. Same with the power strip it’s all plugged into. Same with the batteries in the remote control.’

"BRO": Hey, I probably paid for the box of Kleenex I was using, too!

"PIPSQUEAK": You weren’t using a Kleenex. You were using one of those mini paper cups with Sidney characters on them, which we didn’t usually have around the house, except that weekend was Mom’s turn to buy the snacks for my peewee soccer team.

"BRO": ...Pipsqueak, there is no way you remember all these details.

"PIPSQUEAK": I mean, am I wrong? Oh, and if I remember right, I think the cup had Adam Bell on it. I definitely remember it was green. What other Sidney movies use a lotta green? The Tome of the Tropical Forest, maybe? Nah, wrong shade of green...

"BRO": ...Huh. Weird.

"PIPSQUEAK": Yup. But as I was saying, Bro: your own parents tried to exert power over you, and you told them no, and there was nothing they could do about it. That was... Bro, that was seriously the most badass thing I’ve ever seen in my life. And ever since then, I’ve wanted to be like you.

"BRO": ...Wow, um... I gotta say, Pipsqueak, you’re leaving me speechless. But, uh... I’m pretty sure they still tried to reprimand me after that.

"PIPSQUEAK": If I remember right, they toldja that you weren’t allowed to babysit me anymore, and you weren’t allowed to watch that movie alone anymore. So you started watching it with me a lot. And every time you did, you would take a looong time in the bathroom when the movie ended.

"BRO": And I never would have done that if I knew you were there when Mom and Dad walked in on me.

"PIPSQUEAK": And now I can still quote huge chunks of the movie because we watched it so much.

"BRO": Is that so?
"PIPSQUEAK": (singing off-key) I believeeeewe I can flyyyyy…

"BRO": A classic.

"PIPSQUEAK": But still: Mom and Dad wanted to take your stuff away from you, but they couldn’t. Ever since then, I’ve wanted power just like that.

"BRO": Power?

"PIPSQUEAK": Power, Bro.

"BRO": The power was nice, Pipsqueak, but I’m not focused on power first and foremost.

"PIPSQUEAK": You-you’re not?

"BRO": I mean, hell yes I want power, but that’s a stretch goal. I just want a comfortable life where I don’t have to worry about money. If I can get to the point where I’m rich enough to have people working as my puppets, well, that would be both fine and also dandy, but the only power I really need is the power to live my life the way I want, beholden to nothing and nobody… you said you just finished middle school, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh, yeah. Why?

"BRO": You haven’t read the book that I stole that ‘beholden to nothing and nobody’ line from yet, have you?

"PIPSQUEAK": I don’t… think so?

"BRO": Well, I won’t spoil which one it is, but you’ll probably read it eventually. I don’t think you’re allowed to graduate high school in this country without reading it. Extremely slow read, but it’s worth it in the end. Nice little story about how good people exist even when there’s ugliness and bigotry all around -- a lesson I really needed and one I need to remind myself of every so often, but with any luck, a lesson you’ll never need.

"PIPSQUEAK": …Why are we talking about this?

"BRO": For funsies.

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, remember, I only have so many quarters.

"BRO": How many do you have left?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… lemmme count.

"BRO": Okay, Pip, if you need to count them, you’ve got plenty.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, maybe I don’t want to spend them all, okay?

"BRO": I’ll reimburse you one day.

"PIPSQUEAK": No you won’t.

"BRO": Don’t worry, Pipsqueak, I don’t swindle my own people. Okay. So. Back on track. You saw me get busted when I was up to bat for the Yankees, you see me take the power out of Mom and Dad’s hands when they try to punish me, that makes you yearn for great power in life?
"PIPSQUEAK": I mean… yes and no. I mean… I mean--

"BRO": Evidently, you mean a lot of things.

"PIPSQUEAK": Can it. Yeah, if I’m being honest, I would like to be filthy stinkin’ rich and stupid fucking powerful.

"BRO": And that’s a normal thing to want.

"PIPSQUEAK": But I got to thinking about it, and it’s like… did I only want to get rich like you so I could be powerful?

"BRO": Ooh, Pipsqueak’s getting philosophical!

"PIPSQUEAK": So that’s kind of what I wanted to get into with you.

"BRO": Philosophy?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...So… what drives you, Bro?

"BRO": ...What drives me?

"PIPSQUEAK": What makes you want to be… who you are?

"BRO":Hmm. That’s a really broad question there, kid.

"PIPSQUEAK": Even better. Don’t overthink it. Tell me the first thing that comes to your mind.

"BRO": ...I’m sorry, Pipsqueak, you’re gonna have to give me more to work with here.

"PIPSQUEAK": Okay. Fine. Make me do all the work.

"BRO": Hey, bud, it’s your question.

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… okay. So, you sell stuff on the street, right?

"BRO": Pawpsicles, get ‘em while they’re cold!

"PIPSQUEAK": Which is an idea you stole from me and the boys when we made fruitsicles two years ago, before that little bitch Jimmy stole all our profits for it, and I made the mistake of complaining about it to you during our annual phone call on my birthday!

"BRO": Hey, you know what they say, Pipsqueak, good artists imitate, great artists steal.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Did-- did you just… admit--?

"BRO": I did. I think it’s been long enough.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...You know what, Bro? Fuck it. Water under the bridge. But you know what? This is perfect. You’re a thief. You’re a con man. You’re a loose cannon. A fucking renegade. You could be working in an office somewhere, you could be selling used cars or jewelry like Mom or Dad, hell, you could be a cop if you wanted to! So… why be a shifty salesman of all things?

"BRO": ...I guess you could just say it was my calling.

"PIPSQUEAK": Why do you think it was your calling?
"BRO": Well… it didn’t seem like the world had any other place for me, so I filled my role. People always saw me as just another sneaky fox, so I tried to be that, and, wouldn’t you know it, I had a knack for it. So it stuck.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hmm…

"BRO": Something on your mind, Pip?

"PIPSQUEAK": You say you think you had a knack for it?

"BRO": I definitely do. Kills me to say this, but I’m starting to think the whole sneakiness gene might just be part of our people’s DNA. So we make the best of it.

"PIPSQUEAK": …I’m… thinking about a few things.

"BRO": Tell me.

"PIPSQUEAK": …Um--

"BRO": Did the wind sweep you off your feet?

"PIPSQUEAK": …Huh?

"BRO": Did you finally get the chance to dance across the light of day?

"PIPSQUEAK": What?

"BRO": And head back to the Milky Way? (singing off-key) Telll mee --

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, what the fuck are you doing?

"BRO": Sorry, Pipsqueak, but the longer we talk, I’m starting to feel more comfortable being more of a goofball around you in ways I can’t be around other people. Gotta maintain my image. But I know you’ll always love your big bro no matter what, so I can be whoever I’m feeling and I don’t have to worry about you judging me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, now I forgot what the fuck I was gonna say.

"BRO": Sorry, bud. We were talking about how our people have the Sneakies in our DNA and you said that you had multiple things on your mind.

"PIPSQUEAK": …OH! I remember now. So for one… what if I don’t have it in my genes?

"BRO": What, the trickery?

"PIPSQUEAK": Or just the Knack you mentioned, Bro. My plans -- I don’t call them scams anymore, I call them plans --

"BRO": One day you’ll be ready for enterprises and endeavors!

"PIPSQUEAK": Mine don’t work, like… ninety-something percent of the time. It’s not always that they don’t buy, because sometimes they do buy! But when they buy, they always realize I’m ripping them off and they get pissed and then they whale on me to get their money back.

"BRO": And they don’t remember who your brother is?
"PIPSQUEAK": When shit goes down, I usually don’t remember to tell them. Besides, you’ve been gone for so long, it’s like… so what if he’s your brother? He’s not ever coming back to protect you… You’re not coming back anytime soon, are ya?

"BRO": I’d love to, Pipsqueak, but I’m barely breaking even out here. I can’t afford a vacation. Not unless Mom and Dad pay for everything from my plane ticket to my rent for the month. I’d love to see you, Pipsqueak, but Mom and Dad don’t want to see me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Alright, alright… but, yeah, it’s like… I can con them into buying something, just like you… but I can’t con them into thinking they liked it, just like you.

"BRO": Well, keep your chin up, champ. I have my dissatisfied customers, too. I don’t just deal in Pawpsicles. Like I just started a side business making rugs on the cheap--

"PIPSQUEAK": But I never have a satisfied customer, Bro… is it that I haven’t had a good idea? Or is it me?

"BRO": Kiddo, you’ve got plenty of time to figure out your business model. You’re still young.

"PIPSQUEAK": I’ve been trying to figure this shit out since I was a little kid! Even before the Space Jam incident -- that was just the moment I had a sudden vision of a clear goal I wanted, but I’ve been trying to figure out this hustling thing for a long time before that… Hustle. I can’t believe I just said hustle. That’s always been your word. But… fuck! Should I have figured it out by now?

"BRO": Kid, you can’t give up on yourself.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Well… you gave up on yourself.

"BRO": ...What the hell are you talking about?

"PIPSQUEAK": That was the other thought I had. So we were talking about how you think the trickster gene is just in our DNA? And the world just expects our people to be no-good untrustworthy scoundrels?

"BRO": Uh-huh?

"PIPSQUEAK": Then what’s this I remember that you really, really wanted to be a Boy Scout when you were a kid before some asshole kids beat your ass for being a fox?

"BRO": ...No. Nuh-uh. No way do you remember that. That happened before you were born! I remember Mom hugging me when I was crying and it was hard to hug her back because she was something like eight months pregnant with you! I remember that! So how did you hear about that?

"PIPSQUEAK": Because I remember you telling me the summer I turned nine when you were drunk on Mike’s Hard Lemonades you paid some paint-huffer to buy for you from 7-Eleven. And I remember they were Mike’s because they were still pretty new back then and I wanted to try one because I didn’t know they had booze in them, so you let me have a sip but I chugged half the bottle and I puked all over the living room carpet, and you were too drunk to clean it up.

"BRO": ...Jesus Christ, Pip...

"PIPSQUEAK": Then Mom and Dad get home from work, they bitch you out for being drunk and giving beer to your kid brother, yadda yadda yadda, and a few weeks later, you move out. The end.
"BRO": ( silence )

"PIPSQUEAK": So, yeah: you were crying into your nasty lemonade, telling me the whole story, trying to impart your wisdom on me about how the world isn’t fair, about how people suck, shit like that, and I’m just sitting there trying to watch SpongeBob, and honestly Bro, I couldn’t understand half of what you were saying, so a few days after you move out, I ask Mom and Dad what the hell you were talking about, and they give me the whole story.

"BRO": ...The things you manage to remember may never cease to amaze me, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": So you used to want to live on the straight and narrow, huh, Bro?

"BRO": When I was young and stupid.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, what changed?

"BRO": Wh-- whaddaya mean, ‘what changed’? I realized that that was no life for a fox.

"PIPSQUEAK": So you didn’t actually change your mind, you just felt like you were being pushed away from who you wanted to be.

"BRO": I changed my mind about what walks of life were available to me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, what was stopping you from being a goody two-shoes anyway?

"BRO": Well, those fucking kids, for one!

"PIPSQUEAK": And?

"BRO": ...What the fuck do you mean, and?

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, you’re cussing a lot more now than I’ve heard you--

"BRO": Because you’re pissing me off, Pipsqueak! You bring up probably the most traumatic memory I have, and you expect me to just act like everything’s hunky-dory?

"PIPSQUEAK": You brought up your most traumatic memory when you were seventeen, sloshed on Mike’s, telling me for the first time about how important it is not to let people see that they get to you, but the more I think about it, I think there’s a bigger lesson there that went right over your head: by choosing to be an asshole like they thought you were destined to be, you proved them right.

"BRO": ( silence )

"PIPSQUEAK": You proved them right, Bro. You decided to be who they thought you were, not who you wanted to be.

"BRO": And that was a mistake I made when I let them see that they got to me.

"PIPSQUEAK": And? That was one thing. One event. If you really learned your lesson, then why didn’t you try to keep being a good person and just not give a shit what other people think?

"BRO": Pipsqueak, I was eight.

"PIPSQUEAK": And you’ve had fourteen years since then to go back to that little kid who wanted to make the world a better place instead of just hustling to survive and not caring about anybody
else but yourself. But you never did.

"BRO": Don’t you remember the other lesson I taught you? About that night? If the world’s only gonna see a fox as a shifty snake-in-the-grass, then there’s no point in trying to be anything else--

"PIPSQUEAK": So you gave up on yourself.

"BRO": ...Huh?

"PIPSQUEAK": You gave up on yourself. You had one obstacle… you didn’t overcome it… and you gave up on your dreams.

"BRO": Pipsqueak, I encountered that obstacle when I was eight, for Christ’s--

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, I’ve had the same obstacle over and over with my business career since I was three. I never got past it, but I kept trying, because that’s what I thought success stories were all about. But by the example you set, I shoulda given up a long time ago.

"BRO": (silence)

"PIPSQUEAK": You’re letting me see that I’m gettin’ to ya, Bro.

"BRO": Because you’re my brother and I can show you a side I can’t show other people.

"PIPSQUEAK": So you say foxes should have a knack for trickery, but you set the bar to give up on your dreams when it seems like the entire world is against you. My dream was to be a trickster, but it just ain’t workin’ out. So tell me, O Wise One, what should I do next?

"BRO": ...So, what, were you thinking about joining the Junior Rangers or something? A little old for that, don’t you think?

"PIPSQUEAK": What? Oh. No. Hell, no. The boys and I actually tried joining the Urban Rangers once, just to prove we could, but… it didn’t work out.

"BRO": Sounds like you gave up on yourself, too, Pipsqueak!

"PIPSQUEAK": Naw, Bro, we were just in it for the slick uniforms. It wasn’t a long-standing goal like it was for you. It was a passing impulse. And it passed.

"BRO": Hey, if you say so.

"PIPSQUEAK": So… let’s recap: you used to want to make the world a better place, right, Bro?

"BRO": When I was young and stupid, yes.

"PIPSQUEAK": And you… really don’t want that anymore?

"BRO": Hey, Pip, if the opportunity presents itself, I’ll go for it, but it’s not gonna happen.

"PIPSQUEAK": And we can agree that, as a consequence of my own trauma, I want fame and power.

"BRO": Can’t argue with that.

"PIPSQUEAK": So here’s the question on my mind: is it possible to… or, no -- can you think of a way how… maybe… a fox could use his natural wits to make the world a better place? And
maybe, if things fall into place right… you know, cash in on the limelight?

"BRO": ...So you want to use your natural gifts to be the hero the world needs, and you want to be lauded accordingly?

"PIPSQUEAK": Well… when you put it that way--

"BRO": Sounds like Pipsqueak wants the best of both worlds!

"PIPSQUEAK": Wha--? Yeah! Of course I do! Don’t talk to me like I’m an asshole for wanting everything I want!

"BRO": Well, you know what they say, Pipsqueak, you can’t have your cake and eat it, too.

"PIPSQUEAK": Fuck what they say! You know what? Scratch that question. Lemme rephrase that. Can a fox… hm… can a fox be a fox and still be... heroic?

"BRO": Pipsqueak wants to be a superhero!

"PIPSQUEAK": Fine! Can a fox be a fox and still be… noble? Good? If we’re really born to be manipulative little shits, can we… can we use that to make things better for ourselves and everybody else, and not just for ourselves?

"BRO": ...Pipsqueak, I’m going to be honest with you, part of me is messing with you just because I don’t know how to answer that. It’s a good question.

"PIPSQUEAK": I refuse to believe that our people aren’t capable of being better than ourselves. That just sounds too fucked up and I don’t wanna live in a world where that’s the case.

"BRO": ...Let me think…

"PIPSQUEAK": I think I might be a lot like you, Bro. Maybe I never had the thought to try to make the world a better place for anybody other than myself because I never realized that was an option for someone like me. Till now.

"BRO": (silence)

"PIPSQUEAK": But, yeah, fuck it, I can still be a little bit selfish with it. If I’m gonna make the world a better place, then I’m gonna want some recognition for it. I’m still gonna want fame and power either way, so I can get it by being greedy and getting rich… but what if I can get fame and power for doing good things? Is doing good things not good anymore if you’re doing them for kinda-selfish reasons?

"BRO": I know what you mean, Little Brother, it’s just like people who get off on giving to charity; it’s the grayest of gray morality and I don’t have an answer for you.

"PIPSQUEAK": Does it make me evil that I want fame and power, Bro? After I’ve never tasted either and saw you basically have both my whole life?

"BRO": Evil? No. No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t… That one I can answer for you… Hm… Okay, here’s a question for ya: how much do you remember Mom talking about Grampa Vik?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...You mean Grampa Vuk?

"BRO": They’re the same person, Pipsqueak. Guy’s full name was Viktor Vukovich.* If you didn’t know that, I’m guessing she hasn’t told you much.
"PIPSQUEAK": Aw, she’s told me plenty. He was a great man, always provided for his family, got them out of shitass Hungary, blah blah-blah blah-blah.

"BRO": Well, there’s a lot more to it than that. There’s a reason she kept her last name when she married Dad.

"PIPSQUEAK": I thought she just didn’t like how Dad’s last name was hard to spell because of that silent E at the end.

"BRO": C’mon, Pipsqueak, she says that as a joke. Do you really think Vukovich is that much easier to spell?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Man, I dunno, I never thought about it. Don’t talk to me like you think I’m stupid, Bro.

"BRO": Sorry about that, Pipsqueak, I’m just… she really never told you about Grampa Vik? She wouldn’t stop telling me about him before you were born.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, Bro, you were still in the house until I was nine, do you remember her telling me?

"BRO": She probably would have told you in private if she did, like it was a family secret she wanted to clue you in on. Maybe she did tell you but you just weren’t paying attention.

"PIPSQUEAK": Shit, maybe. So why’d you bring this guy up?

"BRO": Well, Pipsqueak, you asked if a fox can be foxy and still be noble? Be good? Well, this guy might just prove that the answer is yes.

"PIPSQUEAK": And this isn’t just going off the sugar-coated fairy-tale stories about him you heard from Mom?

"BRO": I asked Dad once if this guy was for real or if Mom was just nuts for her dad, and he said that although he’d only met the guy a couple of times, he didn’t have any reason to think Mom was just talking him up. So here’s the Cliff Notes version of the guy’s life story; stop me if I’m telling you something you already heard.

"PIPSQUEAK": You don’t have to tell me twice, Bro.

"BRO": Alright, so… I’m recalling this all as I go along, so sorry if it comes out clunky.

"PIPSQUEAK": Take your time, Bro. You’re repaying me for all these quarters, though.

"BRO": Sure thing, little buddy. So… The Vukoviches had already been through a lot through the years. You know that “Vukovich” means “son of the wolf” or something like that, right? Way, way, way back, half a dozen centuries ago, a couple of wolves who lost all their children to diseases and accidents and all the stuff that killed kids back in the Dark Ages… they ran into a sweet little orphan fox-boy and bada-bing bada-boom, pressed the reset button on their lineage.

"PIPSQUEAK": I think I heard that somewhere.
"BRO": Awesome. Fast forward to, like… 1800? Thereabouts? At that point, the Vukovich foxes have to get the heck out of Ottoman-occupied Serbia because the Turks… uh… how should I say this?

"PIPSQUEAK": Because the Turks started raping and murdering people in all the neighboring villages so they wanted to get the hell out of town before they came for theirs. If that’s where you were going with that, Gramma already told me that. Plenty of times.

"BRO": …Well, I was trying to think of a more delicate way to put that, but basically. I guess my little Pipsqueak really is grown up, now isn’t he?

"PIPSQUEAK": You’d better believe it. But seriously, Gramma already told me that story in full gory-ass detail a couple of times now. That lady really hates her some Turks.

"BRO": Oh, don’t I know it! I remember Mom telling me that when her family moved to Vancouver and found out that turkey the bird and Turkey the country had the same name, they just plain never ate turkey around the house, just because Gramma and Grampa didn’t want to ask for it at the deli. I still can’t tell for the life of me if Mom’s just goofing on us, but considering how weird Gramma acted when she came to Delaware for Thanksgiving that one time, I’m not ruling out that Mom was being completely serious.

"PIPSQUEAK": I don’t doubt that for a second, Bro.

"BRO": So now they have to amscray out of their homeland, and it’s like, okay, Hungary’s right next door and they seem marginally better, so they head north. Set up shop in Budapest in a little Serbian enclave. But things aren’t going too hot. It’s not just that a lot of the Hungarians don’t like them for being Serbians, the other Serbians don’t like them for being foxes!

"PIPSQUEAK": There really weren’t any other foxes around for them to hang out with?

"BRO": Some, but not many.

"PIPSQUEAK": Figures.

"BRO": Alright, so put a pin in that. So Grampa Vik was named after his own grandfather, our great-great-grandfather. I don’t know too much about this guy, neither does Mom, neither does Gramma, and Gramps himself never met the guy, either. But as Grampa always told Mom and as Mom always told me… this Original Vik? They called him “first among the foxes.” Or whatever that would be in Hungarian. And I do mean Hungarian, not Serbian, because by that point it was, eh, the late eighteen-hundreds? All I’ve heard for sure about this dude was that after something like three-quarters of a century of not getting respect from anyone, the guy says screw it and moves his family out of Budapest and into the countryside, where there are a lot more fox families around, and I don’t know the specifics of how he did this, but he somehow commanded the respect of all the other species in the area and established himself as a leader in the fox community, all the while being an ethnic Serb. All the while he’s providing for his family like the Vukovich men haven’t been able to do in generations. First among the foxes. The foremost fox. The greatest fox who ever lived. That’s how Mom talked about Vik One-Point-Oh. She says even Grampa felt unworthy to bear his name.

"PIPSQUEAK": …You don’t say.

"BRO": That I do. But as great as the guy is, some of the locals still don’t like him, and one day long before Grampa Vik is born, they find Original Vik dead in a ditch somewhere.
"PIPSQUEAK": Jesus Christ!

"BRO": Mmhmm. To this day, we don’t have a clue who did it, but the story goes that the local authorities didn’t try too hard to look.

"PIPSQUEAK": What if it was the cops who killed him?

"BRO": That idea has been floated. But now we’ll never know. But by the time Great-Grampa Attila’s ready to have his own--

"PIPSQUEAK": Wait, wait, stopstopstopstopstop… our great-grandfather’s name was Attila? As in Attila the fucking Hun?

"BRO": Okay, now I’m kinda getting peeved with Mom for not telling you anything.

"PIPSQUEAK": Maybe she thought she told me but she’s actually remembering all the times she told you.

"BRO": You know what? That’s a pretty good hypothesis, Pipsqueak. But yeah, his honest-to-God name is Attila, which is apparently a pretty normal name in Hungary, and at this point the Vukoviches are mostly integrated into Hungarian culture -- still hanging on to the customs of their ancestors when they’re amongst themselves, but for their own convenience if nothing else, they give their kids Hungarian names and they don’t talk Serbian when strangers are around.

"PIPSQUEAK": Gotcha.

"BRO": So Attila’s having his own brood and he’s debating naming one of the sons after his father, but it doesn’t feel right at first. Then he has a son that comes out and even though he was just born, the kid’s got an uncanny resemblance to the Original Vik. According to Mom, it wasn’t just the way the kid looked, it was something about the way the light caught in a twinkle in his eye.

"PIPSQUEAK": A twinkle… in his eye?

"BRO": Hey, kid, I’m just telling you what I’ve been told. Still, none of this is ringing a bell so far?

"PIPSQUEAK": Nope.

"BRO": Damn. Next time I talk to Mom, I’ll have to ask her what’s up about that. So now Grampa Vik is a little kid. Not a toddler anymore, but definitely not old enough for any big responsibilities. And one day, the little scamp is playing in the forest they live in, when he sees a frog he wants to chase. So he chases it. He doesn’t even realize he’s late for dinner. Loses the frog in the creek and wanders home after dark… do you know where I’m going with this?

"PIPSQUEAK": Not really, Bro.

"BRO": …Nobody’s there. They’re all gone. His mom, his dad, five brothers and sisters. They’re gone, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": …What? Did they… where’d they go?

"BRO": Well, at first, Grampa Vik thinks they just… went out. Where? He’s a little kid, he doesn’t know. And by some miracle his uncle finds him wandering the woods, starving and dehydrated, and saves the kid. And the uncle explains that Vik’s mommy and daddy won’t be able to come home anytime soon.
"PIPSQUEAK": Did they… did they abandon the kid or something?

"BRO": Isn’t it obvious, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, you’re talking to me like I’m stupid again.

"BRO": …They were kidnapped, Pip. And probably murdered right after that. Not that we can prove anything; they never did find the bodies.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Holy shit …

"BRO": I had the same reaction when I first heard about that. See, the thing is, some people in the local village thought that Attila was stealing chickens from their farms. And they were right. Because Attila was having trouble scraping money together and their sustenance farming wasn’t doing diddly-squat, so he did what he had to do to protect his family. And one farmer -- I think he was a wolf -- one farmer he was stealing from really didn’t like that, so he and his farmhands went and eliminated the threat to their wellbeing. And basically everybody who heard what happened to the Vukovich family knew it was those farmers who did it, but they didn’t want to get involved. Apparently when Original Vik died, people slowly but surely thought it was safe to start disrespecting the foxes again, and by the time Grampa Vik rolled around, nobody gave a damn who his grandfather was anymore. Everyone thought, well, the sneaky fox was stealing and was telling his half-a-dozen kids that he was morally right for doing so, so they got what was coming to them. The only ones who had their back were the other foxes in the area, but they were foxes, what could they do? Any questions, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Oh, my God …

"BRO": Now you’re speechless hearing what I remember! So the uncle, apparently he never got the vulpine charisma gene because he was kind of a loner, never had his own family, but that works out because now he has a traumatized kindergartner to raise. So he teaches Vik everything he needs to know about being a fox in the world. And to keep a low profile, they try to survive off what the forest can provide for them, but every so often, just to make sure the kid knows how to be a little sneak when necessity demands it… they hop on over to the farm of the guy who expunged his family, and they bag themselves a chicken. Just to give the guy a big middle finger. You follow?

"PIPSQUEAK": Keep going.

"BRO": Well, by the time Vik’s a teenager, he’s starting to feel plenty confident in who he is. He’s starting to steal more chickens from that farmer just tofuck with him, and his uncle’s getting up there in age -- I think he was Vik’s mom’s oldest brother -- and he’s providing for him, too. As well as a stunning young vixen from the village who he met when he scattered a bunch of guys harassing her. And for bonus points, she’s ethnically Serbian and Croatian. Her name was Erzsébet, or Elizabeth, but you and me call her--

"PIPSQUEAK": --Gramma.

"BRO": Bingo. But as Grampa Vik gets more ballsy with stealing these chickens, the farmer’s losing his patience again. Now remember that Grampa at this point is only, like, sixteen, so he’s still dealing with the same generation of people. And when the farmer puts the pieces together and realizes it’s Attila’s son, he just goes on a warpath. And he even manages to kill Grampa’s uncle, and now Grampa is pissed. He was already fighting back with psychological warfare, but now he’s trying to get this guy to regret ever being born. Long story short, Grampa wins.
"PIPSQUEAK": That’s it?

"BRO": ...Long story less-short, Grampa single-handedly depletes the guy’s livestock and the farmer kills his useless farmhands before doing the same to himself.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Oh my fucking God.

"BRO": But Grampa did what he needed to do to protect those he cared about, all by using his cunning and not being afraid to break a few rules. And then he and Gramma had thirteen kids, mostly feeding them off the fat of the land, but also nabbing a few chickens here and there, since everyone in town knew by this point not to fuck with him -- man, Pipsqueak, if I gave myself a swear jar, I could probably pay you back for the phone call today -- but then a few years after Mom was born, bringing up the rear of the baker’s dozen, Gramma and Grampa both decided that communist Hungary sucked, so they headed over to Canada. And from there, his hero’s story is basically the same as any working immigrant parent, with all the due credit to Gramma, who also broke her back to give her family a better life in a strange new country.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...You know, maybe Mom never told me all this because she’s always so busy working.

"BRO": Could be. She always seemed busier after you showed up because that was around the time she and dad both got their promotions and they moved us out of that crappy apartment in the city. Do you even remember living in that apartment, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": Nope.

"BRO": Didn’t think so. But hey, yeah. Grampa Vik. There’s your answer. Assuming I wasn’t lied to -- and knowing our people’s legendary ability to spin fantastic, elaborate yarns, heck, maybe I shouldn’t assume that -- but if the stories are true, he’s someone who used his foxy instincts for good and not for evil. Maybe he didn’t make the entire world a better place, but he made the world a better place for the people he cared about.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Jeepers, Bro.

"BRO": Oh! And I completely forgot the part where he smoked like a chimney and got some nasty lung cancer. The doctors didn’t think he was going to last as long as he did, but he stuck it out long enough to see his youngest daughter get married. And the only time I ever saw the guy in action was when Mom showed me her and Dad’s wedding video -- just for Grampa’s convenience, they held the wedding in British Columbia. And you can see him in the church, there’s a nurse pushing his wheelchair and his IV stand as he walks Mom down the aisle, Mom’s holding him up as they dance for all of fifteen seconds, you can just see that the guy looks like he’s living on borrowed time, but he’s there. And the only time I’ve ever heard the guy speak -- his lungs and throat are failing, and you can just tell that English clearly isn’t his first language, but he’s still speaking so eloquently and confidently -- there’s two points on the wedding video when they capture him speaking. One, he’s talking to Mom, Mom’s crying, saying she’s so happy he could make it, and Grampa says, “Of course I would make it, Antónia; I have journeyed half the world for those I love, and I love you more than I love life itself, my daughter.” And then Mom hugged him and cried in his arms for a solid minute.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Jeez, who could beat that?

"BRO": Well, depending on your tastes, he may have topped himself. The second part where he speaks, he’s sitting with Dad, and whoever’s filming cuts in right as Dad’s explaining that he really admires Grampa as a man, and Grampa says, “Terrance, you are my friend, but I think of you as a
son. I know you make my Antónia happy, and I have belief in you that you and your children will make me and my wife proud. Remember, Terrance, old Viktor may die, but they cannot kill the spirit of the fox. I love you, my son. Please keep making my daughter happy.” And Dad, who’s clearly shaken by the words, he just spits out, “Oh, uh, uh, ye-yessir! I-I will! I love you, too, Dad.”

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Eh, the one about going to the ends of the earth for his daughter was better.

"BRO": But then out of nowhere, Grampa gets the strength to lean over and kiss Dad on the lips, and Grampa and everyone else laugh their asses off while Dad looks like he wants to crawl in a hole and die from embarrassment.

"PIPSQUEAK": (chuckling) O-okay, fuck it, that one wins.

"BRO": But yeah, I’m not an expert on how exactly cancer works, but something bad went down in his body the night after the wedding, and the guy croaked the Thursday afterwards. He made it as long as he could for his family, and it was just long enough. And I looked at a calendar and did the math; apparently Mom was so heartbroken that she wasn’t in the mood to conceive me until four months later.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Is this guy for real?

"BRO": I can’t tell you, Pipsqueak, but if he was anything like he was in that wedding video, I can believe it. I really can’t believe you haven’t seen it yourself. You’re sure Mom never showed it to you?

"PIPSQUEAK": I’d ask her right now but, you know, she’s at work. And she probably won’t be getting home until she’s not in the mood to talk about it.

"BRO": Makes sense. She’s working to support her family just like her parents did for her.

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, but she’s only got two of us, not a dozen plus an extra. And you’re not even around anymore!

"BRO": True. But you know what? I’d actually say don’t ask her. Not yet. Maybe there’s a reason she hasn’t shared this with you. She seemed pretty emotional about it every time she told me -- understandably so -- and maybe she just doesn’t want her heart broken again.

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, this phone call’s been a fucking rollercoaster.

"BRO": Are you even tall enough to ride a rollercoaster?

"PIPSQUEAK": (faint growling noises)

"BRO": I’m just messing with you, Pipsqueak. But does that answer your question? About if a fox can use his natural powers for good?

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, what if I don’t have these natural powers that you and the rest of our people seem to have?

"BRO": Man, Pip, don’t worry about it. You still have time to develop your skill set. At least I hope you do, because I’m hoping I still have time to develop mine.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, tell me, Bro: what does it mean to have talent? I always thought that it was something you’re born with, something you don’t have to develop.
"BRO": Believe me, Pipsqueak, I’ve been thinking the same thing a lot recently.

"PIPSQUEAK": So hearing about this super-fox who lived off the grid in the woods and broke the law to help people he cared about… it just seems too good to be true. I mean, shit, were they born that way? Or did they have to become that way?

"BRO": ‘They’? We’re… we’re talking about one person, right, Pippo?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… yeah, my bad. ‘He.’

"BRO": Well, I know that Grampa got that way because he went through one of the worst childhoods I’ve ever heard of, and then got lucky to be raised by someone who could make him into that kind of guy. So I’d actually say he definitely wasn’t born that way. But do you know another super-fox who lives off the grid in the woods, breaking the law to help the people he cares about?

"PIPSQUEAK": …No. Bro, I told you I just got my words mixed up!

"BRO": Just checkin’. Juuust checkin’. But hey, there may be hope for you and I yet! If there is a genetic element to it, then one of us might be next! It seems like the schedule is every other generation. Granted, I don’t know what any of our three-dozen cousins are up to in life… have you guys gotten in touch with the rest of Mom’s family besides Gramma since I moved out?

"PIPSQUEAK": Nope.

"BRO": Didn’t think so. Mom’s the weird one who married an American and moved to the States. Actually… I think a few of Mom’s oldest brothers never left Hungary since they were already grown up and out of the house by the time Gramma and Grampa hopped on the boat. But anyway, greatness definitely didn’t smile upon any of Mom’s generation. Aunt Judy and Uncle Joe both went to prison, Uncle George drunk-drove his car into a river, Aunt Eva OD’d on heroin and Uncle Mike’s probably snorting cocaine right now as we speak, completely forgetting he had a wife and four kids he walked out on--

"PIPSQUEAK": All I know is that Uncle Sam has Down syndrome and lives in a nursing home somewhere in BC.

"BRO": Wasn’t even gonna mention him, but yeah, if Gramma and Grampa did one thing that wasn’t that great, it was having kids into their forties when things like that are a lot more likely to happen. Poor Sammy. He didn’t deserve that. Sam was Number 12, so Mom’s lucky she didn’t turn out the same way. Really, the most… uh… the ones of Mom and her siblings who achieved the most greatness would be Uncle Kris, who played minor-league hockey for awhile before he realized the Whalers were in no hurry to call him up to the NHL, and Aunt Paula got sober and now she’s an AA sponsor, so she’s helping people, good for her. And I guess Uncle David became an Orthodox priest, so there’s that, if you’re into that sort of thing.

"PIPSQUEAK": I ain’t. But… fuck, I don’t wanna sound like such a whiny little bitch, Bro, but… the idea that this isn’t in our control kinda makes me feel even worse. Because then there’s a pretty good chance that it just ain’t in me, and if it is … shit, what if I somehow fuck it up?

"BRO": Pipsqueak, relax. Just follow your gut and see where it takes you. That way, even if you go the wrong way, at least you can feel like it was the best choice you could have made.

"PIPSQUEAK": …Bro, that doesn’t make any goddamn sense.

"BRO": Hey, kid, at least I’m trying to give you helpful advice. If you told Dad about all this, he’d
probably just think you were being weird. And I have to ask, Pip… what did inspire this question?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...You really wanna know?

"BRO": No, Pipsqueak, I don’t really wanna know, and I’d rather waste my time hearing something I don’t want to hear just as part of an underhanded plot to get you to waste even more of your quarters. Just to mess with you. Of course I wanna know, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I met a fox not too long ago who got me thinking.

"BRO": Why’d he get you thinking?

"PIPSQUEAK": Because he seemed perfect.

"BRO": Was it that really tall guy you were talking about?

"PIPSQUEAK": I thought you said you didn’t believe that guy was real!

"BRO": Maybe he was real, but you overestimated how tall he was just like how you overestimated how perfect he was. Are you sure he didn’t just seem five feet tall from your perspective? Because I know that when I’m standing right next to, like, a bear, from that angle I can’t tell when they’re six feet tall or ten feet tall. The opposite works too! My driver’s license’s said four feet for years now, and the bigger species can’t tell that I’m fudging the numbers by like, four or five inches.

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… no. No, Bro. I got plenty of good looks at him. It wasn’t an optical illusion.

"BRO": ‘Plenty of good looks’? What, were you stalking him?

"PIPSQUEAK": I was… maybe following him around. Him and his friend. The boys were with me.

"BRO": Wait, for real?

"PIPSQUEAK": That’s the thing. I met him, I got it in my head he was perfect, and then I had the chance to follow him all over town--

"BRO": ‘All over town.’

"PIPSQUEAK": --and by the end, I was starting to think he was perfect in more ways than just being fucking gigantic. He seemed like he was a fucking genius. I don’t just mean book-smart, Bro, I mean street-smart, too. Just like a fox oughta be. And it seemed wherever he went, people knew him and they loved him. And wait! I know what you’re thinking! And I was thinking it, too! ...This guy can’t actually be like this, can he be?

"BRO": Maybe he’s a businessman like me. Maybe he’s putting on an air to get people on his good side.

"PIPSQUEAK": That’s what I was wondering…

"BRO": You said it seems like he knows everybody? Well, I know I’m trying to make a pointed effort toward meeting everybody I can in this town. It’s exhausting sometimes because some people are just so freaking antisocial -- especially the transplants from the Midwest -- but having connections always pays off. Oh, speaking of transplants, I randomly ran into a guy who I knew from high school back in Delaware. Sloth. Nice guy. Works at the DMV now.

"PIPSQUEAK": A sloth? I don’t remember you having any sloth friends.
"BRO": I said I knew him, Pipsqueak. I didn’t say me and him were boys. Dude’s kinda weird and I would never choose to hang out with him, but he doesn’t know that. You know, it’s weird: on the West Coast, apparently the stereotype is that DMV employees are slow, whereas back east the stereotype is that they’re the most mean-spirited motherfuckers on planet earth. Which they are. Pardon my French. Don’t be in too excited for the day you get your license, Pip.

"PIPSQUEAK": Cool, cool. But, uh… so, back to the guy I met. Mister Perfect. The thing about him was… let me put it this way: if I saw someone else trying to act like him, I’d think they were fake. But nobody thought this guy was fake!

"BRO": How do you mean? What was he doing?

"PIPSQUEAK": Like, being really polite, but in a way that seemed cool and not just dorky.

"BRO": You mean like he was chivalrous?

"PIPSQUEAK": What’s that mean?

"BRO": ...Was he wearing a fedora?

"PIPSQUEAK": What’s a fedora?

"BRO": ...Did he act like an old-timey gentleman? Like his social skills were kind of outdated?

"PIPSQUEAK": Kinda. Like if you took the old-timey gentleman and just… tweaked him so he could exist today and nobody would think he was trying to copy Casanova or… or Adam Bell or something.

"BRO": Why does Adam Bell keep coming up in this conversation?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Man, I dunno.

"BRO": Well, listen, Pipper, a lot of losers try to emulate old-timey charm to get chicks. Most of them fail and look even worse than if they were just awkward or dicks, because now the entire world can see they’re fakes. But you may have run into one of the select few who can pull it off. If you want to emulate him, you can go ahead, I’m not your keeper, but I’d advise you to tread carefully and not lose your sense of self trying to be someone else.

"PIPSQUEAK": But what if I want to be someone else?

"BRO": Well then, quite frankly, you’ll never be happy, Pipsqueak. Now, you mentioned this guy was perfect, and you’d originally asked about foxes being good people. Did this guy do something while you were following him that made you feel like he was actually heroic and not just Mister Popularity?

"PIPSQUEAK": (breathing)

"BRO": Pipsqueak, buddy, are you there?

"PIPSQUEAK": We was just… going door-to-door in a… kinda run-down neighborhood downtown, making sure the people there were okay. Seeing if they needed any help.

"BRO": That’s it?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...And like I said, they all knew him and adored him.
"BRO": This is how this guy spends his days off?

"PIPSQUEAK": I think he was unemployed.

"BRO": Ha! Of course. Maybe he was on disability checks because his body’s a wreck from being too freakishly tall.

"PIPSQUEAK": No, he… seemed fine to me.

"BRO": Well, from what you’re describing, Pip, I can see why you might be jealous of this guy at first sight, but I think your gut’s right here. He sounds like a phony.

"PIPSQUEAK": Nono! That’s the thing! My brain thinks he’s a phony… my gut’s telling me that my brain’s overthinking things.

"BRO": Hm. Interesting… Alright, let me say this: if you want to try to copy this guy, go ahead, but you’d better know what you’re doing when you do, or instead of being Somebody, you might wind up being Nobody.

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, you basically already said that.

"BRO": Well, what else do you want me to say? I’m out of advice!

"PIPSQUEAK": …Can I ask a new question?

"BRO": Absolutely.

"PIPSQUEAK": Should I -- in your opinion -- should I try to be who I think I am, or should I try to be who I want to be?

"BRO": You should want to be who you think you are, Pipsqueak. That I can say with certainty.

"PIPSQUEAK": But what if I don’t like who I think I am?

"BRO": Then get some confidence and learn to like things about yourself.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, what if someone did that, what if someone tried to be who they really thought they were, and everyone else in the entire world thought they were just an enormous asshole? What if who I am is an enormous asshole, Bro?

"BRO": Then if who you really are is an asshole, be an asshole.

"PIPSQUEAK": ( silence )

"BRO": That’s what I did.

"PIPSQUEAK": …Should I be taking advice from you?

"BRO": Me? Oh. No. No, absolutely not. ( chuckles ) I have no idea why you even called me, really!

"PIPSQUEAK": …Great. Glad I wasted my time.

"BRO": Glad I could be of service!

"PIPSQUEAK": So do you think my business skills will get better?
"BRO": I thought we just discussed that you shouldn’t take me at my word?

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah. We did. But I’m stupid. So answer the question anyway. Do you think I’ll get better at selling shit?

"BRO": I can’t answer that for you, Pipsqueak. Practice doesn’t necessarily make perfect if you don’t have the critical thinking skills to figure out what you’re doing right, what you’re doing wrong, and how to fix what you’re doing wrong. Maybe you have that, maybe you don’t. I don’t know you like that.

"PIPSQUEAK": You don’t know a lot about me, do you?

"BRO": Oh, God, no. I’d love to catch up the next time we see each other, but I don’t have the time and money to travel, so unless you’re coming out here, that won’t be for awhile.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hm… Do you think I… can get better? I’m not asking if you think I will, I’m asking if you think I can.

"BRO": You mean with your business acumen? Or your critical thinking?

"PIPSQUEAK": Both. Or just… becoming a better person than I think I’m supposed to be.

"BRO": Sure you can get better, but it’s the same as how you can win the lottery. Try it out, but don’t put all your chips on it, because it probably won’t pay off. But still, have some fun and gamble a little bit on yourself.

"PIPSQUEAK": If someone helps a bunch of people and they admire him for it, is it bad if that person gets off on the admiration?

"BRO": No.

"PIPSQUEAK": Do you think Grampa got off on the admiration he got?

"BRO": He might not have shown it, but he definitely did. At least a little bit.

"PIPSQUEAK": And from what I told you about the freakishly perfect super-fox who everyone seemed to love, do you think he gets off on it?

"BRO": I mean, he’s got to. If you don’t get a kick out of everybody calling you a hero… man, then you just aren’t any fun.

"PIPSQUEAK": And… last thing… is it… unheroic to be short?

"BRO": ...What the heck are you talking about?

"PIPSQUEAK": How come in every movie and TV show I’ve ever seen, the heroes are always tall guys? Like, okay, they’re not gigantic, but they’re never below average. Hell, like-- we keep bringing up Sidney movies for some reason, let’s think of all the Sidney movies. Now the girly Sidney movies, the boy-ey Sidney movies. The ones with hero types. Even in cartoons, they’re always fucking huge! Like, I’m thinking over the videotapes we have in the living room… even when they did fucking G-rated Sherlock Holmes with mice, fucking mouses, Bro, they drew G-rated Sherlock as the tallest mouse on the screen. Or one of the tallest, at least. Do you get why I get that impression?

"BRO": Jeez, someone could do a psychological study on you to prove the negative effect of
physical vanity in media.

"PIPSQUEAK": But am I wrong?

"BRO": And does this have something to do with how the guy who’s easily the tallest fox you’ve ever met also seems to be easily the most heroic fox you’ve ever met?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Yes.

“BRO”: And now you’re afraid that life imitates art.

“PIPSQUEAK”: ...Yeah.

"BRO": I’m not gonna lie to you, bro, I’m sure there’s some way of thinking that because society thinks being taller is better, taller people have more self-esteem, so they have the cojones to do more brave things, proving the stereotype true, ipso facto, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. But forget that, Pipsqueak. Real life doesn’t play by Hollywood’s rules. Hell, if you ask me, it would be pretty fucking heroic for a short guy to overcome that very stigma and do something heroic anyway. But that’s just my opinion. You wanna know what’s really heroic? Having confidence when the world says you don’t deserve to have any. Unfortunately, little brother, confidence is the one thing I don’t sell, so I can’t just give it to ya. You’re gonna have to find it for yourself.

"PIPSQUEAK": (silence)

"BRO": Although cocaine makes a pretty good imitation, which I can sell you, though it’s not a permanent fix. And it can have some nasty side-effects.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...I think I know what I gotta do next.

"BRO": Oh? Did I help you, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": By accident, kinda.

"BRO": Do you feel like you know me better now?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… by accident. Kinda.

"BRO": Well, works for me. You good to go?

"PIPSQUEAK": I mean… is there anything else you wanted to ask me?

"BRO": I dunno. See any good movies lately?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… I saw one about skateboarders last weekend. It was alright. One of the guys was named Stacy, and I thought it was weird that they named him that.

"BRO": I think that was a real guy named Stacy that that character was based on, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": Oh! Wait! I remembered the last thing I wanted to tell you!

"BRO": What’s that?

"PIPSQUEAK": We found the waterfall in the woods.

"BRO": ...No shit?
"PIPSQUEAK": It’s real. I thought you were just fucking with us, Bro. Sorry I doubted you.

"BRO": You see, Pipsqueak? You can always trust your old Bro.

"PIPSQUEAK": Except when you tell me to my face that I shouldn’t take your advice because you’re a stupid asshole.

"BRO": Darn tootin’, Pipsqueak. So… did the crazy homeless guys who lived around there die or something?

"PIPSQUEAK": Uh… I gotta ask, Bro, did you ever actually… see those crazy homeless people?

"BRO": I myself didn’t, but I heard their voices, though. It was weird because, through the trees, half of them sounded like methed-out rednecks, and the other half sounded British or something. Pretty weird combination, if you ask me.

"PIPSQUEAK”: ( silence )

"BRO": So did you see them?

"PIPSQUEAK": What? Oh, no, no, uh… no sign of ‘em. We actually only went there because -- if you remember Kevin, the hyena kid who lived next door -- he went there at night to try to find it, but he ran into some cops who thought he was the crazy homeless person, so they kicked his ass.


"PIPSQUEAK": Naw, fuck him. He had it coming.

"BRO": Is he alright?

"PIPSQUEAK": Nope.

"BRO": …Oookay then. Did this guy… do you have a history with this guy that you and him don’t gel?

"PIPSQUEAK": Oh. Bro. He kicks my ass all the time for no reason. And Double-D’s and Ed’s.

"BRO": That stupid hyena can beat up a freaking grizzly bear?

"PIPSQUEAK": Ed’s a klutz and he’s too kind to fight back. Unless he has a pebble in his shoe.

"BRO": …I don’t get it. But hey, if I’m ever back in town and I run into this hyena kid, I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind for messing with my baby brother! I don’t care if he’s bigger than me, I’ll give him a piece of my mind!

"PIPSQUEAK": If he ever wakes up.

"BRO": …Is he in a fucking coma or something? Uh-- pardon my French again--

"PIPSQUEAK": Yeah, he is. Good riddance.

"BRO": …You know, Pip, you were talking so much about wanting to be a fox hero, but here you are happy that a kid got beat into a coma by the cops. Does that seem pretty heroic to you?

"PIPSQUEAK": He’s the villain of my story, Bro. He’s the bad guy.
"BRO": You know what would be really heroic, though? Reforming him and forgiving him.

"PIPSQUEAK": What the--? Bro, weren’t you the one who said you were cool with being an asshole? Where’s this coming from?

"BRO": Hey, Pipsqueak, I can still dream about what I’d do if I were heroic. But it’s just not in my genes. Maybe the Super-Fox can help you fix him with that magical personality you raved about. Just something to think about.

"PIPSQUEAK": Naw, he doesn’t have to help him. Fuck him. I want him to be a worse person than me.

"BRO": Okay, now that is definitely not heroic.

"PIPSQUEAK": What the fuck do you know about heroism?

"BRO": Well, if someone were to try to convince me that they were, quote, ‘heroic’ when they were that vindictive, I would tell them to their face that they hadn’t convinced me. You’ve got me thinking about a lot of people I know who say they think that prisons should rehab criminals instead of just punishing them, but then when they hate someone -- for personal reasons, for political reasons, whatever -- when they hate someone, they want that person dead. Oh, yeah, sure, you want to reform bad people until they do something to slight you. Real fucking noble of you. There’s another for the swear jar. But yeah, this is why I don’t vote.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...So you wouldn’t actually take my side against him.

"BRO": Who? The hyena? Of course I’d take your side, Pipsqueak! And I’d go up to this kid who I definitely can’t fight -- legally or physically -- and I’d try to work my charisma to talk to him on his level and get him to change his ways. Because there are some people whose asses you can kick and you can get them to feel bad for what they did to you, but most people? Kick their ass or scream at them that they’re an asshole or something that makes it clear that you think you’re unarguably good and they’re unarguable evil? They’re just gonna think you’re stupid, or an asshole, or a narcissist, and they’re gonna feel vindicated in whatever they did to piss you off, because they’re gonna think that if that’s how you react, you’re an asshole and you deserved it.

"PIPSQUEAK": ( silence )

"BRO": And I’ve been that guy. When I was living in Boston a few years back, I was in line at the grocery store and the nervous-looking bunny in front of me is digging through her purse, and clear as day I see a can of Fox Repellent.

"PIPSQUEAK": Wait, they still make that stuff!?

"BRO": You have to order it off shady websites or late-night infomercials on bunny channels, but yes. They do. Even though it’s basically just regular mace with a racist label. And when I see the can, I just tell her off for it. I say, hey, you have a can of mace that specifically targets one demographic, how do you justify that? How do you think you’re a good person for doing that? If you’re so confident in your decisions, lady, mace me right now in a crowded grocery store. And I’m expecting her to be embarrassed. Instead, she turns to the cashier and says something like, ‘Jeez, foxes are so aggressive over nothing, this is why I have to protect myself from them.’ Now I know -- I know -- I was right to feel displeased that she had that can of mace in her purse… but I’m not so sure it was the right move to tell her off, not because it was an inherently immoral decision or anything, but because I saw the net result… she was even more confident in her bigotry than she was two minutes prior. Now, I’ve talked to other foxes about this, I’ve talked to other predators
about this, hell, I’ve talked to a few prey friends about this, and it’s a whole big thing; some say I made the right choice to tell her off and that it was fucked up that she wasn’t embarrassed; some say I should have told her off just as an act of justified catharsis and if it worked on her, then it worked on her, and if not, then whatever; some say I should’ve killed her with kindness because telling her off was never gonna work, but others say that being nice to her would be excusing her racism; others say she never would have listened to me and my best bet was to find a not-racist prey person around and talk through them to talk some sense into her -- and even then, half of them say I should have used my prey proxy to tell her off anyway and the other half say I should have had the prey person be like, ‘hey, I don’t mean to attack you, but your decision is stigmatizing that poor gentleman who’s done nothing to you’ -- and most of them, most of them, say that there’s nothing I could have done, she’s prey, I’m a predator, she’s a bunny, I’m a fox, she would never be convinced to change unless something snapped in her brain and she made that decision to change herself, and I just have to twiddle my thumbs and hope that happens… It’s a shame that bunny was racist, because she was smokin’ freaking hot. No loving god would ever rig my libido to want to copulate with the people who hate me… You still there, Pipsqueak?

"PIPSQUEAK": Mmhmm.

"BRO": Listen, bro, I’m sorry I went on that tangent, I don’t want to talk politics, but politics are really messed up in this town and I can’t not think about them when they barge their way into my head… okay. Back to the hyena kid. Listen, Pip: changing people is hard. A lot of different people have a lot of different ideas for how to do it: positivity, negativity, kindness, anger, compassion, ridicule, praise, punishment, peace, violence, emotional manipulation, lobotomies, psychoactive chemicals… but most methods don’t work most of the time, and all those methods can make things worse if the person doesn’t know what they’re doing with them. Because it all comes down to the person implementing those methods. And everyone thinks that their method works best, and nobody will allow themselves to be told otherwise, which shouldn’t be surprising since taking it upon yourself to try to change someone is an inherently arrogant thing to do, begging the question of whether changing people is even possible … but we have to believe it is, and we have to try it anyway. Because nothing’s going to get better unless we believe people can change. Then there are some people who think they can just shun all the people they don’t like… forever. And they don’t want their enemies to change; they want their enemies gone. Dead. Defeated. And I don’t like that mindset because I’m that person to somebody else, we’re all that person to somebody else, and I don’t like that I can make an honest mistake once and there are people out there who feel high and mighty specifically because they’re never going to give me the opportunity to redeem myself. But somebody still has to convince these fucking people they’re wrong, because if nobody does, then society is fucked. And I’d try to do it myself, but I don’t think that even I’m that persuasive. But someone out there has to be… Whew. Shit, I’m almost done… hey. Pipsqueak… I don’t know what this hyena kid did to you. Or what he’s done to anybody else. But as someone who knows that people out there think I’m unforgivable because of the species I was born as, I don’t believe in unforgivable. Unless an actual, honest-to-God medical professional checks him out and says, yeah, no, he’s got a problem with his brain and he’s emotionally handicapped, he’s literally incapable of not being an asshole, then fuck it, do away with him. But if you really want to convince me you’re the one in our family who’s really first among the foxes, then don’t give up hope that he can change. Even if you can’t be the one to change him, don’t give up hope that he can. Because even Grampa Vik wasn’t that strong… Changing people is hard, Pipsqueak. That’s why I consider it heroic. And that’s why I don’t think I’m a hero.

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Are you done?

"BRO": Like I said, Pipsqueak, I’ve been thinking about this a lot.

"PIPSQUEAK": I was gonna say, a lot of that sounded scripted.
"BRO": I may have been rehearsing that monologue in the shower the other day. But hey, I know a lot of people who--

"PIPSQUEAK": Oh, great, more .

"BRO": No, this is only a quick sentence or two.

"PIPSQUEAK": Or twenty.

"BRO": As someone who knows a lot of people for networking purposes, I know a lot of people who would hate me for believing something as controversial as ‘forgiveness is good’ and ‘we should try to change people instead of shunning them’, and they always twist it into ‘oh, well, would you forgive the people who did 9/11?’ and I just--

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, you’re ranting again.

"BRO": Fuck, I’m sorry, Pipsqueak… what I meant to say was thanks for letting me bitch and moan in confidence.

"PIPSQUEAK": Your swear jar’s overflowing, Bro.

"BRO": Probably. I’m gonna have to watch my tongue after this to make sure those naughty words don’t slip out when I’m conducting business. But hey. Kid. Of course I would take your side against that mean kid. You know I love you, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": ...Why would you think I know that?

"BRO": Because I’m your brother!

"PIPSQUEAK": And? You call me once a year on my birthday and that’s it.

"BRO": Then get your own cell phone with the money you snagged! When I call the house phone, Mom and Dad won’t shut up and by the time I get the chance to talk to you, all my prepaid minutes are gone!

"PIPSQUEAK": Bro, I wasn’t lying when I said I’ve always looked up to you, but… part of me’s been wondering for awhile if I shouldn’t. Like, subconsciously.

"BRO": Uh… what do you mean?

"PIPSQUEAK": For like, a year and a half, I keep having this dream where me and the boys are getting chased out of town by the other kids in the neighborhood. They want to kill us. And I’m trying to find your place because I’m sure you’ll keep me safe. Then we get there and the first thing you do is twist my ankle in a complete circle until it breaks.

"BRO": Wha--!? Why the hell would I ever do that!?

"PIPSQUEAK": Because you actually kinda did that once when I was a little kid. I was like, three or four. We were playing Uncle and you twisted my ankle until I started crying. I couldn’t walk right on it for like a week.

"BRO": ...P-Pipsqueak, I don’t remember ever--

"PIPSQUEAK": We were watching a hockey game in the living room. One of the teams was the Whalers back when they were still around. I think that’s why in the dream, you live in a trailer shaped like a big green whale. I think Uncle Kris was still in their system back then, so that’s why
we were Hartford fans for awhile… actually, yeah, he was definitely still in their system, because Mom brought up our uncle, and that gave you the idea to play Uncle.

"BRO": ...Uh--

"PIPSQUEAK": Mom and Dad were there, but they were so wrapped up in the game that they didn’t notice you were hurting me until I started crying loud enough. Then Mom got up and smacked you across the face and her claws scratched your snout really, really deep. Then Dad chokeslammed you onto the couch and screamed “What the fuck is wrong with you!?” so loud he couldn’t talk again for an hour. And when he threw you down, a bunch of blood-drops from the gashes on your nose splattered all over the couch and the wall. Then you were crying.

"BRO": ...O-okay, I… I remember now.

“PIPSQUEAK”: If you remember, then tell me why you did it.

“BRO”: I-I don’t remember that! Just the part about… Dad throwing me on the couch… and--

"PIPSQUEAK": I think the only reason they didn’t take me to the hospital was because Mom and Dad knew I was afraid of going to the doctor back then.

"BRO": ...B-b-but Pipsqueak, I never hurt you besides that, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": I dunno. I don’t remember everything. But you definitely did it once, and that makes me wonder what’s inside you.

"BRO": You said you were three or four? So I would’ve been… what, eleven or twelve? Pipsqueak, I was stupid when I was a kid! You know I’m not like that anymore, right? I was a stupid kid!

"PIPSQUEAK": Well you started your lucrative business venture around that age, so how stupid could you have been?

"BRO": ...I-I--

"PIPSQUEAK": I feel like such a prissy like Double-D putting these bullshit meanings on my dreams, but… what if it means that I’ve spent my whole life chasing after this perfect idea of my brother… someone who’s gonna help me and protect me and… lead me… only to finally find you and find out you don’t really give a shit about me? But hey, that’s just a guess. It’s just a dream. A dream I just happen to keep having. Maybe it don’t mean nothin’ at all.

"BRO": ...Pipsqueak. I’m sorry. That’s who I was. I’m not like that anymore.

"PIPSQUEAK": Well, you know what, Bro? I have faith that you can change, even though I barely know who you are in the first place.

"BRO": ...I see.

"PIPSQUEAK": For the record, Bro, I wasn’t even going to bring that up before you told me I oughta try to forgive the hyena. Because I’ve been having this dream every couple of weeks, and I’ve been remembering the time you fucked up my ankle every couple of weeks, and I just kept writing it off as, ‘oh, that’s some wacky shit that happened once, it doesn’t mean anything else!’ But then you went on your little rant and you got me thinking about it. Forgive Kevin. Of course you would think that. You clearly have a vested fucking interest in me thinking that way.
"BRO": Hey, bro, I already said I’ve made mistakes and I want people to forgive me for them!

"PIPSQUEAK": Exactly. You know you’re an asshole and you want to be let off the hook for it. I guess I’ve been ignoring the warning signs for years but your little soapbox put the pieces together for me in five minutes. Fuck, it was probably a good thing you didn’t want to play with me that one time you were holed up fingering your prick to a bunny in basketball shorts; God knows what kind of fucked-up games you woulda wanted to play... Well, anyway, I’m actually running out of quarters now!

"BRO": Wait, really?

"PIPSQUEAK": Yup. Buh-bye, Bro.

"BRO": Wait! Pipsqueak. Real quick, I… you… you do know I love you, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": Mmhmm. Sure.

"BRO": I’m serious! Even if I don’t say it much, I do!

"PIPSQUEAK": You say a lot of things, Bro. Not all of them are true.

"BRO": C’mon, I wouldn’t lie about something like that to my own brother! Pip, for real, save up for your own phone and I’ll talk to you more often!

"PIPSQUEAK": I thought you were always busy hustling and time is money?

"BRO": Bro, I might have a bunch of friends in this town, but I’m not really close with any of them. I’d love to make time to talk to my baby brother some more. Especially now that you’re older and we can have adult conversations!

"PIPSQUEAK": (silence)

"BRO": I’m lonely in this godforsaken city, Pipsqueak. Nobody here cares about me.

"PIPSQUEAK": Then just call the house and ask for me.

"BRO": Mom and Dad are gonna act weird if I do! They’re gonna think I’m trying to corrupt you!

"PIPSQUEAK": Hey, do you think Mom and Dad hate you because you’re a bunnyfucker?

"BRO": Huh? Oh, uh, uh… Well, lemme put it this way, Pip. They’ve never once asked me if I have a girlfriend.

"PIPSQUEAK": Hm. Neato.

"BRO": (silence)

"PIPSQUEAK": I wasn’t going anywhere with that. I’m still hanging up on you. Toodles.

"BRO": Pipsqueak, don’t be like that!

"PIPSQUEAK": I guess telling you off works to make you feel bad.

"BRO": Hey, when it’s coming from my own baby brother--!

"PIPSQUEAK": When’s my birthday, Bro?
"BRO": ...Pipsqueak, I know your birthday! I call you on your birthday every year!

"PIPSQUEAK": No, Mom reminds you it’s my birthday the day before.

"BRO": ...Julyyy...

"PIPSQUEAK": Mhmmm?

"BRO": ...Twenty-fifth.

"PIPSQUEAK": Nope. Catch ya later.

"BRO": Pipsqueak, you know I love you, right?

"PIPSQUEAK": The phone’s beeping in my ear, Bro.

"BRO": I love you, Pipsqueak.

"PIPSQUEAK": (rustling sounds)

"BRO": I’m sorry, bud.

(click)

(call ends)

Chapter End Notes

*A. N.*, Man, I lost count of all the pop culture references in this one. And if you haven’t seen Vuk a.k.a. The Little Fox, I gotta say I recommend it; not the greatest film ever, but certainly one that deserves more recognition outside of Europe. Anyway, I was racing to finish this (it wasn’t supposed to be 46 Google Docs pages, but I just couldn’t close the floodgates I’d opened) by today, the 4th, because not only is it the 21st anniversary of Ed, Edd ‘n’ Eddy, it’s the one-year anniversary of this fic! (...give or take a day because I couldn’t figure out FF.net/AO3 at first) There’s still plenty, plenty, plenty more to go, so before continuity lockout really sets in, I’m brainstorming ways to further promote it besides passively linking to it on r/fanfiction at random -- crosspost on DeviantArt? give Tumblr a try? be ballsy and muse about it on Twitter? (...lolno… right?) Even if you’re reading this far in the future, if I’m still not done with it, I’d love to hear your recommendations for how to advertise this efficiently. I’ve seen other people do it, and I want a piece of that pie. I like pie. As for the present, the next Significant Date would be the 19th (Ed’s/Matt Hill’s birthdays) but yeah no I’m not making that, so I’m gonna shoot for February 16th (Robin’s stepdad’s/Brian Bedford’s birthdays). Hopefully I don’t get drafted to die in Iran before then. Wish me luck. Thanks for a good first year in the fanfic world -- if this all blows up tomorrow, I’ll still remember my OGs. Take care.

...And yes, I have now retconned the endings of both Robin Hood AND Ed, Edd ‘n’ Eddy. I am an iconoclast. Fear me, for I shall dismantle all that you hold dear. But for good reason.
Anxiety

Chapter Summary

One man fears he isn't the person he's always tried to be. Another fears that he can never be the person he's always tried to be. They are then thrust into a situation that demands they be the people they've always tried to be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

19. “Anxiety”

That thing was happening where no matter what they did, they had a funny feeling that it wasn’t the best way they could be spending their time. But neither of them confessed this feeling lest it jeopardize their confidence in one another.

After a very long day showing the boys around yesterday in eighty-seven degree heat, the two of them decided they might as well turn in early; as they say, “Early to bed, early to rise, and we’ll hit Prince John right between the eyes.” They overslept and woke up less than an hour before sunrise. They made a journey toward Sherwood Forest Road, not actually planning to conduct business that morning, just going to see if it was still being patrolled like bees guarding a hive. Sure enough, they saw red and blue lights through the trees, not even moving, just parked there, and they swallowed their pride and accepted that it would be awhile before their highwaymen act would be a risk worth the reward. As they left the area, they theorized that maybe word about the fate of the von Bartonschmeers got around in upper-class circles and now the rich folks who frequented the road were finally taking the urban legends seriously; perhaps there was no one to rob on that road anyway, and there might not be until everyone forgot.

Since they were relatively close by, they made their way to the Major Oak; amid all the insanity, they just wanted to make sure it was still there. They chuckled to themselves that of course the Sheriff and his men would be such cowards to avoid journeying to that place at night to ambush them, even if it would have been the most logical move on the Law’s part; then they wondered if their charade of acting like the camp was abandoned had worked too well, and their self-impressed chuckles trailed off.

While they were there, they grabbed a book that they had been reading together; they needed something to do to pass their down time in that godforsaken van, and since everything they’d done the last few days seemed to tie back to waiting for the heat to die down, they were going to have a lot more down time than usual. They got back to the van and brainstormed how they wanted to spend their day. Robin wanted to get down to the financial district in time for the morning commute, but they resolved that they’d never make it in time; Little John suggested they go back to bed for awhile and wake up fully refreshed for some action all day long and into the night, but they both agreed that they were just too awake now to fall back asleep. Then Little John asked if Robin knew when the heat wave was going to end, and Robin thought that was a damn good question. They went around the junkyard looking for recent newspapers and soon found a Sunday edition that forecast that this particular day was going to be the hottest of the week, topping out in the low nineties despite strong winds. Little John mused that the people of the city would probably
understand if they took it easy that day so they didn’t die of heatstroke, and he was fully expecting Robin to dismiss that as cowardice, but much to his surprise, Robin agreed that they shouldn’t overwork themselves on this particular day, but also stated that they couldn’t stay in that godforsaken van all day as it baked in the sun. Little John proposed that they head back to the Major Oak and spend the day playing defense, or at least until they came up with a better plan of what they could do with their day, adding that for all they knew, those nutty kids might come out of the literal woodwork and tell them they were ready to get down to business. Robin consciously remembered the previous day when he saw the mural in the warehouse and felt reinvigorated in his mission, but for some reason, when he woke this morning, fully aware of yesterday’s memory, he just wasn’t feeling it. He agreed with Little John and they hoofed it back to Sherwood, weapons drawn just in case the cops grew a pair.

They sat perched in the branches to hide themselves, and they stayed there for a bit before they realized that they were so bored that they might as well gamble their safety to have something to do, so they climbed down, found a serviceably comfortable spot to sit next to one another, and cracked open the book.

The book was a recommendation from their drug supplier, who described it as a literary Blair Witch Project -- a film that was released the second summer of the Merry Men’s adventures and which they had never had the time or interest to see. In the highly-experimental novel, a young man becomes obsessed with an old, blind, mononymous hermit who recently passed away in his friend’s apartment building, leaving behind scraps of a faux scholarly examination (complete with copious amounts of false citations to nonexistent sources) on a fictional documentary about a house that changed dimensions and ultimately turns out to contain a supernatural second house inside itself. The book was structured as the report being presented with footnotes from the guy who discovered it, detailing his process of finding out more information on the dead guy and how all this research on the dead guy was causing him to lose his mind, regularly further interrupted by long incoherent rambles about the discoverer’s sexual exploits. All the while the author would mess around with the formatting, with words being spelled out one letter per page or entire sentences being printed upside-down and backwards. Robin and Little John had on several occasions asked their drug guy just what the hell kind of book he had recommended them, but he insisted they push through, as it was considered a modern classic. Indeed it was considered a modern classic at the time, but about a year after the events of our story, Dear Reader, the novel’s author would release another experimental novel that was even more gimmicky, and the wide consensus among readers and critics alike was that the author was just an overly-pretentious madman who had been given too much credit the first time.

The main character of the dead man’s story-within-a-story was the inhabitant of the haunted house, who was a successful photographer who was most infamous for taking a photo of a starving child in Africa being eyed by a vulture -- which was a detail that some readers found bogus, Robin and John included, because that was a very real photograph and the real-life photographer had committed suicide after being guilted for taking a photo instead of helping the child. But in any case, in the part of the book Robin and John were at, this photographer is bravely venturing into the supernatural anti-house inside his own to rescue a team of explorers who got lost inside it, and the photographer is reluctantly being assisted by his estranged, bumbling, unaccomplished non-identical twin brother, who admires the photographer so much that he refers to him by his last name, even though they are twins and are equals and have the same last name. Again, Dear Reader, none of this was actually even happening within the continuity of the story the Merry Men were reading. In this particular part, the narrator of the hoax dissertation was discussing the rocky nature of the twins’ relationship leading up to this botched rescue mission, and the boys were taking turns reading aloud, trying to playfully one-up one another on their narration skills to keep themselves entertained.
“‘During their childhood,’” Robin read, “‘Tom and Will were seldom apart. They gave each other the support, encouragement, and strength to preserve in--’”

“That’s per-ser-vere, dumbass,” Little John teased.

“Actually, Johnny, we’re both wrong. It’s persevere. Only two R’s.”

“Oh, kiss my ass, Robin.”

“Anyway; ‘...the strength to persevere in the face of parental indifference.’ ...Hm.”

“You alright?”

“Yes, yes, er… ‘Footnote two-thirty-one: Terry Borowska interview... Of course, their intertwining adolescent years eventually unraveled as they reached adulthood, Will pursuing photography and fame in an attempt to fill the emotional void, Tom drifting into an unremarkable and for the most part internal existence.’”

“Well, shit, I can relate.”

“To whom?”

“Rob, who do you think? C’mon, it’s my turn. Ahem… ‘ER-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh;’” John verbalized the bizarre break between fragments in the report because the old man in the story evidently tore up this part of the essay and tried to flush it down the toilet, leaving the discoverer to piece the shards together (I’m not making this up, Dear Reader). “‘Tom, however, never hid behind the… add-junked’? Is he even using that word right?... ‘the adjunct meaning of a career. He never required the rhe- tor -ic of achievement. In fact, his life never moved much beyond the here and now. Nevertheless, in spite of a brutal struggle with alcohol--’ glug, glug, glug... ‘--Tom did manage to per-ser-vere his sense of humor--’”

“Preserve his sense of humor,’ Johnny.”

“Goddammit. ‘...and in his twelve-step program inspired many admirers who to this day speak highly of him.’”

“Oh, well good for him!”

“Before the A. A. part, I was seriously wondering if my brother changed his name to Will and became a photographer. Aight. ‘Of the hard times that came his way, he experiiiiiiiienced the greatest grief during those eight years when he was estranged from his brother or, in his words, ‘when the old rug was pulled out from under old Tom.’” Okay, nevermind, this guy refers to himself in the third person, I can’t relate to him anymore.”

“Indeed.”

“‘It’s hardly a coincidence that during this period of--’ Wait. ‘...that during this period, he succumbed to chemical dependencies, went on unemployment, and prematurely ended a budding relationship with a young schoolteacher.’ It’s... kinda creepy how they clarify she was young, ain’t it?”

“Agreed.”

“‘The Navidson Record never explains what came between Tom and Will, though it implies Tom envied Navy’s success and was increasingly dissatisfied with his own accomplishments.’ ...Hm.”
“Now are you alright, Johnny?”

“Yeah, yeah, just… the footnote’s not important. ’ER-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh-zuh! ’ Aight, your turn.”

“Thaaank you, Johnny… ‘In his article “Brothers in Arms No More”, published in The Village Voice ’ -- which is a real publication -- ‘Carlos Brilliant observes that Tom--’”

“I think it’s pronounced Bree-ont . Look, there’s no I .”

“Sure there is, Johnny! It’s after the R !”

“Jesus, Rob, you know what I mean!”

“Oh, behave, Johnny. He observed that… ‘Tom and Will’s estrangement began with the birth of Chad--’ Help me here, Johnny; Chad is the photographer’s son, right? I don’t quite remember.”

“He’d better be the son; that’s the assumption I’m operating under.”

“‘Quote, “While it’s complete speculation on my part, I wonder if the large amount of energy required to raise a family pulled Will’s attention away from his brother. Suddenly Tom discovered that his brother, his only sympathizer and supporter, was devoting more and more time to his son. Tom may have felt abandoned,” unquote.’ Footnote two-thirty-three… is lost. Splendid. ‘Annabelle Whitten echoes these sentiments when she points out that Tom occasionally referred to himself as, quote, “orphaned at the age of forty,” unquote.’”

“Pathetic and yet completely relatable.”

“How so?”

“…Is that another footnote?”

“Ah, yes! Erm… it’s also lost.”

“I don’t think less of Thor because he’s a registered sex offender, I think less of him for his taste in literature. The storybook I made in third-grade art class was probably better than this. It was about an astronaut that got his foot stuck in a crater on the moon and the entire world has to put its differences aside to save him before he runs out of air. I call dibs on the movie rights.”

“Johnny, we can stop reading the book if you really want to.”

“I’m perversely interested. So let’s per-ser-vere . Keep reading.”

“‘The year Tom -- and Will, for that matter -- turned forty was the year Chad was born.’ Alright, your turn, Johnny… Johnny, are you sure you’re alright?”

“…I’m trying not to be a crybaby again, Rob.”

“I won’t think you’re being a crybaby, Johnny.”

“Yeah, but I gotta consider that everyone else on Planet Fucking Earth would and that you’re just the weird one.”

“Well, bollocks to what other people think! Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“…Hrmh…”
“All that about Will having a son and ignoring his brother is making you think about what will happen to you if I ever get together with Marian again, isn’t it?”

“...Honestly, yeah.”

“Johnny, you know I would never--”

“I know you wouldn’t, but it’s all the… it’s the way they stress, ‘oh, the only person in the entire fucking world who cared about Tom didn’t have time for him anymore,’ and me wondering if I’m too fucked up in the head after all the shit I went through to diversify my friend portfolio without using you as a liaison… I’m not afraid you’d consciously cut me out of your life to focus on your lady, I’m afraid that it would just sort of happen.”

“Johnny, I would never let that happen.”

“I know you keep saying that, motherfucker, that’s why I’m trying not to think about it! But I… keep thinking about it.”

“...If it makes you feel better, Johnny, this section sort of gummed up my head as well.”

“Why, because they’re talking about brothers and one of them’s named Will?”

“Er… yes, but, more specifically, the part where they helped each other get through a childhood of ‘parental indifference’--”

“--Which I still don’t fully understand about you two’s childhood.”

“One day I’ll finally be up for explaining it, Johnny. But that and how they drifted apart, and then one envied the other for their success… and I wonder, maybe you’re not the only one who got sick of me lording over them.”

“Wh-whaddaya mean?”

“Hrmhrm… that passage got me thinking that maybe you were right that I can sometimes take my self-aggrandizing too far. Maybe that’s why he was so… so bloody irritable that day.”

“Aw, Jesus, Rob, I’m sorry I ever--”

“No, no! You’ve done nothing wrong, Johnny. If anything, I should thank you. Clearly I needed this moment of… well, clarity.”

“For fuck’s sake, this book was supposed to take our minds off our lives, not make us sad! Maybe if you sit on my shoulders, you can knock Thor’s teeth in for the both of us...” Little John waited a moment, listening to the sounds of the forest, making sure there were no audible clues of anybody around before he put his arm around Robin and pulled him into himself once again. “I love ya, little guy.”

“I love you, too, big guy.”

THUMP-tha-thump! The two jumped as a substantially-sized rock sailed from out of the density of the forest and landed at their feet.

“GODDAMMIT!” Little John jumped to his feet, grabbing his staff and scanning the direction that the rock had come from. “Does another fucking teenager think we’re a gay couple and now they’re throwing rocks at us again!? How does this keep happening!?”
“Little John, mind your voice—!”

“What the fuck is wrong with the kids in this town!? Tennessee wasn’t even this bad!”

“Shhh!” Robin begged, and after a moment, Little John turned back to the fox.

“Sorry, Rob, I’m just tense right now.”

“Look,” Robin continued. “There seems to be a note tied to the rock!”

It was actually rubber-banded, but there was indeed a piece of loose-leaf paper attached to the stone. Robin leaned forward to retrieve it (though John noticed that Robin still had his hand on his bow as he did) and sat back as he began unraveling the message.

“What’s it say?” Little John asked as he leaned in.

“Oh, well this is interesting! ‘Give us until the end of the week to make a decision.’ Signed, our friend Eddy.”

“EDDY!” Little John roared in the general direction of Peach Creek. “YOU SERIOUSLY COULDN’T JUST TALK TO US LIKE A NORMAL PERSON INSTEAD OF SCARING THE SHIT OUT OF US!”?

“Little John, quiet!”

“I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!”

“Little John?”

“What’s up?”

“. . .I believe this has made up my mind for me. Now that we know we mustn’t wait on the lads, I think I know what I need to do today.”

“What’s that?”

“Today shall be the day I finally face my fears and see Missus Foote.”

“Oh… I see. Uh… what did you want to do besides that?”

“Well, Johnny, depending on how well or how poorly it goes, it might take up the rest of the day. Just look at the shadows.”

So he did; it was already early afternoon. “. . .Jeez, where did the time go? Hell, we musta been reading that book for longer than we thought!”

“Strange as it is, that story sure is engrossing. But, er . . . Little John, if it’s alright with you. . . I’d like to go alone for this one.”

“Y-you do? Are you sure?”

“I alone was the one who gave him the bow and arrow. I was the one who inspired him. I was the one who should have known better. And if she’s so merciful as to guide me toward Toby’s parents, I’ll go and tell them the same thing. This is my cross to bear, Johnny, and I beg you not take this as some sort of arrogance thing.”
“No, no, I get it, I, uh… come to think of it, there’s someone I need to see myself. Alone.”

“Ah, who is it?”

“…It's personal, Rob.”

“Ah. Okay. I see. Are you taking your weapons?”

“Nah, I’m thinking I’ll blend in better if I don’t. I’m probably gonna go get changed into something less conspicuous while I’m at it -- I mean, all our clothes are right here.”

“Right. I think I’ll steal that idea from you. Shall we reconvene here, or at the van?”

“Honestly, Rob, with all that police presence, I think it’d be best if we meet up somewhere in town and head back together. Safety in numbers and all that.”

“Fair point, Johnny, fair point. Perhaps we should meet back together at Ott--”

“The church.”

“...The… the church?”

“St. Ursula’s. In the little mini side-chapel they never lock up because there’s nothing worth stealing in there. And Tuck’ll be somewhere around just to keep watch over whoever gets there first and winds up waiting on the other one.”

“Er… if you insist, Johnny. But are you sure you’d rather not just meet at Otto’s house? His house has no closing time, and I for one likely won’t be done until after he’s home from work anyway.”

And Little John just gave Robin one of those you motherfucker looks. “Well, I won’t be started until he gets home from work.”

“Oh… I see,” Robin murmured meekly, realizing he’d just accidentally figured out what John didn’t want him to. Considering his own private conversation with Otto, Robin had a hunch he knew what -- or who -- Little John needed to vent about without him around.

--III--

It’s funny; as he was on his way to specifically discuss his feelings of inferiority to Robin with an impartial arbiter, if he had just looked down at his shirt, he would have realized that there was at least one thing that he had always been in charge of between the two of them.

They were in hardcore undercover mode. Not only did they not bring their weapons with them into town, but they hopped on the bus to save them some time and keep them out of the oppressive heat; this was almost always a safe move, since not only did it keep them from being seen out in the open, but many of the other passengers on the bus (and most of the drivers) recognized them, and either actively supported them or at the very least respected their efforts enough not to blow their cover. But in the highly unlikely chance that someone riding a city bus through Georgetown saw the duo and recognized them as their enemy, Rob and Johnny had an extra layer of camouflage, as they were dressed as blue-collar as they could be, and Little John had always been the one in charge of arranging their “hardcore undercover” wardrobe.

Robin originally deferred the task to Little John since he thought John would know American working-class garb better than he did. Little John had a pretty good strategy for this: sports fan apparel. Despite what they had told Alex a few days prior about how wearing a specific sports
team’s logo was a great way to get caught if people were looking for you, it was also a great way
to hide if people weren’t looking for you. After all, what’s a better way to blend in than to dress
like people whose only joy in life is watching people who were bigger, fitter, and better-paid than
oneself playing games for the commoners’ amusement?

Robin agreed that this was a good idea, but seeing as he definitely wasn’t an expert on North
American sports, he left the curation up to John. It was a good thing that they operated out of a city
like Nottingham which, despite its population and because of its poor geography, had no major-
league sports franchises of its own; this way, they could wear gear from all around the country and
not look too out-of-place, since sports fans around town were left on their own to pick and choose
their favorite clubs. All of these pieces of merchandise came courtesy of the employees of the
Sports Authority downtown, which didn’t have that vast of an in-store selection of clothes for
teams outside of the mid-Atlantic, but whose employees would gladly place a special order from
the distributor for the local heroes who overpaid them in much the same way they overpaid the
employees of all the other chain stores and fast-food restaurants whose staff were on their good
side.

Of course, they still followed one self-imposed rule for these clothes: stick to their favorite colors.
If you were to see Robin and Little John walking down the street, neither armed for self-defense
nor wearing their trademark garb, you would likely still recognize them because of the hues they
donned. This was partially for their own preference, partially to tip off their allies that it was really
them, and partially because the same daredevilry that inspired them to lead their lives of crime in
the first place also led them to want to drop hints of their identity to their enemies, just to mess with
them when those enemies didn’t realize how obvious those hints really were.

Little John’s sports wardrobe was much more elaborate than Robin’s; it was a small indulgence of
selfishness in an otherwise selfless way of life. While his “regular” attire was well-known to be an
Eagles shirt and a Jets jacket with the logos scratched off both of them, John also owned some
Eagles and Jets shirts and hats that didn’t have their insignias scratched off. Keeping with his
favorite color of forest green, he also found himself with a bunch of hockey gear despite not having
any emotional connection to the sport, with Sharks stuff, Stars stuff, Wild stuff and Mighty Ducks
stuff. He wasn’t against wearing teal every so often, with a Marlins hat and a Jaguars shirt and a
Diamondbacks hat, plus a sea-green Dan Marino jersey he found on a clearance rack once. Then
there was his second-favorite color, that silvery-gray shade of blue like his backup bycocket hat
used to be; he had Mariners stuff and Seahawks stuff and Magic stuff, and was debating getting
some Lions stuff before he decided that he didn’t want to even tangentially support the mayor (for
similar reasons he passed on getting a Timberwolves shirt with their old color scheme when he had
the chance). Once in a blue moon he would be in a mood for dark red, not unlike the red that Will
always preferred, so somewhere in the hollow of the Major Oak were a brick-red Astros hat and a
scarlet Cardinals shirt -- Arizona Cardinals, not St. Louis, since the Little family had always been
Cubs fans (not just because of the ursine connection, but because Cubs games had always been
nationally televised on WGN). The ursine connection was, however, the sole reason why the
Littles were also Bears fans, and although their navy shade of blue wasn’t quite John’s favorite,
they would do just fine in a pinch.

But today, he was wearing two articles of gray-blue clothing that were very deliberately chosen: a
Tennessee Titans hat and a Memphis Grizzlies shirt. Even though neither of these teams played in
his home state when he lived there (hell, they didn’t even play there back when he was a free man
seven years ago), when he found out that the Volunteer State was getting put on the national sports
map and they were going to be wearing some of his favorite colors (and especially when he found
out the basketball team was named after his people), he just had to get some. Imagine his surprise
when that past autumn, the Grizzlies rebranded and retired their old teal and emerald, now using a
shade of blue much like the one the Titans used; he immediately went and updated his apparel, and
at first he thought that the Grizzlies/Titans gear went very well together. But in just the last few days, Little John had started to make bizarre connections about it that were starting to bug him.

That shade of blue kinda-sorta reminded him of his brother. Now, under ideal lighting conditions, someone whose rods and cones were all functioning correctly could clearly see that the other Little twin’s fur was as gray as graphite, but oftentimes it appeared to have a bluish tint to it, and indeed some of the kids the twins grew up with would have described John’s brother as being straight-up blue; God knows that was a contributing factor to his nickname. The shade of blue John was currently sporting was still discernibly different from the blue of his brother, but the idea of a bear who is blue from Tennessee, no, from Memphis no less -- John’s brother loved music more than anything, and while the guy always had a soft spot for the country tunes that made their hometown famous, he had always expressed jealousy of their state’s larger major city for having the more metropolitan blues and jazz sound. It was entirely possible that Little John’s brother wound up in Memphis after John left Nashville -- but John wouldn’t know, because he hadn’t spoken to his family in nearly twenty years. And the look on the mascot’s face: stern, intimidating, confident, all things Little John had always wanted to be and was always shamed by his father and the neighborhood kids for not being, things that he arguably was now (or at least was a helluva lot closer than he was when he left home) but nevertheless things that he had always seen reflected in his brother. John’s brother was known as probably the friendliest of the large predators in the neighborhood, but if you did something to piss him off, that big, strong, powerful, angry bear could come out of him in a heartbeat, and when it did, he’d look a lot like the Grizzlies’ new logo. And Little John was always heartbroken that he couldn’t be like that when his brother could. A big blue bruiser bear from Memphis… was Little John unknowingly wearing a tribute to his brother on his shirt? Wait, shit, hell, now Little John was wondering if he subconsciously only liked that shade of blue because his inner child still wished he could be his brother. But he tried to keep his mind off it. He had specifically chosen the Tennessee wardrobe combo as part of a test: when he got off the bus and he and Robin went their separate ways, would strangers on the street still recognize him if he didn’t have the five-foot fox by his side? He was giving them an enormous hint by wearing Tennessee-themed gear; they knew he was from Nashville, right?

Robin’s American sports clothing collection wasn’t nearly as extensive as Little John’s. He liked John’s idea to blend in with licensed merchandise well enough, but he didn’t want to always be wearing such things, for he still thought of them as a wee bit gaudy, so you could still spot him trying to blend in by wearing regular clothes with no logos anywhere on them. But when he did wear the clothes John recommended for him, he made a point to keep it with his trademark green and yellow. Robin had an Eagles shirt just like John did, albeit Robin’s used the older color scheme utilizing a kelly green with yellow highlights. Little John also begrudgingly got Robin a Packers shirt just because he knew Rob would love the colors, although when Robin found out from Alan about the rivalry between Green Bay and Little John’s favorite childhood football team, he started wearing it more sparingly. Robin had some shirts with the logos of the SuperSonics, as well as one for the Bucks from before they switched to purple a decade ago, and a Celtics shirt which bore no yellow but Robin wore it anyway as a tribute to his mother’s Irish extraction, which was always kept hush-hush back at home; many people on the street saw Robin wearing these basketball teams’ logos and remarked that Robin was definitely tall enough to play for those franchises’ small-mammal-division clubs. One thing Robin almost never wore anymore was a cheapie Mexico national soccer team jersey-shirt he had found somewhere, which he stopped wearing because Latin-American denizens kept trying to speak to him in Spanish; it wasn’t that Robin was offended, quite the opposite, for one of the few things about himself that Robin was genuinely embarrassed about was that he had completely failed to pick up Spanish despite having plenty of opportunities to immerse himself in the language during his time in the States (on at least one occasion, he panicked and found himself responding in the broken French he faintly remembered from his schooling in England, trying to explain that he was only wearing the shirt
pourquoi j’aime le vert et le jaune before he realized that he was speaking the wrong Romance language, and Little John just had to stand there watching awkwardly, lamenting that he had chosen to take German as his required foreign language in high school at the behest of his ambiguously xenophobic father, not that he remembered much sprechen sie Deutsch either). Robin particularly liked the A’s stuff that John had found for him, particularly the more retro stuff with a lighter shade of green more toward his liking, and on this particular day Robin was wearing the green-on-yellow A’s cap which was a pain in the ass for Little John to find for him since even the Sports Authority employees couldn’t find one in their nationwide system (ultimately one employee had to hit up a friend of his who worked at a Lids in a mall in Lemon Brook and had their distributor deliver it there, at which point the Lids employee brought it over and the Men grossly over -overpaid him for his troubles), but which was well worth the effort because the green-yellow hue reminded Robin of that stupid awesome bycocket he used to always wear back when times were good.

Today was a strange day, though. A rare sight indeed could be seen, as in addition to the yellow Oakland cap, Robin was wearing the only piece of North American sports apparel he owned which wasn’t green in some capacity. It was a red Angels shirt that he and Little John had randomly found when they were incidentally in a Kmart in Rehoboth Beach two years back, the shirt commemorating Anaheim winning the World Series the previous October. Robin saw the shirt and he wanted it immediately, which confused Little John at the time, but later made a lot of sense. It wasn’t quite the same shade of red that Will always wore, and indeed the Angels didn’t even start using that color scheme until a couple of years after Will passed, but something about that specific red shirt compelled Robin to want to own a shirt it seemed like his brother might wear; Robin later added that he also liked how it had the word “CHAMPIONS” emblazoned on it. He wore the shirt only on special occasions, and this day was one such occasion. Still thinking of the mural he’d seen yesterday, and given his current mission to atone for ruining another young life, he most assuredly had a red angel on his mind, one who was certainly a champion in his eyes.

They both got off the Montana Avenue bus at 45th Street, just south of the Bethlehem General Hospital campus. From there, they silently wished one another luck before they walked in opposite directions. Little John crossed the street to catch the eastbound 45th Street bus to take him twelve more blocks down to Iowa Street, and Robin headed two blocks west before cutting south on the exact side-street he needed.

Residents of the 4000 block of North Idaho Street knew that if they ever wanted to be granted the gifts of the Merry Men of Sherwood Forest ever again, they’d have to get lucky running into them somewhere else, because they weren’t going to be making housecalls on their stretch of street anytime soon. Ever since that fateful Halloween, the neighbors knew that Robin Hood knew that he had messed up badly, and he dared not show his face again around the site of his greatest shame. That said, the Footes didn’t actually live on the 4000 block of Idaho, but they did live in a corner lot at the intersection facing 40th Street, and if there was some commotion happening on the side street, they could see it from their concrete backyard. Whereas it would be much less attention-grabbing if they breezed past on the main thoroughfare, which the Merry Men had had to do a few times in the intervening years, Robin always trying not to look at the gray row house on the corner.

Robin looked both ways and crossed 43rd Street. As he approached the Foote residence, he found himself feeling oddly helpless and he didn’t quite know why. On the rare occasion that he experienced intense, unmitigated, preemptive nervousness, a simple chit-chat had never been the cause; hey, maybe this was how Little John felt all those years before Robin helped him rediscover his outgoing side. But while Robin could understand his own apprehensions that it would be a most awkward conversation, he was thoroughly confused by why he felt afraid. What was there to fear? Was Amanda going to say something that vindicated this newfound feeling of permeating
self-doubt? No, no, no… she couldn’t. She couldn’t because he was going in there expecting her to verbally eviscerate him, and therefore there was nothing she could say that would make him feel even worse. Right? Come now, Robin, he told himself, now is not the time to trip over your own laces! Remember that mural! Be strong for Will! Be strong for Marian! Be strong for Alan and Tuck! And be strong for all the friends you haven’t met yet!

He looked less attentively as he crossed 42nd Street; he knew that few people in this neighborhood could afford a car, and even fewer would have a place to park it amid these concrete row homes with no grass in sight. He kept changing his mind on how he wanted to handle the conversation with Amanda, but he knew that the best laid plans would surely fall apart, as she’d surely not follow any script he had written in his head. And besides, improvisation was one of his strong suits, wasn’t it? Therefore he decided to spend his mental energy on another question: what the hell would he say to Toby’s parents if he found them today? Hello there! Pleasure to meet you for the first time ever! Surely you’ve heard of me, they call me Robin Hood and I’m the reason your son is in juvie! Even a blind man could see that would go over poorly… hey, wait, now that he thought of it, maybe that would have been a better plan: dress up in his blind man outfit and talk about himself to the raccoons to weed out how they feel about him. No, no… too pusillanimous. They would deserve to see the real him. But… shite, what did he even know about Toby? Okay, he knew that Toby’s real name was Tobin (and the lad was cerebral enough to observe how odd it was that Tobin and Robin didn’t rhyme); he was nearly a year older than Skippy, despite his timidity; his parents made him wear a turtleneck sweater all throughout the year; he (like Skippy) wasn’t allowed to drink caffeinated soda or iced tea, while decaf soft drinks were allowed but still discouraged; and this may have just been conjecture on the Men’s part, but Robin and John were pretty certain that Skippy and his siblings were the only kids Toby was allowed to hang out with. That was it. They didn’t even know the kid’s last name. Heck, maybe the kid was adopted and his parents were a buffalo and a chipmunk.

Robin halfheartedly looked both ways before crossing 41st Street, but he was glad he did. While he was in no danger of getting struck by a motorist, parallel to him, some guy in an old shitbox Honda Civic blew the stop sign and raced ahead toward the main street, and as Robin looked up to give him the evil eye, he noticed a young badger boy kicking around a soccer ball on the sidewalk in front of his house, down and on the other side of Idaho Street. Maybe the loud sputtering noises from the car spooked him, but one way or another, the kid lost control of his ball, and as stray balls always seem to do, it bounced right into the path of the oncoming vehicle. And the boy wanted his ball back.

“LOOK OUT, LAD!” Robin hollered as he ran down the sidewalk toward the boy; there was no way he was going to make it in time, but he had to try. From his vantage point, the car obscured his view of the boy as it came to a screeching halt, and Robin’s heart nearly stopped when he heard a loud thump.

Then, as if volleyed over by an angel, the ball rose over the roof of the car and back into Robin’s line of vision, bounding right toward him. Left speechless by the sight, Robin felt the wind blowing into his slack-jawed mouth as the ball landed gently in his waiting arms. He looked up to see the car pull off, revealing the boy to be standing at the edge of the street, safe and sound.

“CONNER!” came a woman’s muffled cry. A door burst open on the boy’s side of the street and a badger woman ran out and wrapped her arms around the boy, collapsing into tears. “Conner! Conner, what did I tell you about playing in the street!? You… you scared the shit outta me…” she wept.

“Mommy, that fox has my ball,” Conner said as he pointed.
Robin took a breath to come down from the moment and walked over to the boy and his mother. “Apologies, Master Conner,” he said as he presented the soccer ball. “I do believe this belongs to you.”

The mother relinquished her hug as she stood to face the legend before her. “Oh-- Oh, my God, I… I knew I recognized that voice I heard somewhere!”

And Robin -- whose brain was still a bit scrambled from the excitement, both that which he had just witnessed and that which was impending -- was surprised to find himself not knowing what to say to that; his etiquette classes had taught him how to respond to I know you, not I know your voice, and he was struggling to think on the fly, so he just replied with a charmingly bashful smile. Judging by the look on the mother’s face, it worked.

“Thank you-- so, so much for saving my son, I… I don’t know how to thank you--”

“Madam, I appreciate your kind words, but I cannot take the credit for saving your son; I merely helped him to save himself.” There, that was better. He was back on the ball. At this point, he could feel more eyes upon him; the ruckus must have brought some of the neighbors to their doors and windows to see if it was indeed really him.

“Mom, do you know him?”

“Oh, apologies, Master Conner! How rude of me not to introduce myself! Robin Hood of Loxley, South Yorkshire, England.”

“And he’s one of the best people you’ll ever meet in your life!” the mother added. “He’s a good guy, and if you ever see him, you can know he’s gonna keep you safe, just like Mommy will, okay, sweetheart?”

The boy just stared up at the towering fox.

“That’s quite a nice ball you have there, Master Conner,” Robin said as he got down on one knee to put the boy at ease. “You know, soccer’s quite the popular sport back where I’m from. Tell me, lad; do you want to be a soccer player when you grow up?”

The boy gasped. “I didn’t know grown-ups played soccer!”

And Robin tried really hard not to break his warm smile and give the kid a sideways look. He remembered a conversation he’d had once with Little John about how Americans rejected association football, and Johnny theorized that seeing how there were so many peewee leagues but nobody cared about the MLS, perhaps the same simple premise of the game that made it so accessible around the world made Americans think it was a children’s sport. Robin was so wrapped up in thinking about how uncannily Little John had called his shot that he completely forgot to answer the boy.

“Oh… you mean--?” She cut herself off as she pointed down the street. Robin turned and looked over his right shoulder. In the backyard of the corner lot by the alleyway stood a bespectacled widow rabbit glaring at Robin, along with about half a dozen of her brood, plus some other young children who weren’t rabbits.
“Oh, dear,” Robin murmured, trying to go for cheeky sarcasm but coming across as too genuinely concerned. “It appears as though I’ve been spotted. I must ask though… did I perchance come on the day of another birthday party?”

“N-no? What do you mean?”

“All those other children; are they friends of her children?”

“Whah? Oh… you really haven’t been here in awhile. She turned her home into a daycare to make money. As opposed to… you know, not having money to feed and clothe her own kids.”

“And considering her situation, I must say that’s a brilliant idea. But it’s a situation I should have been around to help. I’m sorry, ma’am, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Julia.”

“Julia, the pleasure is mine. Now, please do be blunt with me,” he said, noticeably quieter. “Does she still hate me?”

“…Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Oh, she wants to kill you.”

And Robin’s eyes pursed open so wide that some regions of his eyeballs were exposed to fresh air for the first time in his life.

“Ah, don’t worry, though,” Julia continued. “She’s not actually gonna shank ya or anything. She’s too religious to do that. Did you want me to maybe come over there to back you up in case she loses it?”

“Oh-- No, Miz Julia, I must handle her wrath all my own; I mustn’t bring others into it. I do appreciate your bravery, though.”

“And we all appreciate your bravery, Robin. Except for her and her people.”

“ ‘H-her people’? What, rabbits? Did I turn them against foxes?”

“No, it’s not a race thing. I think. I’m sure she’ll explain it all in annoying detail; that woman loves to talk. Good luck with her,” she said as she walked back to her door, dragging her son by the arm.

“I wanna play basketball when I grow up!” said the little badger boy.

“Well we can’t afford a hoop, now come on inside, Conner!”

“I wanna be as tall as you when I grow up so I can play basketball!” the boy exclaimed, eyes locked on Robin.

“Eat all your vegetables, young man, and it might just happen!” Robin answered as the badgers closed the door behind them. He stared at their house for a moment before turning to face his destiny.

He locked eyes with Amanda, refusing to cower away from her view. She looked unimpressed more than anything, but it was hard to see her eyes as the sun glared off the lenses of her glasses,
which were tucked into the purple babushka-like scarf that may have seemed to be an odd fashion choice, but she had always dressed conservatively -- actually, the scarf was probably actually a brilliant way of beating the heat. As he stepped off the asphalt and back onto the sidewalk, he waved politely. She turned to the children and muttered something to them, and they all sheepishly went back into their home through the back door. She turned back to Robin just as he got to the point where he couldn’t help but speak, and when he did, he didn’t have a clue what he was going to say, so he was going to do what he did best and play it by ear.

“Good afternoon, Missus Foote,” he began. “If I may trouble you to ask, how are you doing today?”

“I was doing fine before I heard screaming in the street,” she said, crossing her arms and starting to tap her foot. “Shall I bother to ask why you’re here?”

“Amanda, I--”

“Amanda is my name to my friends; you can call me Missus Foote.”

“Er-- My apologies. Missus Foote, I will not beat around the bush; I--”

“Then don’t beat around the bush by telling me you’re not beating around the bush. Just spit it out, Hood.”

Robin’s vast experience in all sorts of tough social situations had not prepared him for a customer quite as tough as this. He realized he was starting to feel eyes upon him again. “Missus Foote, perhaps we should take this inside--”

“I’m not making the mistake of welcoming you into my home again. And I don’t care how smooth everyone else thinks you are; it doesn’t work on me anymore and you’re not going to win me over by inviting yourself into my own house.”

“And I understand that, Missus Foote, but the neighbors might hear--”

“Then let them hear! If you don’t want a street full of people hearing it, then maybe you shouldn’t be saying it!”

Perplexed, Robin glanced back at the crowded street full of ogling eyes from every door and window. The thought crossed his mind how depressing it was that it was mid-afternoon on a Tuesday and not a single one of these people had a job to be at, but then again, neither did he. To give themselves more privacy, he scooted a few steps further into the alley.

“Oh, no, don’t you try to hide from your public, Mister Hood!”

“Missus Foote, I am trying to apologize. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for my past recklessness and I’m sorry that Skippy got involved.”

“‘Got involved ’? Is that what you call it?”

“I’m sorry that-- I’m sorry that I failed him as a mentor. I’m sorry I put it in his head that he was invincible and that no harm could come to him because he was on the side of good. And I’m sorry that I wasn’t there to save him from the police when they arrested him for trying to be like me .”

“And it took you four years to find the decency to apologize?”

“And I also apologize for being so tardy to… realizing that you were looking for more than my
condolences about the situation. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize that you blamed me for what happened to your son… and that you were right to do so. And I apologize for putting off telling you so for… far too long.”

She didn’t say a word. Robin had indeed tried to apologize to Amanda back during that hellish autumn, but it was a very much a third-person apology. *I’m sorry to hear that, this is an outrage, we’ll avenge him somehow*, to paraphrase. But Amanda had told him that she didn’t want to talk about it and that she wanted some time alone. So he left and returned to talk another day, only to be told again that she was in no mood. He tried a third time only to be told that when she wanted to talk to him, she’d let him know; by this time, her grief seemed to be shifting from sadness to anger. At first, Robin thought that she was simply annoyed by his insistence to speak to her, but when weeks and months passed and he’d never gotten word that she was ready to talk about it, the lightbulb went off: she meant she would initiate conversation when and if she was willing to talk to him. That’s when Robin realized that there was another way of interpreting who was truly at fault.

By that point, so much time had passed that Robin was afraid it was too late to rebuild a rotted and decayed bridge. That only left the question of whether telling Robin to leave her alone was some sort of test to see if he would come to her and apologize against her specific wishes, but considering everything, he couldn’t imagine she was in the mood to be asked that.

“Missus Foote, I’m not used to people I think to be good disliking me, and quite frankly… I was afraid to come talk to you about it, because I knew that with every second that passed, you would have more reason to hate me. I was afraid you would be right to believe that I’m not capable of being as good of a person as I wish I could be. That is why I delayed. I can’t expect you to forgive me, but I couldn’t live with myself much longer unless I tried to ask for your forgiveness.”

“So this apology is entirely for your comfort and not for mine?”

*Good lord, where is she getting these retorts from?* “Er… as I have heard said, Missus Foote, follow your moral compass and at least one person is pleased. Though I do hope to please the both of us, and that would have no chance of happening had I not tried.”

The look on the mother rabbit’s face had not changed. After a moment of silence, she spoke again: “You busted me and a small village’s worth of people out of jail when we actually did something illegal, and two months later you couldn’t figure out how to bust out an innocent child?”

Robin was visibly flabbergasted by the logic of her accusation; of all the things he expected him to hurl at him, he had never for a moment expected that. “Amanda, it’s much easier to break open an entire holding cell from a poorly-guarded precinct than to free one individual from a penitentiary, especially one that’s competently guarded and halfway to Maryland!”

“Don’t call me Amanda, fox.”

“Then don’t call me fox, Amanda!” And Robin was just as surprised as you and I to catch himself hollering. And so was Amanda. Her scowl was gone and she flinched a little bit. She looked scared. And Robin was scared that he had scared her.

“Er-- Missus Foote, I’m dreadfully sorry, I don’t know what came over me--”

“I think we both know what came over you, fox,” she answered, looking like she was trying -- and succeeding -- to overcome her fear to confront someone she was now afraid of.

Robin really wanted to interrogate her about what exactly that was supposed to mean, but he knew that conversation would go nowhere. “Please, ma’am, if there’s anything I can do to even… begin my journey down the path to redemption, tell me, please tell me, and it shall be done. You have my
word.”

Her fear was dissolving to annoyance once more. “You come here asking for my mercy and you come dressed like you just got out of a ballgame?”

*Oh*. Robin had completely forgotten about his urban-camouflage duds. “Please disregard my manner of dress, ma’am, it’s merely a safety precaution–”

“And if you’re such a gentleman, why aren’t you at least holding your hat in your hands?”

Okie dokie, now Robin was starting to get irritated. He had expected her to kick him while he begged at her feet, but not quite like… *this*. He slowly reached for his baseball cap with both hands, pulled it down and held it in front of his chest, a bit above eye-level with the rabbit, who couldn’t help but notice his wringing the hat as he spoke. “The thought to remove my hat to beg your graces may not have slipped my mind had you not interrupted me… to be completely candid…”

And Amanda thought of accusing him of turning the blame for his insolence on her, but decided to go a different route. “Such a gentleman… such, a, gentleman… That’s what they say about you, don’t you know?” She turned to her right slightly and started slowly moving back toward the street, probably to make the two of them both more visible to the neighbors. “Such a gentleman… so mature for someone so young. How old were you when you started doing all this?”

“Twenty-four,” Robin said, still wringing his A’s hat.

“Twenty-four,” she mused; she wasn’t facing him. “Still a boy, really. So that would make you how old now?”

“Thirty-one, ma’am.”

“Pah! You may not think it, but you’re still young. Still just a boy… just like my Skippy. The neighbors thought it was cute that you let him and the raccoon boy tag along with you. They said it was like you were a father figure they desperately needed. But I would have called it more of you being their favorite older brother. You were simply too youthful to be a father figure. And at the time, I also thought that was cute, but… I should have warned myself. That was the big hint. You really weren’t responsible enough to keep those kids safe.” She turned her head back to Robin, but not her body. “You may have convinced everybody that you were so mature, so intelligent, so *moral*… but that doesn’t mean you *were* any of those things. Remind me what you wanted to do before you became everybody’s favorite criminal?”

Robin took a deep breath of frustration, knowing exactly why she was forcing him to declare such information. “Acting. I wanted to be an actor.”

“A professional pretender. A liar for a living. Sounds about right.” She turned her body back toward him, but she kept her distance. “I was a fool for being taken by your charm. You gave me a gift and made my children happy and tricked me into thinking you were going to be the one to keep us all safe. But I know better now. People think you’re invincible, but you’re really just a reckless little kid, a crazy little boy who only keeps escaping danger because the world doesn’t know how to handle your energy… Do you remember the Vietnam War, Hood?”

“It was a bit before my time, ma’am.”

“Well the most powerful army in the world went up against a bunch of crazy guerrilla fighters whose moves they could not predict. And the guerilla fighters put up a great fight punching above
their weight, but they still couldn’t win. Instead, it dragged on for years, a lot of lives were ruined that didn’t need to be ruined, and it all just resulted in a stalemate. Does that remind you of anything?”

It did. “I see the parallel you’re drawing, Missus Foote, but if you’re comparing the U. S. Army to the metropolitan police, didn’t the Americans eventually submit?”

“Did you not hear me!? They quit after a decade of innocent men, women, and children were killed for what was a massive men’s ego contest that solved nothing! And that number included a lot of scared little boys on both sides of the conflict who were forced to pick up a gun and die for their country before their lives had even begun! Do you really think all those cops you keep scaring the bejeebers out of have any personal stake in oppressing the poor? I am the poor and even I know that most of them don’t care about any of this! It’s just another job to them.”

“Er-- ma’am, I need to stop you there,” Robin said, putting his cap back on crookedly before he might compulsively tear it up. “The police do have a personal stake in maintaining the inequality in this town. Getting bonuses under the table or meeting quotas to keep their jobs--”

“--Which they do because without them, they’d be poor just like us. They’re just like us, Hood. They were desperate people who needed an out and employment with the police was the out. And you’re punishing these desperate people for daring to get out.”

“And that’s another thing! We don’t kill the cops. Nor the rich people we rob. In fact, we take every precaution to avoid permanently injuring them as much as possible! We don’t need any more enemies, we don’t want any more enemies, we merely see that… that…”

“That what?”

“Good lord, I’m flustered here. We see that they’re standing in the way and we do the best we can. And toward this end, we don’t see anyone doing any better than us. If you have a better strategy for how we can handle things even better, I’d love to hear it!” he scoffed.

“What about all of us poor people you’ve sworn to protect? You realize that they’re taking their frustration with you out on us, right? It came to a head once, then the bubble popped, and now it’s festering up again. Taxes are rising, people are being arrested over nothing, and even for people who’re in the same spot as they were seven years ago, that seven years of no progress has destroyed the hope they once had. The hope you once promised them, the hope they once believed you would deliver.”

“What on earth are you talking about!? Every single day we meet countless new people who know who we are and their faces light up when they see that we’re--”

“Robin ,” Amanda nearly growled. “ They’re faking it . They’re faking it so you’ll keep going and giving them the small gifts that fix their short-term problems. But these are my people, Hood, not yours, and I know them better than you do. I know that none of them actually believe that you’re going to be able to fix the big problems in this town. Not anymore. You had a shot a few years ago and you blew it.”

Robin really wanted to contest that it wasn’t their fault that things fell apart that fateful September, but he knew that she wasn’t going to care.

“Your ways aren’t working, Hood,” she continued. “Either come up with a new plan like the strategic genius everybody thinks you are, or get the heck out of the way and let someone else do it -- someone who knows what they’re doing .”
Robin was losing his patience with himself for losing his patience with her. “Missus Foote, you’re far from the first person to tell us that you don’t have faith in the efficacy of our methods!”

“Well, with any luck, maybe I’ll be the first one you’ll have the mind to listen to.” And then she turned and made her way back to her door, many of the children crowded at the glass to witness the altercation. “You’ve wasted enough of my time. Now please don’t ever show your face around my house ever again.”

“So there’s nothing at all I can do for you, is there?” Robin felt the need to at least try to ask.

_SLAM! Click._

And then he was alone. _Wow_. That was… that sure was something, alright. It was brutal and it tested his emotional strength, but he didn’t know many people who could have handled it better.

Oh, yeah, there was the _other_ thing he came here to ask.

“Missus Foote?” he asked as he knocked on the door; the home was very much scaled down for the habitation of smaller species, so he was nearly as tall as the doorframe. “Missus Foote, please, I have one more question to ask. This is nothing self-serving; I must know this for someone else’s benefit!”

As he expected, there was no answer.

“Missus Foote, please, tell me where Toby’s parents live! I’ve never even met them, and they deserve an apology as well! Please, ma’am, be gracious.”

No answer. Robin turned and looked at the window, which because of the smaller scale of the house was entirely below his line of vision. A bunch of toddlers and early-elementary-aged children seemed to be clampering on top of one another to get up high enough to catch a glimpse of the legendary fox. Many of the children were rabbits, the youngest of whom couldn’t have been Footes since Roy had passed seven years ago; in the daycare there was also a beaver, a badger, a sheep, an otter, and still others he couldn’t get a good view of. But he couldn’t help but notice that there wasn’t a fox kit anywhere among them. He told himself that with all the diversity of species in this town that that was purely incidental.

Upon further inspection, he realized the window wasn’t even locked. Robin had no plans to break into her home (as easily as he could have done that), but he did have a more polite idea. He put his paws on the window’s glass and slid up, managing to get it open just a tinge.

“Hi, Robin,” said a little rabbit girl dressed in pink. She was just big enough to talk through the gap. Oddly enough, she also seemed mildly disinterested; she wasn’t glaring or anything, but she looked like she was only talking to him to do him a favor.

“Tagalong?” Robin asked, faintly recognizing the little girl as the youngest of the Foote children, the one with whom Amanda was newly pregnant when Roy passed. “My, how much you’ve grown! You must be… how old now?” he asked, fully knowing the answer.

“I’m six.”

“Mt, six! You’re almost as old as Skippy was when we met him. Now, Tagalong, can you do me a great favor? Please ask your mummy where Toby the Turtle’s parents live so I can see them. Tell her she doesn’t have to speak to me; she just has to give their address to you so you can tell it to me. Can you do that for me?”
“Okay,” she said, and she hopped away from the window. Robin stood there for a moment waiting, saying hello to the children who said hello to him. He wished he had a logical spot in that exchange to ask what Skippy’s real name was, but whatever, he would surely have another chance eventually. He could feel through the gap in the open window that the home had functioning air conditioning, but it wasn’t functioning well.

After a minute, Amanda would be the one coming to the window, looking thoroughly annoyed with Robin’s antics. As she approached, Robin debated whether he should make an embittered joke about how he could have easily burglarized their home but he was just too gentlemanly for such a thing, but as she opened the window, he didn’t even have a chance to get the first word.

“Phoenix,” she said flatly as she slid the window up.

“Wh-what?” Robin asked. And to be fair, it was kind of hard to hear Amanda over the sound of her window squeaking open.

“The raccoons. They live in Phoenix now… Children! Go! The grown-ups are talking!” she shooed the kids away, then looked back at a dumbfounded Robin. “Phoenix. It’s a boomtown, you know. Population’s exploding. Roger heard from Church authorities that they were splitting a ward in two and building a new meetinghouse, and he felt compelled to go and serve the Lord.”

Robin was seriously questioning whether this woman was speaking English. “I… I don’t follow.”

“Did you not know Roger was a bishop?”

“Missus Foote, I never even knew their names -- I’d never met them. And what’s all this about wards and meetinghouses? I’ve never heard this terminology before in my life. At least not with regards to a church.”

“Wards and meetinghouses are what people of your faith may think as equivalent to parishes and chapels.”

Robin turned his head very slowly and gave her a funny look. “Pardon my ignorance, but… what church would you happen to belong to?”

She didn’t look like she would pardon his ignorance. “If you’d been paying any attention all these years, you would know. We belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

And when he heard that, it all just retroactively made too much sense. What Robin knew of the faith he knew from Alan, who had learned much about it during his exploits in the Mountain states, which was the heartland of that most distinctly American religion. Robin had always known that Amanda was religious, but he had always assumed that she was some type of Protestant. But all the clues he never picked up on: her obsession with family and togetherness; the way she alluded to being obligated to give a specific cut of her meager income to her church; her allusions to Roy’s time as a missionary in Belgium when he was younger, and her allusions to her own volunteer teaching of Sunday school, which she oddly referred to as “Primary”; the way she prayed with her arms folded like a pretzel; the way all of the Footes plus Toby were forbidden from drinking caffeinated sodas or eating chocolate; the way Amanda never partook in alcohol; the irresponsible quantity of children, as if Amanda and Roy belonged to a faith that not only believed that a woman was at her holiest when pregnant but which seemed dead-set on out-producing the Catholics; the excessively conservative manner of dress for the entire family, as if they belonged to a faith that required them to wear special undergarments at all times as a uniform for heaven; the way that despite Amanda’s religiosity she always seemed a tad bit uncomfortable with Tuck’s explicit Catholicism; the fact that the dinner table at Skippy’s seventh birthday held a dish of peas,
carrots, and white grapes suspended in lime Jello and topped with Cool Whip. He should have been able to see it from space, but he just hadn’t been looking for it.

“You’ve been fucking Mormons this whole time?” He couldn’t help it, he just blurted it out. His shock was so profound that he almost sounded like an American on the word fucking.

“We don’t care to be called Mormons, Robin, and we certainly don’t care to hear that other word you used right before that. Especially with children around. Now goodbye.”

“So the raccoons just moved across the country with their son still--?”

“I said goodbye,” she said aggressively as she slammed the window shut, either not knowing or not caring that Robin’s hands were parked on the windowsill.

“GHEEEaaahhh--!” he yelped before biting hard into his own tongue. Screaming his head off wouldn’t have been a good look for him. “A-A-Amanda! Please! Please come back to the window! My hands are stuck! A-Amanda! My hands are stuck in the window! Please let me go!” He tried to simply push up on the window, but it was actually rather heavy. He leaned down to get his mouth close to the gap. “Children! Children, please! Can one of you open the window!? I-I’ll run to the store and I’ll get you all toys and candy if you can open the window!”

Through the window, he could see the kids staring at him, but he could faintly hear what sounded like Amanda saying something to the effect of Don’t you dare go near that window. And the children, still looking at Robin, all walked out of the room.

This had certainly not been his day. “Will somebody PLEASE open the bloody fucking window!?” he screamed with his head leaned back, facing the sky and the sweltering sun beaming down upon him. At this point, he would take his chances screaming openly for a neighbor to come over and help him. As he was wondering what the hell was up with the way he kept incurring window-related injuries lately, he felt the vinyl windowsill vibrating, suggesting angry footsteps coming from inside the house. He looked down to see Amanda returning to the window, absolutely livid, with a small aerosol can in her hand. There was a split second where he was able to read the can’s label before she opened the window, and to say that he was in disbelief would have been an understatement.

The second she opened the window, Robin jumped backward and twisted his body around. As he hit the ground, he felt a strange moisture spray upon the back of his shirt and tail, and could smell a very pungent odor that stung his eyes and burned his nostrils.

“Stay away from my family, you evil fox!” he heard her say from behind him, followed by the window slamming shut one more time. He propped himself up -- a tad painful with his smashed hands -- and turned to see that this time, she had closed the curtains.

“What the hell is wrong with you!” he screamed as he turned himself over onto his bottom, glaring incredulously at the vacant window. “You get my hands stuck in your window, you accuse me of harassing you, and then you try to-- you do realize that’s just regular pepper spray sold at a ridiculous markup for its racist label, don’t you!? But what should I have expected from a member of a church who only let predator species become clergy when the government threatened to revoke their tax exemption!? Yes, I know about that!” Robin got himself to his feet gingerly, trying not to put too much pressure on his paws. “Perhaps it’s for the best that I never came back to take the blame for your son if this is what your true colors are! And I should have known!” He made his way over to the hose on the wall and turned it on to soak the mace off of his clothes and body. “You told me to stay away until you were ready to speak to me, and then you blame me for not taking the initiative to come to you anyway! What was that, some kind of
vindictive test!? I don’t care what happened to your son, a good person doesn’t do that, you duplicitous bi--"

And that’s when he caught himself. This wasn’t who he was. Or, rather -- it wasn’t the person he strove to always be. And yet here he was being some other kind of person. He tried to think how he should have handled this situation; maybe the polite thing to do would have been to take the verbal abuse submissively, but at a certain point, he didn’t think he deserved all that, and Robin had never been one to take injustice lying down. But while screaming his head off at her wasn’t going to make her regret her unjust behavior, talking to her rationally just didn’t seem to be working much better. She had always seemed like such a sweet lady, and he didn’t like giving up on people he cared about, but if this is who she really was… what else could he do?

As he turned off the water and started to roll the hose back up, he dwelled on his sheer shock that that had indeed just happened. He had heard that anti-fox sentiment was a lot worse in the States than it was back home, and he had seen some hints of that with some smaller prey species taking longer to warm up to him than others did, but this was by far the most straightforward bigotry he’d ever been subject to. And this was for a guy who had grown up in a country where “fox hunting” was an infamous pastime, wherein aristocratic prey with nothing better to do would roam the countryside looking for a lone fox to recreationally assault (usually just beatings or throwing projectiles at them, but in some rare extreme cases violating and/or murdering their victim); it was something Will had had to deal with regularly at boarding school, but Robin had never been so unlucky, thanks in no small part to his mother and Oliver refusing Robert’s offer to send Robin to the same institution, opting instead for the private day-school near their fox-majority village. Robin had to consider that maybe the experience of foxes in the British Isles wasn’t typical of their species globally: on the one hand, foxes were far and away the most common predator species in Britain, so most anti-predator sentiment there was heavily implied to be about them specifically; on the other hand, there were so many foxes in England that basically everybody who wasn’t a hermit knew a few personally and knew most of them weren’t bad people, so it seemed like most people back home knew better when thinking with a cooler head. Was that all not normal? Was this what it was like when you lived in a big city in a big country where someone could go their entire lives without actually getting to know a fox as anything more than a passing stranger? At a certain point, Robin got bored of being polite and stopped recoiling the hose, dropping the last few feet on the cement.

His backside was completely soaked, but in the intense heat, it actually felt kind of good. as he walked back out of the alley and into the street, he again felt the eyes upon him. And it was the strangest thing; he didn’t want to meet their gaze. He felt so goddamned narcissistic thinking it, but, yes, he had an image to maintain. His success and survival was reliant on his audience seeing him as an endlessly generous, infinitely patient man of the people, and he had just caught himself acting wildly off-brand. Yes, the circumstances would not have rewarded him for engaging in mature behavior, but the behavior he chose instead didn’t do anything better, and everybody knew it. These people hadn’t seen him on their street in years, and this was their reintroduction to him. And he knew he might have been making it even worse by not returning their gazes with his famous winning smile, but much like with Amanda, he didn’t think good behavior would have fixed much. He had gained a reputation of being a lovable rogue and badass rebel who didn’t care what other people thought about him, and he cared a lot that people continued to think that way about him.

“Mom, isn’t that the guy who you said was a good guy?” came a young voice. Robin turned; it was Conner, standing at an open window.

Julia appeared behind him. “Yeah, I... I thought so.” She grabbed Conner and pulled him away from the window.
“But I heard him screaming at Missus Bunny…” said Conner, his confused voice fading as his mother dragged him away.

Then Robin’s heart skipped a beat when he realized that most of the people on this street probably didn’t see what Amanda did at the very end. They only could have heard him screaming about it, and with the acoustics of this street, who knows how clearly they could have heard him.

“D-does everybody understand that Amanda Foote slammed her window on my hands and then sprayed me with Fox Repellent?” he projected his voice to the street. “You all heard me saying that, yes?”

As his eyes scanned the people watching him, they meekly turned and left their doors and windows, none of them even giving him so much as a nod for an answer.

“Amanda-- I-I mean, Julia?” he asked the open window, his mind completely knackered. “What did you mean by her and her people didn’t like me? She didn’t clarify.” No answer. “Did you mean her church? ...Are you sure you didn’t mean rabbits? Because she fox-sprayed me.” Still no answer. Dejected, Robin nevertheless tried to be the positive force he aimed to be, and realizing that he neglected to give her a gift earlier, he pulled out one of the miniature faux-velvet pouches of cash that he kept on him at all times. He tossed it into the open window -- which, as a trick of the light, he didn’t realize had an outer screen on it. He thought the window was just dark because it was in the shade. The baggie bounced off the screen and back on the pavement, rolling a bit back toward him.

Now he was glad everyone had left their windows. He picked up the bag and walked down the street. His back was drying fast in the immense heat. Even as he crossed 41st Street and was now away from the scene of the incident, he cursed that he had chosen to wear such distinctive clothing; he was hoping to be able to go a bit without being recognized. At least until he could get his head straight and was no longer in the mood to berate a woman he had done wrong, be her vindictive or otherwise. He wasn’t feeling like Robert Edward Hood; he was feeling more like Robert Edward Scarlett. And as he walked along Idaho Street, knowing that certain physical features about himself made him stick out like a sore thumb, he once again wondered if his great height wasn’t the only thing he inherited from his biological father. For these reasons, he found himself wishing desperately that Little John were there right then, both to keep him in line when the evil in his blood began to show itself and to give him someone larger than himself to hide behind now when he didn’t want to be seen.

Was she right? Were all the people that he and John were helping just pretending to believe in them because they benefited from doing so? These people were desperate; it wouldn’t be that much of a stretch at all that a large chunk of these people were faking it. But he couldn’t let himself think that; he had to have faith in their faith. Otherwise this would all have been an enormous waste of time and quite literally a waste of a few lives.

But then he thought of Skippy. He thought of his parting words when he left his seventh birthday party. After their day had been ruined, he swooped in and remedied it, and he left them with a message of hope. What exactly had he said? ‘Don’t worry; happy times will soon be here again.’ He thought those were the words he used.

And as he crossed 42nd Street, Robin still believed that there was hope that he and Little John would succeed; God knows they almost did it once. But he hadn’t said happy times could return; he said they would. He said that with one hundred percent certainty that his mission would be a success. And when he scanned the Footes’ living room one last time, he could see in their eyes that they believed him, too. Amanda had believed him, as did Skippy, as did all the other brothers and
sisters who looked upon him with awe. And Robin knew in that moment that there were a lot of other people in Nottingham who believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that he and his men would be the ones to bring happiness back into their lives. And Robin, of course, believed it, too. When he made that promise to Skippy that things would soon get better, Robin really did feel as though that with his skills, his smarts, his determination, and the best friends a man could have backing him up, there was no way the Merry Men wouldn’t succeed eventually. Robin didn’t feel that way anymore.

--III--

When Otto turned the key in the deadbolt of his front door, he got worried when he realized it was already disengaged. The regular lock was also undone. He looked down at the foundation of his house to see the piece of concrete that hid the spare key; if anybody had used it, they were courteous enough to put it back.

“Hello?” he asked as he tiptoed into his living room. He grabbed the bat from underneath the couch cushion and slowly made his way through his house toward the back door. Absolutely nothing seemed out of place; had he simply forgotten to lock his door? As he got to the kitchen, he saw a figure outside the window. He let out a loud sigh of relief when he realized who it was.

Little John heard the back door open and turned to greet the old dog. “Hey, Otto,” he waved, keeping his two fingers together so he didn’t drop his cigarette. “I remembered where the spare key was! Pretty good hiding spot, I gotta say.”

“John? Uh… what’re you doing smoking outside my house?”

Little John took a quick drag and blew the smoke out the side of his snout. “Well, shit, man, you want me to smoke inside your house?”

“I thought you quit years ago.”

Drag. “I did!” Puff. “That’s the great thing about quitting. Now I can have one whenever I want. Because I quit!”

“Hm. That’s… that’s clever, John.”

“Thanks, I stole it from a movie.” Drag, puff. “Oh, don’t give me that look. I’m a thief, hombre. It’s what I do.” Drag, puff. “Got it from some arthouse short film my old roommate made me watch once. It was literally just Tom Waits and… Tom Waits, aaand… fuck, that old punker who never wears a shirt. I forget his name. Except he was wearing a shirt in this. It was literally just them two sitting around in a diner and shooting the shit for, like, eight minutes, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. And it wasn’t even bad, it was just, who would wanna sit through all that talking and no action? And speaking of sitting around and shooting the shit! You got some time for that chit-chat you agreed to? About how Robin’s driving me fuckin’ bonkers?”

“Uh… I was about to make myself dinner.”

Drag. “KFC’s in the fridge.” Puff.

“Oh, uh… thank you, John, that was very nice of you!”

“Hey, don’t thank me too much, I already ate my share when it was warm. Speaking of warm, can we head inside now? It’s hotter than hell out here.”

Little John stamped out his cigarette and ducked under the doorway. He maneuvered his way
around the ceiling fan and moved a chair out of the way at the kitchen table, sitting himself down and propping himself up against the wall; with his proportions, it was the most suitable arrangement for him. As Otto was messing around getting his food ready, he asked John, “Did you want a beer?”

“Uh-- I wasn’t gonna ask, but if you’re gonna offer.”

“Alright, I’ve got--”

“I said yes, Otto.”

And Otto understood, grabbing the first bottle he saw and untwisting the cap with a dishtowel. He brought the beer over with his plate and handed John the bottle. “For the record, John, I did remember you said you wanted to talk sometime this week, but I didn’t think it would be the very next day.”

“And I’m sorry for dropping by unannounced, man, but the opportunity presented itself. Robin had to go off on a solo mission. Voluntarily.”

Otto leaned forward. “He’s not in any danger, is he?”

“No, he shouldn’t be.” Swig. “But I appreciate the concern, and I’m sure he does, too. I wasn’t gonna tell him I was coming to see you, but the sneaky little shit found out anyway.”

“Speaking of Robin, you said you needed to talk about him to me? And that you weren’t feeling yourself?”

Little John took another swig. “The short answer is yes. The long answer is I have absolutely no idea where to start. Y’know, I ain’t Robin, I’m a helluva lot better at talking on the fly than I used to be, especially back before I met him, but I still can’t piece together an entire fucking narrative out of everything that’s in my head.”

“Don’t worry, John, I understand. Just--”

“How… hell, come to think of it… that perfectly sums up everything I wanted to tell you… I’m just gonna unload some thoughts for a second. Stop me if you have any questions, alright?”

“Sure. Now I’ll have a chance to eat my food while it’s hot out of the microwave.”

“Perfect, perfect…” Little John took one more long swig to wet his whistle before he let loose. “So. Robin’s been kind of a dick lately. And the whole thing is I don’t know if this is anything new or if I’m just starting to see it differently. So the other day he just plain called himself the leader. Which, okay, when there were five of us, five wildly different personalities, he was the nucleus keeping us together. We needed someone to step up if he were gonna be operating as one cohesive unit, and it was all his big idea, so sure, Robin’s the leader of the club he founded. Completely fair, totally cool. But now there’s only two of us. There’s no more big wily group needing guidance, it’s just A and B. And really, ever since Tuck tapped out and Alan got busted…” Swig. “…that’s when I started feeling less cool with him acting like the one in charge, because, again, there’s just two of us. And I didn’t really… I couldn’t put it into words for years until the other day when we were really close to getting busted, and I was opening up about how I felt bad about, like… fuck, how could this end well for us? Even if we’re on the right side of history, we’re still criminals with a rap sheet longer than the Golden Gate Bridge. So best case scenario, we might get to be free men who’re unemployable. So while we’re talking about this, fucking Robin starts saying he’ll find a happy ending for us because he won’t fail me as the leader, and it’s like, uh, buddy? What the fuck
are you talking about? Because that’s the thing. He doesn’t seem like he thinks he’s taking the role of the ‘leader’ because someone needs to step up -- he seems like he’s getting off on it. He’s fucking arrogant about it. It’s clear that he doesn’t think my contributions are equal. And I’m just thinking, okay, Rob, ol’ buddy ol’ pal, sure, sure this little club of ours was your idea, but we’ve been doing this for seven fucking years, motherfucker! SEVEN FUCKING YEARS! I--”

“Shh!” Otto said with a full mouth before he swallowed. “My neighbor’s trying to sleep. He works odd hours.”

“Sorry, man. But… yeah. At this point, I kind of do expect that I be regarded as an equal member of the team as Robin. I’ve thrown away as much of my life as he has to help these people out. And what really cemented this was just yesterday when I saw a graffiti mural of all of the gang together, but Robin’s front and center while I’m literally in the background with a retarded look on my face - - and I’m not trying to be a dick, but I do mean that I literally look like I have an intellectual impairment in that graffiti. And… shit, if I’m being completely honest, I’m… I’m kind of afraid that he’s right. I’m… I think every so often that the guy might be better than me. Maybe there’s a reason why he’s the main man and I’m the sidekick. Man, I don’t know…” Little John looked up at Otto for the first time in about a minute, and Otto responded by stopping mid-chew and staring back at him like a spooked deer. “I’ve given you a lot to think about, haven’t I?”

Otto swallowed. “Y-yeah. You have. But that’s for the best. Let it all out.”

“What’s on your mind so far, Otto?”

“Uh, well…” he said with his mouth full, then swallowed again. “I guess my first question is why you feel so inferior to him.”

“Oh, Jesus, dude, it’s a long story--”

“I have nothing but time.” Buckle up, Dear Reader.

Little John groaned and took another swig. “I mean... part of it is kinda a self-fulfilling prophecy. And by that I mean... he walks the walk, he talks the talk, he’s gotten the world to think he’s the head honcho, and that’s just as good as actually being the head motherfucker in charge. But... sometimes I wonder, gee, what if he’s earned the right to be cocky because he really is the best there is? My God, Otto, the kid’s just good at everything.”

“I can’t help but notice you’re calling him a kid.”

“I mean, yeah, part of it is that I feel even worse about being this guy’s lackey because he’s six years younger than me. I have memories from before he was even conceived. And... I’m not usually one to load up on random tidbits of information, so don’t recruit me for your bar trivia team, but I just keep running into things that came and went in the gap between when I was born and when he was. Like, my dad’s favorite band, Creedence Clearwater Revival; they came and went in those six years. I think The Brady Bunch squeezed into that window, too -- I might be off by a year or two, I don’t know, but the world changed a lot in those six years, and every time I find out more about that, the more I feel bad about... what’s with that look?”

“Uh... remind me how old you are?”

Little John gave him an appropriately sideways look. “I’ll be thirty-eight in October.”

“That’s it?”

“How fucking old did you think I was?”
“Oh, older than Alan, at least. Pushing Tuck’s age.”

“Do I act like a fucking geriatric?”

“Well, hey, John, in my defense, you do have a very… mature sounding voice.”

“Hm.” Swig. “Well, a lot of people also tell me I have a teddy-bear face, so I’m glad it balances out. But yeah, let’s count Robin’s talents and gifts. Let’s see… he never misses with a bow and arrow, and he’s pretty handy with a sword, too—”

“Yes, because he’s been practicing them his whole life.”

“I’m not so sure Otto. The guy just seems to have the ability to pick up anything fast. Way, way, way back in the day, we all tried to go bowling once. The five of us. We knew the owner and he was friendly. Apparently Robin’d never bowled before. He started out with a couple of gutter balls, but by the eighth frame he’d just scored a turkey and was about to pass Tuck for the lead. He had failed at something, figured out what he was doing wrong, remedied it, and excelled at it all in the span of thirty minutes.”

“...Really?”

“Ask Tuck if you don’t believe me.”

“Uh… wow. Did Robin end up winning?”

“Cops showed up and we split. Never finished our game.”

“I see…”

“And that’s what I really envy about the guy. The guy’s got confidence even when he has absolutely no logical reason to. Not to say he’s never lost his confidence -- God knows he’s had his bad days -- but it takes a really bad day to get him down, and even then, it doesn’t last for long. It took his fucking brother committing suicide right in front of his eyes for him to even get close to long-term self-doubt, and even then, he miraculously pushed through it. And he’s so goddamn confident that he can teach himself new skills on the fly! Now, I’m not as unconfident as I used to be -- I know I don’t sound too confident complaining about somebody else’s confidence, but just play along -- but there’s still a scared, dinky little cub inside of me who just can’t wrap his head around how anybody could ever get to be that good at believing in themselves.”

“Well, I--”

“And then there’s the way he gets along with everybody. If he wants to be your friend, whether you think you want to or not, tough shit, he’s gonna make you his friend, and you’re gonna like it. God knows it worked on me when I was at my most jaded. And then there’s the leadership thing and how he’s just so good at it, but we already talked about that.”

“Well, listen, John--”

“Shut up and eat your chicken while it’s hot, Otto. So for all of those, you could debate whether it was a case of nature or nurture that he turned out that perfect, but do you know what’s not up for debate? How did that guy get to look so goddamn good? That’s one hundred percent a nature thing. And I live with the motherfucker in the forest, so I know he doesn’t have any special beautification routine. And he’s in the perfect middle ground between being, like, ‘bodybuilder’ hot and ‘boy band’ hot; it’s like he’s perfectly classically handsome. And the dude’s gigantic. Like, I guess it makes sense that a smaller species could produce a gigantic specimen without a bunch of health
problems since they have nowhere to go but up, but it just seems like another way that he was put on this earth to command attention. So you take all these good things about him that I know he didn’t have to work on and now it’s like, well, if this is all natural, how do I know the other stuff isn’t? It’s at the point where I could seriously imagine some reality where we win, we get our freedom back, we decide to celebrate by showing each other where we grew up, he takes me back to England, we meet his parents -- probably half his size -- and they decide to be polite and show us his baby pictures, and I can already envision one where it looks like someone’s trying to play peekaboo with him, but Baby Rob’s not having it, just staring at his mom or his dad like they’re fuckin’ crazy, because even as a literal baby he understood object fucking permanence. I can just imagine it. I know the guy ain’t perfect, but the way he flaunts his stuff...” Swig. “...he’s close enough.”

Otto was absentmindedly stirring the gravy into his mashed potatoes as he made a point to keep his eyes on Little John, just in case the bear wanted to return the eye contact. “You know… before you went on all that about his physical stuff… I was gonna say--”

“I know you’re a Jesus freak, Otto, so I’m sorry if all this talk about a guy’s body is making you uncomfortable, but for the love of God, don’t tell me you were getting the impression that I was nyeh, like the sociopathic fucking kid in the woods thought we were.”

Otto had stopped stirring. “I... wasn’t gonna say that. And although I would be confused at first and a little bit weirded out, I wouldn’t be offended if that turned out to be the case. Please don’t mix me up with those people who make a mockery of my faith by calling their hatred virtuous.”

“Oh. Uh, alright. That’s good to know, I guess. Well, what were you gonna say, then?”

“I was gonna say it was interesting that you wanted to talk about things Robin was good at, and besides archery, you mostly just listed characteristics rather than actual skills.”

“Well, like I said, the guy’s good at everything he tries because he’s the single most self-confident person I’ve ever met, and since he never really loses at anything major, that just makes him more self-confident. And I don’t know if that’s a case of he got lucky in life and he always got dealt the best cards or if his brain is just wired differently, but--”

Otto leaned in as he cut John off. “You really think he’s never really lost at anything?”

Little John chose his words carefully before answering. “You know what? If he has, he hasn’t told me. Shit, that’s something I forgot to mention earlier; sorry, I toldja I didn’t have a script for this.” Swig. “Part of the arrogance thing is that he doesn’t ever seem to share his weaknesses with me. Or at least not the things he’s really embarrassed about. Either he tells me flaws of his that he’s just meh about, like how he can barely drive a car because he never really had to, or if he’s really embarrassed about it, I have to find it out by accident, like how we got in close quarters with some drug pushers once and he didn’t have an offhand knowledge of how much an ounce went for or how to smoke it, ‘cuz he was just never into the stuff. Granted, I didn’t know either as a result of my own upbringing, but I digress.” Swig. “That’s what I mean by lording over me. I’m his best friend -- I think -- and it’s like he still wants me to admire him and think he’s a flawless hero, just like all the people in this town seem to think. And I sometimes wonder, does he really see me as a friend, or just a business partner? With a clear mind, I know it’s the first one, but... my mind ain’t been too clear lately. And he’s not helping.” Swig. “Got another?”

“Sure thing.” Otto got up to retrieve another beer. “So, just to be crystal clear,” he said as he rummaged in the fridge, “you’re frustrated because Robin doesn’t treat you as an equal, not the townspeople?”
“No, both. Like in that godforsaken mural. Thanks,” Little John added as he accepted the bottle. “And I tell myself if Rob started treating me like an equal part of the team, maybe all the people who adore him will follow their lead. After all, his great leadership -- that’s one of those things that people always say about him to symbolically suck his dick. Wait, I already mentioned that...”

Otto was seriously considering finding a notebook and pencil somewhere to start taking notes. “So… are you ready for me to be completely honest with you?”

Little John was about to take another sip, but he stopped the bottle right before his lips. “Well, when you start out like that, I think I need to hear what’s on your mind whether I can handle it or not.”

“Alright. So… I think when most people in this town think of you and Robin… they think of the archery tournament a few years back.”

John still hadn’t taken a sip. “...Go on?”

“Because that was where the most people altogether at once saw you two in action. And during that tourney… well… Robin was the center of attention, putting himself in the crosshairs, and you were, uh… quite literally sitting on the sidelines.”

Little John slowly lowered the beer and even more slowly turned his head toward the window. “God, dammit,” he seethed.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, John, we all knew you were still helping, but it was very much a… a supporting role, I guess.”

John picked up the beer again and angrily took a swig. “Now ya see, I was thinking it was the party afterwards. I was starting to worry that I was acting like too much of a goofball for these people to take me seriously. I mean, hell, it doesn’t help that I was singing a song was literally about him -- sure, Alan helped me write it, but Alan was a lot more comfortable being in the background, and I’m not the person I was four years ago. Back then I was content to be with Robin. Now, I’m pissed that I can’t be like him. Like, shit, do I just not have that natural leeaderrrrshiiip people always rant and rave about in him?”

“Well, in some ways, that’s good that you’re driven to be like him, John. He’s a great guy to strive to be like.”

The look on the bear’s face made it clear that that was a poor choice of words.

“That… that didn’t help, did it?” Otto choked out.

“Nope.”

“Well, uh… hey, it’s still good you have a clear goal of who you want to be like, and that you want to improve. That’s more than a lot of people.”

“But you don’t understand. I’ve been trying for years now to be more like he is. Back when I wrote that song with Alan, I was in a transition period where I was happy to be around the guy specifically so he could rub off on me. Now I’m getting worried that it’s not happening fast enough, and that it’s not going to.”

“These things take time, John.”

“But seven fucking years, man! I’m pushing forty! I’m running out of time!”
“Well, I’m fifty-nine, how do you think that makes me feel?”

“Well, why aren’t you panicking that you aren’t more like him!? Like you just said, he’s a great person to want to be like!”

“I-- you know what? That’s a good point, John.” And Otto was silent as he thought for a second.

“What is?”

“Now, John… please, please, please don’t think this is condescending to you, but… you do realize… you realize most people don’t want to be heroes, right?”

Little John was visibly surprised.

“And by that I mean…” Otto continued, “…most people are content with just being normal, so long as their lives are comfortable. I mean, sure, everyone would like to be called a hero, but to do the things you’ve got to do to actually be one… most people would rather sit back and admire a hero than be one.”

John looked a tad bit embarrassed. “I-I, uh… I… that’s something that… I think I knew that in the back of my head, but… not the front of my head.”

“I mean, sure, if I really thought about it, I could overthink it and get really depressed that I’m not an amazing guy like Robin is. But I have a roof over my head, a line of work I enjoy, I had the privilege to have a woman I loved in my life for thirty years, and I’m lucky to live in a world where people like Robin exist -- no, people Robin and you exist -- to be heroes and keep me safe so I don’t have to.”

Little John opened his mouth for a second to say something, but nothing came out.

“You say you were in the background in that graffiti mural? John, you were still in the mural. I wasn’t. That’s nothing to shake a stick at.”

“...Well, I appreciate that, man,” Little John forced himself to say.

“And for what it’s worth, I’m just gonna say it: regarding Robin’s infinite confidence in the face of danger? Me and a bunch of other civilians’ve always just thought the guy was crazy. But John… you’re not doing anything wrong. You’re a hero to this town, too.”

“And I appreciate that.”

Otto sighed. “John… when people talk about how great Robin is… it’s not to tear you down, it’s to prop him up, for being the kind of guy you only come across maybe once in a lifetime. You want to be remembered as a hero? Then please don’t be the kind of guy who can’t handle hearing someone else get a compliment. That wouldn’t be very heroic.”

The bear looked further embarrassed, and was having trouble maintaining eye contact. “I’m gonna be completely honest with you, Otto… I hear you say that and I just think, ‘Well, shit, why can’t I be one of those once-in-a-lifetime people?’”

“I mean… the big, cosmic answer is that then he wouldn’t be special, but I know that’s not what you mean. You mean why can’t you be that special person.”

“Exactly! If anyone can be like that, why can’t I?”
“Because not everyone can.”

“Jesus, you know what I meant. If… if an individual -- any individual -- could live that kind of life, why can’t I?”

“Alright, alright, much better wording. I understand you better now. Uh…”

As Otto was thinking of an answer, Little John beat him to the punch:

“Do you think I’m being immature?”

“…What?”

“Do you think I’m being immature? For not being content with being a good friend and a good sidekick to a great hero?”

“Uh-um… well… John, it’s good that you’re being introspective about this--”

“No, I don’t think that I’m being immature. I think that you think I’m being immature, and I don’t want that to be the case.”

“Oh… That’s fair.”

A moment of silence passed. Little John took another sip.

“This is my dilemma, Otto. I don’t know whether Robin’s being a bad friend… or if I’m being a bad friend for thinking he’s being a bad friend.”

“And I do not think that dilemma is a sign of a lack of maturity, John.” The old dog sat back in his chair, only because leaning forward was starting to hurt his back. “But I have to say, it’s quite frankly a miracle it took this long for you two to start getting on each other’s nerves.”

“…Whaddaya mean?”

Otto leaned forward again; he couldn’t help it. “Now -- this isn’t a backhanded joke about the two of you, please don’t think that it is -- you two spend more time together than most married couples. And you two either have more patience for one another than those couples or you two just plain like one another’s company more than they do, but one way or another, there haven’t been many times in the last few years when I’ve seen you without him somewhere nearby, or at least when it’s not part of divide-and-conquer strategy for a plan.”

Little John couldn’t help but chuckle a little, still a tad embarrassed. “I guess that kid who threw rocks at us was on to something. But hey, if you were to tell Rob that, he’d probably tell you it was strictly strategy. Back when there were a few of us, we could split into smaller groups so we wouldn’t be stuck with the same personalities all the time. Then Tuck got sick and Alan fucked off, and now, boom, it’s just the two of us, and for safety reasons, we quite literally gotta have each other’s back. The fact that we get along great purely coincidental and honestly kind of a miracle. But you know what?” Swig. “Knowing him, he’d never have a problem with this arrangement. He’s almost… he’s almost sociable to a fault. I’m talking likecrippingly extroverted. If he didn’t have someone around to bounce ideas off of whenever he wanted, he’d lose his goddamn mind. He always needs someone to talk to for the sake of it. To my understanding, him and his girlfriend might have been almost as inseparable as we are now, or at least as much as their adult lives would allow.” Swig. “As for me… I know me and my shit, too. I don’t feel too weird being tethered to the guy like other straight guys might be because… hey, if I can spill my guts?”
“You may.”

“...I spent so much of my life wishing I had a good friend, I wasn’t gonna complain when I fell ass-backwards into having a great friend. But that’s part of what’s bugging me: what if this guy who I’m stuck spending most of my waking hours with isn’t the great friend he got me thinking he was?”

“And honestly, John? You two seem to be tight like few I’ve ever seen before. And I do mean seem, and I’m saying that because even if you two aren’t as perfect friends as it seems to both of you and all of us outside observers, that wouldn’t be shameful, that would just be bringing you back towards normal. Like I said, you two’re still way ahead of most married couples, and I don’t mean that in any disparaging way.”

“No, no, I believe ya, I believe ya…” Little John was tempted to ask if Otto thought he and Robin got along better than Otto and his wife, but he couldn’t imagine an answer to that being anything other than awkward. So instead, he asked this: “How much have you gathered about my childhood over the years?”

Otto thought about it for a second. “Uh… I know you and your father didn’t get along, and… I think you’ve mentioned having a brother you didn’t speak charitably about, either.”

“Alright, so…” Swig. “…Goddammit, I’m sorry. Can I get another one?”

“I think I’ll get myself one, too,” Otto said as he did so.

“So this oughta make everything make a lot more sense. So for reference, my pop was… actively, actually an asshole, but he’s not too important. What you gotta know is that my brother was actually my non-identical twin.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yes. And thank you.” Swig. “And basically the same reasons why my dad… hated him less, I guess… were the same reasons I was jealous of him.”

“What’s your brother’s name?”

“Mister Dumb-Motherfucker-Who-You’ll-Hopefully-Never-Meet. But it wasn’t so much that he was an asshole that it was he just didn’t know how to be a good brother. Like, when I say non-identical… I’m embarrassed to tell people who I’ve met as a full-grown adult this, but I was a really, really, really late bloomer, Otto. I was tiny and my brother was gigantic. People refused to believe we were twins -- hell, we even had a pediatrician as kids who even he refused to believe it. And this was an even bigger problem because we grew up in an area with a lot of big predators.”

“Jeez, I… if he was huge compared to you, I’m… honestly really curious how big this guy must be.”

“Oh, no, we’re probably roughly the same size now. Assuming he didn’t keep growing after I moved out -- which, hell, if I did, he might have too. Watch me meet him one day and he’s twelve fuckin’ feet tall. I’ll be fucking fuming and I won’t even try to hide it.”

“I, uh… I see.”

“Okay, wait, now I’m kinda afraid that might’ve actually happened. Because he always took after our dad more than I did. Did I mention my dad was half-polar?”
“...You did not. And looking at you, I never would have guessed you were a quarter.”

“Well, you can see it more in my brother; his fur’s just plain gray. And yeah, our pops was something like nine-seven, and if you know anything about my people, you know they think size lines up with your worth as a person. So for that reason, my dad always preferred my brother, and my mom-- bless her heart, she tried so hard not to play favorites like her husband, but to be completely, one hundred percent honest, I kinda wish she did, because that would’ve been the one thing that I woulda had over him. But that’s the thing. Because he never felt starved for love from his family, and because he literally fit in in society, he never had any self-esteem problems. I did. He got to be Mister Cool Guy who everyone loved and who everyone wanted to be around, who everybody wanted to be friends with, and that’s all on top of how he was big and strong and I know at least a few girls in our high school thought he was hot...” Swig. “This all sounding familiar yet, Otto? Does my brother sound kinda like somebody else we know?”

Otto nodded.

“I mean, granted, he wasn’t exactly like Robin. Rob’s a certifiable genius -- shit, that’s another thing he’s good at that I just forgot to mention earlier -- but my brother...” Swig. “It wasn’t that he was stupid, it’s just that he didn’t apply himself, because he lived for fun and applying himself in school wasn’t fun. As for me? I didn’t fall behind in school, but I didn’t pull ahead either -- I didn’t think I was ever gonna be good at anything physically or socially, so I tried to be good at school, but...” Swig. “...even though I was trying my best, and he just scraped by so our dad wouldn’t beat his ass, we still got the same grades. Maybe I edged him out a little, but there were still actually smart kids who weren’t trying at all, and their grades were still better than mine or my brother’s. And it’s just, fuck, are our people really as stupid as people think we are? And yet! And yet...” Swig. “...the fact that he felt so confident that life would be fine even if he didn’t take his education seriously... that was another thing about him I was jealous of.” Swig. “And Christ alive, my brother definitely wasn’t as noble as Rob is. You know what his biggest flaw was? He was easygoing to a fault. He was such a social butterfly that he couldn’t relate to me as somebody who had trouble making friends. You see, my brother, he liked to fight. For fun, I mean. His favorite sport was boxing, and the only other reason he bothered to maintain a C-average was so that he could stay on the school wrestling team. So when he saw me getting my ass kicked by his friends-- which happened a lot-- he just thought it was for fun. He thought we were just playing. Hell, sometimes he’d start whaling on me with this stupid childlike smile on his face-- he thought, as a bear, there was no way I wouldn’t be enjoying this. And it’s not even that he didn’t understand what pre-fucking-meditated assault was; one of his smaller friends was this panther kid who moved to Nashville from India in the fourth grade, and whenever people messed with that guy, oopsie!, here comes the big behemoth to make these sorry-looking motherfuckers regret ever laying a hand on him. It was just with me that he couldn’t understand why I wasn’t more like him. And sometimes I think, hey, maybe if I just mellowed out and stopped being so goddamn anxious about looking like an eight-year-old, maybe if I was just confident in who I was like he was, then maybe people would respect me and then they wouldn’t care that I was four feet tall. And maybe my brother knew that, and he was trying to lead by example. And that’s another thing about him I was jealous of. And how he could and would stick up for his friends, not just because he was big enough but because he was confident enough, too. Goddamn, I need a drink.” Swig.

Otto kept nodding, trying to focus on the details of the story and not focus on envisioning how ridiculously little Little John apparently used to be. He was starting to wonder whether the giant bear’s nickname started out as something completely unironic.

“What I’m trying to say, Otto, is that this ain’t the first time I’ve had to live with somebody who just... embodies everything I wish I could be. I’ve always had a specific person I could point to and say, ‘Him. I want to be like him’, and I’m sad because I’m not like him.’ It used to be my brother,
but then I found someone better than him. Somebody who I should actually be jealous of.”

“...Can I say one thing about that?”

“Well, we’re having a conversation, so I’d hope you have something to say about that.”

“Right. So you mention you had trouble in school. Well… John, I work in a blue-collar field. Not to disparage my colleagues and clients, but I’ve met a lot of people who seem genuinely unintelligent, and a lot of people who just seem uneducated -- through no fault of their own, of course, because education is a luxury and a lot of people in this town don’t have access to much of it. But John, you don’t strike me as unintelligent. Heck, you just used the word ‘embody’. I don’t think a truly stupid person would use words like that.”

“Oh, I just learned that word from Rob.”

“But still: you learned it.”

Little John glanced at a crack in the tile floor. “Yeah, yeah, I… alright, I get what you’re saying.”

Otto took a sip of his own drink. “So… I think I have an idea of what’s going on here. You’ve always felt like you’re not good enough because there’s always been someone around who you feel is better than you in every way.”

“Yessir, Dr. Smith!” Swig. “And for awhile after I met Rob, I started feeling good about myself because I finally had somebody backing me up, but now I’m starting to feel like he’s still on some higher echelon and the both of us know it.”

“See? Now you just used the word ‘echelon’.”

“Also from Rob. Or Will. Probably both; they were both well-educated.”

“But on the topic of backing people up… uh… you… you know Robin’s not actually perfect, right?”

“Oh, absolutely. I probably know the guy’s flaws more than anybody at this point. But knowing his public image, that might not be saying much.”

“But listen, John… don’t tell him I said this, but I can tell that Robin’s going through some stuff right now, too. You say you’re not feeling yourself? Well, I don’t think he’s feeling himself, either.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you don’t need to tell me twice. I’ve seen the guy cry more in the last few days than I have in the seven years before that.”

And Otto was going to take another swig, but that statement surprised him. “Y-you have?”

“I mean, that’s probably an exaggeration, but I’m probably not far off.” Swig. “He’s been thinking a lot about his brother and his girlfriend, but he’s been thinking about the lack of progress we’ve been making these last few years. Like, we ran into this really bitchy porcupine lady the other day who told us that apparently some people who robbed a liquor store got gunned down by the cops because they thought they were with us, and Robin was shaken like a martini for the rest of the night…” Swig. “Actually, wait. Do you know if that thing about the liquor store actually happened?”

“Uh… doesn’t sound familiar, but knowing the cops in this town, I don’t doubt it.”
“Well, it had him fucked up either way. But yeah, the thought does cross my mind that maybe me telling him off for being such an arrogant prick to his one irreplaceable friend is getting him down, and it goes back to what I said earlier: I don’t want to be a bad friend, but I’m not happy with the way things are shaking out.

Otto readjusted in his chair. “Well, it’s funny you should say that, John, because you may have just proven the point I was about to make.”

“And what’s that?”

Otto leaned forward to stress his argument. “Maybe Robin’s always been this endless barrel of confidence… because he had people like you to back him up,” he said as he pointed. “Your confidence in him gave him confidence in himself, and you know what? The other way around, too: you were feeling great when you believed he felt great about you. But it seems like… I’m not pointing fingers, but one of you initiated something to make the other feel like… like the shared confidence wasn’t there anymore. I don’t know if it was him being condescending to you or you telling him he was arrogant, but… you two were playing so well off each other for so long, and now something broke that. And it’s not necessarily anybody’s fault, but it clearly happened.”

Little John’s face revealed he had mixed feelings about that analysis. “Now, that makes a lot of sense… but it’s not airtight. When I first met the guy, he was completely alone in the forest. Who was backing him up then?”

“I dunno. Residual support from his girlfriend? He’s an actor by trade, isn’t he? Maybe he was faking it.”

Swig. “Well, even if you’re right, then how do you propose we fix it?”

“You’re not gonna like hearing this, John.”

“Just fucking say it.”

“Alright. So… Robin sees you as a sidekick? Fine. Be his sidekick. And when he feels better about himself, maybe he’ll be more in the mood to talk about how you want to be seen and treated.”

“Great, more talking.”

“Because for better or worse, John, we’ve all come to be reliant on you two, so we need you both to be on the top of your game. Hey, you want to know what I think would be heroic? If you -- if you, John -- were to bite the bullet and play the role of the sidekick against your wishes, but for the greater good. After all, they say heroism takes sacrifice.”

“So I gotta sacrifice my own happiness?”

“Well, I mean--”

“No, I get it, Otto. What you said makes sense. But damn if I can’t shake the feeling of, ‘shit, how much more do I have to sacrifice to be regarded as equal to Robin?’ And you see, just like that, we’re back in the big-picture issues. If I take the role of the sidekick in stride, that might be all they ever see me as. They might start to think I’m okay with being the second banana. And after all this selfless shit we do, the one selfish thing I want is… goddammit, I just want to be recognized.”

“I recognize you, John.”

“You’d fucking better! I’m an eight-foot grizzly bear sitting at your kitchen table!”
“C’mon, John, you know what I meant.”

Little John sort of ran the lip of the beer bottle with his tongue as he stared at the ceiling fan in front of his face; it was spinning slowly to compliment the air conditioning, which was running on low to save electricity. “In some ways, though, Otto… I kinda don’t know what you mean. I-I mean… mixed messages. So… you did say, Rob’s a good person to want to be like, right?”

“John, please, I didn’t mean any harm--”

“No, Otto, I’m not fighting it, I just wanted to make sure that’s what you said.”

“Uh… y-yeah, I did say that.”

“And a few pages later you said I should just… accept the role of the sidekick.”

“For now. As a means to an end. But to answer your question, yes, I said that.”

“Okay, so which is it?”

“…How do you mean?”

“You said be more like him and you also said stay under him. I can’t do both.”

“Hm…” Sip. “Actually, John, I’d argue you can only do both, and that that’s only one option. The idea is you can either try to emulate him while you take the role of his protégé, and then you can be ready to be more like he is for when your work in this town is done and you can reenter the civilian world--”

“Well, wait. Stop.” Swig. “For one thing, Rob’s skillset only lends itself well to his outlaw lifestyle. That’s one of the few things he’s actually ashamed of: he didn’t get very far in the real world before he fucked off to Sherwood. And because of our outlaw lifestyle, we’re not so sure there’s ever gonna be a time when we can just up and reenter the civilian world.”

“Well then, there’s your second option for more immediate results. Pretend to be okay with taking a backseat, but make it clear that you want him and everyone else to start giving you co-star billing. And you can get that co-star billing easier by not trying to emulate him at all, just be yourself -- your best self -- and bring to the table what he can’t. If you two were really two equal parts -- and I agree you should be -- then it would be boring at best and wasteful and redundant at worst if you two were exactly the same person.”

“Okay. Otto. Again, that makes sense, but for Christ’s sakes, I’ve been trying that for years! It hasn’t worked.”

“I… thought you said you were trying to copy him? I-I-I mean, I’m not trying to be difficult, that’s just the impression that I--”

“I was trying to do both. I was trying to copy his confidence more than anything. I had it in my mind that if I really wanted to be like him, I should play to my strengths and not dwell on my weaknesses, just like he did. But like I said, all other things being equal, people just love him more.”

“Well, I--”

“And I keep thinking, goddamn, I shoulda been focusing on fixing my weaknesses, because I had a lot of them. Like -- this is fucking embarrassing to admit -- for the longest time, I was the timid one
between us. When Rob wanted to loot the mayor’s procession, I said nuh-uh, no way, there’s a law against robbing politicians, but he basically called me a pussy in the most debonair way possible and I said fuck it and went along with it. And when we heard about the archery contest and we both knew immediately that it was a sting operation, I warned him against it, he went on about how a faint heart never won a fair lady, and so again, I said screw it, there’s no stopping this kid’s libido. And that whole time, I wasn’t consciously trying to be overcautious, that’s just who I was. My truth was that I thought things like that were suicide missions. And I still remember the day, just a few years ago at this point, when we were talking to some teenagers we met -- not the ones you met, you’re probably never gonna see those kids again -- and they were telling us how they’d grown up with legends of us, and you know what the legends about me were? That I was a grump-ass. That I was such a pussy who never really wanted to go through with Rob’s plans and I only did begrudgingly. Sure, the kids still thought I was cool and they respected that I still went through with all the plans anyway, but their idea of me was that I was the member of the team who bitched and moaned all the time. And I heard that and I thought, that. That was the reason people always thought I was under Robin. He makes the plans, I complain about them before eventually just following his word. That’s why nobody ever mistook me for the leader. That and me being a goofball at the party. That and me being a big dumb bear who’s all brawn and no brains. That and the fact that Rob just had natural social skills and I was still relatively new to the concept that I was capable of making friends. And the only reason I was able to make friends was because I was trying really, really hard to loosen up and be as cool as some hybrid of Rob and my brother. You see? Even in life, he just... be’s himself and I just follow his lead. This is the real me I brought to the table, Otto. I can’t afford to be the real me anymore.”

Dear Reader, is there a term to describe when someone clasps their hands together, but keeps their index fingers extended and pressed against one another, all bumped up in front of pursed lips? Because that’s what Otto was doing. “I understand your frustration, John, truly I do. But… you might hear me say this and think it’s the most unhelpful thing ever, but… I know one thing: don’t spend your entire life trying to be somebody else. That’s the fastest way to guarantee you’ll never be happy with who you are.”

Little John took a sip and debated whether he wanted to go down another rabbit hole. “Does that make sense, John?”

He decided he did. “So about that... so... I don’t know how much you remember about Will, but... part of what -- for me at least -- part of what hurt so much about losing him was that he really was just a kid. And I mean that in the best way possible. Hey, don’t tell Rob I said this, but... as much as Robin is probably a better friend on paper, Will was more fun to be around. Being around him made me feel like I was getting back the youth I never got to enjoy. Robin might have been the responsible friend I needed as an adult, but Will was like the wild and irresponsible childhood friend I never had. Only reason I didn’t go to pieces like Rob did when he left was because, quite frankly, I was used to being miserable.”

“Oh... I see,” Otto affirmed, trying really hard to contain his shock.

“And one of the things about Will just being a big kid was that... the guy really loved cartoons. Hell, for Christ’s sakes, it was his idea to start using oo-de-lally as a codeword, and he stole it from some show on The Cartoon Network that I’d never even fucking heard of. But I’m telling you this because I remember that second summer, when we were rockin’ and rollin’ and nothing could get us down, there was some cartoon movie that was getting rave reviews that Will really wanted to see. I think it was based on some book he read as a kid. It wasn’t Sidney, it wasn’t PixArt, it wasn’t FantasyFactory, it was some company that doesn’t usually mess around with animation. But me and Rob agree to go with Will to a theater -- we snuck in, sue us -- and Will loved it, Rob thought it
was cute, but I was just shook by how profound it was. And by that I mean this… So it was a movie about a boy befriending a giant robot, but it turns out the robot’s an alien or something that was built to destroy the earth -- motherfucker got amnesia when he crash-landed, I forgot to mention, but he starts remembering his intended purpose. But now he loves this kid and he doesn’t want to be a killing machine. Then when the government tries to kill the son of a bitch with a fucking nuclear missle, he’s gotta sacrifice himself to save everybody.”

“And this was a kid’s movie?”

“It was a *cartoon* movie, yes, but it wasn’t just for kids. C’mon, Otto, that’s a really old-fashioned way of thinking. Actually, I think it was rated PG-13 if I remember correctly. But... all throughout the movie, the running theme was… ‘you are who you choose to be.’ It didn’t matter that the robot was built to kill, he chose to be somebody that didn’t kill. And while Will’s on the edge of his seat and Rob’s trying not to fall asleep, I’m just sitting there during the climax thinking to myself… jeez, *you are who you choose to be* … Why didn’t anybody tell me that? Why the FUCK didn’t anybody ever--!?”

“Shh! I’m sorry John, but your voice carries.”

“Shit, sorry, man. But yeah… nobody had ever taken the time and care to sit me down and tell me to my face, ‘Hey, Johnny, you are who you choose to be. Not who you’re born as, not who other people try to make you into, but who you choose to be.’ And I’d had some inklings of that before, especially when I decided I wanted to take some notes from Rob, but goddamn, there was something about just… *hearing* those words strung together as a sentence like that for the first time, like it validated my suspicions that I wasn’t stuck where the world wanted me to be. Now… this isn’t an attack on you, Otto; a lot of people’ve told me this over the years. But contrast that to you and a bunch of other people telling me… ‘Oh, Johnny, don’t ever try to be somebody you’re not.’ Well, shit, which one is it? Am I supposed to try to be who I wish I could be, or am I supposed to just make peace with who nature made me and find my place in the world? I mean, am I just being childish for believing that cartoon movie contained some legitimate life guidance? Because I’ve heard--” He stopped suddenly, glanced at his beer, and took another swig. “I’m sorry, I’m rambling again. But do you see what I mean?”

“Yeah… yes, I see what you mean.” Otto finished his beer. “Need another?”

“Please.”

Otto pondered as he got the both of them another round, and had this to say as he returned to the table: “Okay, John, maybe I’m naive for thinking this, but… what if both statements are right? What if the real you… *is* who you choose to be? What if who you’re raised as is just what everybody else wants you to be, but… that feeling inside you… that nagging that you want to be somebody else… what if that’s your mind’s way of saying… *that’s* who you really are? *That’s* who you’re meant to be, not this composite of who everybody else wanted you to be. The person you feel you *should* be… *is* your true nature, and *that’s* why you want to be that kind of person so bad. Your nature’s calling, John. And I might not be an expert, but I encourage you to follow it.”

John looked down at Otto, who had a Robinesque smile, looking very pleased with the advice he had just dispensed. And Little John wanted to likewise give a warm smile in return, but he still had one burning question on his mind. “So tying this all back to the big problem… my insatiable urge is to be just like Robin. Maybe put my own spin on his personality, give it a little of my Southern charm, but I more or less want what he has. Would that still be me being my true self, or would that be straying from this journey of self-discovery?”

Otto maintained his pedagogical smile. “You know what, John? I think you almost had it the first
time all those years ago. You can be more like Robin... by being more like yourself. Sorry if I sound like a hippie, but... follow your heart, John.”

And Dear Reader, you will have to pardon this narrator’s lack of subtlety, but Little John himself was one millisecond’s hesitation away from saying this to Otto point-blank: he didn’t know who he was. He had been so many people and had tried to act like so many more that he didn’t know if any of them were his authentic self. He had been brave and he had been cowardly; he had been shy and he had been antisocial, and he had been a party animal after that; he had gone through phases in his life where his resting states had been sad, then mad, then glad, and he had gone through phases in his life where he was chiefly motivated by fear, then by hatred, then by love. He had been self-satisfied and yet jealous; loyal and yet begrudging; inspiring and yet destructive; a lover and a fighter, and both and neither. He had long harbored a desire to be seen and heard and regaled as a hero, but was fully aware that this desire was inherently unheroic. He wanted to be who he felt he truly was, but he had only ever felt like he should have been someone else.

And perhaps that was the biggest thing: despite Otto’s well-intentioned advice, the old dog didn’t seem to grasp the concept that Little John did not consciously feel like he had a sense of self. Since day one, he had always existed in reference to someone else; first his brother, and now the fox. Whether or not he was psychologically born as an empty vessel to only exhibit the traits others put upon him was irrelevant, because if he had some inner calling leading him his own way completely independent of others, John had never heard its siren song; if it ever existed, it was gone now. Now the closest thing he had to a sense of personal fulfillment was to be like Robin because he wanted the love and adoration and talent and confidence and purpose and sheer sense of self that Robin had. Little John knew exactly why he wanted so badly for strangers to think highly of him; it’s hard not to care what other people think when other people are all you’ve ever been.

But when he glanced at the clock, he decided that if he took the conversation in that direction, he’d be there all night. He had some important questions he had to ask.

“Alright, so I need to ask a neutral party. I’ve been thinking a lot about the differences between me and Rob; you tell me if I’m doing something wrong, something right, or if it’s just a matter of us being different and nobody’s doing anything wrong. Sound good?”

“Al-alright.”

“Okay, first: am I too much of a goofball? Do people not feel like they need to take me seriously?”

“Uh… what do you mean?”

“Like at the party that everyone remembers after the archery contest where I was playing the song-”

“No. No, you’re fine. You were definitely a lot more energetic than Robin, but that’s not a bad thing. Not to most people, at least.”

“So it wasn’t immature? Not… spazzy ?”

“What? Oh, lord, no. You’re so hung up on leadership? Well you were the leader of that party. The entire town needed that to loosen up. If anything, I kind of remember Robin being too straightlaced--”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Otto, he was not being too straightlaced. I’ve heard people talking about that party for years afterwards. Robin was being a more chill, cool kind of fun -- almost a more mature
kind of fun you could say. And on at least three occasions we’ve met civilians who specifically bring up how they remember him playing the fiddle with his bow, and just how badass that was. *That’s* what I was thinking of when I asked.”

*Sip.* “...If you say so.”

“Next: do I speak too stupidly?”

“Uh… a-again, I beg your--”

“Do I talk like a stupid person? Especially compared to Robin, who talks like James Fucking Bond?”

“...I-I mean--”

“Or is it just impossible to compete with his accent?”

“...Well, that might be part of it. But while we established earlier, your vocabulary isn’t necessarily un intelligent, I gotta say… honestly… you do swear a lot.”

Little John was incredulous. “... *Really?*”

“I’m just saying, John, some people associate that with a lack of smarts and a lack of class. And I know Robin swears, too, but… really not that often.”

“...God, *dammit!* ...Oh, wait. I guess I just proved your point. Okay, but fuck it-- I-I-I mean, nevermind that. Next question: am I too negative?”

“...So one more time, I need you to be more specif--”

“Jesus fuck, Otto, I mean do I get angry too often and frustrated too easily? Or do people just think that about me because I’m a grizzly bear? ...Hm…” *Swig.* “...Well, that question answered itself.”

“John, considering the nature of your work, it’s perfectly reasonable that you would lose your temper every now and again.”

“I don’t want to just be reasonable. I want to be great like Rob.”

“Well, sure, Robin hardly ever gets angry, but he’s not normal like that.”

“I don’t want to be normal , motherfucker, I want to be--!”

“ *Shh!* John, your voice is projecting again!”

“It fucking better be, a big bear without a big voice isn’t really that big.” *Swig.* “But I apologize. I’m just--”

“You’re just severely overthinking this is what you’re doing. You don’t need to completely reconstruct your personality to be a good and likeable person -- people already think you’re good and they like you just as well. And you definitely shouldn’t be trying to copy him beat-for-beat -- you want to have confidence, John? Thinking you need to be exactly like somebody else to feel fulfilled isn’t very confident; it takes confidence to be who you really are.”

And again Little John was debating just outright telling Otto that his fundamental lack of a sense of self was the key problem, but Otto kept going.
“You know what? All this about how you… you really seem to think Robin is perfect, don’t you?”
Otto asked.

“Not completely, but as close as anybody can get in practicality.”

“Well, this is all reminding me of something I saw on TV once that reminded me of… well, there was somebody who was a hell of a lot like Robin, except in one key detail: he wasn’t exactly a good guy.”

Little John winced. “What did you see?”

“So... there’s this TV show where they take a bunch of people and they put them on a desert island and they make them vote each other out and--”

“Oh, do not tell me you watch that crap!” Little John slammed his beer on the table. “Do not! Aren’t you too old for trash reality television?”

“Hey now, it’s actually damned fascinating. Still better than a bunch of the other garbage on in primetime. Besides, how do you even know that show exists if it didn’t even come on until after you started living in Sherwood?”

“Because we still live in society, brother, we’ve heard of it. And what we’ve heard is that it was a pop-culture phenomenon, what, four-five years ago? Then everyone got bored of the concept and now only weird people still watch it.”

And Otto leaned forward and gave Little John a very serious look. “Well, I can tell you one thing, John: I don’t think Robin wouldn’t try to shame me for my choices in television when it’s not bothering him.”

They could both tell that Little John felt thoroughly put in his place. He glanced down at his beer sheepishly, not even attempting to reply.

“As I was saying,” Otto continued, leaning back to comfort, “on that show about, eh, a year ago?, there was a guy who… I don’t know what made it snap in my brain, but something about him kind of reminded me of Robin. He was smart; he was charming. He seemed like he was good in all the challenges; he didn’t win all of them, but there wasn’t anything he was bad at. As he put it, he wasn’t the strongest guy out there, but he was the toughest and the craftiest. Hell, when they all had to shoot a bow and arrow, all of them weren’t great shots, but he was the only one who could even hit the board.”

“This isn’t too important, but was he a fox?”

“He was nowhere near as tall as Robin, but yes, he was.”

“Jeez, was his name Robin, too? Or Robert?”

“No, it was-- Oh. Oh, wait, it was, actually.”

Little John threw his head back and rolled his eyes. “And was his last name Hood?”

“No, his last name was…” Otto began, but he trailed off when he realized that the contestant’s surname was the source of another bizarre coincidence, nothing related to Robin’s name but rather related to Marian’s. “I-I don’t remember his last name, actually. But what topped it all off was that everyone liked him. He was most assuredly the leader of his tribe. And he was a good one; his team almost never lost, and they were almost always happy. They goofed around and sang and
danced all around their makeshift shelter in the woods; even in the middle of a typhoon, while the other teams were miserable at their camps, he and his team were singing “Have You Ever Seen the Rain” -- and CBS had to pay royalties to Fogerty and company to use that scene, so you know they wanted you to see it. And even though he was clearly running the show, people never thought to vote him out, because they were loyal to him. He even once won a chance to read a letter from his brother back home, but he surrendered it so everyone else could read theirs instead. Incidentally, one of his strongest alliances was with a great big grizzly bear with a thick Southern accent who liked to get drunk and dance--”

“A fox and a bear make a great pair,’ that’s what they say, ain’t it?” Little John mused, stoically pretending not to notice the ridiculous quantity of parallels.

“--but his closest bond by far was with a pretty vixen who, at first, yeah, they were just pretending to accept the other’s flirting because having an alliance was good for their game. But by the end of the game, they were in love, and everyone could see it -- and I do mean the end of the game, because they wound up being the last two standing. He proposed at the live finale and she said yes. And it was clear to everybody that what he had been doing -- his great leadership, his upbeat attitude, all the right moves he made -- he had done it for love. It was love that drove him through all that hardship.”

“Hardship he signed up for.”

“Fair point, but so far, do all those details sound familiar?”

Swig. “They ring a bell. But what I got the most out of all of this is that a long, long time before you and me had this conversation, you already had the thought yourself that Rob was a fuckin’ superhero.”

“Uh-- not quite a superhero, but a spectacular guy, yes.”

“And this is the part where I’d tell you again that this sets off my deep-seated inferiority complex, but I’m sure you’re sick of hearing about that. So okay, you saw Robin reflected in this other fox on TV who was written to be perfect?”

“...N-no, John, I know it sounds ridiculous, but it really isn’t scripted.”

Little John gave him a look like he had just said the earth was flat. “You really think I believe that?”

And Otto was none too pleased by his skepticism. “John I’m serious. When the show first came on the air, people thought it was fake, but it’s been long proven to be a lot more fact than fiction. If you don’t believe that, then lie to me. You asked earlier if you’re too negative as a person? Right now, you’re being too negative, and it’s definitely not heroic.”

But John had something else on his mind that prevented him from being embarrassed by that tell-off. “Well, it’s kind of hard to believe that a real person could also be that perfect. It’s fucking me up upstairs to think there are multiple perfect people running around on this planet -- or are all foxes some sort of flawless species and we’ve just never noticed because they’re all the way down there?”

“But you’re forgetting two things: for one, I never said either Robin nor this other fox were perfect. Because I don’t believe they are. In fact, the second thing you forgot is that I did say this other guy’s biggest flaw… was that he wasn’t a good guy. His charisma and confidence bit him in the ass. He successfully got everybody in the game to think they were his friend, and then he betrayed
all of them, and because he assumed -- correctly -- that he was talented enough to run the table, he
didn’t feel an ounce of shame about it. Then when it came time for the jury to vote for a winner,
they didn’t forgive him. They didn’t vote for him. They voted for his girlfriend -- or should I say,
fiancée.”

And Little John was indeed surprised to hear this.

“Not to say, though,” Otto continued, “that she didn’t play well herself, but it seemed clear to
everybody that he had it in the bag. Even the host said he was the main character of that season,
and when the girl won, the host asked the guy point-blank if he thought she deserved it. My point,
John, is that you could be exactly like Robin -- down to ridiculous details -- and still not
necessarily be a good person if you don’t make good decisions about how to use your talents. And
I believe that part of the reason so many people think Robin is downright saintly is because he has
friends --” (and he gave a bad and obvious mug to Little John) “--to help him make sound
decisions. So don’t focus on being just like Robin, John; focus on following your moral compass.
That’s what I admire.”

Little John glanced at the clock again and felt compelled to down the rest of his beer. He just
wanted to get out of there. He had come here looking for guidance, for a specific goal of what he
should try to do with himself or with Robin, but now he was just even more confused, and he was
starting to feel like this had all been an enormous waste of time. “Well, Otto, according to your
theory, I’d best be getting out of here soon, since Robin’s waiting on me, and evidently he needs
me by his side to keep his own composure.”

“That’s the spirit!” Otto beamed without an ounce of irony, much to John’s chagrin. “Even Jesus
needed his Saint Peter!”

And that one hurt for some reason. That was the one that made Little John wonder if Otto seriously
had not been listening this entire time. Had Otto simply not believed him when he referred multiple
times to the delusions that plagued him, telling him he had been constantly surrounded by
inimitable greatness his entire life, and although he knew that these were delusions, such deification
of his friend was not helping? Or had John himself simply failed to make that clear?

In any case, he had come looking for an unbiased opinion, and whether he liked it or not, he got it.
All he had wanted was to feel reassured that he and Robin were like Butch Cassidy and the
Sundance Kid, two great friends who were not only partners in crime and brothers in arms but also,
at the end of the day, equals. But no; by the old dog’s decree, Robin was Jesus and Little John was
merely Saint Peter, someone who was content to follow in the footsteps of the greatest person who
had ever lived, and whose own greatness was only legitimized in reference to his leader. And
Robin was that fox on that reality show and Little John was that redneck grizzly bear he cut loose,
trusting blindly until the bitter end that the fox would choose him over the woman he fell in love
with. And Robin was Will from the book they were reading while Little John was Tom, his failure
of a twin brother who was still a great guy but just couldn’t hold a candle to the one with whom he
had shared a womb, who he admired as a superior person, who he could have actually been if the
DNA had shook out differently. And Robin was The Fonz and Little John was just Richie, who
was already no longer the main character of his own story and who would eventually be written
out of it entirely. And Robin was Batman and Little John was Robin, confusingly enough, always
striving to emulate his hero. And Robin was Karl Malone and Little John was John Stockton, an
invaluable member of a great team to be sure but nevertheless someone who was never greater than
its second-best member and who would be best remembered as the guy who quite literally set the
league’s career record for assists. And Robin was Dean Moriarty and Little John was Jack
Kerouac, who much like Little John was most famous for a piece of art exalting the greatness of
his friend while unambiguously referring to oneself in that art as a secondary character who was
more than happy to stare on in awe and always follow his much more badass friend’s lead; for Little John, it was the song he sang at the hoedown that evidently became what many came to chiefly associate with him, and for Kerouac, it was that terrible novel that just regurgitated real events with the names changed, which John had to struggle through in senior-year English during their unit on the Beat Generation, during which time his teacher thought it would be interesting to point out to the whole class that much like the diminutive Little twin, Jack in his youth had also been nicknamed Little John.

Nonono, he figured it out: Robin was George Bailey. Robin was the guy from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, someone who abandoned their own dreams to help the people of Bedford Falls, but was now starting to have second thoughts about whether it was all worth it and if the life that had passed him by was so meaningful after all. And Little John was Clarence, someone who may have actually been more powerful on paper but whose express role, his explicit purpose as dictated by God Almighty, was to serve, to submit himself, to stand behind him and remind him that his life was indeed important, the entire town would be in disarray without him, he had done nothing but benefit the lives of those he loved, and he must keep going, because there was so much more work to be done; even a guardian angel needs a guardian angel.

And because he was too insecure, too immature, too stupid, too ungrateful, too greedy to accept his place, a place next to greatness, a place that most others on this earth would kill for the chance to occupy, Little John was destined to lose him. Because he had steadfastly refused to treat Robin with his due reverence, he would be punished for his insolence. He had been an unloyal friend and Robin would surely abandon him once his presence was no longer needed. And Little John knew he deserved it because he had dared to dream, to imagine that he could overcome his nature and achieve more than his natural place as the right-hand man to someone superior to himself. After all, Otto said that this was the way it was supposed to be, so John had to accept it, because surely the wise old dog knew what he was talking about, and Little John was just being a silly little cub who didn’t really know how to be an adult and that’s why he would ultimately one day find himself alone again and -- goddammit, he was crying again.

“Uh, J-John, are you alright?”

Little John laid his paw over his eyes, not daring to look at him. He coughed out the tears that had run down his nose and into the crevice of his lips. “L--” *Sniff*. “--I just don’t wanna be alone again, man!”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

*Cough, cough.* “I just don’t want to be left all alone again!” And he heard himself whimpering, a peculiar sound with the timbre of his voice, but he needed to get the air out of his lungs; it simply stung too much. “I-I’m sorry, Otto, I’m drunk.” But considering his size and the quantity of bottles on the table, neither of them had to do much mental math to realize that wasn’t quite accurate. “C-can I use your bathroom, man?” *Sniff, cough.* “I-I gotta piss like a racehorse.”

He slowly got to his feet without waiting for Otto’s permission, then stood upright, promptly banging his head into the ceiling with enormous force. “*GAHHH!*”

Otto didn’t bother telling the bear to keep his voice down. He just watched him as he walked down the hall, the backs of his paws sliding across the ceiling as his palms grasped his aching head, still muttering confused whimpers as he squeezed through the bathroom entrance and shut the door behind him. Otto decided to start cleaning up his dishes.

--III--
As she prayed, she prayed for patience. She asked the Lord to give her the strength to not go up to that fox sitting a few seats down and smack him upside the head for hogging space reserved for larger species.

The elephant had come to the chapel on a Tuesday afternoon to find peace, but she was having trouble finding it, being thoroughly bothered by the rudeness of that fox. The side chapel didn’t have regular pews; it had wooden chairs that were daisy-chained together at the legs with zip-ties. The seats were arranged so the front row facing the tabernacle was for the smallest of creatures and every successive row was for larger and larger people. The chairs in the last few rows weren’t even entirely wooden; they were reinforced with titanium for people whose weight was closer to four digits than two. And while this fox was noticeably very… stretched-looking, he was still a svelte figure, so she refused to believe he could even tip the scales at a hundred pounds.

It was disrespectful enough that he was dressed in sports apparel, but he didn’t even seem to be praying. He was just sitting in the back row, terrible seating posture, his head tilted back on what was supposed to be a large mammal’s lumbar rest, staring at the ceiling, looking bored out of his mind; if his eyes weren’t half-open and he wasn’t adjusting every few minutes, she’d think he was asleep.

Was he homeless? That would explain the ragged and haphazard clothing as well as the callous attitude. Seriously, Fox, there was literally nobody else in there, and he had to be sitting there of all places? Okay, sure, he could probably have used the same point to argue that she shouldn’t care, and he was already there when she arrived anyway, but for spatial reasons there were only about six or eight seats suitable for an adult elephant, whereas there were three times as many a few rows forward that would be more suitable for someone his size. Someone as small as him could sit almost anywhere, but if a family of rhinos or hippos walked in right now, they wouldn’t have as many options. She tried not to make it too obvious that she glanced at him again and went back to bowing her head with her hands folded and eyes closed.

She heard the door open and heard heavy footsteps approach. She tried not to smirk too much as she imagined that somebody her size had just entered and was about to call the fox out, thereby relieving her of the duty of being the bad guy.

“Hey,” said a heavy male voice. The syllable was spoken softly and quietly, but the depth of the voice was still nothing you’d ever hear from someone the fox’s size. It sounded civil enough; was this man going to kindly ask this homeless canine to find a more appropriate spot? How saintly of him! He certainly had more patience than she had. She kept her eyes closed and fingers laced, but she wasn’t praying.

She heard the fox’s clothes scratching along the chair’s cushioning as he repositioned himself. “Hey there, Johnny,” said an Englishman who sounded downright exasperated.

Wait, what? Her eyes burst open and without turning her head, she looked as far to the left as she could. She could see that the fox was sitting upright now, and was regarding a brown bear who stood over him, also decked out in fangear, all of which was a misty shade of blue.

The fox patted the seat next to him. “Sit down here for a moment with me, would you please?” This confirmed the fox was the one with the British accent.

“Uh… alright,” the bear (Johnny?) murmured as he obliged; he would probably have been more suited for the row or two ahead, but his size was much more fitting for the chair than the fox’s. “But the next bus west of here leaves in seven minutes, so we can’t be here too long.”

“Johnny, you and I both know that bus won’t be on time.”
“Hey, a man can dream, can’t he?”

And that’s when she realized who they were, at which point she stopped praying for patience and started praying for forgiveness.

“You actually been praying, man?” the bear asked. “I-I mean… no judgment, I just thought after all the times we’d teamed up arguing with Tuck, we just agreed we weren’t into that.”

(Okay, admittedly, now the elephant was praying for patience again, but then revised it to praying for guidance on how to accept this revelation that the duo she admired didn’t share her faith as she’d presumed.)

“No, not praying. Just thinking. Pondering.” The fox was speaking rather solemnly, almost monotone.

“I can already tell whatever went down between you and Amanda didn’t end well. Did you find the raccoon’s parents?”

“We’ll have plenty of time for me to give you the play-by-play on the journey home. After all, don’t we have ourselves a bus to catch?”

“...Then why did I just sit down?”

The chapel was quiet enough that the fox’s deep breath through his nose reverberated a bit through the room. “Should we have tried to get Skippy and Toby out of the pen?”

“...What? No. Fuck, no. We wouldn’t even’ve known where to begin with such a big mission like that! Like… what would we need? A ride, for one. Then probably a map of the juvie complex, then a directory telling us specifically where their cells are--”

“What about Alan?”

“What about Alan?”

“Should we have tried to get him out of prison? Because he was our friend?”

“No, and for a lot of the same reasons. Plus how he blew us off, got sloppy, made us look bad and made us a lotta new enemies we didn’t need. Honestly, the motherfucker deserved it.”

“And the poor lad in the woods? The hyena boy?”

“...You mean the little psycho who called us fags and threw rocks at us because he thought we were fags and he didn’t like fags?”

“Who shortly thereafter was beaten into a coma by corrupt police? Yes, the very same.”

The elephant was tempted to glance at them when she didn’t hear either of them talk for a second. She was very curious about what they were saying; was this the same kid whose assault made the news?

“Did we fail to be the bigger men?” the fox asked. “He surely did not deserve such severe retribution; should we have tried to save him? Perhaps with him indebted to us, we could have made a good man out of him yet.”

“I-I get what you’re saying Rob,” the bear finally answered. “And in some ways, that makes sense. But we were vulnerable, it was dark, those cops were looking for a fight, we were outnumbered--”
“We’ve *always* been outnumbered, Johnny, and we’ve always made it work.”

“Well as I was trying to say, somebody was gonna get beat the fuck up that night, and if it had to be anybody, it might as well have been that evil little shit. I—I mean-- Rob, you wanted to get the fuck out of there when you realized it was them, too, didn’t you?”

“That I did. And now I wonder if that was an act of cowardice. I wonder if that contradicts all the praise that the people give me.”

“Well even if we coulda done more, considering what that kid was doing, what the cops wanted to do, and how little we coulda done, I’d wager most people would give you a pass on that one.”

“But we mustn’t assume we’ll know how others will perceive us, now can we, Johnny?”

A moment passed. “...Jesus, Rob, what happened between you and Amanda that’s making you think all this stuff?”

“They call us heroes, Johnny. Would they still call us heroes if they knew the names of all the people we failed to help as much as we could?”

“Rob, you’re talking like a fucking poet and it’s scaring the shit outta me. What happened at the rabbits’ house?”

The swishing of fabrics brushing against one another was heard as the fox (presumably) stood from his seat. “I’m ready to go now. I’ll tell you everything along the way.” She could hear his footsteps making their way toward the door.

“You know that nobody expects us to be perfect to a fuckin’ T, right?” the bear asked, almost pleading.

“I expect that of *myself*, Little John.”

And the elephant dared to sneak a glance in their direction. The fox was out of sight around the corner, but she was able to see the bear rolling his eyes, looking wildly annoyed as he stood to exit; He almost looked more annoyed with himself for the way he handled that conversation than he looked annoyed with his fox friend. He turned the corner and was gone. Upon hearing the door slam shut, she once more bowed her head and closed her eyes, and decided to pray for forgiveness in advance for gossipping about this to all her friends.

--III--

They were seeing spots as they walked westward through Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve. The sun was still safely above the horizon, though its blinding light did bleed through the gaps in the leaves and branches, enough to obscure their vision for some fleeting moments. They were nearly back to base camp.

Robin had already relayed all the important details of his conversation with Amanda and was now filling in the blanks with interesting tidbits; he was feeling much better now. “...and the lad looks me dead in the eye and says, ‘I didn’t know grown-ups played soccer!’” he said, doing his best impression of an American toddler.

The sheer ridiculousness of the story caught Little John off guard, and although he otherwise would have been in no mood to laugh so heartily, he couldn’t help but belt out a deep guffaw. “Hey!” he said after a moment. “I called that shot, now didn’t I?”
I had exactly the same thought--"

"WHO'S THERE!? " someone hollered from far away.

That certainly put an end to their witty banter. They didn’t need to tell one another to shush and
listen; they just knew. They couldn’t see anybody through the trees, so whoever screamed that
wasn’t immediately nearby. Still, they listened.

“It was probably just a bird,” said another voice, though this one was much quieter; this one wasn’t
yelling. Both of the strangers sounded like males, but nobody they recognized.

“I heard someone laughing, are you deaf!?" the first voice retorted. They still heard the distant
voices after that, but they were too quiet to be intelligible.

“Shit, we shoulda brought our weapons!” Little John cursed in a harsh whisper.

“Well, then, let’s go retrieve them!” Robin answered as he started climbing a tree without any
signs of hesitance. “I’ll take the high road and you take the low road!”

And as you may have imagined when you read that, Dear Reader, Little John just thought that
Robin’s persistently upbeat attitude was inappropriate at that moment and borderline obnoxious.
But he forced himself to suppress his annoyance and told himself that it was for the greater good
that he should swallow his pride and play the role of the sidekick.

“You stay a few trees back,” Robin said from even higher up in the branches. “If I can grab your
staff and get it back to you, I will.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Rob,” John answered, trying not to sound too vexed.

“I know I don’t, Johnny,” Robin said as he climbed even higher. “I just like talking to you.”

And Little John didn’t know how to feel about that statement, so he chose not to feel anything at
all, and instead decided to tell Robin something entirely different: “Yo, Rob. If they’re easier for
you to grab, you can get somebody else’s weapons for me.”

“You want Tuck’s staff?”

“Or I can use the slingshot.” And John knew this was going to be a tough sell, but he had to pitch it:
“Or the sword.”

And Little John could faintly see Robin’s face far up among the branches and leaves, looking for a
moment not quite so confident. “I’d think your paw’s too big to fit in the handle, Johnny, but I’ll
consider it,” Robin said; neither of them believed those last four words.

Robin started his way through the treetops, jumping from branch to branch, and although Little
John could barely see him from the forest floor, he followed the sounds of rustling leaves. As the
voices grew closer, however, the exposition they delivered was as nerve-wracking as it was
convenient to the plot:

Clickclickclick, clickclickclick... “...Did you forget to refill this thing?”

“Naw, man, you’re just not pulling the handle hard enough.”

“Then you do it, Mr. Brawny Man!”

“Fine, I will!” Clickclickclick, clickclickclick, clickclickclick... “Okay, I specifically remember
checking if this one had gas in it.”

“Are you sure it was that one?”

Robin hopped to another tree but lost his footing; miraculously, another branch was right below it for him to catch himself on. He looked down to see Little John staring up at him, looking like he just about had a heart attack watching that near-disaster; Robin gave him a thumbs up.

“...It wasn’t this one!” The other voice hadn’t replied.

“Well, hey, man, you coulda checked it, too.”

“Where in my job description does it say I have to babysit you and do your job for you?”

“Hey, don’t talk to me like I’m stupid just because I don’t care about my job!”

“Why don’t you care about your job!?”

“Why do you care, motherfucker? They’re sending us out here to die in the woods at sunset because they can’t wait till morning to do this shit!”

“Then get the fuck out of here and let somebody else have your job! Someone else could use the paycheck!”

“Oh, fuck, no. It’s a pretty cushy gig when Sheriff Fatfuck isn’t calling the boss to make us carry out his harebrained schemes at seven-thirty in the afternoon.”

“Seven-thirty in the evening .”

“Take your semantics and shove them up your ass.”

Little John almost made a very loud noise when he stepped on a large fallen branch. Then he was especially glad he didn’t. “Robin!” he whisper-screamed. He got the fox’s attention and pointed at the branch as he hoisted it. They looked pleased with one another.

Clickclickclick, clickclickclick… “I think we got the green light to get the hell outta here,” said the one who had just insisted his partner autosodomize his words.

“And tell them what? That we fucked up?”

“Yes, and that we know goddamn well that they won’t fire us because we’re still the most competent people they have.”

Finally, they were within sight. It was a yak and an ox wearing City of Nottingham Public Works uniforms with protective eyewear, and the ox holding a Husqvarna chainsaw. Little John’s eyes were getting a workout as they darted up and down, making sure he wasn’t going to step on anything crunchy while also making sure that he hadn’t been sighted yet, and still looking for a thick tree to hide his wide rump behind. As for Robin, he was only one degree of separation from the Major Oak, but that separation was the clearing itself, so he had to move laterally in a semicircle to get to the tree, all the while trying to find sturdy enough branches and not rustling too many leaves.

“That probably isn’t the best idea,” said the yak.

“Oh, c’mon. You ain’t gonna get very far in life unless you prove you don’t take crap from nobody,” said the ox. They seemed to just be having a spat and doing absolutely nothing
“Well sometimes you gotta eat shit to make sure you don’t starve.”

“Then I’ll starve. You work this job because your life sucks, too, dickcheese. I’m not taking advice from you.”

“Well maybe if you did, we could help each other out.”

“Nah, I wanna be better than you.”

“You’re an asshole. Do you know that?”

“Assholes succeed in this world.”

“Are you so sure about that?” said a voice from above.

“Huh?”

“Who was th--!?”

*Fwip!* sang the arrow as it pierced the dirt between their feet.

“GWAH!”

“HOLY SHIT!”

And on that note, Little John emerged into the clearing, tapping the large branch in his opposite palm like a mobster with a baseball bat. “Run toward me and ya get conked. Run away from me and ya get an arrow in the back.”

“Thanks for explaining the rules, Johnny!” Robin said as he hopped down to the lowest branch on the Major Oak, holding his bow and wearing his quiver. “‘Assholes succeed in this world…’ I really must thank you for that, I was starting to worry you weren’t going to give me a good opportunity for a segue!”

“Holy shit, they’re real,” the yak murmured.

“Pay up,” the ox grumbled to his partner. He was still holding the chainsaw in his left hand.

“Now, do pardon the cliche, gentlemen, but it is a good one: we can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way,” Robin teased. “You can show us your IDs and then be on your merry way, knowing well and good that if you ever tell anybody you saw us, we will be paying you a visit…”

“…or we can beat the everloving shit out of you and force-feed you some candy that’ll make you forget you ever *did* see us,” added Little John. “We hear they taste like lemon drops, but we’ve never actually tried them ourselves.”

“Oh, Johnny, now you’ve gotten a song stuck in my head,” Robin said, and he sang softly to himself as he slowly and calmly produced an arrow and loaded his bow. “*Where trouble meeelts like lemon drooops, high abooove the chiiimney tops, that’s wheeere... you’ll fiili-i-iind mee, oooh...*” He coolly lined up the arrow with his dominant eye and pointed at the two municipal workers. “So, what’ll it be, gentlemen?”

“Okay! Okay! Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” the yak sputtered as he dug around in his back pocket for his wallet. “I-I-I got it right here!”
“And if you’d like to make a charitable donation to the poor and hungry, we’d me much obliged!” Little John sneered.

“Nick, wait,” the ox said to the yak, and he began fiddling with the chainsaw, once again flicking the ignition switch on and off and jiggling the gear handle. “I got this.”

“Chris, what the fuck are you doing!?”

“I told you, I got this. Just chill for, like, two seconds.” He said almost nonchalantly, holding the instrument out in front of him to get a better look in the waning light.

Fwip! Chris looked down to see that another arrow had pierced the dirt right below him, narrowly splitting the gap between the chainsaw, his arms, and his crotch.

“Consider that a warning shot!” bragged Robin.

The ox looked up very slowly, and more than anything, he looked annoyed. “No shit it’s a warning shot.”

And the sheer incongruity of that response caused Robin’s indomitable smile to fail him. As far as responses go, suffice it to say, that was a new one. “Wh-what was that?”

“No shit that was a warning shot!” the ox grumbled. (As for the yak, he was so enthralled that he had stopped searching for his wallet to watch the scene unfold.) “Everyone knows you guys don’t kill people! Everyone knows you idiots think you’re too classy for that, but everyone says that’s the reason you guys’ve been in a standoff since the last fucking decade! You guys are too afraid to step up and seal the deal!” Robin was having trouble finding the words to speak, and Little John and Nick the yak didn’t have anything to add, so Chris continued: “You wanna shoot at me again?” He spread his arms out and presented his front side completely unprotected. “Go on! Do it! I’m not fucking afraid of you! Shoot me right in the heart, you pussy!”

Robin was trying really hard to call upon his acting chops and bullshit a commanding persona when he really wasn’t feeling it. “S-so… has the Sheriff told you of us? O-or your superiors, perhaps?”

“I know you! You talk about giving a charitable donation to the poor? I am the poor! I met you motherfuckers, like, three years ago when I was still in high school!”

Something compelled Robin to lower his bow a little bit, and Little John similarly found the arm holding the branch getting a bit tired.

“Wait, you met these guys before!?” screeched the yak. “I-I woulda believed you about them living here if you told me you knew for a fact they were real!”

“Well, maybe you shoulda just believed me anyway,” the ox said to the yak, then turned back to Robin and John in succession. “Don’t mind Nick here, he grew up a rich kid. He just can’t get a better job than this because he got a felony for wrecking into a squad car.”

“Hey, don’t air out my fucking details!” the yak protested.

“So… you’ve met us, Master Chris?” asked Robin, trying to be gentlemanly. “Tell us, what were the circumstances?”

“My friends and I were playing basketball in Godin Park after dark and the cops tried to come and arrest us or fine us or something for trespassing after closing, and you two walked up dressed as
homeless men and told them there was a gang fight happening a few blocks away. And it worked. And then you asked us where we were from, we told you we were from the ‘hood, and you gave us the money you got from one of the officer’s wallets that he left in his car. And then you gave us some pep talk about doing the right thing. I remember it like it was fucking yesterday, and I still think about it when I think about how dumb I was for thinking you idiots were actually helping… Oh, and you also told us that if we really wanted to get laid, a confident smile was a lot more badass than a confident frown.”

Robin and John’s jaws had dropped. They remembered.

“Which worked, by the way,” Chris continued, “but that bitch Stephanie gave me chlamydia, so yeah, thanks for that.”

“Eww…” Nick muttered as he scooted a smidge away from Chris.

“And even when we met you there, we knew of you, and we told you so,” the ox continued. He pointed to Robin: “You were the cool guy who could pull off insane plans and stunts and make it all look easy; hell, I knew some nerds in school who were nervous that they could never be as good as you because they weren’t as cool as you.” And he pointed to Little John: “And you were the big dumb brawn who bitched and moaned a lot and didn’t really want to be doing any of this, but you followed his lead anyway because otherwise you had nothing going for you in your life.”

And suddenly, Little John was pissed again. He stomped over to the ox and raised the branch above his head. “Oh, you disrespectful little shit!”

Clickclickclick, clickclickclick… RRRRR! Tikkatikkatikkatikkatikkatikka...

Bzzzzzzzzzzz!

“GAH!” Little John shut his eyes and turned his head just in time to protect himself from the flying shards of wood. When the buzzing sound stopped, he looked down to see a small fraction of the branch left in his paws.

“You gotta love this city-owned equipment, taking twenty minutes to get its ass in gear!” the ox beamed with much the same energy as one would usually expect from the fox. He had to yell, however, as the chainsaw was still running. Speaking of which, he lunged at Little John with it.

“Oh, holy SHIT!” John hollered as he jumped backwards and soon found himself running out of the clearing.

But the ox had his eyes on other sights. He turned toward Robin standing on the branch and charged at him. Robin reached for an arrow and looked down for a split second to thread it in the string, but when he looked up again and saw just how close Chris was, he fumbled it and dropped his bow as well as he fell backward of the branch and yelped as he landed funny, bending his tail and bruising his lower back. He heard the chainsaw briefly cutting into the branch he was standing on, but then it stopped, and he looked up just in time to see the ox coming down on his long, thick tail with the chainsaw. He turned to get on his feet and run, but his foot slipped in a patch of dirt where grass had never grown.

“AAAAARRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHH!” the fox screamed bloody murder as the chainsaw came down upon the end of his tail. Miraculously, the nervous reflexes in the appendage worked and his tail moved yanked itself free, and he tried to make a run for it. But now his lower back was hurting in another way. When his foot slipped, he must have pulled a muscle. He was still able to force himself through it and amble away, but it was the kind of lower-back pain where you have trouble
breathing when you aggravate it. If he had time to think about it, he may have said it was even worse than the pain of someone literally slicing into his tail with a chainsaw; at least that pain ended.

Little John heard the scream and turned to the scene, and immediately realized he had to help his buddy. But he also saw in the corner of his eye something perhaps more dire: Nick the yak was getting away. John didn’t want to abandon Robin, but he had been doing this shit for long enough that he knew the risks of leaving an opponent unattended, and the dangerous implications of him getting away and telling everyone what he saw. He had to trust in Robin’s talent of escape and hope he could hold his own for a while. But Little John thought he could help him out a bit before he went off in pursuit of the yak.

"Thwap! " God… DAMMIT! " Chris had to stop and rub his head where the can of beans Little John had thrown had made contact. This gave Robin a second to clamber up a tree, but with how his back was screaming in agony, he needed a lot more than a second to get up. The way his tail was stinging like it had just been dipped in acid wasn’t making things any easier.

John ran off and tried to catch up to Nick. The bear’s advantage was his species’ deceptive speed, as well as the fact that the yak didn’t know the woods and his work uniform didn’t make it very easy to be nimble; the bear’s disadvantage was that despite being similar in height, yaks were a helluva lot more dense than bears typically were, so when Little John caught up to him, he’d have to rely more on technique to incapacitate him, because brute strength wasn’t going to cut it.

“COME AND GET ME!” Chris yelled up into the tree at Robin. “You afraid to die, buddy? I’m not afraid to die! My life sucks! COME AT ME!"

Robin thought he was about to pass out as he ascended the tree; it hurt too much to breathe and move his back at the same time, and since he needed to move his back to climb, he didn’t breathe. He finally got up to a branch from which he could get over to the Major Oak and get a new weapon: one of the staffs, or the slingshot, or that infernal sword. But first, he had to stop and catch his breath.

Little John had almost caught up with the yak. He realized that they were running more or less in a straight line, but that the line ended soon as a tree stood right in the way.

John thought fast. “ BOO! ”

Nick turned his head to see how far behind Little John was, all while still running full speed. Little John was about three feet behind him. He turned back to face the way he was running. The tree was about three feet in front of him.

THWACK! …Thump.

Nick groaned as he lay face-up on the ground, his eyes barely open and his face smashed in. Little John leaned over and grabbed a hold of his head, and with very deliberate motions thump, thump, thumped it into the ground, just hard enough to make sure he went out but not hard enough to cause brain damage. Then he checked for a pulse. Yup, still ticking. Time to get back to Robin. He didn’t know exactly where he was in the woods -- if he had a second to think, he’d probably remember -- but it didn’t matter. He just had to follow the sounds of the chainsaw.

“You ever heard the phrase ‘get rich or die trying,’ foxy-boy?” Chris taunted. “Just you try to kill me! But I’ll be fucking rich when I bring Sheriff Type-2-Diabetes your body! And who’s gonna rob me then?”
Robin had finally gotten to the shelf with the other weapons. The pain was so intense that he felt like the pressure was going to make something pop; either his eyes were going to burst or his ears and nose were going to bleed. Or he might just soil his trousers.

And he almost did soil his trousers when he heard the sound again. *Bzzzzzzzzz!* But the sound was a lot deeper now, as if cutting into something thicker. He looked down through the branches and, indeed, the ox was going to town on the base of the Major Oak.

Okay, what to do? What to do? Robin looked hastily through the options at hand. Staffs? What could he do with those? The slingshot? What the hell would he shoot, a wad of leaves? The shelf itself? Well, *there’s* an option… okay, no, no there wasn’t. But he didn’t want to touch the sword. Nobody had unsheathed it since that day. He didn’t want to do it now. But he also hadn’t wanted to climb the tree when his back was in excruciating pain. And he also hadn’t wanted to abandon the love of his life. And he also hadn’t wanted to bury his brother. He was no stranger to forcing himself into a tough decision.

“I grew up in a bad neighborhood, Foxy!” the ox jeered. “I am *extremely* desensitized to death!”

Robin could see that Chris wasn’t looking up, only focusing on the chainsaw and the tree. Robin leaned out to get a clear shot.

“And my survivalism skills are probably even better than yours!” Chris continued. “I’ve survived a drive-by shooting! Have you!?”

Robin pulled back to give it some extra leverage, and he launched it down.

“…AAAAAHIIIIHHH! ” The ox dropped the chainsaw as the sword fell from his scalp in front of his face. He felt the top of his head felt moisture; he looked at his hands and saw blood. He felt his head again and wondered if that smooth thing he was feeling was his skull.

Robin tried to scoot back out of his position leaning in the branch. That’s when he lost his balance.

Chris heard a thump, a scream, and a whimper. He couldn’t believe his good fortune as the wanted criminal materialized at his feet. He wiped away the blood that was running into his eyes and picked up the chainsaw, which had disengaged when he dropped it.

Robin tried to prop himself up to scamper away, but he couldn’t put any pressure on the arm he had landed on; it hurt even worse than his back and his tail did. He found himself almost flat on his back, looking up at the hulking ox as he fiddled with the ignition switch and lever once again. Despite being a literal head and shoulders above most members of his species, Robin had long come to terms with the fact that the rest of the world was a lot more diverse than Loxley, and to most people, he was just another little fox. Just like his fellow vulpines who he dwarfed, he was no stranger to feelings of being too small for the world, and in a moment like this, he was feeling very, very tiny.

“You seem like the kind of guy who’s not afraid to die painfully if it means you die interestingly,” Chris said without a detectable trace of irony. He was still fucking around with getting the chainsaw in gear, but he seemed to not be panicking for want of time.

*PPPPPPPbbbbb!* That was the sound that Robin heard when the ox’s hand disappeared. Chris dropped the chainsaw and looked down at his left hand, which -- for all intents and purposes -- ceased to functionally exist.

“*OH MY FUCKING GO--!*”
Another bullet, this one to his upper knee where it met his thigh, brought him to the ground. His cries dissolved into whimpers as he regarded the pulpy mess where his hand once was, and after a moment of contemplation, he passed out, presumably from shock mixed with severe blood loss.

“ROBIN!” Little John hollered as he ran over to his friend. “Did he hurt you?” He dropped the pistol on the ground and leaned over to try to prop his buddy up, but the movement just made Robin scream.

“NO! No! Johnny! Down! Down, I-- I can’t move…”

“What!? What’s hurting?” Little John looked down for clues, and he realized that Robin’s right arm seemed to have one too many joints. “Rob! What the fuck happened to your arm!?”

But Robin had no interest in answering him. He just stared up at Little John and asked his own question. “Johnny… did you… did you just…?”

Little John stood up slowly and nervously, glancing at the sheriff’s gun, and then Chris, and then Robin. “I-I can explain!”

Robin simply stared with no discernable emotion.

“I-I-I-- Look!” Little John went over to Chris to check if he was still breathing. “H-he’s good! He’s alright! I-- He-he needs to go to the hospital, yeah, but so do you anyway! I’ll run to the car park and call an ambulance! Do we know who’s working tonight?” he asked, referring to their cause-friendly paramedic friends.

But Robin just kept staring for a few moments. Then he did something that Little John was finding himself becoming uncomfortably familiar with. Robin leaned over on his right side, hooking his good arm around and over his eyes, and wept.

“R-Rob? …Robin?”

“I-it didn’t used to be this way…” Robin choked out between tears. “I-it didn’t used to… it didn’t used to be this way…”

“…Rob?” Little John knew he had to say something, but he thought of a million things he could say, and he couldn’t decide which one would be the best one to say, so he froze up and said none of them.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!?” Robin wept. “How-how does this keep happening? …Whe-- where did I go wrong? … Where did I go wrong, Johnny!? …Wh-whe-- when did we lose our touch…?”

“Robin, you didn’t lose your touch! We didn’t lose our touch! You haven’t done anything wrong!”

But all that came from Robin’s mouth were low-pitched sobs and coughs of tears flooding his mouth. He was weeping like the little kit he never really got to be.

And it was funny: in any other situation, what Little John had just noticed would be hilarious. He would josh Robin for it and Robin would play off the embarrassing moment in that cool way that only he could. But that would not be the case in this context, for even among the ghastly wound to his tail, the horribly broken arm, and the tears flowing down from his face, it was the stain running down the insides of Robin’s pant legs that made Little John realize that something was horribly, deeply wrong with his friend.
In a moment like this, Little John knew his friend was not perfect. He knew Robin was not infallible, and he knew he was not invincible, and he knew he was not incapable of succumbing to tremendous amounts of pain. But oddly, with that anxiety gone, an opposite one took its place. Little John was now afraid that he wasn’t capable of helping Robin. He didn’t know whether he could be anything more than a shoulder to lean on; he didn’t think he could actually tangibly fix what was broken in him. For all his desires to be truly equal to Robin, he was now being put to the test of whether he could handle helping him when Robin was below him. Little John wanted so badly to be a good friend, to be a capable friend, to remedy what ailed his friend and not just be a crutch to help him deal with things the way they were. And, ironically enough, that was another reason he wanted so desperately to be as perfect as Robin: Robin had been able to fix him in ways nobody else could, and it destroyed him that he couldn’t return the favor.

Little John didn’t want to leave his friend there crying all by himself, but he had to drug Nick and Chris before they woke up and he had to call paramedics for all three of them. He shoved a few pills down the ox’s throat -- he would have given the big guy three, but he only gave him two since they were running low -- and started off to go find the yak again, but before he left, he glanced over at the fox again. His sobbing was winding down; it almost seemed like he was passing out from sheer exhaustion, though the blood loss probably helped with that. Little John felt terrible for the other day in the tree where he more or less demanded that Robin show his bad feelings more often, because now that he had seen him do that, he was afraid there were more bad feelings inside of Robin than he could handle. Something had to change soon, because this was getting fucking ridiculous.

He couldn’t wait until those kids made up their minds.

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* Remember how in the author notes for the last chapter I said let's hope I didn't get drafted to die in Iran? WOW, I did NOT expect that statement to age so quickly. Hot fucking DAMN. That will live forever as a relic of the culture of specifically the first week of this decade and not any more than that. Anyway, the next day I'm shooting for is the 29th because it's not every year you can post something on Leap Day. After that I should probably take a breather with aiming for posting on Special Dates because it kicked my ass to get this ready for today. I should but I won't. (Ha! I'm a comedian. Gimme my HBO special now.) And thanks to you true believers for soldiering through the longest chapter yet. I added "maximalist" to the tags so nobody can say I'm not self-aware. As we all know, with enough confidence and charisma, you can make damn-near anything cool. Peace and love. -Doby
Chapter Summary

A young man struggles with his strange relationship with a piece of children’s media.

20. “Childish Things”

You know, it was weird. As much as Double-D detested Eddy’s idea to manufacture fraudulent identification cards with the express intention of profiting off adolescents looking to illegally procure alcohol, he did harbor some perverse admiration for how Eddy had stepped up his game. It wasn’t another scam where they’d be vending items made from things they got out of the trash or selling experiences that they would be more or less making up on the fly. It actually had required him to save up and acquire capital. The fox had had to clean his family’s gutters just to get his dad to let him borrow his credit card so he could buy the laminates off the internet, and Double-D knew Eddy had to repay his father with interest to inspire him to not ask questions about what the hell exactly he was buying.

That money he repaid his father with had come from their only major scam that spring, which also wasn’t too amateur itself: they had found two old lawn mowers in the junkyard and chop-shopped them into go-karts. The quality of the vehicles wasn’t that bad, but the fact that the scheme had made any money at all had been a miracle. For one thing, the only time they could operate it was during Spring Break, because the only time and place they could run the karts was in The Lane during the days the adults were at work but the kids were out of school. But it took several days of experimenting with adjustable seats and engine displacements to figure out how to configure the damned things so you could stick someone of nearly any size or species behind the wheel and make the car drive the same. By the time the karts were finally ready to go, it was already Wednesday, but Ed, ever the creative type, insisted on painting them to look like NASCAR stock cars with decals advertising Chunky Puffs and Montezuma’s Free Range Manure, physically restraining Eddy from touching the vehicles until he was done customizing them, at one point picking up Eddy with one hand and throwing him without looking over his shoulder and leaving a huge dent in Eddy’s garage door. So on Thursday they were finally good to, but because Easter was in March that year, that meant Spring Break was, too, and the temperature was in the mid-forties and it just wasn’t the best weather for racing go-karts outside, but after overhearing the Eds testing the cars outside all week, the other kids in the cul-de-sac had their interest piqued. Sure enough, they all drove like maniacs, but nobody wrecked the cars irreparably and nobody got hurt, which was itself a miracle because they didn’t have any way of crash- or safety-testing the karts before unleashing them, okay come to think of it nevermind Jimmy did total his kart and get hurt, the poor dumb bunny wound up with his retainer somehow hooked over a lightpost, but this was Jimmy we’re talking about, he doesn’t count, he got hurt all the time, injured was his natural state of being, Jimmy could walk up to you with his arm suddenly in a cast for some reason or an eyepatch over his eye or his leg amputated and you just wouldn’t even question it, you wouldn’t even blink, the twentysomething pothead paramedics were openly calling Jimmy a “frequent flyer” and at least one ambulance driver had compared Jimmy to Kenny McCormick, but besides Jimmy, nobody got hurt, it was just good clean American fun, and those go-karts lasted two entire days before all that beatin’ and bangin’ finally made them certifiably FUBAR (incidentally the accident that resulted in Jimmy getting wrapped around the streetlight was the one that did them in), allowing the Eds to make a sizable profit on a venture that was actually pretty well-received. For a
moment, the neighborhood kids didn’t totally hate the Eds.

But then Eddy had done something weird: he said he’d take the boys to the candy store, they’d buy one and only one of their respective favorite flavors, and then save the rest of their profits for a bigger plan Eddy had cooking for when Summer Vacation rolled around. And although it seemed to Double-D that Eddy was going through withdrawal-type symptoms for much of April and May (whether this was due to being deprived of jawbreakers or just not being allowed to spend the money was unclear), Eddy stuck it out. As far as Double-D could tell, Eddy didn’t cave. And as much as Double-D was disgusted by Eddy’s greed, he could commend Eddy for the restraint he showed in order to feed that greed in the long run.

But this one seemed… sloppy, for want of a better word. It seemed like a two-steps-forward, one-step-back sort of deal. It maintained the elevated level of work ethic but the artistic vision seemed to be blurred.

Eddy had arrived at his house last night with two big plastic bags from RadioShack; he had once again spared no expense and proved he was willing to spend money to make money. At first, Double-D could not fathom where the money came from, and he was convinced Eddy had stolen it; when Eddy pulled the receipt out of his back pocket, the wolf revised his hypothesis to say that Eddy must have robbed someone who had just left the store (perhaps inspired by their field trip with the strangers from the woods the day prior) and then worked backward to think about what he could make with whatever happened to be in his victim’s shopping bag. But Eddy again had a rebuttal: who in their right mind would be buying this quantity of these items? Eddy did admit, however, that the product idea was indeed inspired by a specific event that had transpired involving the Merry Men yesterday.

But Double-D’s skepticism wasn’t entirely unfounded. Seeing what Eddy’s idea was, Double-D couldn’t conceive of who would buy such a thing. For such a risky business decision, it almost would have been preferable that Eddy not go for fresh-out-of-the-box electronics to ruin and retool instead of used goods he probably could have purchased for pennies on the dollar from that one sleazy pawn shop on Boyd Street run by the mongoose with the thick accent who could often be heard grumbling to himself in Malayalam from the back office and whose front counter was manned alternately by that older goth wolf chick (who come to think of it was probably somewhere around Robin and John’s ages) who had no bones about telling the customers that she’d rather keep working retail her whole life than abandon her counterculture wardrobe, or by that ocelot who was in Eddy’s brother’s high school graduating class and was doing pretty well in NSU’s engineering program before he got expelled for academic dishonesty (and for snorting coke in his dorm, both infractions reported by his disgruntled roommate after the ocelot trashed their room during a bender, but that would have made the school look even worse than regular old plagiarism so on the official record it was just for cheating) and now could often be seen behind the cash register playing Madden or 2K on an old 11” TV monitor, often playing at an inappropriately low difficulty setting and completely bumslaying the computer teams because virtual curbstomps were the only thing that made him feel like he had some modicum of power in his life anymore; that would have seemed like a wiser place to procure capital from for such a shoddy idea.

But Eddy said not to worry, leave the marketing strategy up to him, just make the devices, Sock-Head, and to reward him for his loyalty, Eddy presented Double-D with a Peru-flavored jawbreaker and tossed in another half-dozen quarters to go along with it; payment in advance, Eddy said. But wait, Double-D remarked (through slurps of saliva, as he was merely mortal and had already stuck the sweet in his cheek), where on earth did the money for this come from? Eddy coyly chuckled at the question, saying he regrount the bathroom floor the other day, and as for the quarters, he had been saving up for a long-winded long-distance payphone call to his brother and had a few coins left over.
Double-D still wasn’t convinced that Eddy had gotten the money through legitimate means, but regardless, the goods in the bag he was holding were purchased legally, so they were no contraband and he need not worry about harboring them. Plus he had already been paid in advance and Eddy was walking away saying he’d see Double-D on Thursday, so fine, whatever, he’d do Eddy’s dirty work once again.

At present, Double-D was tinkering with the items, trying to figure out the best way to combine them and make them into something that somebody might have the faintest impulse of buying. Hey, that was another thing: if someone bought one of these, then someone else would have to buy one, too, or they’d have nobody to use it with. That probably was going to make it an even tougher sell. Then again, if one person bought it, maybe all the kids in the cul-de-sac would want in on it. Okay, he could start to see what Eddy had in mind in terms of marketing. But the product was still fundamentally stupid and unnecessary. He didn’t know why this would ever be the case, but the thought briefly crossed his mind that perhaps Eddy wanted this scam to fail.

And though this thought distracted him from his work, he welcomed it. In fact, he so welcomed distractions at the moment that he had invited Ed to come over and just play around in his room as he worked. Ed messing around in his room as he ruminated on Eddy’s motivations as he worked on this Frankenstein’s-monster of an appliance -- perfect, three layers of distractions to keep his mind occupied so he didn’t think about… them.

“Double-D, what’s this one’s name?” the bear asked, pointing to one of the specimens in the wolf’s ant-farm.

“We’ve been over this, Ed,” Double-D began, “they have no na--” But then he thought of a sunnier answer: “They have no names yet, Ed, but you may name them whatever you wish!”

“I can!?"

“Christen them, Ed.”

“Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!” Ed exclaimed, and he got right to work on naming the ants, 4,837 in all as the label said. “You can be Aldo, you can be Jim-Joe, you can be Heathcliff, you can be Evil Veronica, you can be Lucio, you can be Ed Junior, you can be Yo-Yo-Yo Serpico, you can be Gilbert, you can be Amy McJamie, you can be Lightfoot, you can be Brettland, Bringer of Light, you can be…”

Excellent. As long as Ed didn’t break anything, he ought to be good to plow through his work with this background noise keeping his mind from wandering toward the absurdity he had witnessed two days prior. He had already wasted a day of his life yesterday just stewing on it; he couldn’t afford to waste any more time pondering how queer it was that those two men not only were wanted criminals living in the forest preserve, but that they had established themselves as legendary local heroes after successfully following the formula set by the characters in a 10th-century English folktale.

Double-D had been so flustered by the revelation that Robin was indeed inspired by the story of Adam Bell that he didn’t catch exactly whether Robin was just inspired by the legend in general or the Sidney movie specifically. In the end, though, he knew it was probably a little of both; on the one hand, the fox was an actual Englishman, and if anybody in the modern day could hear the name “Adam Bell” and not immediately think of the cartoon movie, it would be those who were born and bred in the British Isles, but on the other hand, it was the Twenty-First Century, and the Sidney Corporation had its pawprints on everything, so even if Robin didn’t consciously follow the blueprints of the animated humans running around Inglewood Forest and the city of Carlisle, he was likely doing it unconsciously on some level.
And as he tore away the thin paper casing from the flimsy plastic contraptions, he pondered how they could ever have arrived at the conclusion that Adam Bell and company were characters worth emulating. Maybe it was an English thing. And a Southern thing. The Englishman had been told his entire life that Adam Bell was a national hero and likely never questioned it, and the Southerner was from a part of the country that prided itself on the fact that it would rather secede from the United States than cease to enslave mammals from Africa, so he probably grew up with the idea that reckless rebellion was an inherently good thing. The poor fools. They had no idea.

He picked up his screwdriver and started undoing the chassis. He really did expect better of the Englishman, though. Yes, a cynic could accuse Double-D of falling head over heels for the fox’s distinguished accent, but even if he sounded like a Cockney stereotype, he still conducted himself like a well-bred gentleman, and that’s what Double-D would insist was what convinced him he was a good guy. Well, whoever raised him to be like that clearly never took care to clarify to him that no matter what the story of Adam Bell seemed to preach on the surface, vigilantism was something that was only to be admired in the abstract and not actually carried out in real life, where laws are not necessarily meant to be broken and good and evil were not black and white as they were in the popular folklore.

Come to think of it, he no longer resented that his parents had never let him get that movie from Blockbuster when he was younger. While his parents usually steered him toward entertainment that was educational on some level, cartoon movies and TV shows were a special treat they allowed him to sometimes indulge in, but Adam Bell was one video he never got to rent. His parents had respected his intelligence enough to tell him exactly why not: it glorified violating the law and distrusting authority for the sake of it, and they said that all the kids who watched it grew up to have behavioral problems, and that it was a big mistake that the Sidney company made it (which he believed for the longest time, as evidenced by how rarely The Sidney Company acknowledged that film compared to its more seminal works). While Double-D loved his parents and respected their judgment, he wasn’t incapable of being frustrated with their decisions, and one of those frustrations had always been that they didn’t trust him enough as a little kid to understand that Adam Bell was a work of fiction and that you’re not actually supposed to go out and start a violent insurrection; that said, after meeting Robin, he forgave his parents, now seeing that it was absolutely possible for someone to otherwise be an upright citizen of the world and still maintain the childish notion that there were times where breaking the rules was justifiable in the name of good.

Of course, that forgiveness was contingent on his deciding once and for all that his parents’ beliefs on law and order were correct. And while he did lean toward them being correct, he had been paying more heed to the opposite argument for quite a while now, and while he was still leaning toward them being correct after meeting Robin and John and seeing them in action, it was pushing him closer toward contradicting them.

“Double-D, which came first? Pluto the planet or Mickey Mouse’s dog?” Ed asked. He had moved on to ogling at the model of the solar system hanging from the ceiling, which with Ed’s height was right in front of his line of vision.

Double-D gathered his composure and turned in his chair. “Uh-- th-the planet, Ed. Although they were named around the same time! In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that Milt Sidney named the dog character Pluto in celebration of the newly-discovered planet!”

“Cool!”

“Cool, indeed, Ed. Now, have you finished naming all the ants yet?”

“Oh! Sorry, Double-D! I was just thinking of new names.”
“Well, perhaps you could name one of them Pluto!”

“Ooh! Great idea, Double-D!” Ed said as he jumped back over to the ant-farm. “You can be Pluto, and you can be Pot Shot, and you can be The Former Missus Lindsay Mendoza, and you can be Ping-Pong, and you can be Astro Boy, and you can be Harriett…”

*Phew.* Double-D thought he handled that pretty well after being thoroughly spooked by the reference to The Sidney Company. Of course he knew offhand that Pluto the planet and Pluto the dog were both named in short succession in 1930; he had done as much research on Sidney history as he had on outer space. That’s what happens when you start getting curious about the children’s movie that’s the forbidden fruit for the whole of your youth.

As he undid the casing for the other half of this technological abomination he was tasked with creating, he found himself having trouble brainstorming how he could wire the two ingredients together, unable to stop dwelling on the regret of all that time he’d wasted investigating that godforsaken cartoon movie. It had started innocently enough. It was almost two years ago, during Thanksgiving Break of seventh grade. Ed had had the flu and Eddy was grounded for trying to get 100% on a test by smearing chapstick all over the scantron, so Double-D had to occupy himself for a few days. As he ate his breakfast grapefruit that Monday morning, he was flipping through the TV Guide to see if there were any good documentaries on. Those TV Guides were printed for nationwide consumption, so the channels were listed alphabetically rather than by what their channel number was in a given market, and what should happen to be listed right below The Science Channel but The Sidney Channel? They were marathoning a bunch of Sidney Classics that week since kids across the country were out of school, and *Adam Bell* was slated to come on at 2 p.m.

All throughout his childhood, he’d been curious about what his parents had withheld from him, but that curiosity had mostly remained dormant as he came to accept that he was too old for such a film and furthermore too old to think it was a good idea to circumvent his parents’ will. But his parents weren’t going to be home for a long time, and the only other people who would conceivably call upon his presence were incapacitated. He had nothing better to do, and now there was nothing else he *wanted* to do but to investigate what all the fuss was about. So he went for it.

He almost missed the beginning of the movie, not because he was preoccupied in any tangible way, but simply because the anxiety that he was about to disobey his parents just to watch a children’s movie weighed heavily on his mind. Eventually he did get the nerve to turn on the television, tuning in literally less than three seconds before the opening credits rolled.

It started innocently enough. It opened up with a live-action storybook sequence being narrated over by the same American actor who played ever-loyal William of Cloudsley; the old bear had been a B-list comedian and bandleader back in the Radio Era who was pushing seventy by the time *Adam Bell* came out and had already been in a few previous Sidney flicks for apparent lack of anything better to do with his time in that stage of his career, and while kids in the late Sixties and early Seventies sure seemed to love hearing his voice in the cinema, one couldn’t really say that his name had been forgotten by modern audiences because most denizens of the Twenty-First Century would likely have never known his name in the first place -- Double-D, of course, only knew his name and his career because of all the research he’d done, just like how he knew the little-known detail that the film was originally going to be a musical and the narrator was supposed to be a separate character voiced by a then-popular country singer, but the company was broke and reeling after the death of Milt Sidney in 1966 and the music budget had to be cut drastically. The narrator explained that while viewers surely had seen and heard many different renditions of the tale of Adam Bell, in the mono-species world of humans, they had their own version, and it went thusly.
So far, it was going well. Double-D’s later research into the real-life legend of Adam Bell had indeed yielded copious amounts of contradictory details. In some versions, Adam had been a nobleman who rejected his status to serve his conscious and live a life of crime, and in others he had been raised poorer than dirt and had nothing to lose; in some versions, he was a control freak who demanded his followers go to their knees in his presence, and in others he took egalitarianism to its logical extreme and his band of men could be described as sort of resembling an anarchist commune; in some versions, he did what he did out of a pious sense of moral obligation and he was borderline obsessed with the Virgin Mary, and in others he was a godless man who didn’t even actually give to the poor. But all of those would have been inappropriate for a children’s movie, of course. So they went their own way where they kept the ugly details vague; okay, so far, nothing objectionable.

The first real scene of the film showed Adam, William, and Clym of the Clough having witty banter as they patrolled their wooded home, before happening upon an aristocrat who the film goes to great lengths to clarify is unambiguously evil. So the trio disguise themselves and rob him silly in a most slapstick-y manner, but not before Adam himself -- voiced by an Englishman whose species Double-D couldn’t remember, who was unknown back then and even more anonymous now, having always preferred the stage to the screen and having very few other Hollywood credits -- gave his men a quick pep talk. He reminded them that people in Carlisle were starving, and although there were certainly easier and more legal ways to ease their plight, nobody in a position of power was willing to do that, so the three of them had to take it into their own hands and do it the hard way -- which, ergo, made them the good guys. The speech was peppered with small jokes from William and Clym to temper the seriousness of Adam, who was not portrayed in the film to be a boring old fuddy-duddy by any stretch of the imagination but certainly someone who was not afraid to temporarily turn off his jocular side and be straightlaced when the situation called for it, this quality implied to be a key reason why he was the leader.

And Double-D was shaken by how well they had framed that speech. It wasn’t too serious, it wasn’t too silly, and most importantly, it argued its point well, and that’s what bugged him the most. He had been led to believe that this film had literally pushed the narrative that violent rebellion was a good thing in and of itself, and that it chose a terrible example of that; as he had understood it, the style and essence of rebellion that Adam Bell portrayed was less “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Hancock” and more “Che Guevara, Adolf Hitler, and Maximilien Robespierre.” But that was not so, and they had done well to clarify that the characters were operating under a relatively sound moral code all the same. And he would be embarrassed to admit it out loud, but as much as Double-D knew of the tale of Adam Bell from simply being a citizen of the world, he actually had never bothered to learn the fine details, and while all throughout his research into the Sidney movie he had seen people on the internet and elsewhere posit that the movie was made for even younger children than most Sidney movies (the scene where they stop the action to carefully explain that they only break the law as a means to a righteous end often being cited as evidence of this), Double-D was glad that they clarified that they robbed the rich to give to the poor, because after being forbidden from hearing the story all his life, he honestly didn’t know.

That first time he watched through the movie, he had some slight trouble paying attention to everything after that opening scene. He still got the gist of it: the rich people in Carlisle and environs are getting sick of being victimized by the Inglewood Forest Gang and are doubly sick of how the impoverished locals adore them; their more and more elaborate attempts to capture Adam and his men aren’t working, and if anything he’s getting wise to them; it’s insinuated that they keep sending for help from the (unnamed) king, but their pleas go unanswered, probably not helped by the fact that Carlisle is probably as far away from London as one could be in England; one of the rich barons gets the idea to use his hot daughter (who’s roughly Adam’s age, which is to say
vaguely between eighteen and forty-five) as a lure by having her pretend to be a poor woman who’s his biggest fan; it works too well, as not only does Adam fall hard for her, but she starts developing feelings as well (keeping it all G-rated, of course); she comes to believe in Adam’s noble mission and reveals her true intentions, but decides to use this to help him and his band strike back against the rich at her father’s castle where they all congregate; they do, but their plan is leaked when the over-excited townspeople can’t stop talking about it, so the rich people’s defenses almost do them in, and just as the love interest’s father is about to finish Adam off, whoopsy daisy, someone left the door unlocked, and in walks the king, having been made privy to the classist oppression occurring in Carlisle and none too pleased with the aristocrats; the outlaws get pardoned and Adam and Eve (get it? because they’re humans?) live happily ever after. Double-D still got all of that, but he was distracted, still thinking of how he had been misled by his parents into thinking this film exalted acts of evil.

Whether his parents were consciously lying to him or whether they just didn’t know themselves, he may never find out. But this was nevertheless one of the first times in his life that he felt like he couldn’t 100% trust his parents’ judgment. And all over a forbidden Sidney movie of all things.

And that was how the obsession began: conflicting feelings over a children’s movie. After his first viewing of the movie -- and at present as he fussied about with the gadgets -- he still mostly sided with his parents. He still believed that the real world was too complicated to morally justify the vigilantism of someone like Adam Bell, whose actions only worked in a fictional world where good and evil were clearly spelled out. He still believed that any rational person would come to the same conclusion and that it was a bit alarming that Mr. Hood and Mr. Little had no apparent qualms about what they were doing.

But then again, what else were his parents not telling him? To learn, one must have not previously known something, and if Double-D was thirteen when he was first introduced to the idea that there can be righteous reasons for breaking the law -- not necessarily that there were but that there could be -- then perhaps in nearly five decades of life, his parents still had yet to learn that themselves, not because they were stupid but because they just didn’t have the opportunity to be exposed to such a well-spoken argument.

And when Double-D wanted to learn more about something, he sought to find out all that he could about it; even incidental details that might not immediately answer his question, because they might help paint a bigger picture in the end. And so his research began. He strained his eyes more than he was proud to admit learning all that he could about Adam Bell, and when he learned all he could about the original legend, he turned his attention to the Sidney movie, and since that was a much more recent part of history, there was infinitely more to discover.

And in his search to find if there was anything he was missing that would push him one way or another on the debate of the morality of Adam Bell, any wisdom that he had not yet been exposed to, he left no stone unturned. He looked into the actors and the animators and the writers and the composers and the entire Sidney company itself in the years leading up to Adam Bell’s release; did they agree with its morals, or were they simply selling this famous tale to make a buck? Evidence pointed more toward the latter, but hey, this project still had their names on it, right? Surely they must have espoused this sense of morality on some level. He looked into contemporary reception for the movie; did audiences at the time harbor the same skepticism that his parents did? It seemed that the movie didn’t do too poorly, but it didn’t do too well either, so while it wasn’t the most forgotten Sidney movie by any means, it certainly wasn’t one that you would see frequently celebrated by The Sidney Company thirty-odd years later. Furthermore, critics at the time seemed to all say that the movie was… eh. It was harmless and cute enough, they said -- which Double-D found strangely offensive; did none of these people notice how oddly profound its underlying philosophy was? And he looked into what the film’s modern legacy was in present day; sure
enough, just more adults remembering the movie fondly but not actually saying what specifically they liked about it, just that it was a fun movie with age-appropriate humor and action scenes that kids would indeed get a kick out of, but again, none of them noticing the moral debate it posed, let alone chiming in on that moral debate.

At least that was most people’s thoughts on Sidney’s Adam Bell. There were, however, those outliers who cared very deeply about the movie, and for very different reasons.

“RAWR!”

Double-D flinched and looked to his left to see that Ed was puppeting the replica human skull that usually sat on his desk.

“GAH! Ed! Don’t!” Double-D hollered as he swiped the skull out of the bear’s paw. “Uh, p-pl-please don’t touch Simian.”

“But Mr. Skull wanted to talk, Double-D! And I must speak for those who cannot speak for themselves!”

“Uh, g- hm-- ...Have you finished naming the ants, Ed?”

Once again, Ed sprang back into action. “Sorry, Double-D! I’ll be right back on it! You can be Sisyphus, you can be Daystar, you can be An Ant Named Antoine, you can be Ballykissangel, you can be Potato Bob, you can be Glorious, you can be Baba O’Riley, you can be Rip Van Winkle, you can be Sousaphone, you can be Gigolo Joe, you can be…”

Double-D put the skull back in place. Once again, thank you for the perfect transition, Ed. The skull wasn’t a real one -- would it even be legal to get one’s paws on a real one? -- but it did hold a sentimental value for Double-D. Although originally acquired as a nifty knickknack in remembrance of a long-gone species, in his head it now served as his closest connection to those creatures for whom he now had discovered a strange affinity, all because of that infernal children’s movie.

Even long before that Sidney movie rocked his world, Double-D had found the real-world story of the humans to be a damned fascinating one. For one thing, it was only in the last few centuries when archaeology became more sophisticated that humans were even proven to have actually existed. Before then, the scant evidence of the human race was attributed to deformities of other ape species -- considering what was now known about the humans and their evolution, that answer wasn’t entirely incorrect.

He stared at the gutted electronics that lay before him, thinking instead of that hound dog friend of Robin and John’s who he had met two days prior. Double-D wondered if that man would have appreciated the skull. After all, for generations, the dog peoples were the main proponents of the theory that the humans did indeed once exist when all other species believed they didn’t. They were the ones who maintained faith in the legend which other species regarded as pure poppycock. They were biased, of course, as they were themselves characters in the humans’ story. Hound dogs, German Shepherds, Great Danes, Saint Bernards -- they all told similar tales that their ancestors had been close allies with the humans. Even though there had been no genetic science to prove it, millennia of dogs and wolves procreating made it clear as day that the two species were cousins, but the dogs all told stories that elaborated on how this schism happened. They said they evolved separately after their ancient wolf forebears had made the tough decision to abandon their respective packs and go make friends with those hairless apes who seemed to be making great technological advancements incredibly quickly and who seemed to be good people to have on their good side -- which they were, until they all froze to extinction in an ice age. This narrative was
shared with excruciatingly similar details by every dog subspecies from across the Eurasian supercontinent -- although, curiously, the first confirmed human remains were found in modern-day Ethiopia, so apparently those humans really got around.

Every separate subspecies of the dog community privately mourned the loss of their friends for tens of thousands of years straight on through to the present day, and the way that they adored them for centuries despite no hard evidence of their existence was not unlike how many hold a reverence for angels. It was also notable that in a world where everybody thinks their species was the first and foremost -- saying that their people were the first to discover fire, that their people were the first to develop speech and language, that their species was the first one created by God Almighty -- if you ask a dog, they’ll almost never claim that dogs nor their wolf ancestors were those primitive pioneers; they’ll invariably say it was the humans, and the rest of mammalia followed their lead.

Indeed, if Double-D lived in a less intellectual home, the idea of a wolf owning a replica human skull would have been scoffed at. To many wolves, the scientific significance of such a thing would be tainted by the association with the dog/wolf rivalry. A human skull would be regarded as a relic that only a stupid dog would value, a sign that they still pledged their allegiance and voluntary subservience to another species that they thought were godlike but every other species thought never existed -- until it turned out they did. Perhaps more simply put, if Uncle Ward ever came back and saw Simian sitting on his nephew’s desk, he’d probably remark that the boy was some sort of race-traitor.

Or he might call him a baby. One way or another, stories about humans came to be regarded as something juvenile. If you want to make it clear that a story is for little kids, make all the characters humans; it would be on par with having a story comprise of talking birds or fish or reptiles, except a lot easier to draw in a cartoon or storybook. There was another practical element to this: in the last half-century especially, efforts had been continuously made not to over- or under-represent any species in children’s media to ensure that kids didn’t get the idea that any species was more or less important than any other, and the easiest way to circumvent that problem entirely was to simply have all the characters belong to a species that did not functionally exist. But even long before the Civil Rights era, children’s stories sporadically would use humans as characters, because there was just something fantastical about what might as well have been a fantasy race. Suffice it to say that the present-day dog community hadn’t been too pleased that the species they admired were treated as childish things, but seeing as it was still bringing their memory back into mainstream culture in some capacity, they weren’t complaining too loudly.

Those were simply the facts of that lost species and their impact on modern mammalian society. He already knew those before that fateful November day when he sat down to watch the forbidden children’s movie. But things got a lot more interesting when he started doing his research into the film populated by cartoon humans.

It turned out that there was an entire expanded mythos to the story of the humans. Or, rather, there were several thousand versions of this expanded mythos and everybody who cared enough about the mythos had their own version of it, but they all had a number of common characteristics, and it went something like this:

In the real world, for the above reasons of species egalitarianism and the stigma that humans were reserved for children’s stories, many Abrahamic religions in modern day taught the story of Adam and Eve to children using humans as the main characters. Some took this concept and ran with it, combining it with what the dogs had been saying for eons: humans were indeed the original species, and the ones who got the best start out of the gate, discovering fire and speech and agriculture and tools and society, and then they got too big for their britches and fell from grace.
Except for those who really love this fictional narrative of the humans, the part where they fall from grace doesn’t happen. Instead, they continue to pull ahead from the other species, and they wind up living in a society much like our own, with all the modern luxuries and much the same history. Furthermore, all the other species of the world, long ago left behind in the humans’ dust, still inhabit the world in their primitive state: no clothes, no sapient thought, certainly no equal status to the humans, no nothing. (And in some versions, just to throw the dogs a proverbial bone, some add the superfluous detail that those primitive dogs are the humans’ preferred pal in the animal kingdom, and in addition to all the extant subspecies from the real world, the humans even bred hundreds more types of dogs, including some as small as Barbie dolls, just because they could.)

Alright, so for all intents and purposes, society only comprises of one species, so there should be no conflict, right? Nope! After spreading out all across the world, humans in different regions started looking dissimilar, and some of these dispersed peoples found their local geography gifted them with certain resources that gave them an arbitrary advantage over their cousins, which they then proceeded to abuse horrifically, and they had no qualms about it because the differences in phenotype combined with an utter dearth of scientific knowledge and the advantages and disadvantages different peoples had been given by their geography led many to believe that different types of humans were unequal. Fast forward a few centuries to their equivalent of our modern society and the humans have (mostly) come to realize that that was a supreme error in judgment, but the rifts of the different peoples’ histories with one another still remain, and they keep arguing about how to fix what is broken, and they argue about what is broken, and they argue about how to argue, and every people seems to hate every other person on some level and feels justified in doing so because they believe that those other peoples hated them first, and it’s just a whole big mess. Add in that they’ve also gone through the same conflicts in gender, creed, and nationality as the real world has, and one can see the message clear as day: you don’t need to be very different from somebody else to find a difference you can start a never-ending conflict over. This extended mythos of the humans served as the perfect allegory for the nature of conflict in the real world, for as much as human characters were considered childish, their story could contain some profound truth if one was willing to do some philosophical digging.

The people who cherished this extended story of a human society were semi-colloquially known as **skinnies**. Or, rather, those who cared about the story were considered part of the larger “skinny” community. There were plenty of skinnies who didn’t care to think too much about the deeper implications of an all-human society; they were in it for other things.

Double-D had run into that community countless times during his research into Sidney’s *Adam Bell* and he still didn’t have a completely clear idea of how to describe them. The impression he got was that there were many different kinds of them and it would be a logical folly to try to paint any individual as wholly representative of the group. The only inherently common trait was that they had an affinity for human cartoon characters, and in that community, *Adam Bell* was widely regarded as the father of the fandom, having brought the concept of “skinnies” into the mainstream -- while many in the community preferred other, later “skinny” franchises and intellectual properties to the 1973 Sidney film (indeed, most of them seemed to have other favorites), *Adam Bell* held a place of respect among them for laying down the first brick. Beyond that, there were as many different types of “skinnies” as there were skinnies themselves.

Some of them kept their love of human characters under wraps and reserved it for online message boards, while some of them publicly wore their hobby on their sleeve like a badge of honor. Some of them dressed up in elaborate human costumes, while some of them were more than content to admire in the third-person. Some of them just wanted to consume their favorite media over and over again, while some of them were inspired to create their own -- and among those, some of them made illustrative or literary reimaginings of their favorite human worlds with their favorite
“skinny” characters while some of them conjured entirely original works. And while some of them simply and innocently thought the characters were cute, some of them took their transfixedation with these characters to its logical extreme in a most explicit way that made Double-D and a lot of other outsiders squeamish, to say the least.

Come to think of it, that was another thing they all had in common: there were those who knew of the community and thought they were depraved as a whole, not knowing or not caring for any distinctions between the factions; the whole of the community bore this ire together. Never mind that such adulterations of children’s media was far from the group’s main goal (well, for most members, at least); an outsider who discovered “skinnies” almost always discovered the “mature” side to the community shortly thereafter, and almost always interpreted this in the worst possible way, and almost always found the entire community offputting. While this prejudiced phobia of the community was not as widespread in those days as it would become in the following years and decades, it was still present, and it was assumed that anybody who knew of skinnies but was not themselves a skinny would be disgusted by the concept of skinnies by default.

For his part, Double-D discovered all of that by accident. He had seen some people online mentioning that Adam Bell had essentially birthed the skinny fandom, inspiring him to do some Googling in hopes to find out what that community thought about the moral message of the film. When he executed his search, he was hit with countless articles and exposés discussing the dark side of the community. While he was not interested in being part of this dark side, he felt it was his intellectual duty to learn about anything tainted that may be associated with that damned cartoon movie that had become the center of his attention. While scrolling through a forum post that seemed to just be a cavalcade of people expressing their unexaggerated loathing for skinnies, he saw someone leave a comment that was nothing but a URL. While many of the other commenters had been crassly dismissing the skinnies as a bunch of creeps who were so perverted that they wanted to copulate with a species that didn’t even exist anymore and might as who well be regarded as having a fetish for cavemen, this particular forum-user had previously left comments that -- while still maintaining the same attitudes as their compatriots -- were certainly more intelligently written than the ones surrounding it. Therefore Double-D thought he could trust the URL, believing it would lead him to some scholastic data or a first-person investigative story about the community and how they expressed their love of human cartoon characters; instead, that would become the first time Double-D had ever seen pornography. If he had just scrolled down the forum thread a little farther, he would have seen other users admonishing the one who had led them to bear witness to such accursed images.

Thank God his parents weren’t home to hear him scream. The things he saw there not only compelled him to delete his browsing history, but to also run several different antivirus applications, research how to wipe his DNS logs, and contemplate calling his internet service provider to report his computer hacked, lest they see any strange data on their end of the records.

And yet, if he were to be completely honest, he found it all fascinating. Not the art itself -- the fact that the art existed. Because at first, he was too paralyzed by fear to even click away from the page, but when he gathered his composure, he figured that since he would never be able to bring himself to return to this site, he might as well see what it had to offer while he was there; he was still there to research the public opinion of the Sidney film, and in the quest for knowledge, one must leave no stone unturned, not even the dirty ones. And he had to admit, some of it wasn’t that bad; yes, there were some that portrayed acts that would get winces from passersby even if two consenting adults did it in the real world, but there was also some very soft stuff, not even necessarily softcore, but PG-13 stuff like characters making out or just standing around giving each other bedroom eyes, and some that were just the characters smiling at the viewer, drawn far more handsomely than they had been in their original iteration. And while he would certainly describe some of it as downright depraved, as a whole, well -- it would depend on whether one put more stock into the
object of desire having a familiar anatomy or whether one put more stock into that object of desire having the mentality of a sapient adult. For posterity, Double-D did not see very many pieces involving characters from Adam Bell; again, while the community seemed to respect that film’s importance to their fandom, it was hardly many members’ favorite. Honestly, the fact that he couldn’t grasp how anybody could find 90% of these images attractive had less to do with the fact that they were humans and more to do with that fact that so many of them were so poorly-drawn; when his later research suggested the idea that some artists of these pieces created them not for their sexual appeal but purely for shits and giggles, those artists being fully aware of their community’s reputation as a bunch of perverts and deciding to toy with the concept, Double-D took a deep breath and told himself that there were far worse avenues for self-expression.

These thoughts came and went over the last two years, and as he warmed up his hot-glue gun, they returned once again. He knew that if anybody found out that he was privy to the existence of the skinny community, they would expect him to denounce it. But he didn’t know if he could bring himself to do it.

For one thing, it was another case of his empathy being problematic: he was willing to defend a people who he had been told did not deserve to be defended. Just like how he couldn’t have assumed Eddy had been right about Robin and John being the bandits when they matched the vague description, he could not bring himself to condemn that entire community when so few of them had actually done anything damnable. He knew that some would see this refusal to condemn them as a damnable offense on his part, but as he thought through these thoughts once again sitting at his desk, he told himself to take a page out of Robin and John’s book and follow one’s own moral compass no matter what others may think; he just hoped that was the right move.

There was also the way that their existence made him feel better about himself. It wasn’t a “wow, I’m better than these losers” sort of thing (although he would certainly feel that way about some specific members he encountered), but more that he felt less weird knowing he wasn’t the only one upon whom a children’s cartoon movie had a profound effect. He could now tell himself that art marketed toward kids was still valid art and was allowed to make an emotional impact just as much as art intended for adults -- hell, if anything, if may have been more impactful because it could be appreciated by children as well as adults.

But he could also relate to the skinnies. In all his observations of them, intentional or accidental, he had come to form the theory that on some level, consciously or otherwise, the skinny fandom was a form of escapism for all involved. Whether it was simply escaping a hectic day by drawing characters they thought looked cool or going so far as to indulge in an elaborate fantasy of an entirely different world, everyone needs to get away sometime. Double-D didn’t hate real people by any means, but there were certainly days where he wanted to throw his hands in the air and resign himself to never understanding how the rest of mammalia ticked. And over that most recent Winter Break, when he again was home alone with his friends out of commission, this time Eddy having the flu and Ed being grounded for stealing some of Sarah’s dolls to practice voodoo, Double-D caught another re-airing of that blasted film on The Sidney Channel. Now having a few years’ familiarity with the forbidden flick, he was much more at ease as he sat through it once again. He went into it intending to look for more clues to help him decide once and for all whether his parents’ philosophy of morals and ethics was a philosophy worth emulating or if he needed to start formulating his own, paying special attention to everything past the point that he zoned out in introspection during his first viewing. But he was still a bit nervous; not nearly as nervous as the first time, but enough to be distracting. Then he had a weird idea: he hit the mute button and just started watching the closed captionings. And suddenly he was overwhelmed by a strange feeling of calm. And it was strange indeed, and he zoned out again for a few minutes as he tried to determine the cause. Then it hit him: by muting the voices, he had removed the last proof to his subconscious mind that there were real people in this film. He could pretend that these characters did not only
exist as pencil scratchings on art cells; he could pretend that he was staring into a window into an entirely different plane of existence. And he liked that idea. He liked pretending that there was another world besides this one. He liked playing with the idea that he could one day go there; he liked hoping that perhaps there, life would make sense. It sure seemed like a nice enough place on the screen -- sure, they were dealing with abject poverty and they were living in a time with limited education and nonexistent hygiene and near-universal illiteracy and backward social structures, but they were also living in a world where good defeats evil and the good people get along instead of fighting with one another over which of them is the most good and goddammit people there just seemed nicer, and he would honestly consider sacrificing his modern comforts if he were somehow granted the opportunity to go to a world like theirs where people would like him for once in his life -- perhaps not for a lifetime, but certainly for a moment. He was a man of science and he knew this was purely a childlike whimsy, but for as much as his parents had encouraged his creativity, they had always encouraged it within the confines of reality, and had always tacitly discouraged playing around with logical absurdities. But much like the movie itself, the chance to lose himself in juvenile fantasies was something he didn’t know he’d been missing all these years. He did notice more details during this second viewing, but he was still thoroughly distracted by the unprecedented euphoria of his daydreaming, and suffice it to say that every week when the new TV Guide arrived in the mail, Double-D would check for if he would have a feasible chance to squeeze in a third viewing.

...Was he one of them? He nearly hot-glued his fingers to the plastic, distraught by the thought. He knew that he certainly didn’t consider himself one of them, and he also knew that he would much rather not have people think he was one of them; he didn’t want any more people hating him without hope of reconciliation. But he was terrified that if anybody found out that there was a “skinny” children’s movie that crossed his mind every single day of his life, he wouldn’t have much of a choice of who he was perceived to be; the fact that he had originally only started dwelling on that film in the hopes to help him develop his own feelings independent of those of his parents’ about the nature of law, morality, and justice would probably just have made his case look even worse. And the feeling that he got was that that community would likewise claim he was one of them whether he had the balls to admit it or not. Sure, fine, he was originally only obsessed with it because he felt the need to learn all he could about the piece of art that was forbidden from him, and sure, fine, he only willingly maintained this obsession because that blasted film came to represent a strange continuing coming-of-age phase where he was forcing himself to think critically about whether he actually agreed with what his parents taught him or if he only thought he agreed because that was what his parents taught him, and sure, fine, it was the only “skinny” thing he held such a deep affinity for and he really didn’t care that deeply about any other skinny movie or television cartoon -- true, in the intervening years since he finally popped his “skinny” cherry, he had found himself having a new appreciation for animated works he came across featuring human characters, but he didn’t really care about them nearly as much as he did for Adam Bell, and furthermore it was none of their business and they didn’t need to know that. But he’d encountered enough of them to know that they would be the first to say that there was no finite quantity of ways that one could find themselves in the fandom, and his journey was completely valid; he also knew that many of them would say that if he wasn’t a card-carrying “skinny” yet, he would get there in due time. And if anybody on either side of this cultural argument found out that he had a history of watching that skinny flick and catching himself consciously realizing he was enjoying it specifically because it featured human characters, that would be it, end of story, case closed.

He had tried so hard for so long to gain the reputation of being an intellectual wolf who had no time for such silly things as fiction and fairy tales, and he feared that could all be undone if anybody ever found out that he had such a strange relationship with a Sidney movie, and who knows what damage may ensue if someone got the impression that he was in it specifically for the human characters and made the logical leap to assuming he was really only in it for the risqué
underworld associated with it. People tabbed as perverted man-children don’t get into Harvard, nor Yale, nor Stanford, nor MIT, nor Penn, nor the University of Chicago, nor Northwestern, nor William and Mary, nor Johns Hopkins, nor Duke, nor Tulane, nor Vanderbilt, nor Cali-Berk, nor USC, nor UCLA; hell, if such a fate befell him, he’d be lucky to get into Miami of Ohio -- he might even have to settle for a diploma mill like Arizona State.

He tried to reassure himself that if, heaven forbid, such information did become publicly disseminated, he should use it as the ultimate opportunity to test his strength. It would be a challenge of the utmost difficulty, but one that would reap great rewards if he succeeded: the challenge to clear his own name and to destigmatize a niche community whose members had (for the most part, at least) never hurt anybody in the name of their hobby. But it was a challenge he was not exactly up for, and one he’d certainly rather never face; he knew as well as anyone that the old adage that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger wasn’t always true, as it could still leave someone battered, broken, and crippled if they weren’t truly prepared for the test, and often did -- and even this was conveniently ignoring that the hypothetical what doesn’t kill you could still indeed kill you.

He would love to have the resolve to do what he felt was right and not care whether it aligned with anybody else’s moral compasses other than his own, just like Mr. Hood and Mr. Little seemed to do. But as it was, he still disagreed with their methods, both in their principle and their sheer efficacy. Perhaps his further time spent with in the world of Adam Bell would inspire him to change his tune, but as he sat there tinkering with the electronics, he had not yet gathered enough evidence to disagree with his parents on the notion that it would be more civil, more righteous, more mature, more rewarding, more palatable, more safe, more sane, and simply more effective to work within the confines of the law to fix the problems they were trying to fix. And if they were going to keep evoking the name of Adam Bell -- a name which, for better or worse, Double-D found himself feeling a connection to and having a strange sense of ownership of, and as embarrassing as it would be to admit, he felt overwhelmingly uncomfortable and a tad bit violated when somebody else mentioned that character, whether they were referring to the Sidneyfied version or not, just like he had felt uncomfortable in the junkyard the other day -- then he definitely would not be joining them in their merry adventures. And as far as he knew, Eddy (and by extension, Ed) were on his side with this one. I mean, Eddy had to have disregarded their invitation, correct? Why else would be be asking him to help in this scam by designing --

"YEEEeeeOOOWWWwwww!"

"Ed, what’s wrong!?" Edd asked as he turned in his chair.

"Jim bit me! JIM BIT ME!!!" Ed bellowed as he held out his right arm, jumping from leg to leg in pain, Jim the Cactus hanging a few feet off the ground as its spikes were dug deep into the bear’s paw.

“Oh, dear, Ed! I’ve told you time and time again that Jim likes to have his personal space!” Edd chastised as he walked Ed over to sit on his bed.

Double-D retrieved the first-aid kit he had ready to go at the end of his bed and got a pair of latex gloves shortly after that. The wound was not a pretty sight, and Double-D felt a bit queasy looking at it. As he tended to the injury, he had the thought that if Robin and John were to ever question his bravery and his drive to face his fears to help people, he would cite moments like this as how he was brave in his own way. He would really rather not have looked at all that blood and flesh, but he made himself do it to help his friend.

When forcing himself to confront such an unsightly scene, he typically did one of two things: he
either envisioned things that he found pleasant to look at to take his mind off his present reality, or he envisioned things that he had seen which were much more unpleasant to look at as a way of contextualizing that he had successfully willed himself through seeing much worse. But with all the recent thoughts of Adam Bell and the skinnies, something in his brain must have short-circuited, because he envisioned things that could be described as both or neither. He had visions of that one time a year and a half ago when he clicked that link and was bombarded by obscene images, many of which he would agree were indeed sinister. And this part of the memory frightened him. But he also remembered some of the images that were actually quite well-drawn, images he did not find viscerally objectionable, images that disturbingly did not disturb him when he thought of them then and still disturbed him by not disturbing him as he thought of them now. And this part of the memory frightened him even more.

“Are you okay, Double-D?”

Edd snapped out of it and realized he had stopped working on Ed’s paw, having opted instead to come to a complete standstill and stare into space. “Uh-- y-yes, Ed, why do you ask?”

“You stopped making Jim stop biting me.”

“Oh, yes, um… sorry, Ed.” He got back to work. He dignified them, but he didn’t want to be one of them.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Double-D?”

“...I will be Ed.” And he hoped he was right about that.

When the small talk ran dry and the silence became unbearable, she went ahead and addressed the question they both had. “So… do you know what we’re doing here?”

The tiger was a bit shocked by this, having been operating under the assumption that they had both nonverbally agreed not to ask the obvious for lack of an answer, and since he didn’t know what else to say, he said that. “Uh… I dunno, um… I just sort of thought we both agreed without saying that we weren’t gonna ask that, ‘cause… y’know, if you wanna know and I wanna know, then clearly neither of us do know.”

The antelope took a sip of her can of Diet Coke, which by now seemed warmer than the air in the room. Perhaps that was for the better; it was absolutely freezing in the records room. It was in the upper eighties outside, so the central air conditioning in the precinct was set to full blast, which was probably an agreeable arrangement in the rooms that were getting bombarded by sunlight through their windows, but the records room had no windows, so it felt like the equivalent of being in a windy cave.

“Oh, I know that,” she said as she put the can down. “But we can guess. Let’s hypothesize.”

“Uh… well, I guess it makes sense why you’re here,” said the tiger, “he probably can’t navigate the records all by himself.”

“Well, they asked me to load up the missing persons database, and I did, so now any idiot could just type in the deets on whoever they’re looking for and find them. Boom, plug and chug.”

“Yeah, but you know how that guy’s like… a technophobe or something.”

“Ah. True that, true that…” she murmured. “But who does he need me to look up?”

“Uh-- jeez, I dunno, Jimmy Hoofa?” the tiger shrugged. “I’m more curious why they needed an officer in the room. I-I mean… he’s got the Sheriff basically riding his dick at all times, right? Why do they need me for that he can’t do?”

Halfway through that statement, the antelope’s expression soured. “I know you don’t know me much, Jake, but I am a Christian and I really don’t appreciate that dirty language of yours.”

“OH! Oh, oh, Jesus shit, I-I’m sorry, I-- wait, I just did it again, didn’t I? Took the Lord’s name in vain I mean. Hey, I--”

And the antelope just burst out laughing. “Aw, no, man, I’m just playin’ witchu! Don’t worry, it don’t mean nothin’.”

“Oh, uh… heh, he-um…” the officer tried to chuckle.
“That sheriff is a dickrider, though,” she said, and then was silent for a moment as she stared at the tiger and contemplated what a pity it was that a guy who was so smoking hot could be so awkward. After the moment passed, she added, “I could really care less to work with the mayor in person.”

“What, you’re scared the lion’s gonna eat ya?” the tiger asked with a self-amused smirk, choosing the worst possible time to display confidence.

She looked unamused again, and this caused him to chuckle harder, thinking he was in on the joke this time. But when he opened his eyes again and she still wasn’t chuckling with him, he realized the offense was real.

“I ain’t scared of no lion,” she said. “Specially not a British one. Hell, you stick me in a room with a British lion and an African lion and me and the African lion’ll gang up on the British one for fucking up our continent!” She took another sip of soda, her body language seeming a tad tense. “I’d like to see that British motherfucker just try to bite my ass! Probably couldn’t even break the skin with his fucked-up British teeth…”

Jake’s posture suffered as he tried to shrink into his chair. “S-sorry, I, uh… it was a bad joke, my bad.”

She saw his discomfort and figured she might as well go easy on him, seeing as they were probably going to have to work together to get the mayor in and out of their lives as quickly as possible. “I mean… it ain’t just that. It-- it’s mostly not that. I can see him as an individual and I still don’t like him. I mean, by all accounts, he’s a whiny little bi--”

Knock, knock, knock.

“Speak of the devil,” the tiger muttered.

“Come in!” the antelope called, putting on a well-rehearsed façade of warmth when she really wasn’t feeling like warmly greeting her new audience.

As Rocky opened the door for him, the mayor took a deep breath as he entered the room alone. What was about to transpire may have been very easy or very, very difficult, and he was going to force himself to get through it without his assistant nor his sheriff by his side. And those bandits had the audacity to call him a coward? They ought to see how brave he was being now.

“Hello, Mayor!” the beaming records clerk greeted, extending a hand for shaking. “I’m Kristy Mwangi, I’m the recordkeeper.”

“Mayor John Norman.” Prince John had never much been a fan of shaking commoners’ hands, but he bear-and-grinned it as he accepted it, turned it, and kissed the back of her hand -- that’s what an important man is supposed to do when he meets an important woman, right? “The pleasure is mine.”

Kristy took deep breaths through her nose as she used all her power to refrain from backhanding him across the snout. She retreated her arm and wondered where that bottle of hand sanitizer went.

“Uh-- Jacob Stripling, Nottingham P.D.,” the tiger coughed out, seeing the weird way the lion had greeted the antelope and hoping not to get the same treatment when he presented his own hand for shaking.

Instead, the mayor did that thing where he wrapped his hand around the other person’s fingers and shook hands that way. “Officer, a pleasure to meet-- Just a minute, now. Haven’t we met?”
“Uh… no. N-no-uh-not, uh… officially,” the tiger sputtered, less disturbed by the random question and more disturbed by how he could feel that the mayor’s thumb seemed to be strangely… damp.

“Oh, surely we have! I have a very good memory of faces and I recognize yours!” He dropped the handshake to ponder the tiger’s face. “Stand up, would you please?”

Thoroughly confused, he obliged and stood, and he looked a tad worried as he glanced down at the undersized lion who didn’t even make it up to his shoulders. Kristy looked upon the scene with a similarly confused look, and Rocky the Bodyguard, wanting no part of this awkward moment, closed the door and stood in the hallway, prepared to answer if anyone asked that it would be more useful to watch for intruders than to keep the mayor safe from an antelope and a tiger with visible anxiety issues.

John had to catch his top hat as he craned his neck to meet the tiger’s gaze. “Ah! Yes! Yes, I remember now! You’re the tiger who works as Commissioner Roe’s bodyguard! I didn’t know they assigned an officer to her! Fascinating…”

“Uh-- n-no, I… I’m… I’ve always been a cop. F-for the City force, I mean. Never worked private security.”

“Nonsense! You’re the tiger I always see with Doty! Why, I saw you just the other day!”

“…Was his name Ryan?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Her bodyguard. Is his name Ryan?”

The mayor tilted his head down and looked blankly straight ahead, which incidentally was where Jake’s badge was on his chest. “It may have been.”

“Yes, that’s probably my half-brother.”

The mayor winced at the tiger’s badge. “I see.”

“C-uh… can I sit down now?”

The mayor didn’t answer. He instead turned his head away from the both of them and dug his lip into the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, pondering how such a misunderstanding could have happened.

“I-I’m gonna sit down now,” the tiger said, and he did.

“This half-brother of yours, is his surname also Stripling?”

“I don’t know his last name, I didn’t grow up with him, but I know his last name isn’t Stripling. That’s my mom’s last name.”

“Interesting.”

“Yeah, our dad got around a lot. I’ve got half-brothers and half-sisters all over the city and probably all over the country at this point. Some of them are turning thirty-five this year, some of them are still being born this year.”

“And who exactly is your father?”
“Oh, some guy I’ve never met. I don’t even know the guy’s name,” he lied.

“By the way, speaking of absentees,” Kristy interjected, “where’s that dude with no arms?”

“Who--? Ah. Yes, Hess. Charles. He works very hard for me year-round, around the clock, so when he requested today off, his first day off in recent memory, I allowed it.” Indeed, Hiss had come to the Mayor that morning with two pieces of news: first that something strange had happened with two public works workers sent to Sherwood Forest, and secondly that he desperately needed the day off to go and have his wrist-watch repaired; suffice it to say that the shock of the former ensured that the mayor would not think too hard about the latter.

“And what about Woodland and Nutzinger?” Stripling asked. “They told me you requested to have a cop because you might want to file a police report about something, but usually those two are always at your beck and call.”

“They’re presently off scouring Sherwood Forest looking for some wanted criminals. Which leads me to why I’m here today…” He positioned himself in the best possible spot to address both of them without having to move his head and risk toppling his top hat. “As you may have heard, yesterday afternoon, bordering on evening, two public works laborers were sent into that forest preserve to cut down a particularly pesky tree, thought to be used as a sort of ‘base-camp’ for highly dangerous and most wanted criminals; the laborers awoke this morning in hospital in--”

“You mean ‘awoke in the hospital’?” asked the officer, the look on his face like that of a confused child. “Or ‘a hospital’?”

The mayor simply glared. “…They awoke in hospital in Lewes, far from the forest, having no memory of ever having arrived. As for the bandits? If they do exist -- if seven years’ worth of incidents such as these all were indeed committed by the same perpetrators -- they not only remain at large, but their identities remain unknown. It is thought that not only are they masters of disguise, escape, and illusion, but also masters of sewing fear, and it is not a matter of their record being flawless in never once leaving evidence of their identities, but rather that they have so thoroughly convinced everyone in this city -- including our law enforcement -- that they are such an indomitable force that nobody dare testify against them too loudly. It is in confidence that this conversation be kept private that I clarify that their refusal to be identified or to even have their existence verified is why there has not to date been any formal action taken against them, instead being handled off-record by the highest-ranking and my most trusted of law enforcement officers, lest it make the management of this city’s law and order look incompetent for not being able to capture them. Before I continue, would either of you like to declare that you are indeed privy to the names of the wanted?”

“Uh… n-no, not really,” said Jake.

“No, sir,” said Kristy, who just wanted the mayor to get to his point.

“No, sir,” said Kristy, who just wanted the mayor to get to his point.

“Very well, then,” Mayor Norman said as he nodded slightly, not making eye contact with either of them. “You see, it is thought that their identities may have been hiding under our noses this entire time. Despite my dreadfully busy schedule, I, along with Hi-- Hess , Charles Hess -- have been doing research into the clues left us by the perpetrators, and while it is to our understanding that searching criminal databases is a fruitless endeavor as the suspects do not match the descriptions of any previously known and convicted offenders, the fact that they may have been operating in such a clandestine manner for nearly a decade may make one wonder -- what if one were to find them on a list of missing persons?”

“And I imagine that’s why you wanted me to already have the database pulled up,” said the
“Precisely, Miz Kristy,” the mayor said confidently, not remembering the clerk’s last name and not really caring.

“I mean, we can thumb through here, but we can only filter results by vague details so much. Especially if--”

“Ah, but I may have more than vague details! Shall I elaborate?”

“Please,” she said, more politely than she wanted to.

“I’ve, er… I’ve been made aware of some names that some denizens of this city have attached to these characters. Now, I’ve no idea whether these names are real, whether they are pseudonyms, whether they were misheard, whether they are pseudonyms which were themselves misheard, whether they were--”

“Mayor, would you like to take a seat?” asked Kristy. “Maybe if we got you seated, we can start plugging these names in and see whether we can get any leads off them!” She gestured to a swivel chair in the corner, hoping she wasn’t being too obvious.

They mayor glanced back at the chair, looking surprised by its existence. “Ah, yes! Thank you, Miz Kristy.” He walked slowly and stiffly to retrieve the chair and push it into place in front of the computer screen between Kristy and Jake. He sat down like molasses dripping from a ladle, looking stiff, uncomfortable, pained, keeping his back almost unnaturally straight as he bent his knees, eventually losing balance and falling backward into the chair, which almost slid out from under him, and he wouldn’t have been able to break his own fall because both of his hands went up to secure his hat.

“You alright, Mayor?” asked Stripling.

“Er-- y-yes, yes, I just-- I merely… I’m not a fan of these ‘swivel chairs,’ as they call them.”

“So, you have some names for us? I can start typing them in,” the antelope insisted.

“Patience, Miz Kristy, patience.” He turned to Officer Stripling. “Now, Officer, I have a question for you…”

And with nobody looking at her, this inspired Kristy to throw her head back and roll her eyes as dramatically as possible for the amusement of nobody but herself.

“…Have you received the news of the DNA results from the pig mask found this past weekend?”

“Uh, no sir, I’m not on that case,” the tiger answered meekly.

The mayor was unimpressed, but he soldiered on. “Well, to enlighten you, the results were that the hair on the mask was indeed fox hair, although again, it did not match the DNA profile of any convicted criminal for whom we have a DNA sample.”

“Uh… ok. Good to know, I guess. So do you have a name on this fox?”

“I may,” he said as he turned back to the computer screen. His heart was racing, but he was able to temper it with another long, slow monologue; he had always found that forcing himself to break out into an eloquent speech helped him regulate his emotions when he needed to. “Now, I feel the need to remind you that these names are… purely anecdotal. They may indeed be wrong! It’s quite
possible that I may have been misled when I discovered these names--”

“MAYOR,” the antelope snapped; the resulting shock made the lion jerk his head, jostling the hat out of its perch and tumbling it down onto the table.

Kristy realized she may have overdone it. “Uh… I-I apologize, Mayor, but, uh… the anticipation is killing me just as much as it is for you! And hey, the sooner we find out if those names are right, the sooner we can move forward with nabbing ’em, right?” She put her fingers on the home row of the keyboard. “So here we have a database where we can find anybody who’s ever been reported missing without being found. Say the name and I can search from anybody who’s gone missing in the state of Delaware since 1885!”

And the mayor looked a bit disappointed by that. “Only Delaware?”

And the recordkeeper looked a bit confused by that. “I-I mean… yeah, that’s what it’s set to search through by default. I can, uh… it’s a nationwide database, so I can add Maryland to the search if you want--”

“And the District of Columbia, too, please! A-a-and Virginia, just for good measure! A-and Pennsylvania, and New York! Please,” the mayor sputtered, trying to contain his excitement. “We want to cast a wide net!”

“Uh… oookayyy…” the antelope agreed as she added “MD”, “DC”, “VA”, “PA”, and “NY” to the search criteria. “Alright, so what’s this fox’s name?”

Kristy and Jake weren’t going to say anything, but they could absolutely feel the table moving from John’s restless leg shaking up a nervous storm.

After a deep breath, Prince John finally said, “First name Robert … last name Hood .”

Kristy typed the letters in, hit Enter, and was taken aback when there was indeed exactly one result.

“And we have a hit,” quipped Jake.

“That we do,” Kristy said as she clicked on the page, which loaded with a cache of information on the fox, who she couldn’t help but think looked downright dashing in his last known government photograph, not the most masculine of specimens but more like ‘boy-band’ attractive. “Last seen May 3rd, 1998, reported missing on the 6th. In Washington, DC. Huh. Good call, Mayor.”

“Y-yes, thank you,” the mayor squeaked. “So, er… now what?”

“Wh--? Whaddaya mean, now what?” asked the clerk, noticeably offended by the lack of a plan.

“How can we, er… how can we officially connect this man to the outlaws in the forest?” He turned to Officer Stripling. “Perhaps for this we’d best turn to you, Officer Stripling.”

“Uh, w-well, I mean… you got his name right, so that’s a start,” the officer replied. “That ought to be enough to formally accuse him, if you wanted to do that, but if we don’t have more than a name to go off of, this might all be an enormous waste of time if it’s not him.”

“Plus, you know, there’s no guarantee that he’s still even alive,” Kristy added.

“That, too.”
“Hm, speaking of…” Kristy murmured as she noticed something. “That was just over seven years ago. If they do things in DC like they do here, the family probably got a call last month asking if they wanted to formally declare him dead. But either somebody forgot to call them or they said no, because he would be marked here as ‘Declared Dead’ if he had been.”

Oh, dear. The family. John hadn’t even considered that a missing person’s file might indicate their closest relatives. Granted, the fox wasn’t formally related to Richard, but they only had two degrees of separation, so maybe--

“Who is his family?” the antelope mused aloud as she read. “Hm. All he’s got are a Marian V. Swift, listed as a girlfriend… a William J. E. Scarlett, a brother -- different last names, but whatever--”

“Hey, maybe they’re half-brothers!” Jake interrupted. “Maybe I’m not the only one whose dad got around.”

“Hey, good point,” she conceded disinterestedly. “…aaand an Anne E… Cloge? C-L-O-U-G-H. However you pronounce that. Listed as just a ‘roommate’. By the looks of it, these are just the people he listed as his I-C-E contacts on employment forms and stuff. He’s also got a Brianna Hood and an Oliver Chase listed as parents, but they don’t have any contact information. But, uh, yeah… that’s all he has for known relatives and contacts.”

The mayor breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Oh, this makes more sense!” Kristy continued. “Apparently he was a British national -- so he probably didn’t have any real family in the States.”

“Looks like he’s one of you, eh!?” Jake said to John with a smirk. “But I guess that means he’s not our guy.”

“H-how do you mean?” asked the mayor.

“Well, I think people would have noticed if the bad guys had a British accent.”

“This specific bad guy DOES have an English accent!”

“…He did?”

“Yes! R-er-- reportedly, I mean. H-have you no working familiarity with these characters at all!?!”

“Naw, man, I usually get stuck on bicycle duty down by the tourist traps. Jesus, man, I don’t care if you’re the mayor or not, don’t snap at me like that! Do you want my help or not?”

And the mayor recoiled. “Er-- dreadfully sorry, Officer, that was quite unprofessional of me, but er-- No. No, no excuses! That was my mistake! But, er, tell me, Officer, does the detail of the matching English origins help our case of pegging this man as one of our suspects?”

Jake could feel himself growing a backbone to this guy. “I mean, it could, but it would help a lot more if we had eyewitnesses -- or, fuck, I guess ear witnesses in this case -- all come forward and say the same things about him, and not just you.”

“Witnesses?” The mayor thought about it for a moment. “Yes, I can get you witnesses.”

“You can?”
“I’ll tell you what, though,” said Kristy, “even if we do bag this guy, you can’t have him deported. He’s an American citizen. It looks like… oh! It looks like he took the test right before he disappeared and was granted citizenship *in absentia*. Poor bastard. But damn, he got citizenship fast for having moved here in ’92… oh! Oh, he graduated NYU. Yeah, that probably helped put him on the fast track. Fancy-ass Brit…”

“Jesus, how much information do they have on this guy?” Jake said as he leaned over to get a good look himself.

“As much as they can find,” Kristy explained. “They do an extensive background check on these people when they disappear to get all the clues they can. Like… here, we see a listed alias as ‘Robin Hood’, and then you check the Notes section and that tells you that he was into acting and that was apparently his stage name -- I always thought of Robin as a girl’s name, but whatever--”

“Wait, is that a fucking typo!?"

“Where?”

“There,” the tiger pointed. “Four foot ten? And he’s a fox?”

“Wait, really?”

The mayor silently let them make their discoveries, not wanting to interrupt.

“Are we sure he’s not a coyote or a wolf or a… a hybrid or something?”

“Hybrid of what?”

“Shit, I dunno!”

“Well, it also says a hundred and fifteen pounds, and if the rest of his body is as skinny as his face looks, proportionally speaking, this guy’s gotta be stretched. Unless both numbers are wrong…”

“Christ is Lord, how do you even *lose* a fox that big--?”

“Perhaps it is best for me to note…’’ the mayor found the nerve to cut in, “…that the mysterious fox outlaw has also been described as exceptionally tall for his species. And any eyewitnesses will surely corroborate this fact.”

The other two backed away from the screen, starting to feel as though the mayor wasn’t going into this as blindly as he had originally seemed.

“Oh, uh… okay,” Jake mumbled. “That helps to know. So… you definitely seem pretty confident that this is your guy. Now, our options are--”

“Ah, but there is another. His name is--”

“Is it his brother?” asked Kristy.

“Er-- I beg your pardon?”

“I just realized in the notes at the bottom that it says his brother, that Scarlett guy, he went missing a few days later, and investigators say that before he disappeared, he said he was reported as saying he was gonna go find Hood.”

“Er, erm-- n-no, I don’t care about him. I haven’t heard that one’s name tossed around; that one’s
probably dead. But the other person is -- and his name will not make this obvious, so note that I am saying this before we see his picture, especially you, Officer -- the other one is described as a brown bear, about eight feet tall, with a faint but noticeable Southern accent. Miz Kristy, if you would please execute a search for a John Little having gone missing in Delaware."

“Hm, sure, I can do that.” She readjusted the search criteria and typed in the name. She got three results, which only listed names and dates with no pictures. “We got one from 1897, one from 1922, and one from 1998.”

“1998, please.”

She clicked and the three of them were greeted with the face of a big brown bear whose smile was teetering on the border of adorably bashful and unattractively anxious. And all his stats listed alongside his picture matched what the mayor had predicted.

“And let us note the date he went missing.”

“Last seen May 4th, reported missing May 7th,” the antelope murmured, both shocked and impressed.

“Another hit,” the tiger muttered, sharing much the same tone as the antelope. “Sunk my battleship.”

“I see this guy wasn’t declared dead in the last month either,” Kristy mused as she investigated the page. “Oh, I see why. So… for us to do that, we would’ve had to have contacted the family and gotten their permission, but… looks like this guy didn’t have any family. Man, that’s kinda sad.”

“What, he didn’t have any family anywhere on Planet Earth?” Jake asked. “Did this guy just blink into existence?”

Now it was Prince John who was silently sitting there, watching the other two converse, waiting impatiently for them to get to the point -- the point in this case being how they could go about formally declaring that these two did indeed exist and were enemies of the state. If need be, he had one of the Merry Men’s old signed notes folded and stuffed and ready to go in his suit’s breast pocket, to produce if nothing else qualified as irrefutable evidence that these were indeed their guys, but he wasn’t looking forward to explaining why he’d been sitting on this evidence of a crime for six years, so he was really hoping it wouldn’t come down to that. But if it were going to come down to that, well, this would once again be his way of proving his bravery to the doubters and naysayers; at least that’s what he was telling himself as he sat there, watching them gawk at the missing individuals’ profiles, waiting for them to draw their banter to a close.

“Oh, uh… hm,” Jake muttered, trying to pretend to keep the volley of the conversation going so neither of the other two would see his uncontrollable expression of shock when he heard that name. He wondered for a second if it was the very same, but he told himself that both that first name and
that last name were very common and not species-specific, so he shouldn’t just up and assume that this bear was old roommates with--

“Pardon my impatience,” said the mayor, “but if I may ask, what more do we need to… oh, how would you say it… place formal suspicion upon them, as it were? To make these characters officially wanted by law enforcement?”

“Uh, well, um…” the tiger spat out, his thoughts not fully formed yet but ready to say anything to keep the conversation moving in a new direction. “It—it’s a good start that you were able to, uh… predict who these guys were, I guess. But we’d need to get, like… actual… tangible proof these guys are still alive, in the woods or not. Like, uh… like, we’d need a witness. Um… this might be a dumb question, but, uh… have you seen them, Mayor?”

The lion was quietly pensive for a moment.

And Jake found the mayor’s hesitance thoroughly confusing. “Uh… b-because that would make this all a lot easier if you could give the first witness statement right now.”

And John was all ready to reach into his breast pocket and show them the note that he had been saving for years for an occasion just like this, telling himself that no matter how weird they thought he was for keeping it a secret, he was still their mayor and they still worked for him and he shouldn’t care what they thought, and that he ought to be thankful that they even found fox hair on that pig mask at all to make a moment like this even possible.

But wait. The pig mask. Maybe he wouldn’t have to be the first formal eyewitness. Nor would he have to wait for stupid Woodland to put in a statement. There was another.

“Er… Miz Kristy, would it be possible for us to print out these men’s photos?”

“Uh, y-yeah, but, uh… why?” She didn’t know who he had in mind.

“To show them to someone who could not be with us right now. We may be able to verify our first eyewitness within the hour.”

The antelope figured it was as good a reason as any if it got the lion out of her presence, so she clicked around on the bear’s profile to print the page, and as soon as the printer in the corner started buzzing with life, she clicked back to the fox’s page and clicked in the same sequence. She was still wondering why the mayor had no interest in the other missing fox brother, but again, she knew that she would regret her curiosity if she asked.

“Yes… you may have to help me find him, Officer, but now that I’ve had some time to think on it, I do recall that there was a case of someone seeing these bandits recently… and not conveniently falling ill with amnesia shortly thereafter…”

“I-if you say so…” the officer mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

The second page finished printing, and Mayor Norman went over to retrieve what would be his tools in the next step of capturing Robinhood’n’littlejohn. He swiped the pages out of the printer tray. “And when we find that person, we shall show him these --!”

He glanced down at the pages and did not recognize what he was looking at. The closest thing to the faces of a fox and a bear were the silhouettes formed by repeating stripes of magenta flowing horizontally down the page.

“Er… pardon my, er, technological ignorance, as it were, but, er…” He turned the pages around
and held them up to the Gen-Xers in the room. “...are they supposed to look like this?”

Kristy hardly waited a millisecond before she stood from her seat and made her way to the door. “Goddammit, wait right here, I’ll go get more ink from the supply room.”

--III--

The boy nurse walks you back from the bathroom to your room. The girl nurse and Dr. Buckner are waiting there. The boy nurse and the girl nurse both help you back up onto the bed, and get you seated upright against the pillows. You don’t like sitting this way because there’s nowhere for your tail to go, but you can’t convey to them that this arrangement makes you uncomfortable.

You could try to convey it to them, but you will likely fail. Just as you tried to tell the police what happened, the words wouldn’t come out. Just as you tried to write for the doctors what happened, you could not hold the pencil straight. Just as you tried to pantomime what had transpired a few nights back to anybody who might be halfway decent at charades, you can’t figure out how to get a message across.

And it’s the strangest thing. You want to just tell them -- “my tail is uncomfortable this way,” “I’m worried about my parents and I’m frightened because I don’t know where they are,” “this is what I remember from the SUV the other night but please don’t quote me on this because I’m not sure if it was all a dream” -- but at best you spit out incoherent gibberish and at worst your vocal cords fail altogether. You’ve sat in this very room with Dr. Buckner for three hours giving her a beat-by-beat play-by-play of what happened that night, just as you had tried to do when the cops found you, but Dr. Buckner didn’t catch a word of what you were trying to say. You’d snuck a glance at her clipboard; she scribbled down that you had been, quote, “frantically speaking in tongue.” At least when the cops were interrogating you at the crime scene, they eventually got a sliver of the story when they outright asked if you had been robbed and you pointed in the direction you remember the strangers’ footsteps going. They must think you’re stupid for not being able to talk. Stupid and evil for impeding justice. They want to find the people who hurt your parents and you want to help them but you just can’t. You’re just so overcome with fear that the adults will be angry with you if you do something wrong that you simply cannot make yourself calm down enough to speak clearly. Perhaps this is what moral cowardice was: wanting to do the right thing but being so crippled by fear that it leads one to be ineffectual or perhaps even a hindrance to the force for good. You suppose it’s true what you’d heard, that any fear you can overcome was never truly a fear after all, because if you were truly, deeply, animalistically afraid of something, the inhibitors in your brain would have never allowed you to confront it; you can say with certainty that you are certifiably afraid to speak -- except you can’t say it, because, well… you know…

You reposition your legs to give your tail more space to stick out on the right side; the paper on the plastic bed crinkles and crunches as you shift yourself. You know that a guest, or guests, are coming to see you. The nurses and Dr. Buckner won’t tell you who they are, but they have ruled out that it’s your parents, who they reassure you are still “in the hospital” -- they keep saying “in the hospital” even though you’re in the hospital, and you wish they’d just clarify whether they’re in this one or a different one but you can’t ask them so for now you’ll just have to assume by their syntax that they mean they’re in some other facility entirely.

You look at the boy nurse who just brought you back from the bathroom. It was the third time you had to go in twenty minutes; the anticipation of these mysterious guests is making you nervous. You don’t remember what the boy nurse’s species is called but he’s smaller than you. When he takes you to the bathroom he always sort of stares off into space at a forty-five degree angle to you and you know that he was trying to balance his duty to watch out for you and make sure you didn’t drown yourself in the toilet while still trying to give you some semblance of privacy and you want
to appreciate his diligence but he just always seemed so annoyed. He always seemed like he didn’t want to be there. Like he was only a nurse because his family wanted him to go into medicine in some capacity. Like he was trying to force himself to be a good person but kept getting the inkling that deep down he would be having a lot more fun if he were a bad person. You believed that he had your best interests in mind but you also believed that one day he would not, and when that day came he would not hurt you because you were not important enough to him to be worth hurting; when that day came, you would simply never see him again.

The girl nurse is a pig. It’s not her fault that she’s reminding you of the fox’s costume. It’s not her fault that you feel so uncomfortable when you make eye contact with her. It’s not her fault that you keep expecting her to rip off her own face and reveal something else. It was a shame, too, because she was a lot nicer than the boy nurse -- the boy nurse wasn’t mean, he just wasn’t nice either. The girl nurse was nice. She was the one who noticed that you pointing to your crotch meant you had to use the bathroom. She was the one who fluffed your pillows and made sure your room wasn’t too cold, and who explained as gently as she could that you weren’t allowed to have blankets because you could “hurt yourself with them.” She was the one who popped her head into your room at midnight to say goodnight, she was clocking out and going home for the night, but she would be back in twelve hours. And as nice as it was that she was probably slightly bending the rules of how much she was supposed to be interacting with her patients, good God Almighty did it scare the everloving bejesus out of you when you saw that pig’s face in the half-light of the hallway in the dead of night, just as you saw that fox’s pig mask by the light of the moon.

That’s another thing you wish you could tell them. The fox and the bear, while frightening, were not themselves frightening. Thinking of their faces now frightened you, but remembering when you looked at their faces, you remember an overwhelming feeling of benevolence. It was as though the fox and the bear were not evil, but something about their presence was indicative of the presence of evil. They had done nothing to harm you, if anything they had gone out of their way to give you comfort, but the fact that they were there meant that something was horribly wrong. It was like the tales told by those who have come back from brief moments of clinical death, wherein they are cradled by angels of light who reassure them that everything will be okay; you appreciate the comfort of the angel, but the fact that you’re seeing one at all worries you beyond any balm the angel can provide. It is for this reason that envisioning that fox and that bear nevertheless fills you with dread: despite their faces so friendly and their voices so sweet, you understand that they are here to save you from a peril you cannot even begin to comprehend, and that worries you.

There’s a knock at the door. All four of you turn toward it. Dr. Buckner gets up to answer it. You can sense the nurses’ eyes turn to you to ensure you keep relatively calm as these strange visitors enter. The nurses are serving a purpose not unlike the fox and bear did; they’re trying to help you feel safe even though you know you would be safer if you were in a position where you didn’t need them to keep you safe. The fox and bear filled this role better, but with that came a higher sense of ambient danger, so you find yourself preferring the presence of the nurses.

Dr. Buckner leads three men into the room. First is a police officer. A tiger, tall and fairly athletic-looking. He seems friendly enough. He looks at you; he’s smiling; he waves, flailing all his fingers. His other hand is at his side, carrying a manila folder. Secondly is a scant little lion, and he’s dressed in Edwardian apparel for some reason. He looks rather distinguished, or rather looks like he wants you to think he’s distinguished. He’s not smiling, but he’s not scowling either, but he looks like he wants to. He oddly does not have a visible mane, and for some reason this strikes you as familiar; you feel like you should know who this is. You know he’s someone important, like he’s the president or something but he’s clearly not the president. You know your father speaks of him being an idiot but an idiot whose idiotic leadership is beneficial to the rich people who idiotically live within the city limits instead of out in the suburbs like your father chose to. The third man is a rhinoceros wearing a much more modern suit. He’s probably the important guy’s
bodyguard, but it looks like he’s not planning to say a word to you, so his occupation likely won’t matter.

“Martin,” Dr. Buckner says, trying her best to sound sweet, “this is Officer Stripling and Mayor John Norman. They’re here to ask you a few questions about what happened to you. Now, don’t worry, Martin, you’re not in any trouble; they just need your help!”

The officer steps forward to the side of your bed and gets on a knee so he doesn’t loom over you; the lion and the rhino stay back by the far wall, watching. You can feel your extremities start to tremble, and each of the nurses laces one hand through one of yours and places their other hand on top. Dr. Buckner stands close by the officer; whether or not she means to, it seems like she’s trying to signal that he’s dangerous and she’s protecting you from him.

“Hi there, Martin,” says the officer. “My name’s Officer Stripling, but you can call me Jake! M’kay, buddy?” His voice is a little bit bassy, a little more-so than the bear’s voice, the kind of voice that can sound either very heroic or very villainous, and it sounds like he’s trying his hardest to push it to the good side.

He also seemed to be filling the role of someone who provides solace in a place of peril, but while you could commend his efforts, he just wasn’t selling it as well as the fox and the bear, nor even the nurses. Perhaps it was because his efforts were being offset by the strange sense of antagonism that was radiating from the lion. You glance over at him for just a second. You see a smile creeping on his face, but you can tell that it’s not a smile that’s supposed to give you comfort; it’s a smile that is entirely self-serving.

The lion’s using you for something. He’s only there to see you because he has something to gain from doing so. You don’t know how such a notion enters your head, but it does, and it won’t go away.

Therefore the officer is inextricably tied to this evil force in your head, and his attempts to calm you are futile. Like the fox and bear, you don’t believe that he is evil, but unlike the fox and bear, you get the feeling that he is not here to save you from the evil that is present, but rather to make that evil -- alongside which he is operating -- more bearable. He is not an angel here to save you from death; he is a wrongfully damned soul here to tell you that not everyone in hell is looking to harm you because some of them are only here because they simply never had a feasible way to get to heaven.

Jake puts the folder on your bed and looks at you again. “Now, Martin, I don’t want to bring up any bad memories, but… we understand that you may have saw some people who may have hurt your mom and dad that night. Now… there are two guys in particular who my friend the mayor and I think might have been them. Now, uh… we understand that you’re not much in the mood for speaking right now, but Martin, you could help us out a bunch if you could just communicate by… nodding, or shaking your head, or pointing if you recognize one but not the other, alright? We’re just doing this to try to catch the bad guys so they’ll never hurt anybody else ever again, alright?”

When you don’t answer for a moment, he turns to the doctor. “Are you sure this is alright? Should you be doing this?”

“I’m right here,” she says stoically.

He nods, glances at you one more time looking more remorseful than friendly, and looks down at the folder. You watch as he flips it open and spreads out the two sheets of paper.

You don’t even have to wait for him to hold them up to recognize them. You don’t even have to wait for him to take them out of the folder or lift them off the plane of the bed to recognize them.
You see the faces you will likely remember for the rest of your life. Faces you will see in your sweetest dreams and your darkest nightmares. Faces that will flash before your eyes in negative space during the split second when the lights are switched off. Faces you expect to await you in the waning moments before your consciousness is finally extinguished.

And again you scream not because the faces scare you, but because you are scared of the mysterious things the faces are trying to save you from. And you scream so loud and so long your own ears hurt. And you scream so loud and so long you start to see spots in your vision. And you scream so loud and so long your hands go numb and your tongue goes dry. And you scream so loud and so long that by the time you're done your voice is probably as deep as the tiger's from all the irreparable damage you’ve done to your throat and lungs. But eventually your screaming fades out, replaced by the sounds of the lion softly chuckling to himself, sounding very pleased by your torment indeed.
Chapter Summary

A prisoner is the subject of an informal interview, merely to explore if he has any connections to some wanted criminals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22. “Auxiliary Document 3”

The following is a transcript of an interview between an investigator and an inmate at Nottingham County Correctional Institution in Blades, Delaware. The transcript is presented as provided* by the Nottingham County Police Department on July 8, 2019. Permission to view and use was granted upon journalistic request and under the condition that this publication stipulate that the Nottingham County P.D. and the Nottingham County C.I. are understood to have been working since the time of this recording to uphold higher standards of professionalism. The Nottingham County P. D. and Nottingham County C.I. both declined to answer our editors’ further questions about the transcript.

*Formatting has been adjusted to fit your screen.

NOTTINGHAM COUNTY CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

INTERROGATION LOG

Date of Recording: 06-15-2005
Time of Recording: 1344h.

Inmate Name: DALE, ALAN ARTHUR
Inmate #: S-1881
DOB: 01-10-1964
Place of Birth: ELK CITY, OK
Residence at Time of Arrest: NOTTINGHAM, DE
Date of Arrest: 02-14-2003
Date of Conviction: 09-16-2003
Species: COYOTE
Sex: M
Hair: TAN
Eyes: BROWN
HT: 04-01
WT: 0083
Sentence: 126 YRS
Served: 1 YR, 5 MOS, 30 DAYS

Charges:
Grand Theft Auto - Police Vehicle (48 counts)
Conspiracy to Commit Fraud (96 counts)
Sale of Stolen Goods (44 counts)  
Destruction of Public Property (104 counts)  
Destruction of Private Property (32 counts)  
Trespassing - Private Property (61 counts)  
Trespassing - Public Property (510 counts)  
Robbery (85 counts)  
Inciting a Riot (74 counts)  
Violating the Public Order (399 counts)  
Vandalism (235 counts)  
Resisting Arrest (3 counts)  
Assault of a Police Officer (2 counts)  
Misdemeanor Obstruction of Justice (4 counts)  
Felony Loitering (13 counts)  
Attempted Involuntary Manslaughter (1 count)  
Attempted Arson (5 counts)  
Public Indecency - Urination (66 counts)  
Misdemeanor Jaywalking (7,301 counts)

START OF RECORDING

INVESTIGATOR:
--are now recording. Alright, this is [REDACTED], today is, uh, June 15th, and I’m sitting down with a, uh… excuse me, with an Alan Arthur Dale. Good afternoon, Mr. Dale.

DALE:
And a blessèd day to you, sir.

INVESTIGATOR:
Uh… th-thank you. So… just for the posterity of the recording, you, Mr. Dale, were convicted in 2003, of, uh…
(papers rustling)
Um…

DALE:
I was convicted of a whole boatload of things, sir. Some of them you could prove I did, some of them you guys just assumed I did, some of them you guys used backwards math to calculate how many times I would have theoretically done them so you could charge me with them dozens or hundreds or thousands of times… and some of them you just plain made up because you wanted to put me away for the rest of my natural life.

INVESTIGATOR:
...Uh--

DALE:
But I don’t mean to take that all out on you, sir. I know you’re but one small part of the system and you likely had no part in what became of me. I’ve definitely never seen you in the courtroom before. And as we speak, in the back of my mind, I’m praying the Lord give me the strength to treat you with the mercy I hope you show to me.

INVESTIGATOR:
...Yes, but for the sake of the recording, you were mostly convicted of…?

DALE:
Stealing squad cars and giving them to the poor. The same poor you and your ilk systematically
INVESTIGATOR:
And it looks like you were selling them, because I see here that there’s also a few dozen charges of Sale of Stolen--

DALE:
Now you see, that’s one of those that you guys made up. I didn’t charge the needy a dime. I was doing the Lord’s work.

INVESTIGATOR:
I see… Now, I’ve got to say, Mr. Dale, you do strike me as… especially religious.

DALE:
Why yes! This April marked the one-year anniversary of accepting Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior!

INVESTIGATOR:
So, for the sake of the recording, would you call yourself a born-again Christian?

DALE:
Now, I wouldn’t use that term, because I can tell you that there are a lot of guys in this prison yard who call themselves “born-again” but they all have very different ideas of what those two words mean. And I think it would be obscuring my duty as a Christian to waste my time getting caught up in all that bickering.

INVESTIGATOR:
Mr. Dale--

DALE:
But I will say this much, sir: I did begin identifying as a Christian when I previously had not, I do believe I now have a close relationship with Jesus Christ when I previously had not, and I did baptize myself in the toilet last year on Resurrection Sunday --

(clothes heard rustling)

-- which is why Hopkins shanked me the day after, for not respecting the sanctity of that day, but my newfound faith was stronger than the pain --

INVESTIGATOR:
Mr. Dale, you don’t need to show me the scar--

DALE:
-- so if it makes you more comfortable to call me a born-again Christian for convenience’s sake, I’d have no qualm with that.

INVESTIGATOR:
...Mr. Dale, I just needed a simple yes or no for the recording, you didn’t need to say all that.

DALE:
I disagree, sir. The Lord told me to mention all that, and He’s the one authority I obey above all others.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well… what I was getting at was… was there a specific reason why you decided to turn to Christianity?
DALE:
There was. That reason was because the prison library didn’t have a Quran.

INVESTIGATOR:
Uh… no, I--

DALE:
No? But that was quite literally the reason, sir. And if I may say, sir, if you guys were to start
stocking the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, I know that lion Mustafa in
Block C would greatly appreciate it. He’s the one who got me interested in his faith, but alas, it
wasn’t meant to be.

INVESTIGATOR:
...Mr. Dale, when I asked you about your journey towards, uh, religiosity, I was hoping you’d say
something to the effect of, uh, you were feeling guilty for your actions. And you were looking to,
uh… what’s the word? Atone. Alright?

DALE:
...So you were asking me loaded questions?

INVESTIGATOR:
...Did you seek piety out of a sense of remorse for your crimes or not? Because the questions we’re
here to ask… we’ll know that we can have more faith in your responses if you… if you say that
you, uh… you feel the criminal life is behind you and you’ve washed your hands of all that.

DALE:
Sounds to me like it would be in my best interest to lie and pretend I did.

INVESTIGATOR:
So you don’t regret stealing all those cop cars?

DALE:
Absolutely not, sir. If anything, rediscovering God has only strengthened my resolve that such a
daring act of charity was the correct thing to do.

INVESTIGATOR:
Alright, well, for starters, this is why you’re still in prison, because you haven’t learned anything--

DALE:
Quite the contrary, sir, I’ve learned plenty.

INVESTIGATOR:
No you haven’t. So as of--

DALE:
Now, sir, you certainly seem to be interested in finding the facts of a situation, so let me just make
this clear up top before you ask me whatever it was you were going to ask me. In many ways, I’m
the same guy you arrested. I still think someone like you just doesn’t need to exist. But whereas I
used to wish you dead, I have seen the light now, and instead I wish you find your own way to God
and abandon your position so as to better serve Him. I encourage you to--

INVESTIGATOR:
You seriously want to have this conversation?

DALE:
Sir, there’s no need to be so defensive. I’m not going to hurt you; I left that part of me in the past. I know now that the only way you can change is if you come to that decision yourself. All I can do is plant the seeds and hope they get plenty of sun and water.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, hey, Buddha, enlighten me, when you say “someone like me doesn’t need to exist,” you mean…?

DALE:
Cops, sir.

INVESTIGATOR:
That’s what I thought. So you’re, what? Forty-one? Think you’d been around the block enough times to realize by now that your little teenager’s fantasy about a world without police would be a complete hellhole.

DALE:
It’s funny you should say that, because all my journeys throughout this country have led me to believe the exact opposite.

INVESTIGATOR:
Forty-one and you’ve never once needed the police to keep you safe?

DALE:
Ah, but you don’t keep people safe, you just clean up messes. When you’re not fighting for the interests of the rich, of course. I personally have never felt safe in the presence of police.

INVESTIGATOR:
What the f*** are you talking--?

GUARD:
[REDACTED], you really shouldn’t engage with this guy, this isn’t what you’re here to talk about. You might just rile him up and he might give us false information just to f*** with us.

INVESTIGATOR:
You shut the f*** up!

GUARD:
Hey, b****, don’t talk to me that way!

INVESTIGATOR:
Then don’t talk to me at all while I’m doing my job! And you! Hey, I’m curious. Explain to me how you cop-haters are going to run a world without any cops. How the h*** are you going to keep people from committing crimes?

DALE:
Oh, it’s really quite simple. Once you remove all the pillars of systematic injustice and hierarchy -- of which the police are one of ‘em -- society will have no more desperate people who need to commit crimes to stay alive. Most crime is only the product of circumstance, after all.

INVESTIGATOR:
Oh, right, right, because you haven’t ever seen a crazy person who shoots up a fucking post office because his life sucks?

DALE:
Well, maybe if the society was structured in such a way that his life didn’t necessarily have to suck, he wouldn’t have wanted to do that, hm?

INVESTIGATOR:
Course he would have! He’s crazy!

DALE:
Sir, I never did say that all crime would be a thing of the past if myself and those who thought like me had our way. Just most of it.

INVESTIGATOR:
And how are you going to deal with the criminals that slip through the cracks with no cops around, wise-a**?  

DALE:
I’ll tell you how: a strong sense of community. Which is something the presence of the police are impeding.

INVESTIGATOR:
“A strong sense of--” What, do you mean a f***ing lynch mob?

DALE:
Well, you’d be surprised at how popular vigilantism is among the common people, if you just got to know them.

INVESTIGATOR:
You’re a f***ing lunatic, do you know that?

DALE:
Oh, I’m just joking around. We don’t want lynch mobs. The Lord would be very cross with us when we came to meet Him if we did. “A strong sense of community” is meant to mean that whenever someone violates the agreed-upon moral code, they would be dealt with democratically--

INVESTIGATOR:
“Democratically”? I thought your nutjobs’ entire thing was that you didn’t want rules, and now you’re going on about “agreed-upon moral codes” and democracy?

DALE:
Oh, believe me, sir, when I first heard all of this, I was confused, too, but I assure you that a world without laws does not necessarily mean a world without order. You know, there’s actually some good anarchist literature I can recommend to you if you’d like to hear it from people who can probably phrase it better than I can, but none of it’s in the prison library. Funny how that works.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, I’d like to see your “agreed-upon moral codes” stop something like 9/11. Or Columbine!

DALE:
Pardon my flippance, sir, but the existence of police didn’t stop those things, either.

(six seconds of silence)

INVESTIGATOR:
...You know what? This is good. This is relevant. Let’s get your biases out of the way. Now anything you say from here on out can be cross-referenced with all that so we can get a decent read
on where your head’s really at.

DALE:
Glad I could help. I’m surprised you didn’t force me to swear an oath of honesty at the top of this.

INVESTIGATOR:
Oh, no, that would be unconstitutional. This is all in regard to a very recent development and there wouldn’t have been any time to ring you up for a formal interrogation.

DALE:
Huh, well, that’s awful civil of you.

INVESTIGATOR:
There, you see? We’re not the bad guys in all this. And you don’t have to be our enemy.

DALE:
Well, in a world where evil exists, if you’re not the enemy of evil, then you’re not doing enough right.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, I’m still not convinced that the entire concept of law enforcement is evil.

DALE:
I didn’t think you would be. So what did you come here to ask me?

INVESTIGATOR:
Uh… hey, what time is it--? Oh, Jesus Christ. Um…

GUARD:
I told you not to waste time debating him.

INVESTIGATOR:
You suck my d*** until the saliva makes it shine, alright?

GUARD:
What the--? B****, do you want me to protect you from this crazy t**** or not?

INVESTIGATOR:
He’s not the “personal injury” type of crazy, he’s just the “wacky ideology” type of crazy. Besides, with you standing all the way over there, he could probably take a few swings at me before you could even break it up.

DALE:
You see? Once again, cops don’t stop crime, they just clean up the mess.

INVESTIGATOR:
I didn’t ask you. So… as of, oh, say… an hour ago… a formal investigation was opened up into two characters who, uh… are thought to be… sort of “bandits” for lack of a better word.

DALE:
…I see.

INVESTIGATOR:
These individuals are being tied to a… whole slew of unsolved cases from a good chunk of the last decade, going back to the spring or summer of 1998, and, uh… apparently Mayor Norman caught
wind of them and saw to it that the, uh, the poor little schmuck with no arms did some research and found some names and faces to attach to these figures.

DALE:
I see.

INVESTIGATOR:
And the weird thing is… if the leads are correct… the suspects are actually two individuals that’ve been thought missing since… well, basically since the spring or summer of 1998, like I said. And the reason we don’t think this is completely crazy is because, uh… they were… their faces were more or less identified by an eleven-year-old boy from Lemon Brook whose, uh… it’s thought that these bandits set a trap for the kid’s parents and looted their car, and now the kid can’t speak, he’s so shook.

DALE:
Hm. That’s a heartbreaker to hear.

INVESTIGATOR:
Oh, absolutely. So… they showed pictures from the two guys’ missing-persons files to the kid, and apparently he just screamed his head off. The officer in the room declared probable cause. That all happened about half an hour before they sent me to talk to you.

DALE:
So I see.

INVESTIGATOR:
And the mayor asked if we could look into any convicted criminals who, uh… if they had relevant details, I guess. I don’t know what exactly he said, but they started looking through records and they discovered that you, Mr. Dale… before you were arrested in 2003… you had also not been heard from in any legal capacity since 1998.

DALE:
…Understood.

INVESTIGATOR:
And while your file says that at the time of your apprehension you were crashing on friends’ couches all over the city… it’s not like we have every single night for five years accounted for. It’s not unreasonable that if you were living off the grid as a full-time criminal for all those years, you very well may have crossed paths with them. Especially seeing as, uh… it is rumored that these guys were also living off the grid.

DALE:
Alright, I think I gather what you’re getting at.

INVESTIGATOR:
I mean, I guess it was already implied that they were living off the grid if they were missing for, like, seven years, but, uh--

DALE:
Now remind me again, sir… I’m under no obligation to tell you anything here I don’t want to?

INVESTIGATOR:
Right now … yes. Now if you get taken in for another interview under more formal circumstances -- which honestly is probably going to happen anyway -- then they’ll probably hold you to your
word, and the same thing if they ultimately catch these guys and make you testify in court. But for right now, no, you can give us complete bulls*** if you really want to, but understand that when they come in here for real and tell you that they’re going to pore over every syllable and sentence that comes out of your snout, and it d*** well better add up when they check the facts… you’ll have h*** to pay if your story isn’t straight. Or, heck, if you just want to filibuster for… how long is it until dinnertime?

GUARD:  
Three hours.

INVESTIGATOR:  
--for three hours, hey, it’s your time. We can’t legally make you sing like a canary, but we can keep you here until it would be bona-fide cruelty to do so.

DALE:  
I can recite you some scripture if you’d like.

INVESTIGATOR:  
I’ll pass, thank you.

DALE:  
Are you sure? It’s never too late to accept Jesus Christ as your--

INVESTIGATOR:  
I’m Jewish.

DALE:  
...Oh.

GUARD:  
Wait, you are?

INVESTIGATOR:  
...Yeah?

GUARD:  
Man, I thought you were saying that just to f*** with him!

INVESTIGATOR:  
Oh, I wouldn’t be that petty to him… I will admit, though, that look on his face was golden!

GUARD:  
Too bad your little recorder thing can’t see it!

INVESTIGATOR:  
Yeah, I know, right? But, yeah, Mr., uh, Mr. Dale… that’s why I was trying to ask about the whole born-again thing to use it as a sort of vehicle to get the ball rolling and see if you had any regrets about your past, and maybe your conscience would be telling you to tattle on these guys. Because like I said, this is a new development but they want to move quickly, I think they’re looking to get wanted posters printed and thrown up… like, today, so...

DALE:  
Well, I don’t know who these guys are.

INVESTIGATOR:  

Alright, so, I’ll tell you right now, I don’t believe that. Reason why is because when I started describing these guys, instead of you saying “who are these guys” or “I’ve never heard of these guys,” you just went straight for “am I being legally held to my word?”

DALE:
...And I understand how you would arrive at that conclusion.

INVESTIGATOR:
So for better or worse, we now have reason to believe that you have at least some working familiarity with these guys.

DALE:
...I understand how you would arrive at that conclusion.

INVESTIGATOR:
You seem to understand a lot, Dale. But do you understand that you would be helping the pursuit of justice greatly by giving us something to work with? Anything you know about these guys that could help us get a leg up on them? You go on and on about how cops don’t actually stop crime -- well… now’s your chance to help us before they commit more.

(four seconds of silence)

INVESTIGATOR:
Come on, Dale, I can tell by that look on your face that you’re realizing right now that you’ve already told us more than you meant to. But I can promise you that that’s not a bad thing. You might regret it now, but when you look back on this in hindsight, you’ll wish you said more. I guarantee it.

(seven seconds of silence pass)

INVESTIGATOR:
Hey, we can make a deal. You talk and we’ll agree to put a Quran in the prison library for your lion buddy Mufasa.

DALE:
Mustafa.

INVESTIGATOR:
Yeah, him.

DALE:
What gives me reason to believe you’ll actually act on your promise?

INVESTIGATOR:
Uh, this.
(shuffling sounds)
(loud and distorted): Hey recording, whoever’s listening to this in the future, do our buddy Mufasa a favor and add a Quran to the prison library!
(regular volume): What about a Torah? Does the library have a Torah?

DALE:
I don’t recall. I didn’t check.

INVESTIGATOR:
(loud and distorted): And make sure you put a Torah in there too if there isn’t one already! Oy,
gevalt!
(regular volume): ...Jesus, that was the first time I ever said “oy gevalt” dead serious. Don’t tell my grandparents, they’ll throw a fit.

GUARD:
And yet you used Jesus’s name in vain.

INVESTIGATOR:
F***ing A, I did. That’s what happens when you grow up surrounded by gentiles throwing the guy’s name around like they’re playing catch! So yeah, Mr. Dale, pardon me for using your lord’s name in vain, but… is there anything you’d like to tell us?

DALE:
...I mean… I had to make friends to survive all those years… maybe I’ve met the guys you’re looking for.

INVESTIGATOR:
We’re looking for a red fox who’s a British national and a brown bear who’s from Tennessee. Any of this ringing a bell?

DALE:
...If it’s okay with you… I’d like to call upon my Lord for help.

INVESTIGATOR:
Help remembering?

DALE:
That… and help deciding how much I should tell you.

INVESTIGATOR:
Of course.

DALE:
If you’d just give me a moment.

INVESTIGATOR:
Take your time.

(fifteen seconds of silence)

INVESTIGATOR:
Well?

DALE:
I thought you said I could take my time.

INVESTIGATOR:
Right. My mistake. Carry on.

(thirty-seven seconds of silence)

INVESTIGATOR:
Hm?

DALE:
Hold on, hold on, hold your horses, phone’s still ringing.

INVESTIGATOR:
...Alright.

(two minutes and fourteen seconds of silence)

DALE:
...He said no.

INVESTIGATOR:
He said no? To what?

DALE:
To telling you what it is I know.

GUARD:
Well, s***, son, hard to argue with that!

INVESTIGATOR:
But you do confess that you know... something.

DALE:
I conscientiously object to telling you anything I may know, sir.

INVESTIGATOR:
And I conscientiously object to just accepting that and calling it a day.

DALE:
My Lord and Savior has told me to keep my mouth shut, and so His Will shall be done.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well you sure don’t have any trouble opening your mouth to tell us fifty different ways that you’re keeping your mouth shut.

DALE:
What can I say? I’m still a sinner. That’s why I appreciate that Christ offered to save me.

INVESTIGATOR:
Mmhmm. Well here on Earth, we won’t think less of you if you choose to sin some more and tell us what you know.

DALE:
I’m not concerned with the judgment of man.

INVESTIGATOR:
Evidently you are, because a judge judged that you were a dangerous man and put you in the pen, and you seem pretty eaten up over that.

DALE:
Okay, fair enough. I care about the judgment of man inasmuch as I wish they all sought to serve the Lord as I have. And that’s nothing against you, my Jewish brother. I trust that you will find God in your own way.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, I appreciate your well-wishing. But you don’t enjoy being here, now do you?

DALE:
It’s definitely making it a challenge to serve the Lord confined within these walls.

INVESTIGATOR:
Do you ever feel lonely in here?

DALE:
Not with the Lord with me--

INVESTIGATOR:
Besides Him.

DALE:
Not really. I really don’t feel lonely with the Lord at my side. Loneliness isn’t the problem.
Confinement is.

INVESTIGATOR:
You wouldn’t rather have some of your friends from the outside join you in here?

DALE:
Oh, I don’t think they would be my friends anymore if I narced on them. I wouldn’t wish this life upon my worst enemies.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, maybe if they were in here, you could convert them.

DALE:
As I said to you, sir, I can plant the seeds for them to make that journey on their own accord, but I can’t force it. God wouldn’t want it that way.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, according to the rumors out of Mayor Norman’s mouth himself, apparently these bandit guys love robbing innocent people silly, sometimes causing lasting psychological damage. Would God want it that way?

(three seconds of silence)

DALE:
Now… this is where they and I disagreed.

INVESTIGATOR:
So… you were friends with the criminal masterminds living in Sherwood Forest?

(five seconds of silence)

DALE:
Now… I think I can safely say… if I were friends … with criminal master minds… they would have busted me out of here by now… but, my good sir… I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether the operative word in all that was “friends” or “master minds”. Heck, I’m not even sure which of those is the operative word myself.

INVESTIGATOR:
…I’m not sure I understand.
DALE:
...They’ve gotten people out of jail before… so I don’t know if they just don’t want to come get me… or if they just got dumb lucky the first time and they’re too stupid to figure out how to do it again.

INVESTIGATOR:
...I see.

DALE:
Yeah.

INVESTIGATOR:
I’ve got to say, you seem a bit bothered by this.

DALE:
Well... they were kind of stupid. That’s why I had to stop running with them.

INVESTIGATOR:
How do you mean?

DALE:
...In… in the beginning... we all agreed that we were trying to fight the institutional subjugation of poor people, but their big idea was that they could weaken the city’s government by preying on the rich civilians who keep them in power, but after years of not making any progress, they still couldn’t get it through their heads that it wasn’t adding up to anything. So I went my own way and started stepping up the game. Started taking aim at the cops… They had the nerves to tell me I was getting too radical. I told those idiots to their faces that they weren’t being radical enough. So I found some new friends who would help me run my own operation. And I’ve got to say… I saw a lot more results than I did when I was with them. And I felt a lot more fulfilled.

INVESTIGATOR:
I see. That must have been a tough decision for you.

DALE:
It really wasn’t. They wanted to pussy-foot around and scope out people to figure out if they were evil enough to justify robbing them, and I was just there thinking… okay, I can’t tell you you’re bad people for following your moral compass, but come now, these are rich people, they’re evil inherently, even if you don’t overhear them talking about how much they hate “ghetto” types, the fact that they choose to hoard their wealth while people starve is proof enough that they don’t deserve their comfort. They think I’m a madman? Well, I think they’re a bunch of fools. A bunch of fools and cowards.

INVESTIGATOR:
...I… I’m sorry, I… I’m confused, were these guys people you stole cop cars with, or…?

DALE:
No, no, the car idea was my own thing, and I did that with some people I found down by the NSU and USD campuses, mostly students and old artist types. These guys… in Sherwood, I mean… well, if you asked them, they would say that it probably wasn’t practical to go after the cops. Their whole thing was that they wanted to rob rich people and give the money directly to the poor, whereas the cops probably didn’t have anything on their persons worth stealing. But then I had my idea with the squad cars -- continue the charity while striking higher on the totem pole. They were content to attack the base that kept the power in place, I was looking to attack the power itself. And for this they rejected me. They thought that I was a looney toon. And it’s a shame… those guys
always acted so darned gentlemanly, but apparently they were too bitter and insecure to admit I was right and come get me out of here -- or, again, maybe I’m overestimating their abilities again.

INVESTIGATOR:
So much for honor amongst thieves, I guess.

DALE:
(chuckles) Alright, alright, that was actually a pretty good one, copper. “No honor” is right.

INVESTIGATOR:
I’m happy to boost your spirits while this is clearly eating you up inside.

DALE:
Well, I appreciate it.
(three seconds of silence)

And… And do you know the most foolish part? They called me too radical. I pitched my ideas to them and they called me too radical. And then I tried to defend it by telling them that I’d gotten the ideas after making the acquaintance of some very, very wise anarchist thinkers down in the city, and they just scoffed at me. And yet… the irony in all of this… they kind of operated like their own mini anarchist society! We had a close-knit little commune out there in Sherwood; we didn’t need any hierarchy, and even though the one guy was clearly in charge, he never made it official; we didn’t need any rules, because we respected one another as equals so nobody was on the bottom so nobody needed to misbehave just to get ahead; every decision we made, we made democratically; we didn’t practice capitalism, we only had with us what we needed and nothing more; we lived off the fat of the land and the help of our friends in the city and we didn’t need any government to support us or any cops to keep us safe because we had one another’s support. And we lived by an agreed-upon moral code that included only being rough to those oppressive barons who deserved to get roughed up but being nothing but kind and -- if anything -- subservient to the citizens we had sworn to help. You see? We were out there actually preventing crime -- we made sure these people had food on the table and electricity in their sockets so they wouldn’t have collectively needed to go raise h*** to get what they needed to live. You can thank us for doing your job for you.

INVESTIGATOR:
Thank you.

DALE:
You’re very welcome, sir… But yeah, we were living out a by-the-books anarchist utopia, but when I pointed it out, those dumb b***** thought I was a crazy man. Pardon my French, Lord. But yeah… they were afraid of the “A” word. And it’s a darn shame, because we could have proved that such a utopia was possible for all the centrists and doubters, but unfortunately for me, I was in league with centrists and doubters all along. Heh... maybe my utopia was a dystopia after all.
(three seconds of silence)

You look like you want to book me for all those years I was living in the woods and I logically wouldn’t have been filing taxes. Not that I earned any income, but I’m sure you’re not going to let that stop you.

INVESTIGATOR:
No, no, I’m just thinking… you keep referring to your time with these two as living in a sort of anarchist society -- was it just you plus those two, or were there others?

DALE:
There were, but not many.

INVESTIGATOR:
How many more, and who were they?

DALE:
I assure you, they’re not important. They all fell away for one reason or another. Those two are probably the only two left, and it flabbergasts me to find out they’ve still made it this long -- even if not for getting caught, then I’d have imagined they’d eventually get on each other’s nerves. But those two always did get along the best out of all of us. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, they were. And I was just the guy in the background as the resident storyteller because that was the role I was comfortable with before I realized I had higher ambitions than they ever would.

INVESTIGATOR:
I’m sorry, so… you’re saying this as though you went through some sort of change? Like you had an epiphany or something?

DALE:
Yeah, when I said I was turned on to my new philosophy by brilliant anarchist thinkers from downtown, I meant that at face value. I used to be in the back seat of the car, letting the others take the wheel, thinking, okay, yeah, I like this noble endeavor to help the poor. But then I was shown a new perspective and I realized the car I was riding in was going in the wrong direction, and since they wouldn’t let me drive or even hold the map, I had to get out of the car and find my own way. But yeah… before that, I never thought about what we were doing through the lens of politics, and apparently those guys are still waiting to realize it themselves.

INVESTIGATOR:
This really is a fascinating story. So… you were all alone in the whole... anarchism, “All Cops Are B*****s” thing? While you were with the Sherwood Gang, I mean?

DALE:
That I was. Well -- there was another. Neither of the guys you’re looking for. You don’t have to worry about this guy, he’s dead now; we think he killed himself after he scared off a potential new member, but I wasn’t there when he passed, so I’ll never know for certain. Now, this kid -- and I call him a kid, he was fresh out of school when we started, he was… probably barely old enough to drink when he left us -- I don’t know how serious he was about the anarchist movement, but this kid was really into punk rock, and you know how those two go hand in hand. Now, the old joke is that most people who say they’re anarchists are just teens and twentysomethings who don’t know anything about the real world yet -- and I’ll confess, I met a bunch of kids down at the colleges who I kind of got the feeling didn’t totally understand the movement or the real world, that’s why I was most entertained by the anarchists my age or older -- darn, where was I?

INVESTIGATOR:
The kid.

DALE:
Bingo. So, this guy, this kid… his daddy was rich, but his daddy was also a really nasty son of a gun, so A plus B equals C, he hated rich people. And he was really into shaking up the status quo. Hence, he found and fell in love with punk rock music. Now, he and I weren’t completely alike -- he didn’t love cops, per se, but his hatred was more focused on the rich than on cops, and I don’t think he ever even once called himself an anarchist in seriousness -- and I don’t think he should have, since he loved running around with an American flag bandana around his head -- not that he loved everything about America, but he liked it a lot more than back home in England, because he
always said, his country had always been run by the rich and the royal whereas this country was founded by the idea that the common people should run things -- even if it is still a plutocratic oligarchy, it’s supposed to be run by the commoners, and he appreciated that... Aw, heck, I’ve lost my place again. Something about the kid…

INVESTIGATOR:
You were saying you and him weren’t exactly the same.

DALE:
Thank you! So he didn’t focus on cops as much as I did, he didn’t hate statism as much as I did, and I should be adding that he passed before I ever even discovered serious anarchism, and -- I remember now what I was trying to make a point about earlier! About how people think punk rock music and anarchism are for stupid young people who don’t know better yet. I was just trying to say: hey, maybe it was just bound to be a phase for this kid, maybe he was going to grow out of it eventually, but while he was living with us, he was pretty heavily invested in carrying himself with a punk-rock attitude -- as much as one can when they’re wearing an American flag as a headband, but he knew the contradiction and he didn’t care, and in a weird way, I respect that -- and I don’t know if he was fully into the politics of punk rock or not, but he was sort of the precursor to having a resident anarchist in our anarchist commune. Sorry that that was a little long-winded, but yeah, I hope that answers your question.

INVESTIGATOR:
It does, but it also raises a few others. You, uh… if I heard you right, you alluded to him being British?

DALE:
He would probably have corrected you and said “English” specifically, but yes. Yes, sir.

INVESTIGATOR:
Interesting. So, uh… did he have any sort of preexisting relationship with the fox, who, as far as we know, is also from England?

DALE:
It was his younger brother. In fact -- you know what? Once when I got into an argument with that guy about how the group he was running was anarchistic in nature whether he had the stones to admit it or not, I mentioned -- I just up and said it. I told him to his face that his brother was, for all intents and purposes, on my side. He was speaking ill of my personal politics, even though they basically reflected the life he was living, so I decided to make the point that long before I came to think this way myself, his brother had more or less preceded me in thought, just to try to get it through his head.

INVESTIGATOR:
And the younger brother didn’t have anything to say about this?

DALE:
Oh, he was long passed by this point. I didn’t discover anarchy until after he passed, remember?

INVESTIGATOR:
Aw, h***, I’m sorry, my bad.

DALE:
I understand, I’ve dumped a lot of information on you in a short time. And hey, I still feel kind of bad myself for… well, I do kind of regret bringing up the guy’s dead brother as an argumentative point. But then again, the older brother thinks it’s appropriate to -- instead of telling me with his
words that I crossed a line, like an adult -- he decides to lay a hand on me. Shoves me a little on the
shoulder. So I return the favor. Three seconds later we’re having a scrap. Ten seconds after that,
I’ve got the son of a b**** on the ground and I can see it in his eyes that he regrets ever picking a
fight with me. Ten more seconds after that and the grizzly’s got to break us up. That was probably
the exact moment when he realized that I wasn’t going to blindly follow his lead anymore -- and
when you get to know the guy like I did, you know that deep down he’s secretly a real ego-case,
and he’s probably still holding it against me that I dare question his leadership.

(two seconds of silence)

You look like you’re judging me for fighting back.

INVESTIGATOR:
I mean… a coyote versus a tiny little fox, it just doesn’t seem like a fair fight.

DALE:
Well in my defense, I was quite literally punching up. This fox was a tall, lanky son of a gun. Got
at least a head on me. And come to think of it, he’s probably got more muscle than most foxes --
course, not that that’s saying much. His people are all skinnier than all get-out, and he was no
exception. He ain’t got nothing on a good old boy who’s had to work with his hands to earn his
keep.

INVESTIGATOR:
So… you’re kind of admitting that it wasn’t a fair fight?

DALE:
He had a major height and reach advantage that I’d say balanced it out. But it was still a foolish
decision for him to challenge me like that. One of many foolish decisions he made.

INVESTIGATOR:
Well, the way you tell the story, I’m inclined to agree… But it’s interesting that you mention him
being really tall, because… that perfectly matches the description of the suspect.

DALE:
I’m sure it does.

INVESTIGATOR:
And, uh… I’m getting mixed messages about whether this guy was the brains of the operation or if
there was no clear leader because… you know, anarchist utopia and such.

DALE:
I mean, it was implied. It was always a de-facto sort of thing since the group was his brainchild,
and he came up with... seventy-five, eighty percent of the ideas, so we all just sort of dignified that
he was the one at the wheel by default, but he... none of us ever referred to him as having any sort
of stature above us. But the thing about that is -- come to think of it, this is another thing I didn’t
like about the guy -- part of the reason everybody in the group liked him so much was exactly
because he always talked like we were all equal team players, but over the years, you start getting
these little hints that deep down he really does think he’s better than us. Like… let’s run with the
sports metaphor a little more. It’s clear that he was kind of the center of our group, but it wasn’t
like he thought he was the quarterback and we were his blockers and receivers -- it was more like
he thought he was the quarterback, and the coach, and the owner watching from the luxury boxes.
By the time that I got the heck out of there, it was clear to me that he thought he was our franchise.

He was Joe Montana and the players whose jerseys the fans were never going to wear.

INVESTIGATOR:
What about Jerry Rice?
DALE:  
...I’m from the college football territory, man. I don’t really care about the NFL. I completely forgot Jerry Rice even existed.

INVESTIGATOR:  
Okay, fair enough. So this fox, he was… kind of subtly narcissistic?

DALE:  
And how. And I get it -- with large groups of people, you can’t have everyone in charge of everything all the time or it’ll be nothing but conflict after conflict. Too many cooks in the kitchen. And for a while I greatly appreciated that he was able to be our keystone without demanding we start exalting him on high -- you know my politics, you know how I feel about hierarchies.

INVESTIGATOR:  
Do I ever.

DALE:  
But at a certain point, I started getting this feeling I couldn’t shake that he was lying every time he swore that he regarded us each as indispensable members of the team, and at a certain point, I really would rather he had just told us he thought he was our cinch pin instead of lying about it.

And I wasn’t the only one who took issue with this -- his brother was starting to have similar feelings before he passed, and… I feel so d***ed evil for thinking this, and I’ve already prayed for forgiveness for thinking these thoughts and I’m going to do it again… I kind of like to imagine that… if the younger brother really did kill himself… it was because being bombarded by the constant not-so-subtle hints that Robin thought he was on a higher level than all of us, the poor kid started to believe it, and he took his own life because he got it in his head that he could never be as good as his brother and he just didn’t want to be stuck in a life like that. And like I said, I’m going to pray about this as soon as I’m out of here, but if it makes it make more sense, it’s just… the weakest I ever saw that guy was after his brother passed. So it’s just like… yeah, this is the price you pay for your hubris, Robin. You’re responsible for your own misery, you stupid son of a b****. I don’t want to get off on a power trip over the kid’s suicide, I liked that kid and it killed me too when he left, but… d***, I just wish I could stick it to Robin for thinking he was better than me and not even having the decency to tell me so to my face.

INVESTIGATOR:  
Hey, Dale, we’re only mortals. We make mistakes, and we think thoughts that scare us to think them. Maybe you acted upon your foolish thought to steal squad cars, but at least you didn’t act upon your thought to wish a kid dead just for petty revenge.

DALE:  
You know what though? Maybe if he really did think that he was the only truly important member of the team, maybe he was right. I mean, after all, everyone else in the team is gone except for him and old Johnny. And you’ve got to wonder if it’s just a matter of time before the light bulb goes off in Johnny’s head that old Robin doesn’t really think they’re on the same level as people. And you can call me Alan, sir, though if you’re talking to somebody else about me in the third person, some people know me as “The Rooster,” like that song that I kept hearing on the radio about a decade ago. I forget the name of the band.

INVESTIGATOR:  
Well, I appreciate that you feel comfortable enough to be on a first-name basis with me, but I don’t think I’ll be needing to call you very much at all. I think we’re about done here. Unless you want to tell us even more, of course, we’ll be happy to hear it.
DALE:
I… beg your pardon?

INVESTIGATOR:
Mr. Dale, you’ve given us more information than we could have ever asked for. You’ve confirmed their names, confirmed their species, confirmed the fox’s physical details and national origin, you confirmed that the fox’s brother -- who the mayor and the police department is aware of but isn’t interested in -- is in fact deceased, uh, let’s see…

DALE:
...Wait.

INVESTIGATOR:
You’ve warned us that if we ever incarcerate friends of theirs who haven’t burned bridges with them, they might try to come here and bust them out, so thanks for the head’s up, uh, you’ve let us know that we should probably focus more on the fox since he seems to be the guy at the helm of this ship, and, uh… hold on, I’m just reading through my notes.

DALE:
Oh, my God…

INVESTIGATOR:
Oh! And you’ve warned us that we ought to take special steps to protect the wealthy people in this part of the state since they’re the main targets -- I know this might just confirm your suspicion that cops only work to serve the interests of the rich, but in this case, you’ve given us a specific reason to do so, so I just wanted to clarify that this is a very extraneous circumstance.

DALE:
Oh, lordy…

INVESTIGATOR:
Now, it’s probably still going to be a few days before we can officially start attaching names to these characters, because that’s just how the process works, but this is definitely going to help speed up the system. I can’t stress enough how much of a help you’ve been for us.

DALE:
Oh, no no no no no…

INVESTIGATOR:
But is there anything else about them you want to tell us? Like maybe the exact location of their hideout? Maybe the names of some other confidantes we can talk to, and where to find them?

DALE:
(quietly) Dear Lord, be merciful, for I have sinned. In my blind rage and my foolish desire for vengeance, I disobeyed your word--

*(Dale is still heard speaking quietly in background but is unintelligible)*

INVESTIGATOR:
Oh, he’s praying again. Well, hey, we still made a pretty penny, now didn’t we?

GUARD:
Man, I was just standing here thinking, “Why’s this t**** suddenly playing Mr. Nice Guy?”, before I realized.
INVESTIGATOR:
I really ought to win an Oscar for my performance. You said I was gonna get him riled up -- I think I got him riled up alright.

GUARD:
Is it safe to wrap it up here?

INVESTIGATOR:
Yeah, he realized we got him good. It’s gonna be a tough sell to trick him into telling us more immediately.

GUARD:
Should we let him finish praying first?

INVESTIGATOR:
I mean, if your personal religious views make you feel uncomfortable interrupting a man’s prayers, then let him finish if you want -- I don’t care, but I’d rather not. I’m gonna head out and let the guy outside the door know he’s good to come in whenever. Plus we don’t know how long this guy’s gonna take until he’s done praying.

GUARD:
Oh, true that, good point. Don’t tell my mama that I messed with a man’s prayers or she’ll whoop my ass.

INVESTIGATOR:
Is your mama a coppa?

GUARD:
Oh, h***, no.

INVESTIGATOR:
Then she will never hear this. Oh, and that’s another thing, all his talking is probably f***ing with the recording.

(closer to microphone) Alright, so this concludes the interview between [REDACTED] and… what was your first name again?

DALE:
--And also forgive me Lord for my thoughts about Will and his--

GUARD:
A’ight, time for us to go.

(chair scraping against floor, falling over)

DALE:
Hey! Hey, unhand me, you brute!

GUARD:
Yeah, you would call me a brute, you racist-a** coyote.

(Dale heard screaming in background but is unintelligible)

INVESTIGATOR:
Okay, then. Well. Hold on, his name’s somewhere on the paper here. Uh…
INVESTIGATOR:
So this was the interview with Alan Arthur Dale, Inmate #S-1881, conducted by [REDACTED] on June 15th, 2005, at the Nottingham County Correctional Institution in Blades on behalf of the Nottingham County Police Department. And this recording will be ending n--

END OF RECORDING

Chapter End Notes

3/28 Update: The more I think about it, the more I think, "Doby, if you don't ask, the answer is always no." So as long as the entire world is stuck inside their homes during the modern plague, this may be as good a time as any to encourage you to share this with anybody you think might like it (who you haven't already, I don't expect you to pester the same people twice), seeing as it seems the whole world has nothing better to do than to read. Yeah, yeah, this may come across as tacky, but considering the state of the world has the mellowest people I know worried, I might as well shoot my shot. It's like YOLO culture all over again. Remember YOLOing? Man, and we thought it was bad in 2012.

And even if you're reading this long, looong after the epidemic has passed, you can still make a statement that you admired my having the guts to ask you to share this by sharing it anyway. Lol but for real, whenever and wherever you're reading this, take care and stay safe out there. I will see you soon. -D
Chapter Summary

Two characters try to come to terms with change -- and try to see what they can change.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

23. “Run with the Hunted, Pt. 1”

He understood that the doctor was probably very busy doing important, possibly life-saving work, and as such he probably couldn’t just step away whenever he wanted to show them preferential treatment, nor should he. But if the doctor did decide to be derelict of his duty to his other patients so he could get his fugitive friend out of there faster, Robin wouldn’t have complained.

But as he sat there in the ER, staring at the fluorescent lighting on the ceiling until he saw spots, listening to the faint sounds of Little John shifting as he sat passed out with his Titans hat pulled over his eyes in the adjacent chair that was a little too small for a grizzly bear, Robin was telling himself not to be ungrateful for all that Dr. Fort had already done. Much like how the Merry Men had made a point to network with local paramedics and independent ambulance workers, they had also tried to make friends with doctors and nurses just in case they would one day need medical assistance. Of course, whereas a good fraction of freelance ambulance company employees were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed kids fresh out of college looking for work where they can tangibly help people, the kind of people who would be one hundred percent down with the Merry Men’s mission, it was disturbingly difficult to find doctors who were equally as charitable. In their experience, most medical workers they had encountered actually working within the walls of a hospital were some of the most cynical and jaded people Robin and John had ever met in their lives. Most of the nurses were overworked and outwardly bitter about it, and most of the doctors were unabashedly just in their line of work for the money -- ergo, not the kind of people who would be friendly to a group who prey on the rich for the benefit of the poor. During one of their many evenings off in Sherwood Forest when they had nothing better to do than to enjoy some witty banter, Robin and John had once found themselves engaged in a twenty-minute debate over whether one would have better luck making friends with the employees of a hospital or a DMV.

That’s why all the Merry Men, past and present, appreciated Dr. Fort. He went into medicine as a young man with the express desire to be a good person and heal people, and unlike so many of his colleagues, he never let go of that resolve. He had specifically declined to specialize in any specific field of medicine because he wanted to be as well-rounded as possible, and that’s how he wound up working double-duty as a general physician and an emergency room surgeon at Bethlehem General. Not only could he help the Merry Men out with almost any medical problem, but if there was an issue outside of his wheelhouse, he could probably recommend a specialist who wasn’t in the mayor’s back pocket. Fortunately, however, they hadn’t needed his services nor his referrals very often.

They had first found him back during their second summer, a few days after Little John had felt what he thought was a really nasty wasp or hornet sting through the back of his pants while the
gang were walking through Hermosa Park. Somewhere along the line, something caught Will’s eye, and he piped up that there was a giant hole in Johnny’s jeans with a lot of red residue all around it, and Little John could just about die from embarrassment when he agreed to bear his bare ass cheeks to the rest of the guys so they could inspect the damage up close, but it was all for the best, as the other four agreed that they should probably look into finding him a doctor sooner rather than later. After a few days of going to local hospitals dressed as janitors and asking loaded questions to the staff to try to weed out which doctors might be friendly, they finally agreed to reveal themselves to the St. Bernard they met in the service corridors of Bethlehem General, who when previously asked offhandedly if he was worried about the rumors of crazy people robbing the wealthy near Sherwood Forest had said that he actually didn’t really identify with rich people because he worked such long hours that he didn’t really get to enjoy the excess funds in his bank account and wound up giving a lot of it to charity for lack of any other idea of what to do with it. Dr. Fort was hesitant at first, but when they offered to pay him in cash, he saw the genuine concern they had for their friend and agreed to do it for free. The doctor removed the bullet from Little John’s buttock, sanitized and stitched the area to prevent further risk of infection, and listen to the five of them give a more detailed rundown of who they were, what they were all about, and how they operated (and upon realizing that they were basically living as homeless people, Dr. Fort mentioned that he was now a lot less judgmental about how anybody could go a week without changing their pants).

Dr. Fort later came in clutch when he was the doctor who helped figure out what was wrong with Tuck, but beyond that, the Merry Men were lucky enough to not be grossly injuring themselves or catching horrible diseases with any regularity. Most of the time that they came by Bethlehem General to see him, it was just to say hello, ask how he was doing, and inquire if there were any patients who needed help paying their medical bills. They sometimes went to see him for some bad sprains or nasty scratches, but they rarely had to report to him with anything even remotely life-threatening.

And that was what was driving him so crazy. Left alone with his thoughts, Robin couldn’t stop thinking: they had been living on the edge for more than seven years and between the five of them, they had almost all entirely avoided injuries that required hospitalization -- and now here he lay in an emergency room with the first broken bones he had ever suffered in his life, plus a severe laceration that nearly curtailed his tail. Had all those years in the clear been because they were supremely skilled at not getting hurt despite being constantly surrounded by danger? Or was it another sign that they had been running on ridiculous quantities of dumb luck all these years -- and now the floor was about to drop out from underneath their feet? Robin was never one to believe that the future was written in stone, but if a time traveller were to materialize out of thin air at the foot of his bed, he would demand the time traveller answer this question: was this all just going to be a minor setback and an outlier in the trajectory of their lives, or was this going to be a harbinger of things getting much, much worse? Even if he didn’t like the answer, he would have still wanted to know how it was going to be. Robin didn’t fear uncertainty, but he still did much prefer certainty.

Looking at his busted right arm made him feel stupid and weak in a weird way he had never felt before, so because he didn’t like that feeling, he looked at his left arm instead. They had put a paper bracelet around his wrist with somebody else’s name on it, just to make sure that the other staff didn’t get suspicious. “HUTCHINSON, JAMES T”. While Dr. Fort was setting Robin’s arm in the sling, he mentioned that he had scoured the emergency room looking for some obviously rich people whose payment details he could duplicate, but finding none, he got lucky and came across some rabbit kid from the suburbs who wound up in Bethlehem’s ER distressingly often; today this kid had stubbed his foot and fractured a few toes while walking in the dark that night to get a drink of water. At first Robin expressed discomfort with screwing over a kid like that, but the
doctor reassured him that the bunny and his family weren’t going to be disadvantaged by this. They weren’t excessively wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but with only one child, they were certainly financially comfortable, and more importantly, their work gave them good health insurance, which was a good thing since other insurance providers would have kicked them by now with how often they needed to file a claim for their son. Dr. Fort also mentioned that the parents didn’t exactly have the nicest of attitudes; the dad frequently (and loudly) lamented that this “inner-city shithole” of a hospital was geographically closer to his home in Peach Creek than the nicer hospital up in Lemon Brook, and today the mother was complaining that she wanted her son to be given a wheelchair because he was “too delicate” to hobble around on crutches. Even if they did get a statement from their insurance provider noting that they had been rung up for an arm cast and some tail stitches that their son had not received (at least not on this particular day), they could probably just bitch up a storm to the insurance company and get the copay charges dropped -- but with all the things their son had been through, they had probably already lost track of what treatment their son had and had not already been through; they probably wouldn’t even notice.

On second thought, he needed to look at his right arm again. He needed to start getting used to the fact that this was how his arm was going to look for a while. Having never had to be treated for breaks and fractures before, he was just sort of expecting that it would be a hard plaster cast all the way around his arm. Instead it was some sort of a hard plastic shell-type thing that wrapped three-quarters of the way around his arm, which was bandaged from his fingers and past his elbow. And the plastic thing kept his arm stuck bent in a crook, which he could already tell was going to be massively inconvenient in his daily adventures. He hazily remembered the doctor and nurses trying to tell him what was going to happen with him next, but between the blood loss in his tail and the painkillers they pumped him full of, they could tell that he was in no condition to be hearing important information, so they agreed to give him the run-down later when his mind had cleared up. Well, it was later now, and although he was still woozy from the drugs, he was cogent enough to be having troublingly introspective thoughts, so he was ready for the information whenever Dr. Fort would be so kind as to come back.

Perhaps he had jinxed it. He had sworn never to lay his hands upon its handle again after that day, and now that he had, the attached arm was harmed shortly thereafter. Perhaps there was no cosmic force out there dealing out jinxes, but he could certainly see how the circumstances were thematically fitting.

He went back to staring at the ceiling, eyes half-closed. Wow, if things had been different, he really could have landed on his head and broken his neck, couldn’t he? Or at the very least suffered permanent brain damage. He was trying not to dwell on what could have been, but as silly as it sounded to fret over a fairly common not-usually-life-threatening injury, he’d never had to confront the fragility of his own body and his own life like this before. He’d seen countless other people suffer much worse injuries than this, so he was surely aware of the fragility of other people’s bodies, but his own? Robin had the thought that maybe everybody has this same chain of thoughts when they wind up in the emergency room for the first time: coming to terms with the fact that they are indeed capable of suffering bodily injuries that require modern medicine to heal, running self-worrying what if scenarios through their heads, and pondering one one’s own mortality. He wondered if everybody goes through this cycle of grief their first time, and if he was the weird one for taking three decades to experience it his first time. That perpetually-injured bunny kid probably didn’t even think twice about the existential implications of winding up in a cast anymore. Jeez, these painkillers were taking his mind to some weird places.

...Should he just tell Johnny and get it over with? Should he tell Little John while he still had a chance, just in case there soon came a time when one of them wasn’t around anymore? No, no he couldn’t. The rift it would surely cause between them would so deeply jeopardize their safety that it would be an almost selfish plea for forgiveness. Even if Little John didn’t reject Robin for
committing the act itself, he would surely reject him for lying about it for all these years. If there was one good thing about never seeing Marian again, at least Robin wouldn’t have to tackle a similar quandary about how to confess about the similar lie she’d told her.

Of course, being aware that everybody probably goes through some sort of shock after their first major injury didn’t make the faint but constant feeling of anxiety slip away. As he sat there in that well-lit, air-conditioned, mostly-quiet hospital room, as comfortable as one can be considering the circumstances, he had another funny thought that there was only one other time in his life when he was so afraid despite being in absolutely no apparent danger.

Well, more like one and a half. The half one was what happened right after the jailbreak and mayoral mansion heist in the late part of that fourth summer. That one was a half because it was a very strange situation and four years later, Robin still didn’t know what to make of it. For one thing, it shook not only the entirety of the United States, but basically the entire world, so if Robin were to say that the situation caused him to feel persistently worried despite being in a state of physical safety, it would certainly not have been a unique sentiment. Furthermore, since he, John, and Alan were probably the last people in the city to hear about what happened that day up in New York, his mind still didn’t one hundred percent grasp how everything had gone down; he and Little John still had never seen footage of it happening like everyone else in the developed world seemed to, and the two of them had had multiple friendly debates with one another about it (usually around the anniversary of the day) and whether it was downright shameful or completely natural for someone in their position to kind of want to see it just so they didn’t feel left out anymore. And except to his closest and most trusted friends, Robin would never say this out loud for fear of sounding disrespectful to the victims, but… it all just seemed so cartoonish, for sheer and utter lack of a more fitting word. Robin was fifteen when that plane was bombed over Scotland, so he was fully aware of the concept of terrorist hijackings, but… multiple airplanes being flown into multiple buildings? Successfully? How could such an event ever come to pass in reality? It was another thing that Robin would be delicate about saying aloud (and Dear Reader, this narrator called Robin a motherfucker to his face when he told them this, because this narrator knew that they would similarly have to walk on eggshells for fear of coming across as callous when retelling this part), but no part of Robin ever feared his chances of being on a hijacked airplane, let alone one in such a grotesquely elaborate scheme as the one that day up the East Coast, and he would argue that deep down, most everyone else felt similarly, and rather were worried that their fate would be to be involved in such an unlikely tragedy as opposed to one specifically like that. In practice, his and John’s lives were not affected by that tragedy directly so much as they were when Prince John realized he could capitalize on it by tightening up security and authority to previously-unseen levels, in a move which only seemed more and more evil every time the two of them thought back on it. Therefore that event only half-counted as a ‘fear in a state of comfort’ moment; it certainly caused Robin to be persistently and uncharacteristically nervous for a long while, but not because it confronted him with the idea of any perilous situation he truly believed he would ever find himself in.

The only other time that he had truly felt this gnawing, resting anxiety about his own mortality was when a different tragedy had hit much, much closer to home -- a five minute drive from the house he grew up in, to be precise. Or a four minute drive if you drove like his mum did, or a half-hour walk if it was a nice day, though it may have been faster for Robin since he had long legs and it was all downhill. This also happened when Robin was fifteen -- come to think of it, it was only a few months after the hijacking over Scotland. When it was tournament time on the English football calendar, matches were arranged to be held at a neutral ground, and on a Saturday in April, a club from out west and a club from down south (fittingly enough, from Nottingham) were set to kick off down by the banks of the river at the stadium which, if he was in just the right spot and looking at just the right angle, Robin could see from the upstairs window of his home on the hill.
But he had no time to look out the window that day, and he certainly didn’t have time to turn on the
telly and watch the match all the way through. He was preoccupied with schoolwork from the
prestigious independent school Robert Scarlett was paying for him to attend. Robin actually did try
to get things done while having the game on in the background, but he quickly found it distracting
and told himself he needed to at least attempt to be responsible with his time, so he turned off the
match after not even five minutes. He would later find out that it was hardly a few minutes after
that that the match had to be called off when the officials realized something was very, very wrong.

Speaking of education, Brianna had always wanted to go to nursing school. True, she was young
enough that by the time she was university-aged, the UK government had already made higher
education free to open it up to more than just the rich, but while there were no tuition payments,
that was still quite a few years when the student would be expected to work odd hours to pay for
their own subsistence, which Brianna had tried to make work for a semester but she simply
couldn’t maintain the energy to excel in her classes, and going to class part-time wasn’t an option
because that erased the free tuition privilege. Because her large, working-class, Irish-Catholic
family couldn’t (or wouldn’t) pay for her living expenses as an adult, she had to drop out and find
work open to a woman with no secondary education in the mid-1960s.

Fast forward a decade and she found herself with the opportunity to go to nursing school with her
former employer, Robert Scarlett, offering to pay for whatever she needed to support herself and
her year-and-some-months-old son who shared Robert’s first and middle names. Brianna knew
from the very start that this was just another bargaining chip for Robert, him giving her whatever
she wanted so she’d pretend that she didn’t know the identity of the father of her child who already
went up to her shoulders despite just learning how to toddle and who shared several other physical
features with the tall, handsome, wealthy fox whom she’d been previously known to mess around
with back when she was working as his maid before he found another woman whose partnership
came with a financial incentive. He was also offering to have the child cared for by a hired nanny
or possibly his own wife and the mother of his legitimate children until the lad was old enough for
school, and this was all on top of the fact that he was already paying most of her bills as she stayed
home with the baby; suffice it to say, he had his bases covered. She had her reservations about
accepting his offer, but something in her brain reminded her of her childhood dreams to help the sick
and needy, and she had a funny feeling that if Florence Nightingale could be there, she’d tell
Brianna that she could do more good by accepting the evil man’s offer than by pridefully denying
it. She ultimately agreed to accept his offer, albeit waiting a few more years until Robin was ready
to start going to school by himself before she began her studies anew.

Fast forward another decade and after coming home from another long and tiring day of work to
find eleven-year-old Robin already asleep, it dawned upon her: Robert had specifically put her in a
line of work that would keep her from seeing her son. And the more she fretted about it, she
realized he had done the same thing with Oliver. It was all part of a plan to ensure that the lad had
more memories of his biological father who couldn’t care less about him than he had of his own
mother and stepfather. Oh, damn that shifty, crafty fox -- his plan was surely working. Oliver came
home from the factory even later that night to find Brianna crying in their bed, and after he hugged
her for ten minutes to calm her down, they had a long and frank conversation about what she had
realized. She didn’t want to be a nurse anymore, but she also didn’t want to give up on her own
dreams just because somebody had played her dreams against her, and as much as she wanted to be
around for her son, she didn’t want the price of that to be failing to help so many strangers who
may never be helped by somebody else. Oliver had had similar feelings about his own job,
although his case was a bit different: Robert knew Oliver’s personal passion was acting, so the
incentive of working as the supervisor in his factory was that Oliver would have the weekends off
to pursue community productions. But they came to the conclusion that they couldn’t simply quit
the jobs Robert had gotten them -- he would pull the rug out from under them in a heartbeat.
Therefore they resolved that they would maintain their respective lines of work for the good of their son, and make all the time that they had with him count. That was the night when Oliver made the tough decision to retire from community theatre so he could spend more time with Robin, and the night when Brianna told herself that she had gotten into this line of work to help people who needed her help, and by keeping her job to appease Robert Scarlett, the greatest beneficiary of this help would be Robin. This moment did successfully manage to get her through many tough days and nights of work going forward, but there were still some days when she wished she had just quit then and there.

And with all that, Dear Reader, this narrator hopes you may better understand how that Saturday in April was one of those days for her. First, Oliver came home from the work around suppertime -- Robert had gotten wise to Oliver’s strategy and started making Oliver and all the poor South Asian immigrants who worked at the factory come in on Saturdays as well. Robin had had his nose buried deep in a textbook, trying in vain to decipher the timeline of the War of the Roses, but when Oliver told him what had happened at the stadium, Robin immediately ran to the upstairs window to look northeast, trying to make out the area through the trees and in the setting sun. Then he tried to see if he could see the hospital his mum worked at.

Oliver talked him through what he understood to have happened, but as it was a developing story, he wasn’t entirely sure himself. They agreed that when it was about time for Brianna to come home, they would be sitting by the front door waiting to greet her after what was surely the worst day of work she’d have ever had in her life. They wound up sitting there for several hours, wondering how late she would be working.

When the door finally opened, she looked like she had just seen a ghost -- and considering the circumstances, she very well may have. Oliver stood and wordlessly went to embrace her, but Brianna -- still looking spooked -- gently denied his arms and moved toward the living room, where she laid down on the couch and stared at the extinguished television. And for Robin, who was already trying to hide how unnerved he was about what Oliver had told him, seeing the strongest woman in his life completely shut down only made him feel much, much worse. Then, in the quietest of voices, she had started murmuring about the things she had seen that fateful day.

What happened at the stadium that day was not the result of any structural failure, nor any motion of violence, nor any act of God. There were simply too many people and not enough room to breathe.

Sitting there in that hospital bed thinking back on that day, Robin still wasn’t proud about how he had lost his own composure, and he was ashamed for several reasons. When his mother recounted what she had witnessed at the hospital, Robin simply needed to get out of the room, for he could not handle the imagery running through his head; while his parents later clarified that they did not hold this against him because he was still a kid, he himself had never accepted that as a valid answer. Yes, a boy of fifteen is indisputably a youth, but Robin had always been told he acted so mature for his age, and from the very day that happened, he thought running off to his room in sheer panic was indicative of a character flaw. Fifteen was right in that not-so-sweet spot where adolescents were expected to act like adults but rarely did, so he didn’t know, maybe he was being too hard on his young self, but after all these years, he still felt like the world at large would admonish him for behaving so childishly. Similarly, he wondered if the world at large would have told him that it wasn’t his place to feel such selfish grief; after all, he hadn’t lost anybody in the disaster and didn’t know anybody who was injured, all he saw was the broken look on his mother’s face and heard the tale of what had happened. He was sure most would agree that he should feel bad for the victims, and indeed he did, but as he ran away to his room, staring at the walls and ceiling for hours on end, having his mum call him in sick to school on Monday because he had been unable to sleep all throughout the previous two nights, he hadn’t been thinking about the
victims and their families, and he was hardly even thinking of the secondhand trauma his mother had suffered; he was mostly thinking about himself, and his new paranoia of the fragility of life. He couldn’t stop thinking: that can happen? There can be too many people around and you just don’t have enough room to expand your lungs, and that’s it, your life is over? Or if you’re lucky you survive with permanent brain damage from the asphyxiation depriving your brain of oxygen? Then and now, he couldn’t help but think that so many people would tell him *who are you to feel sorry for yourself when you weren’t even affected by this and there are people out there who are really suffering?* And while he also knew that there would be others who would argue that he had indeed suffered something in seeing the hope in his mother’s eyes extinguished and acquiring a previously absent case of claustrophobia -- the “large crowds” kind rather than the “bedroom closet” kind, and while that had mostly went away after about a year or so, it still popped up every so often -- it was much like with the other disaster where he would rather not speak about his personal feelings about it for fear that some may interpret him as making it all about himself. And right up there on his list of fears, next to claustrophobia and witnessing the death of hope, was people thinking he was selfish.

His eyes burst open. Jesus, how long had he been out for? He glanced over at Little John; he was still asleep. He glanced at the clock; it was early morning, but he didn’t remember the last time he checked it so he had no frame of reference. By his guess, it could have been anywhere from five to twenty minutes. He would almost rather deal with the pain in his arm if it meant these drugs would wear off and stop fucking with his head.

But yes, laying in that bed safe and sound fearing that he could die an unnecessary death reminded him exactly of how he felt laying in bed in his home on the hillside in Loxley, staring into space, pondering if he was fated for such a demise, not openly weeping but his eyes certainly wet and glossy, afraid to even roll over on his stomach because he didn’t want anything impede his ability to breathe.

And this narrator knows that was all very long-winded, Dear Reader, but now you know how Robin felt as he grew ever more impatient waiting for that dog to come back. At this point, it wasn’t just a matter of wanting to get out of there fast. It was the extrovert’s curse: being left alone with his own thoughts could quickly drive him crazy. As he glanced over again at the sleeping bear in the chair, all Robin could think was that right then and there, all he wanted in the world was somebody to talk to.

Little John muttered something.


“Wake up…” it sounded like he said.

“Johnny?”

“C’mob, Robin, wake up…” John murmured again, his eyes still under the cover of his hat.

“Johnny, wake up!”

“Wh--GAH!” Little John hollered with a jump, nearly falling out of his chair.

“Johnny, are you alright?”

Little John pulled the hat off the bridge of his snout and looked at Robin. And the look he gave him looked a lot like the look on Brianna’s face when she came home that fateful night.
“L-Little John, Johnny... are you alright?” Robin repeated, now afraid in an entirely new way.

For a moment, Little John just stared at him, his disturbed expression not changing. After a bit, he hurriedly stood from his chair, almost stumbling out of it. “I-I’m sorry, Rob, I-- I gotta take a leak.” He clambered out of the room, almost making a point not to look at his friend. “Fuck, my legs fell asleep…” he could be heard saying as he entered the hallway.

And just like that, Robin was alone again, trying his best to be brave and not to let his thoughts frighten him.

Little John found the nearest men’s room and went straight for the sink. He ran the cold water, cupped some in his paws, and splashed it on his face; it didn’t help at all, but it just seemed like what you were supposed to do in that situation. Good God Almighty, he had never had a dream like that before in his life, and if he never had another one like it again, it would be too soon. That long talk with Otto about Robin yesterday must have done a number on his psyche.

He couldn’t look at Robin. Well, he could, but… he couldn’t. Not after what happened in that dream. Yes, it was just a hallucinatory fantasy, but good goddamn, he was going to have a lot of trouble erasing that one from his memory. Of course, he knew he needed to go back there and be present for his buddy in his time of need, but if he could help it, he was going to avoid eye contact, and keep the dialogue to a minimum.

He shook his face out and made a sputtering sound through his flailing lips as he did. He was going to force himself to tough it out.

When Little John ducked back into the room, Dr. Fort was already there.

“Oh. Hey, Doc;” John greeted sheepishly.

“H-hi, John, um…” The St. Bernard looked puzzled. “Uh, is your face all wet?”

“Oh-- Yeah, uh, I got really nasty eczema under the fur. Just needed to get some moisture in there. Don’t sweat it, Doc.”

And Robin was fairly certain that that was bullshit, but wanting to get to the meat of the conversation, he said nothing.

“Oh, well, if you want, I know a dermatologist who I’m like ninety percent sure would be cool with you guys--”

“No. Doc. It’s fine,” Little John said firmly. “A-and I’m sorry for biting your head off, but, uh… I- I’m just concerned about my little buddy right here,” he said, gesturing toward Robin without looking at him. “So what’s the word?”

“Well, we were waiting on you to get back, because, well, quite frankly, Robin’s still a little, uh, intoxicated at the moment, so, uh, you know, just wanted to make sure I’ve got someone clear-headed to hear this, too. Now… are you sober?”

“Huh?”

“You guys weren’t drinking or anything tonight, were you?”

Little John was mildly but visibly offended by this. “Dude… did I seem like I was drunk when we got here?”
“Well, you passed out there for a while.”

“It’s two in the morning, motherfucker, I’m tired.”

“Well, they do call you guys the Merry Men for a reason, don’t they?” Dr. Fort looked to Robin for support. “That’s a Britishism meaning you guys are partying and getting drunk all the time, right?”

But Robin’s addled mind was having trouble keeping up with the conversation, so he didn’t say a word, instead staring at Dr. Fort like the doctor was an alien.

“Naw, man, we had to cut back on that shit. For our own safety,” Little John explained.

“Oh. Alright, my bad,” the doctor said with a nod as he consulted his notes, the look on his face neutral as though the whole altercation hadn’t even happened. “Uh--”

“Again, I’m sorry if I’m being… combat-a-tive, I guess is the word, but--”

“It’s not a word.”

“Fuck you,” John said, then regretted it. “See? There it is again. But yeah, sorry, I’m just tense, ‘cause… I’m worried about him. I mean, look at him,” said the bear who had not looked at the fox in a solid minute. “He’s got a look on his face like a fish on heroin. And even when the drugs wear off, that arm’s really gonna get in the way of what we do. Y’know?”

“Yeah. No, no, you’re fine. You’re fine…” The dog trailed off as he again glanced at his notes, still looking completely unaffected by any conflict brewing. He looked back at Robin. “Now, Robin, are you… here, right now?”

“Yessir,” Robin mumbled. “I’m just, er… conserving my energy.” Which wasn’t a complete lie. “So tell me, Doctor… how long will it be for my arm to heal?”

The doctor turned again to Little John, who was still insisting on standing. “Did you tell him?” he asked with a hint of awkwardness.

“Tell him what?”

“Alright, so here we have our first problem…” Dr. Fort said as he went to the backlit x-rays on the wall. “So, Robin, you came in here with your arm looking like you had a second elbow. You completely fractured both your ulna and your radius -- in layman’s terms, you broke your arm clean. Plus you have a hairline fracture in your wrist, but let’s put a pin in that.”

“Okay, understood,” Robin said, seeming more alert than a few minutes ago. “So is the wrist fracture what’s complicating matters?”

“Uh… Robin, I’m not trying to be condescending, but have you ever broken a bone as an adult before?”

“No, sir. Not as a child, either.”

“Hm. Well, that explains it.”

“Explains what?” asked Little John. “Would his arm be frailer if he broke it before or something?”

“Uh, yes, but not in the way that you’re thinking,” the doctor said. He grabbed the x-rays off the projector and went to the side of Robin’s bed to give him a closer look. “So, in adults -- hell, in
most adolescents, too -- a complete forearm fracture won’t heal itself… ever.”

“Oh… I see,” Robin mumbled. He was getting anxious again. “But don’t people my age and older break their arms all the time and recover just fine?”

“I mean, kind of. So, the reason why with kids, you can just slap a plaster cast on them and wait for a gigantic hourglass to tick down and boom, they’re hunky-dory: they’re still growing. In the process of their bones growing, the bone can heal itself back into place as long as it’s set correctly. Whereas you’re all done growing -- and as a general physician who sees a lot of my fellow canines, I’ve got to say, you’ve grown a lot, like goddamn, and to be completely honest, stretching yourself as much as you have has probably made your bones a lot, a lot more fragile. Honestly, I’m-- pardon my French, I’m fucking amazed this is your first broken bone. I don’t mean to worry you, but as your doctor, I would be remiss not to warn you that you should have probably suffered half a dozen fractures by now.”

“Well, er… thank you for letting me know that,” said Robin, who was now very worried about his body’s integrity indeed.

“Then again, looking at your x-rays, your bones seem about as sturdy as those of a fox half your height, so who knows, maybe you’re just SuperFox.”

“That he is,” Little John grumbled under his breath.

“So if I were you, I wouldn’t lose sleep over it. But that’s why I asked if you hadn’t broken a bone since your childhood: you seemed to have an understanding of treating fractures like one would for a child. And that’s nothing against you; a lot of adult arm-break virgins are like that.”

“So… my arm will just never heal correctly?” Robin asked. The other two could hear his voice quivering just a teeny bit, but they both knew him well enough to know that nothing made him more unconfident than having people perceive him as unconfident.

“Not properly. Not without modern medicine, at least. But luckily for you, Robin Hood, you’re not living in the Middle Ages!”

“Hm. Quite right. So… does ‘medicine’ in this case mean some sort of steroid to encourage bone regeneration, or…?”

The doctor looked surprised by the creativity of Robin’s hypothesis. “What? N-no. Nonononono, although it would be so much easier for all of us if we had miracle pills like that. In this case, ‘modern medicine’ means ‘modern surgery.’”

“Oh my god!?”

“Mnhmm. We’re gonna have to go in there on both sides of the bone and attach a metal plate to each of them.”

“Go in there’!? What, you’re just going to cut into my arm all the way down to the bone?”

“Yup. Do it all the time.”

“So what?” Little John cut in, “there’s no other solution here other than to nail some iron to his bones!? So the kid’ll never be able to go through a metal detector again?”

“Of course he can go through them, they’re just gonna have to wave over him with one of those wand thingies to find out what’s making it ding.”
“Every single time?”

“Yeah, but you know what? I’d argue there are worse fates.”

“Well, if this is how it must be,” said Robin morosely, “let’s cut me open then.”

“Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa, slow down there, trigger. We’re not doing the surgery now.”

“We’re not?”

“Naw, man. We’ve got to wait a few days for the--”

“A few days? Pardon my impatience, my good doctor, but surely you understand that with our lifestyle, we don’t have a few days to waste with me laid up with a broken arm!”

The dog looked pensive as he chose his next words very wisely. “I do understand, Robin, and I had a feeling that this conversation would wind up going in this direction.” He turned to Little John. “You sure you don’t want to sit down, John? I’ve got a feeling we’ve still got a lot to talk about.”

“I’m good, thanks,” the bear said, looking frustrated, but not necessarily frustrated at the doctor.

“Alright, so, Robin… not to be petty, but you did cut me off. We need to wait for the inflammation to go down or we might fuck up a bunch of veins and arteries. The only time we would perform arm-fracture surgery immediately is when the bone fragments break the skin, because of the risk of infection -- and quite frankly, looking at your arm, the only way that your injury could have been worse is if it did break the skin.”

“Alright, then,” said Robin, “let’s pretend that that did happen and let’s get to work.”

The doctor looked thoroughly annoyed by that suggestion, and Robin realized that this may not have been the best time for his trademark go-getterism.

“So as I was saying…” Dr. Fort continued, “as it is, you may have already done some nasty damage to the nerves in your arm from that break. And beyond that -- you know what? Lemme put it this way. You, Robin… as a consequence of your line of work… I just sort of expect that you’re gonna feel like you won’t be able to follow my orders to go easy on your arm for the next six-to-eight weeks. Am I correct?”

“Er… can you define ‘going easy on it,’ please?”

“Literally don’t exert it in any way. Don’t lift anything, don’t push with it, don’t pull with it -- that includes the string on a bow and arrow -- and remember, you still have that hairline fracture in your wrist. There’s nothing I can do about that; that’s gotta heal by itself, you’ve just gotta give it time. And this is all after I go in there and physically reinforce your bones with literal fuckin’ stainless steel. Absolutely no bearing weight on your right arm… at all. None-zo. Capiche?”

“Ah, well, er… it will certainly be a challenge…” Robin muttered with uncharacteristic bashfulness.

“I’m sure it will be. Now let me explain why I’m being such a stick-in-the-mud about this. As it is now -- I know I keep using that phrase, but goddammit, just roll with it -- as it is now, even if everything goes right -- even if surgery goes flawlessly, even if your bones snap right back into place when I’m resetting them, even if you put absolutely no pressure on your arm until August, even if you do the physical therapy exercises I’m gonna assign you through September -- there’s still a chance that something out of our control’ll go wrong. I’m used to giving this speech, so
here’s the Big Four complications. Number One, regular surgery complications; as with any surgery, there’s a chance something might go wrong, even if we’re extremely careful -- most commonly, an infection can break out. Number Two, you might just never get used to the plates being in there -- you’re probably gonna be able to feel them under your skin, under your muscle, and there’s a chance that they’re gonna hurt like hell, or they might itch like a son of a bitch. You’re probably gonna be able to feel the changes in the atmospheric pressure every time it rains. And there won’t be anything we’ll be able to do about that except wait, like, a year until your arm is finally healed correctly -- except, wait, Number Three, they still might not heal correctly; the bone can pull apart, or the metalware can shift, or, fuck it, if there’s a bunch of tiny fragments in there, they might just not ever come together; looking at your x-rays, it’s mostly a clean break in both the ulna and the radius, but I do see a few tiny pieces in there, so you’re not completely in the clear -- again, not to scare you, but I need you to understand this. And Number Four -- this is the most common one -- you might not be able to move your arm like you used to. Nothing too life-alteringly severe, but stuff that involves rotating your forearm. So you might find yourself thinking, ‘hey, why can’t I turn this door knob from this angle?’ or ‘hey, why can’t I open this jar of peanut butter all the way anymore?’ Little shit like that. And -- John, you’re hearing this too, right?”

“Yessir.”

“So Robin... I get it. You and I both do what we do because we want to use our skills to help people who can’t help themselves. But you’ve either got to take the physical element out of your adventures or you’ve just got to go back to the drawing board if you want there to be a decent chance that your arm ever goes back to normal, because if you mess around with it, the chances of something going wrong go up exponentially, especially the Bone Not Healing and the Limited Mobility parts.”

After a long while of politely returning eye contact, Robin looked down introspectively, first staring at the Angels shirt he was still wearing, then at the sling on his arm.

Dr. Fort crossed his arms in that tough-love sort of way. “I knew this was gonna be hard for you to hear, bud, but you’ve got to think long-term versus short-term here. And hey, maybe your idea of heroism is that you push through an injury and permanently fuck up your body in the process, but... I’m gonna have to disagree with you on that one there. I’m gonna think you’ll come to regret it if you do.”

Robin was still staring at his arm. Dr. Fort glanced again at Little John, who for several reasons still couldn’t bring himself to look at the fox.

“What’s going through your head right now, Robin?” the doctor asked.

Robin took a deep breath and still didn’t look up. “Am... am I getting old?”

“Oh... remind me how old you are?”

“Thirty-one.” Robin lifted his arm and brought it closer to himself to better inspect it. “Thirty-two in November.”

“W-well, there ya go. You see? You’re younger than me. You’re in that gray area. I wouldn’t call you a young adult by any stretch, but you’re hardly middle aged. I don’t know, man, some people think youth ends at twenty-five, some people think it ends at forty-five.”

For this, Little John dared to look in Robin’s general direction. “Kid, I’m almost forty, how do you think I feel?”
“You see?” asked Dr. Fort. “This guy thinks you’re a kid. Why, is this all... is this all making you feel, uh... aged?”

“That it is,” Robin spoke quietly. “I... I don’t mean to be a whiner, but--”

“Robin, don’t worry, these thoughts are perfectly natural. It’s called a midlife crisis.”

“But I thought I was too young for even a midlife crisis! Oh... where oh where does the time go?...”

“Robin, I’m sorry if I bummed you out, but like I said, even if you were ten years younger, we’d probably have to go to surgery. The important thing is that you’re living in the developed world in the modern day and we have the knowledge of how to make you better, whereas with our primitive ancestors, running around on all fours, if you broke a limb, that’s it, you’re done, dead. It’s something I heard in medical school and it makes perfect sense: a species is civilized when a member of its population can break a limb and still recover. Yes, as we go along, we’re gonna get bumps and bruises, and not all of them are going to heal right, but what’s important is that we can keep on chugging. And if you can manage to take a break for a while, I can probably keep you chugging for a lot longer. Sound good?”

Despite his eyes also staying fixed on Robin’s sling, Little John could tell that his friend needed some reassurance. “The doctor makes a good point, Rob.”

“So, how you feeling after all that?” the doctor asked.

That’s when Robin made eye contact with the doctor again. “I have, er... a question that may... seem unrelated. I know you’re dreadfully busy, Doctor, but do you have the time?”

“Uh... sure. Fire away.”

“So... my mother was a nurse. Not a doctor, but she certainly knew more about health and medicine than a random person off the street.”

“...Go on.”

“She, er... before she-- no, excuse me, before I left England... for university in New York... she told me about a, er... something from when I was very young.”

“...Yes?”

“It was a scene from, er... I had been at a pediatrician’s appointment. I think that this was before I had even entered school. I was there because my, er, growth spurts were so bad that... they had to put me on prescription painkillers, which I would be on on-and-off straight through my teenage years. And the doctor... according to my mum... the doctor pulled her aside when he sent me to the loo to wee in a cup for some reason, and... he told her that, er, as a consequence of... my growth... I shouldn’t expect to live very long.”

Little John, who by now was staring at Robin’s shoulder, was visibly disturbed by that revelation, his eyes bursting open and his head jerking back a bit. As for Dr. Fort, he looked sort of compassionately intrigued.

“I see,” said the St. Bernard softly.

“But my mother -- a nurse -- she told me as an adult that this had transpired and, because she knew a thing or two about medicine herself, she told me that this doctor was an idiot and that she could
see that I was perfectly healthy despite being… ‘stretched,’ as you put it, Doctor… so my question to you is, Doctor: was my mum wrong, and that doctor was right?”

And Dr. Fort looked like he was choosing his words carefully again.

“Because this whole thing has certainly made me feel fragile,” Robin continued, “like she said that doctor said I would be. And I never worried about it because I trusted my mother’s judgment, but now--”

“No, no, I understand, I understand,” the doctor interrupted. “I don’t mean to cut you off, but I understand. Okay, so… the short answer is… don’t worry about it. Just don’t. It’s called the nocebo effect; it’s like the placebo effect, but it’s pure evil, and if you’re so thoroughly convinced that something’s wrong with you medically, it’ll become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The sapient mind is wacky like that. The long answer is… your mom was probably right, and here’s why. So there’s two types of really, really tall mammals: natural giants and pituitary giants. Now, pituitary gigantism is so rare that it was hardly a five-minute discussion in med school, but I’ve read up on gigantism cases on my own, and I already know that’s not you. If you had pituitary gigantism, you’d’ve had a tumor in your head squeezing ridiculous amounts of hormones out and you wouldn’t have ever stopped growing without brain surgery, and even then you probably would have chronic numbness in your extremities from lack of circulation and you would probably have been dead by now anyway because of your body being as fragile as a paper doll after being stretched so far — you never had brain surgery, now have you?”

“No, but when my mum told me about the pediatrician’s warning, she did mention that he had recommended I get an MRI to see if I had a tumor just like you described, but she knew that wasn’t the case because she knew I was likely just taking after my father.”

“You see? Now how tall was your father?”

“Four-four.”

And Dr. Fort was expecting something like that. “Sounds about right. And you suggested your mother wasn’t gigantic, but was she on the taller side, too?”

“Er, no, she was actually rather petite. Two-nine or two-ten, I believe. Honestly, I can hardly remember a time when I was smaller than her.”

Dr. Fort was not expecting something like that. “Well… still, it sounds like you just hit the genetic lottery. Like I said, maybe you’re SuperFox. I’m serious, if you ever go back to being a free man, maybe hit up the people at Guinness World Records; I know you aren’t the tallest fox ever, but you might be the tallest one without a medical issue directly causing it.”

Meanwhile, Little John was back to being unable to look at the guy who just kept finding new things for him to envy.

“Look, you might still be at an increased risk for some things; like I said, your bones look almost as sturdy as the bones of a fox half your size — still a little on the thin side, but absolutely nothing alarming. Back and joint problems are gonna come sooner than later for you, but honestly, that happens eventually to most people. And it’s just a known fact by now that bigger people are more likely to get--” (and he was about to mention that taller and larger people were more likely to get cancer because having more cells means more chances that one of them would mutate, but then he thought the eight-hundred-pound grizzly bear standing right behind him might not want to hear that) “—thum… more likely to get into accidents, like just regular clumsy boom-fall-down accidents; the bigger you are, the harder you fall, like they say; the more space you physically
occupy, the more of a chance that something else occupying that space harms you, like a chair that’s too small and collapses under you, or you get plunked by a stray bullet.”

“Hmph,” Little John grumbled, “don’t I know it?”

“But if you were extremely short, you’d have an entirely different set of hazards. So yeah, in summation, I don’t know your entire medical history inside and out, but as far as I can tell, your mom seems like she was right, you seem perfectly healthy for someone your size -- remarkably healthy for someone your size, I should say, because you are. So don’t sweat it.” But then the doctor had one last question: “Why, does your dad’s side of the family have a history of, uh… not-... longevity?”

“I don’t know my father’s family that well,” Robin stated solemnly.


Robin took a deep breath and shifted his eyes toward open space again. “It’ll take some time to move past this, but I think in due time…” and he trailed off just like that.

“Alright. So. You said you were on prescription painkillers as a kid?”

“Yes, but I don’t recall the name.”

“No worries,” Dr. Fort said as he dug around in his pocket. “We can discuss the drug regimen later, but for now…” He produced a pager, the device vibrating as its screen was illuminated neon green, and he leaned in with a cheeky smile. “…this thing’s been buzzing in my pocket for twenty minutes. Duty calls!” he declared as he made his way for the door.

“Wait, Doctor!”

The dog stopped and turned back to the fox. “What’s up?”

“Pardon my insolence, but I truly still don’t understand… why can’t we just treat my arm as if it had an open wound and needed surgery right away? I understand you’re busy, but--”

“Robin, it’s not just because I’m busy, it’s for your own good.”

“And I understand that, Doctor, but surely you understand that I would hardly survive running from the law with an arm that’s not even in the process of healing. If the surgery were performed and the healing process began immediately, that would already be a massive advantage over my current condition.”

The doctor crossed his arms again, looking like he was pissed at Robin for making him feel morally conflicted.

“Have you heard the news of all they’re doing now to try to capture us, Doctor?” Robin continued. “They’ve even merged the city and county police departments in an attempt to gain strength against us. Hell, I’m sitting in this hospital bed in the first place because they tried to saw down the Major Oak!”

Robin looked determined as he returned the St. Bernard’s glare.

“You got into this line of work to help people,” said Robin. “Just think of how many more people will be helped if you help me now. We can wait until you’re not busy anymore, but we can’t wait much longer after that.”
Now it was Dr. Fort who was taking deep, pensive breaths through his nose. Then in a snap moment, he pointed at the clock. “Three o’clock. I get off at three o’clock.” He turned to Little John as he went digging in his back pocket, then grabbed John’s right paw, produced a twenty-dollar bill, and shoved the money in his hand. “The Walgreens at 53rd and Montana. Tylenol and Advil both. If they don’t have Advil for whatever reason, get Motrin. Give him one of each when you get back. Also get me an energy drink and get yourself one as well -- you’re gonna be my nurse.”

“I am?”

“Mmhmm. And you’re gonna help me figure out how to collapse the rear seats in my SUV so you can fit in the back and we can take him to my house. Luckily for you, I’m too tall to drive a medium-mammal sports car and too short to drive a large-mammal sports car, so I’ve got a ride you might actually be able to squeeze into.” He turned to Robin: “You. You listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“You all here upstairs?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Does your thumb count?”

“My thumb isn’t up.”

“Just making sure you’re all here, Doctor.”

Dr. Fort threw his arms up and rolled his eyes. He spoke in a hushed tone: “So you listen: I can lose my fucking license in a heartbeat if I get caught doing this. And unlike you guys, I’m not comfortable working underground. We’re gonna be doing this on my dining room table. The lighting won’t be the best and it won’t be nearly as spotlessly sanitized as a hospital, so if a speck of dust falls in your arm while it’s wide open and you get an infection-- I fucking warned you. And I should be doing this with multiple assistants, but if this is how you want it, then that’s how we’re gonna have to do it. So if something goes wrong and you wind up dead, I swear to God I’ll bury you in my backyard right next to my iguana.”

“Your iguana!?”

“Oh no, what happened to Iggy?” asked Little John.

“I dunno, he decided he was just done iguana-ing. But I’ll try to get everything I need in a bag without looking too suspicious. Let’s see, what’ll I need? Hm, hrm… Oh, goddammit, I won’t have anything to knock you out with!”

“We always have chloroform,” suggested Robin.

“And those pills that Thor makes that aren’t really roofies but we don’t know what else to call them,” added John.

“I-I mean, I was gonna suggest John, you go find a janitor’s uni somewhere and sneak a nitrous oxide machine out the emergency exit, but if you--”

“I can do that, too.”
“But can we fit it in my car with you in there and still not be seen?”

“We'll figure something out.”

Dr. Fort looked up at Little John with a look that signalled that he felt like John was fucking with him, and John replied with a Bugs-Bunny-esque smirk. The doctor turned back to Robin, and pointed as he said, “if a civilian you can trust asks you who it was who patched up their favorite local hero, you damn well better tell them it was Geoff Fort, M.D. But if it’s someone you don’t trust, or someone you don’t know if you can trust, or if it’s someone you know is less than three degrees of separation from a medical professional in this town... you damn well better keep your mouth shut. Comprende?”

“Oui oui, mon capitaine.”

“And if you get found out anyway, you’re always welcome to join us!” Little John added, keeping that grin on his face.

Dr. Fort just took a deep breath again and consulted his pager.

“Doctor, you know we appreciate everything you do,” Robin reassured, back to being genuine.

The St. Bernard just stared at him for a moment before turning back to the door. “Get the goods, John,” he said with a finger wag as he made his way toward the door. “I’ll see you boys later.”

“You’re the man, Geoffrey!” Little John exalted as Dr. Fort slid the glass door shut. Then the bear turned back to the fox and was looking a lot less enthusiastic. “For real though, you feeling better?” He was forcing himself to make eye contact and it was everything he could do to not start wigging out because of it.

“I will in due time, Johnny. I appreciate your concern.”

“...You never told me that a doctor thought you were going to die young,” Little John said, sounding almost lost. “And you never told me they had to put you on painkillers for most of your childhood because you were so freaking huge.”

“There’s a lot I haven’t told you, Johnny.” And how.

“Yeah. Why not?”

And all Robin could think to do was shrug. “Never wanted to.”

That was good enough of a reason for Little John to break eye contact. He turned toward the door and slid it open. “I’m gonna go get your drugs. I’ll be right back.” He walked out, closed the door behind him, and immediately shuddered in full view of the hospital staff in the hallway. He made his way for the exit to pick up the pills and hopefully clear his head.

And just like that, Robin was alone with his thoughts again. Now, the whole thing about finding out his body would no longer regenerate itself as it did in his youth and the tangential panic about the fidelity of his physical frame -- was that an entirely new and separate instance of “feeling persistent emotional panic in a persistently physically comfortable spot,” or was it just a continuation of the one from before the doctor walked in? Well, in any case, he would have plenty of time to ponder it.

And as he did ponder it, he realized there had been another one of those “half-examples” of it hiding right under his nose: it was the months after he lost Will. That was a half-example because
while it did cause him to feel panicked with thoughts of unnecessary demises while he sat perfectly still under the canopy of Sherwood Forest, it was not his own mortality that he was concerned with.

--III--

The surgery was a success, but dear God what a mess it was. For one thing, Dr. Fort incorrectly guessed what size of surgical masks would fit Nurse Johnny; trying to tape a paper towel over his nose and mouth wouldn’t stick, and he couldn’t breathe through a washcloth or dishtowel, so for lack of a better option, Dr. Fort wound up getting creative with a pair of tube socks, cutting them lengthwise and stapling them into a loop, wrapping them around the bear’s snout and fastening them tightly with some binder clips at the back of his head; two sacrificed socks turned into six when Little John puked in the first two pairs, both times the vomit leaking out and onto the floor, the second time almost getting into the incision in Robin’s arm, which was open at least four inches wide and stretched the length of his elbow to his wrist. John had insisted prior to the operation that he was fine looking at blood and innards, but afterwards stated that it was something about how unnaturally straight and clean the incisions were that made his stomach churn; he likened seeing the doctor scalpel through each individual layer of his friend’s skin and flesh to watching someone gut a fish, and the way that the doctor was cutting Robin up as he lay there perfectly still with his eyes closed and his chest barely breathing made the whole scene look not unlike an autopsy. Then there was the matter of the hair; not just the fur shaved off of Robin’s arm which they were pretty sure they had done a good job of cleaning up but kept magically reappearing on the operating table, but also all the facial fur that Little John’s sock-mask wasn’t covering, and individual hair follicle liable to fall out of his head and into the fox’s arm at any moment, as well as all the little fuzzies from the sock-mask itself; both of the latter two problems surely could have been avoided had the full-face paper scrub masks Dr. Fort had brought from the hospital just fit correctly over Little John’s gigantic head. And then there was the blood. It was simply everywhere. The doctor knew that there would be blood, and Little John wasn’t surprised considering what they were doing, but there was just so much of it that the dog was seriously wondering aloud whether this fox was a hemophiliac and didn’t have the courtesy to warn him. Blood was everywhere; it was on the pillows laid on the dining room table to make a bed suitable for the patient, and it was all over the sheets that swaddled him; it was all over the aprons the doctor and his nurse wore, and somehow wound up on their civilian clothes under that; it was on their pants, and their shoes, and their masks; constellations of maroon droplets stained the wood floor and some even made it to the walls; the towels the doctor had brought were soaked through and were quickly depleted, and he remarked that he would have to burn many of these ruined fabrics just so nobody would ever think he committed a murder. Even as they operated, blood was expected to fill the cavity of the operation site, but they could hardly take a full step forward before they had to stop to vacuum up the blood to clear the area out again; Dr. Fort grumbled angrily several times that this is precisely why he wanted to wait for the swelling to subside first.

And the procedure was not without its hiccoughs. The doctor had tried to move some table lamps around so that they would not be reliant solely on the light from the ceiling fan’s bulbs, which would surely be blocked by their own shadows when they leaned over the inspection area; alas, they simply could not find an angle to place the lamps where the light was helpful, so Little John had to spend much of the duration with his arm going numb as he held up an old Coleman camping lantern. Dr. Fort had also spent much of the buildup fretting that the laughing gas would not be enough to keep Robin sedated, but whereas surgeries of this scale typically require intravenous as well as gaseous anesthesia, the doctor hadn’t even thought about bringing an IV drip because anesthesia was not his area of expertise and he did not feel confident monitoring the IV machine while also performing surgery; instead, they cut the gas before the procedure had even begun, woke Robin up with smelling salts, and had him swallow one of the Merry Men’s amnesia pills,
followed by Little John chloroforming him just for good measure before hooking him back up to the gas.

Then there was the point when, shortly after attaching his third sock-mask after soiling his second one when he vomited at the sound of the doctor power-drilling a screw into his friend’s bones, Little John realized he desperately needed to relieve himself. The doctor demanded that John remove his mask, cap, gloves, apron, and paper scrub jacket before going to ensure that no particles attached themselves to his clothes and made their way into Robin’s open wound; Dr. Fort mentioned that if he were really precise about this, he would demand Little John strip nearly naked to erase any chance of cross-contamination in the operation space. John did doff his medical attire, but seemed profoundly distressed as he did, and the sounds coming from the bathroom as soon as the door closed made it clear that the bear wasn’t just being dramatic. When he came out of the bathroom ten minutes later, looking thoroughly embarrassed, the doctor made his nurse scrub his arms and paws with copious amounts of soap under his personal supervision; Little John had already washed with soap in the bathroom, something he had always made a point to do since his father and brother never did, but knowing the seriousness of the situation, he complied. Then just as soon as he had put his medical garb back on, a second wave of gastrointestinal distress came upon him. When he was washing his arms under the dog’s guidance the second time, he proposed a sound theory: it was a product of the ridiculous amount of caffeine in that Red Bull he drank. Unfortunately, the doctor ate immaculately and almost never experienced diarrhea himself, and as such he did not keep Imodium in his home nor a generic equivalent, and he surely couldn’t stop in the middle of the operation to run to CVS and go get some. They still had a long way to go; they had just begun drilling the plate onto Robin’s radius bone when the trouble began and they still had to finish that, clean it all out, sew it up, and repeat the whole process on the other side of his arm with his ulna. Therefore he and his afflicted nurse carried on through this dilemma, stopping every twenty minutes for ten minutes at a time so Little John could purge his body of what it perceived to be poison; at a certain point, Dr. Fort just said fuck it and told Little John to keep his shirt on when he went to the bathroom to save them time from him getting completely redressed again; at a certain other point, while the doctor was waiting for Little John to do his business once again, he was seriously considering going down the street and asking for the assistance of a 17-year-old neighbor who he knew was hoping to go into medicine when she got to college, and although he knew it would be supremely weird and inappropriate for an adult to go knocking on a teenage girl’s door in the dead of night, he was almost about to do it because it would have been supremely helpful to have a second assistant, Little John’s paws were too big to manipulate some of the instruments anyway, the kid sure could use the first-hand experience, and besides, the kid was a notorious night-owl and it was summer break, so she was probably still awake anyway, but as Dr. Fort made his way to the door he realized that the sun was already coming up and it wasn’t night anymore, and that was the only thing that stopped him from soliciting the neighbor kid’s assistance.

It was about eight in the morning when all was said and done. The doctor had completely exhausted all of the sanitizing saline solution that he had brought, terrifiedly certain that after all the mishaps and blatant disregard for SOP regarding hygiene, they had maximized the risk of infection; as he frantically cleaned and recleaned the affected area, he dictated a list of doctors and nurses for Little John to write down, in descending order of how confident Dr. Fort was that they would be cool with helping wanted criminals who targeted the wealthy, who might be able to help them if they should notice pus oozing out of Robin’s cast in the coming days if he himself wasn’t available to help them. He asked Little John to mop up the floor, sponge off the table, and throw all the sheets and towels in the laundry machine while he laid Robin out on his kitchen counter, wrapped his arm in bands of cotton, and wrapped a thick layer of green fiberglass (the doctor figured Robin would appreciate that color choice) around that, running the bounded arm under the kitchen sink so it would meld and setting it out to dry; the patient had begged for a cast that
allowed him to freely use his elbow, so the doctor granted his request, getting as close to the elbow with the fiberglass as he could without impeding its motion but also without failing to cover the stitched area. He had Little John carry Robin -- who at this point had been off of the nitrous oxide for twenty minutes but was still out like a light -- up to his guest room to put him to sleep, and insisted Little John crash in the doctor’s own bed. John was worried about the fact that Robin wasn’t waking up, but Dr. Fort insisted that they had done everything the best they could and Robin was likely just fine, just needing some rest, but added more ominously that even if there was something keeping him unconscious, there was nothing they could do about it just yet. The doctor made his trip to the pharmacy, buying some anti-diarrheal pills for Little John as well as a single-serving sleeve of Oreos for Robin when he woke up, seeing as the guy had bled enough that the doctor might as well give him the standard blood-sugar-replenishing treat given to blood donors. Dr. Fort came home, left the pills and the cookies on the kitchen table, and immediately collapsed crying on his couch, wondering whether he had made the ethically correct decision. He eventually passed out sometime around nine-thirty in the morning.

At a quarter to two in the afternoon, Dr. Fort woke up and went to wake his guests. Robin came to groggily, saying that he felt like he had slept for a week but still didn’t have enough energy, and complaining that his arm seemed to be throbbing. The doctor administered more Tylenol and Advil and had him eat the cookies, and since Robin hadn’t eaten for nearly a day, he did not deny the offer. Dr. Fort then woke up Little John to bring him to see Robin and show him that everything seemed to be alright, all the while still warning about the risk of a delayed infection as well as lecturing about all Robin could and could not (mostly could not) do with his arm through the end of July.

Then he mentioned almost as an afterthought that he had an hour to fight his way through traffic all the way across town and get back to Bethlehem by 3 for another twelve-hour shift in the ER. He said that he could give them a ride back west (though they would have to come back one night to help him sneak the laughing gas machine back into the hospital), and if traffic cooperated and he could get to Georgetown early, he could probably drop them off at Sherwood. He did express concern for Little John’s seating arrangement, as larger mammals squeezing haphazardly into their smaller friends’ vehicles was rather common but still not exactly legal, so the doctor was hoping that he wouldn’t get pulled over for having a passenger not wearing a seatbelt, but John and Robin agreed that if that should happen, the dog should just flash his hospital ID and say he was trying to get these guys to the ER, ASAP. Now bashfully excited by the prospect of being sneaky, the St. Bernard shepherded his patient and nurse back to his Escalade.

And the doctor almost did need to try to be sneaky as he found himself driving down 50th Street toward the hospital.

“...Aw, God, there’s a pig two cars behind me,” Dr. Fort muttered under his breath.

“So?” asked Little John, who was laid out on his stomach over two rows of collapsed seats with his rump still squeezed against the roof of the cabin, his head resting on his crossed arms and popping out between the driver’s and passenger’s seats.

“Look.”

Little John turned and tried to look out the rear window past his own mass. “Oh, you mean a cop!”

“Yeah, exactly! I thought that’s what you guys called cops.”

“Wh--!? Doc, we’re not Alan. That sounds like something he would say.”
“Yeah, if Alan were with us,” Robin added, “he would have taken the chance to ransack all the nice things in your house… or perhaps we would never have even made it to your house because he wouldn’t have allowed us to associate cordially with a man who takes home a hefty paycheck.” His head was starting to clear up, but he still would be in no mood for robbing today; his arm felt like a robotic spider had laid metallic eggs inside of it.

“Yeah, if Tuck had gotten sick a year later, Alan probably wouldn’t have been around for it, just to avoid you and your colleagues.”

“Well, I’m flattered that you think I’m one of the good rich people,” said the doctor, “even if the other rich people don’t let me hang out with them anyway.”

“Well hey man, we’re always going to appreciate everything you’ve done to help us out over the years.” Little John bumped Robin’s shoulder with his nose. “Right, Rob?” If there was one good thing about witnessing all that blood and gore during the surgery, it was that it thoroughly took John’s mind off that unsettling dream he’d had.

“Hey, it’s been my pleasure,” Dr. Fort answered before Robin could reply.

“This Cadillac’s a bit posh, though,” Robin said groggily; his head still wasn’t completely clear, and he was still liable to say whatever crossed his mind, social graces be damned.

“Wh-whaddaya mean?” asked the doctor.

“It’s just a bit excessive, you know?” The way he talked made the other two feel like they were the ones in a semi-dreamlike state instead of him. “Like… we could have done something good with the money…”

“Rob, are you falling asleep again?” Little John asked.

“Hey,” Dr. Fort protested, “like I said, I’m the only doctor at that hospital who doesn’t drive a convertible! Just let me have this one nice thing without making me feel guilty!”

“To be fair, Doc, you didn’t say that,” said John, “you said you were too small for a big sports car and too big for a medium sports car.”

“Well the sentence wouldn’t have made any sense if I included that detail, so I hoped you would put the pieces togeth—!”

BEEEEEP!

“Ya got the green, Doc.”

“Shit, you’re right,” he muttered as he pressed the accelerator. “Hopefully that doesn’t get the cop’s attention.” He was silent for a moment. “Sorry I freaked out like that.”

“Hey, Doc, you’re perfectly mellow-yellow ninety percent of the time, but between the ‘pig’ thing and you immediately getting defensive about the Cadillac, sometimes that sheltered little nerd with his nose buried in a medical textbook still comes out.”

“Well, hey, as long as you guys and the rest of the world don’t think that neurotic little shit is who I really am.”

“Everything we are is who we really are, Doc,” said Little John; the doctor could hear in his voice that he was suddenly much more serious. “But I’m not judging; just because that’s who you are
now doesn’t mean that’s who you’re gonna be forever. And it takes a long, long time to become
the people we want to be -- God knows I still ain’t there -- but what’s important is that we keep
trying to change for the better. Right?”

Dr. Fort snuck a glance at Little John’s face resting on the center console before turning back to
the road. “R-uh-right.” He could tell that the bear had said that to convince himself of what he was
saying just as much as he was trying to convince him.

And John knew that the doctor knew, but he wasn’t embarrassed to be found out. If anything, he
was hoping that that made it clearer that the doctor reminded him of himself and that he was
speaking from a place of empathy, all without him having to destroy any semblance of subtlety and
come right out and say so. As they say, sometimes giving advice can be better than receiving it if it
makes you own what you’re saying. Little John nudged Robin with his snout again. “Right, Rob?”

Robin had passed out again.

“Doc, are you sure it’s okay that he keeps passing out?” John asked.

Without taking his eyes off the road, the doctor grabbed Robin by the shoulder and shook him.
“C’mon, Robin, wake up!”

“Hrmrhm?” Robin grumbled.

“Drink some of your Coke.” The three of them had stopped for food at a Wendy’s along the way;
the doctor would usually never consume junk food himself, let alone encourage others to consume
it, but all of them were famished and weren’t going to be picky.

“He got a Sprite,” John corrected.

“Wha--? Then drink some of my Coke!” The doctor picked up his cup and held it out in Robin’s
general direction. “C’mon, ya idiot, you need the caffeine! Why’d you get a decaf soda?”

“Hey, Doc, don’t call my buddy an idiot when you know his head’s fucked up and he can’t make
sound decisions,” shot Little John. “Hey, maybe you’re the idiot for forgetting he got a Sprite
when you took his fucking order at the drive-thru and you could have forced him to get a Coke
anyway!”

“I just used modern-day magic to fix your friend’s arm! Does that sound like something an idiot
would do?” Somewhere during the doctor’s sentence, Robin took the cup with his good hand, drew
unenthusiastically from the straw a few times, and let his head fall back against the car seat with
his eyes closed. The doctor continued: “And I did it all for free! You ought to be nicer to me!”

“That skittish little nerd’s coming out again, Geoffrey. Is this the kind of person you want to be?”

“No, but I don’t need you challenging me every two minutes in ways that make me default back to
that!”

“Every decision we make is a challenge to be who we want to be, Doc. It’s not just me giving you
challenges. It’s the world itself. Can you handle them?”

“I drank some of the Coke,” Robin muttered sleepily, his closed eyes still facing the roof.

“I didn’t mean to be so harsh on you, Robin,” said the doctor, “but we need to get some food and
liquid in you to get you running again. Even if it is this trash.”
“The kid didn’t even finish his chicken nuggets,” Little John noted as he raised his head to get a better vantage point into the bag leaking grease into the fox’s lap.

“Robin, finish your chicken nuggets, you need to eat something.”

“Aw, you’re not me mum…” the Yorkshireman grumbled.

“I’m sorry, did Mr. Class-and-Elegance right here just say ‘me mom’?”

“His old British-Redneck accent’s coming out,” Little John said. “That usually only happens when he’s really drunk or really, really tired.”

“Hey, we’re all tired. When you guys get back to your camp, just go back to sleep for as long as you want to. Doctor’s orders.”

“I didn’t want to eat the chicken nuggets because I usually take food to my mouth with me right ‘and and the fact that I couldn’t do that made me lose me appetite,’” Robin mumbled nonchalantly as though the last couple of sentences hadn’t happened. Then he seemed to nod off again.

“Fine, then if you won’t eat the chicken nuggets, I will!” Little John said as he reached over to grab the yellow paper bag.

“Robin,” said the doctor, “you can still use your right hand to pick up little stuff like chicken nuggets, just not, like, anything bigger than a stick of butter. Alright?” A moment passed. “Did he fall asleep again?”

“Not for long,” Little John said as he clambered his arms over the crests of the seats so he could pick up the soda cup with one hand and force Robin’s head to its straw with the other. In his half-awake daze, Robin got the hint and obliged to start sucking.

“Hm. Better eat those chicken nuggets fast, because that cop’s still behind me. The ‘taking you to the hospital’ lie won’t make any sense if I bought you guys junk food.”

“You’re the boss,” Little John remarked as he wolfed down the remaining half-dozen nuggets in one mouthful.

Then as the vehicle passed under the Route 23 toll road and approached the six-way intersection where Sherwood Forest Road cut diagonally through the grid system, the doctor decided to be daring and decide if the cop was really following him. “You know what? I got sixteen minutes. I’m gonna take you guys all the way home.” he said as he merged into the right turn lane. “And would you look at that? Cop’s not even following me into this lane.”

“Aw, c’mon!” Little John protested through a stuffed mouth. “You couldn’t a’ done that five seconds ago so I could enjoy my food!?”

“Nope.” The doctor took his spot in the long line to turn right and the cop passed on his left without a glance.

About seven minutes later, they approached the spot where the city gave way to the kingdom of nature, and right beyond the last house and the last side street was the small parking area for that particular fraction of Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve.

“Robin, you awake?” Dr. Fort asked as he flicked on his turn signal.

“For now I am,” he said; despite his stoic tone, it was the most alert he had seemed all day. “I keep
having waves of wakefulness and fatigue, though, so who knows where I’ll be in five minutes.”

“Aw, I’ll carry him if need be,” said Little John. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“And I’ll pay you back one day for all those times you have, Johnny, I promise,” Robin said as he stared out the window, his face not matching the genuinity in his voice.

“Jesus, I wished I clicked as well with anyone on this planet as well as you two click with each other,” the doctor said as he turned into the parking lot.

“What can I say?” said Little John. “Two completely different walks of life, from two completely different places, happened to cross one another’s path and agreed to work together, and whaddaya know, we got lucky, and we click. We’re like John Stockton and Karl Malone -- except we both want to think we’re Karl Malone.”

“Well, Johnny,” said Robin, more ‘there’ than he was before, “I’ve no idea who either of those blokes are, so I’ll let you go ahead and be Mr. Malone.”

Little John didn’t say a word in reply, he just smiled a tired smile at him, secretly wishing that could be the case. But at a certain point, the silence got weird, so he turned back to the doctor and added, “So don’t feel bad about it, Doc. You haven’t done anything wrong, and we ain’t done anything right. We just got dealt lucky cards.”

“Duly noted. So Robin, one last time,” said the doctor, “I’m serious, unless your life is somehow endangered by not using it, don’t shoot that bow and arrow for… at least a week, preferably two -- no, preferably six or eight, but I honestly don’t think you’re gonna do that.”

“Now now now, good Doctor! I’m not stubborn due to ignorance, I’m stubborn due to diligence!” Robin declared, seeming back to his regular self for a moment. “I’ll promise you this: with every decision I make regarding my arm, I will, whenever possible, stop and consciously think about your advice.”

“Hey man, you don’t have to promise anything to me. This is your health we’re talking about here.” The doctor seemed like he was completely done with having this conversation. “If you wanna rush your own recovery because you’re not resourceful enough to find ways to work around your injury, then that’s up to you, man, but at a certain point, there are injuries and disabilities that no amount of money or expertise can solve.”

And Robin wasn’t completely content with the doctor’s tone. “I… have to say, that was a rather sudden shift from compassion to condescension.” It was specifically reminding Robin of the woman at the DC DMV who proctored his first attempt at a driver’s license road exam, who -- after Robin made a bunch of little mistakes throughout the exam and apologized at the end, citing his confusion between British and American traffic customs and bad habits he’d picked up from more experienced motorists on both sides of the ocean -- chastised him for apologizing, saying “it’s your test.”

Dr. Fort pulled into a parking spot, threw the car in park, and turned to face Robin. “Then don’t treat my professional advice like it’s a fucking joke.” He turned off the ignition and unbuckled his belt so he could more easily turn in his seat to face Robin. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Robin, this morning you basically forced my hand into doing something I didn’t feel comfortable doing -- and quite frankly, I’m still not sure I made the right decision. And now I’m trying to give you medical advice for your own good, and you’re acting like everything’s normal and acting all James Bond like you always do, going, ‘oh, my good sir, if it’s convenient for me in my noble mission, I’ll follow your orders’ -- motherfucker, just say yes! And if you’re not going to, then lie to me!”
Little John was simply watching the scene unfold. He thought the doctor was making good points, but he was being a dick about them. Quite frankly, he was disappointed in the way both of them were behaving.

“And you.” Much to John’s surprise, the dog had now turned to face him. “I know, I know, I’m spazzing out and acting like an anal little bitch right now, but--” -- and he turned back to Robin -- “-goddammit, if you’re not going to give me your respect when I’m doing everything I can to earn it legitimately, then I’m gonna call you out and start demanding it, alright?”

“Doctor, I have the utmost respect and gratitude for--”

“Then act like it!” Dr. Fort threw his hands up as he yelped. “Follow my orders and don’t be a cheeky little fuck about them. Just do them. There’s a time and place for you to act like Joe Fucking Cool, but it’s not all the time, always! There are times to be anal little nerds about things and take them seriously, and one of those times is now, alright?”

The three of them were all silent for a minute, and as Geoff and Robin stared one another down, Little John stared only at Dr. Fort, lamenting that they wouldn’t have a moment to have a private conversation about how much he was relating to a lot of what the doctor was saying -- and yet not necessarily the way he was saying it.

“Well, I apologize for my inappropriate attitude,” Robin finally said, the words coming out of his mouth slowly and deliberately.

“Oh… no?”

“I mean, I think if you said what you said with more of the tone he uses, he probably would have been more likely to listen to you. Tell me, Doc, do you like standup comedy?”

“Uh… w-what does that have to do with anything?”

“Real life is a lot like standup comedy; it’s all about knowing your audience.”

“For what it was worth, the doctor seemed touched by the bear’s affirmation of faith. “Uh, w-- well, thanks, John, that, uh… h-hey, I-I appreciate it! I-I tell you what, I’ll do that, and I’ll do it for you.”

“I have faith in you -- that line sounded so damn campy, but since he was effectively trying to learn leadership on the fly, that cheesy line seemed as good a place as any to start.

For what it was worth, the doctor seemed touched by the bear’s affirmation of faith. “Uh, w-- well, thanks, John, that, uh… h-hey, I-I appreciate it! I-I tell you what, I’ll do that, and I’ll do it for you.”
Little John was not expecting that. Holy shit, did that just actually work? Well, okay, the part where he got him to agree to try to better himself worked; the part where his subject succeeded was yet to be determined.

Dr. Fort turned to address John and Robin simultaneously. “Okay, so, before I let you guys go, you guys still got the Tylenol and Advil?”

Neither of them answered.

“...They’re... we left them at my house, didn’t we?”

“Aww, don’t worry, Geoffrey, we’ll get more!” John insisted. “They sell them at every gas station in America, don’t they?”

“Yeah, but I’m just thinking about whether or not he might eventually need something stronger if those two in tandem don’t do the trick.” He turned back to his patient. “Robin, how are you feeling right now?”

“Er, quite honestly... I was trying not to complain, but the pain is getting worse the more I think about it. And I am starting to think more about it.”

“Goddammit, that’s what I was worried about.” He checked his watch. “Shit! I’m already late. I can’t drive you guys to a 7-Eleven.”

“We’ll find ‘em somewhere,” Little John insisted. “If anything, I can put him back in our safehouse and I’ll go get some myself.”

The doctor just looked worried. After a moment of staring at Robin’s arm, he leaned over and pulled open the glove compartment in front of Robin, and pulled out two small pill bottles. He placed them in Robin’s hands. “Here. Take my car stash. They’ll last you through the next day, at least.”

Robin shook the bottles with his good arm. “They sound almost empty.”

“They are. You’re gonna have to get more soon. And when you do, just for posterity, Motrin and Advil are literally just brand names of the exact same thing -- actually, if possible, just go with generic ibuprofen; FDA standards mean they have to legally be exactly the same as the name-brand stuff. And Tylenol is acetaminophen. You guys getting all this?”

“I already forgot what Tylenol’s called,” said Little John.

“Then just read the Tylenol bottle and look for a long word starting with an A, and look for that to save a few bucks. But whatever you get, just be careful to take them as sparingly as possible, not just because you can OD on them, and not just because they can fuck up your liver, but also because some recent research suggests that non-steroid painkillers actually slow or even prevent bone healing. They actually had to take a few drugs off the market for that a few years back.”

“So you’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

“Basically.”

“I’ve been through worse pain as a lad,” said Robin, “I’ll manage.”

“And I’m not trying to knock you down, Robin, but as you said, you’ve never even had a bone fracture before, and I’ve got to say, growing pains are a lot different from the pain of having a
dozen screws drilled into your bones. You don’t know how well or how badly you’re gonna handle this.”

“Alright then, Doctor, tell what I’m to do if I can’t handle it?”

The doctor checked his watch again. “Fuck, I-- I shoulda woken you guys up earlier. Alright, so--” And then he took a deep breath while his eyes looked nervously out their left corners away from the others. “So then we’d be getting into opiates and narcotics. If we’d been doing this operation legitimately, I probably would have given you a ‘scrip for very, very small doses of either oxycodone or paracetamol to go with Advil, with orders to cut the hard stuff and swap it out with Tylenol after two-three weeks tops, because those drugs -- we call them the Big Three, the name brands are OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin -- you know how the old saying is that something’s as addictive as crack? Well, they should be saying crack’s as addictive as this stuff. Me and my colleagues’ve had several conversations about how with every passing year, we’re still amazed the stuff is legal.”

“And Doctor, I respect your medical wisdom enough to swear to you that I would consume these responsibly--”

“Yeah, you say this now. But the research’s been done. These things relieve pain by making your brain release dopamine -- and that’s all addiction is. Your brain likes dopamine, so if consuming something releases it, your brain’s gonna demand more. And I’m no psychologist or psychiatrist or whatever, but I know enough about those fields to know that… we really aren’t as in-control of our brains as we think we are.”

“The doctor’s right, Rob,” Little John added, and Robin was thrown off by how somber the bear suddenly seemed again. “My old man was on Oxy. You don’t want to be on Oxy. Not if you can help it.”

“You see? He knows,” said the doctor. “John, if you don’t mind me asking, why’d they put your dad on Oxy?”

“He was already a giant, so he already had chronic back pain, but then he wrenched his back at work. And at first, I thought it was great because my mom would give him a pill and he’d stop beating the shit outta me and my brother for the night, but then after a few years, I realized, wait, when he’s sober, he’s hitting twice as hard as he used to, and twice as often. That stuff fucks with your mind, Rob.”

Robin visibly regretted pushing the issue. “I’m sorry you had to go through that, Johnny. But-- I’m sorry, Doctor, I’m genuinely confused; why did you bring up the possibility of stronger drugs if you think they’re not worth the risk?”

“Because I’m stupid,” Dr. Fort said flatly. “I shouldn’t have. But I was thinking about how it usually goes that we start you on ibuprofen and an opiate and then swap out the opiate with Tylenol to wean you off the hard stuff, so I was wondering if I was violating the Hippocratic Oath by forcing you to skip a step.”

“Well my apologies if it seemed as though I were mocking you for it earlier, but I really do greatly appreciate all the thought you clearly put into the well-being and comfort of your patients.”

But the St. Bernard was still lost in thought. “I mean… if you guys can get your hands on some, go for it if you need it, but maybe get a razor blade and cut the pills into quarters or something, and for the love of God, watch your back, because all three of them are controlled substances--”
“Wait, wait, wait, stop stop stop stop stop…” Little John interrupted. “…I thought you were offering to help us get them.”

“What? Oh. No. God, no. I’m a doctor, not a pharmacist. I can’t just throw pills at you and send you on your merry way. You guys are on your own for this one.”

John looked at Robin. “Well hey, we have to go refill our night-night pills with Thor, maybe he can whip something up that does the trick without the nasty side effects.”

“You keep mentioning this Thor guy; should I know who this is? Is he somebody I should meet?”

“Come to think of it,” said Robin, “with your expertise at practicing medicine and his expertise at making it, you two could likely perform some miracles together!”

“Plus it would probably be good for your self-esteem to meet him,” John added. “He’s kind of like the, like… he’s kind of like the skittish nerd version of you, except all the time, and he’s not trying to get better.”

“Actually, I’d argue whereas Geoffrey here would go off on someone who’s making him feel insecure, Thor wouldn’t necessarily have the self-esteem to do even that.”

“Ooh, good point there. Hell, could Thor even be a doctor since it requires talking to patients? Could he handle that?”

“Sounds like a mess,” the doctor quipped. “But this guy would seriously need to be a miracle worker if he could make an opioid-equivalent painkiller that isn’t addictive, because like I said, as far as modern medicine knows, the part that makes it addictive is the part that means it’s doing its job right at all. But hey, uh… I’m super late for work. But if you need me, you know where to find me, and if you can’t find me, you still have the list of friendly doctors I gave you, please please please for the love of God don’t overexert yourself, and, uh… yeah. I think we’re good here.”

The doctor got out of the car, went around to open Robin’s door for him, and then to the back of the car to open the trunk and let Johnny out. They exchanged sentiments of gratitude one last time, and as Robin started his way off toward the forest’s walking trail, Little John stayed behind for a moment to catch a word with the doctor.

“Hey, thanks again for taking care of Rob for me,” he said.

“Oh, anytime,” Dr. Fort said, getting the hint that the bear had more to say.

“Listen, the guy gets on my nerves sometimes, too -- like we talked about, there’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance. But honestly, the guy’s so used to winning all the time that he doesn’t really know how to lose. Or-- how to handle it when he does lose -- you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya, I hear ya.”

“And in that way, I almost feel bad for him. But hey… maybe if he wins all the time, there’s something we can learn from him. I mean, I wouldn’t want to be exactly like the guy, but… honestly, I think we could all stand to learn at least a little something from everybody else. You just gotta do more critical thinking for figuring out some people’s lessons than others.”

“Hm… I like that worldview.”
“Johnny!” Robin called from the trailhead. “You coming, old boy?”

“In a sec, Rob!” John turned back to the doctor. “But remember what I said. Every single decision we make, we gotta choose to be who we want to be, not just who we’re used to being. It’s a pain in the ass, but it’s the only way we’re ever gonna get into the habit of getting better.”

“You make a good argument, John. I appreciate it.”

“And I appreciate you, man. But remember: we’re both in this together. I’m still trying to figure out who the fuck I am, too, and God knows that little limey bastard makes me feel really, really bad about myself for not being as great as he is, but now I’m trying to tell myself that I’d be better off learning from him than resenting him; I just hope I’m right.”

“Well, hey, man, good luck on getting your own head sorted out.”

“And same to you. Hey, I gotta say, you’re already a lot easier to talk to than you were when we first met you.” Little John extended his arm for a handshake, and when the doctor reciprocated he pulled the dog in for a one-arm hug. “You take care of yourself, brother.”

“You too, Johnny,” the doctor said as he was let go.

And as Little John began walking away, he added, “And we’re serious! If you lose your licensing over this, hit us up! We’ll take good care of you! And we could use a new member -- God knows you’re healthy enough!”

In the world that Little John knew, that entire conversation would have been regarded as the pinnacle of sappiness. But irony and sarcasm weren’t going to teach either of them anything, so he had to give genuinity a chance. Robin had done much to inspire him to be the best person he could be (with mostly successful results), and as much as John would have liked to return the favor when Robin clearly could have used it right about then, he knew that was going to be a tough sell with that stubborn son of a gun, so the best he could do was try to pay it forward.

And the doctor probably wouldn’t have immediately forgotten Little John’s lessons had he not immediately had something happen to him to preoccupy his mind with worry. As he was driving back toward the exit of the parking lot, a police cruiser hung a right from the main road and came right toward him, with three more cars in tow; all four of them were sporting fresh new decals that read “NOTTINGHAM COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE”. It was the oddest thing; through the windshield of the lead car, he could see what appeared to be a squirrel driving while seated on some sort of scaffolding, whereas in the passenger seat was a grossly overweight gray wolf, looking back at the doctor and glaring at him as wolves always seem to glare at dogs.

“Aw, shit,” the doctor murmured to himself as the procession passed. “Run, boys.”

--III--

“So Johnny?”

“Yeah?”

“Please explain to me where that gun came from.”

“...Found it.”

“Where?”
“...It was under the van.”

“The van? The van we’ve been living in?”

“The very same.”

“Just… sitting on the ground, under the van?”

“Well, it definitely wasn’t taped to the bottom of the chassis.”

“Well, I don’t know that. It may have been. That’s why I asked.”

“Hm, alright, fair enough.”

“How long have you had it?”

“Since we first found the van.”

“When the lads were there?”

“Mmhmm.”

“...It couldn’t have been--?”

“I refuse to believe that the gun was theirs. They don’t seem to be the type.”

“...And I don’t disagree, but the thought does cross one’s mind.”

“Don’t worry, I get it. But I need you to understand that I wasn’t planning on using it unless it was an emergency. And that was an emergency.”

“And I appreciate that you wouldn’t start waving around a gun willy-nilly and I appreciate further the way you saved my arse yesterday, but dear God, Johnny, I wish you would have told me, because when I heard that gunshot, my first thought was, ‘oh, Little John doesn’t have a gun, so it must be someone else, and they surely meant to hit me instead of him.’”

“And I’m sorry if I made you piss your pants in fear and confusion, but I was damned sure you would have told me to get the fuck outta here with that thing.”

“And I probably would have, to be quite honest, but at the end of the day, I respect your ability to make your own decisions.”

“...Well, quite frankly, Rob, I don’t always feel like you respect my ability to make my own decisions. But I know, we’ve already had this conversation. I’m sure you don’t want to have it again.”

“I know we’ve had this conversation, Johnny, but I need to stress, surely you don’t think that just because I say something with conviction that that means I think that I’m infallible.”

“I do think you think you’re infallible when you say stuff like that. And I’d wager most people do, too. And you know what? That can be a good thing when the people you’re talking to don’t have any strong opinion about it, like ‘oh, how are we gonna fix this problem?’ ‘I dunno.’ ‘I dunno.’ ‘I dunno.’ ‘Hey, I’m Robin Fuckin’ Hood, and I have a plan!’ Then saying things like that works. But if someone’s got dissenting opinions -- or, hell, if they have the same opinion and they just want some fucking credit for it -- yeah, it’s gonna sound like you’re saying ‘my way or the highway.’”
“...Johnny, surely you aren’t suggesting I start… acting less confidently so others feel less… I
dunno, is ‘intimidated’ the word?”

“I like how this conversation is having the exact same flow as the one we had in the tree, but
different subjects. ‘Hey, Rob, I feel worse about myself because you never tell me when you’re
feeling bad.’ ‘Johnny, are you saying you want me to be, I dunno, more vulnerable?’”

“But surely that’s not what you’re suggesting? That I specifically act less confidently?”

“...I don’t know honestly. Part of me wants to pick you up and start shaking you and say ‘yes, yes,
a million times, yes!’ but another part of me doesn’t want to… doesn’t wanna take the side of
being anti-confidence. All I know is this, Rob: people are insecure. Maybe you’re not--”

“I have my insecurities, Johnny, you know that.”

“Well you hide them all too well so it seems like you don’t have any. But as I was saying, people
are insecure. I know I’ve said all these things before, but for the sake of my point, let me just
repeat: confidence, charisma, charm, courage, uh, coolness, character. All things I hear people
say about you -- hell, let’s add, uh, cerebralness just to make it The Seven C’s. Is that a word? Or
cleverness, pick whichever one you like better. And come to think of it, replace character with
content of character -- no no, conviction. Confidence, charisma, charm, courage, coolness,
cleverness, conviction, there. And maybe you learned them somewhere, maybe you’re born with
it, maybe it’s Maybelliene, but one way or another, this is a list of qualities people say are in you --
and they’re qualities I never felt I had, qualities I always wanted, qualities I’m still working really,
really hard to try to work on and earn legitimately. And I’m gonna go out on a limb and say most
people aren’t lucky enough to have all of The Seven C’s. So when you ball up all of them and…
just exist with all of those thing in your aura, that can be majorly fucking useful for winning over
people who are completely content with who they are, or at least people who’re content with who
they are in a given moment, but you try that on someone who wishes they could be more like you
and hates the fact that they can’t? You’re just gonna make them focus on how much they don’t
like themselves. And I’d wager that most people are more like me -- at least some of the time.
Now, I’ve seen you, so I know your ways work on people more often than not, but just like how
you rubbed The Doctor the wrong way, you can rub me the wrong way sometimes when… Jesus, I
do n’t know where I’m going with this. Maybe I just hate myself too much and I’m the weird one
for being so insecure that I feel ‘intimidated’ by your ‘confidence’, but even if I am, well, shit,
that’s our reality, we can’t pretend it isn’t, so what are we gonna do about it? It’s just like I told
Geoff -- know your audience.”

“Well, I’m certainly fully awake now.”

“Hell, you’d better be. I’d better not be preaching to deaf ears.”

“...I think I feel more like you do, more than you think I do.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I mean I also feel insecure to a fault about who I--”

“I know that’s what you meant, motherfucker, I meant that the idea of that doesn’t make any sense!
You can say all you want that you have your insecurities, too, but your actions don’t reflect that! I
don’t know anyone who would describe you as being anything short of one hundred percent sure of
yourself, about damn-near everything... at least everything that matters... You know what? ...I just
had a thought. All those people who adore you -- specifically the ones who adore you more than
me -- they admire your greatness because they just assume that you overcame things to become
who you are. But they don’t really know you. I’ve lived with you, for seven years, and I barely know what those things you overcame are. I got something about a shitty father figure, and some class-conflict thing, and today I learned that you, Mr. Fucking Alpha-Male Fox Specimen, were so goddamn tall as a kid it constituted a fucking health scare. That’s it. That’s all I have to go off of. I used to admire how great you were and I was happy to be known as your sidekick because I wanted to be near you so I could learn how to become great, just like you did; now I’m getting angry because you’re just being perfect so fucking effortlessly and I can’t figure out how you did it. I’m not impressed by your greatness like I used to be because I’m not so sure anymore that you ever did anything to earn it -- just like there are rich kids who inherit a bunch of money and never work for it, I’m starting to get pissed because I’m getting the impression that you were just born with all the genes for The Seven C’s and I’ve gotta work my ass off to be a fraction as great as you are -- or at least as everyone thinks you are. And as much as our society loves to pretend we admire people who worked hard for what they have, no, fuck nah, we admire people who were born to be great. People who were born to be great and just become greater. And that ain’t me… Do you see why I’m frustrated? Or do you think I’m a whiny little bitch like that cocksucker with the chainsaw and everybody else in this town seems to think of me?”

“...I suppose there is a lot I need to tell you. Maybe next time we’re stuck in one spot with nasty weather.”

“Well, then I’m praying for rain… I got a question.”

“Please.”

“Do you consciously make a point to treat me the way you want me to treat you?”

“...I’ve always tried to live by treating others as I’d wish to be treated -- barring exceptions like our enemies, of course, but even then I have my reservations about that, but I-I’m digressing -- but… I can’t say I consciously think through ‘am I treating Little John the way I’d want Johnny to treat me?’ Because the way you treat me is unique to you -- and that’s why I like you, Johnny. Because you’re different from me. You bring things into my life that I wouldn’t otherwise have. And I suppose I just always assumed the opposite is true: I treat you as my friend, but I do it in my own unique way. And I always just hoped that was what you liked about me.”

“Alright, alright, fair enough.”

“But is that what you like about me?”

“What is?”

“Whatever you would say makes me unique?”

“...Sometimes more than others.”

“I see.”

“I’m not saying no, Rob, I’m just saying that you bring your flaws to the table as much as your good things.”

“I know, I know… I suppose I was just hoping that I’d have grown enough as a person that my flaws wouldn’t be so apparent anymore.”

“Jesus, Rob, didn’t you listen to the doctor? If anything, you’ve grown too much as a person! Your wittle fox bones are stretched!”
“Heh… fair point, Johnny, fair point.”

“...I have a better question. Wait, fuck. Two, actually.”

“I welcome them.”

“Do you see me as an equal?”

“Absolutely. If anything, it hurts me that you feel that I don’t.”

“Splendid. Nice to see you’re making this about yourself, too. Second: do you regard yourself as the leader?”

“...Leader, of…?”

“Us.”

“...Well, shit, you’ve got me there.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I mean, in my defense, Johnny, I’m just sort of used to thinking myself as such after all those years—”

“I’m just not sure how you can reconcile saying you think we’re equals and saying you think you’re the leader of a gang of two.”

“As I said, Johnny, you got me fair and square. Though I would argue that we can still be equals as friends and people and still have our distinct roles as in this operation we’re running.”

“Welcome to America, where the first rule of workplace culture is that bosses aren’t supposed to be friends with their underlings in case they have to cut them loose for underperforming.”

“So I see.”

“Hey, I’ve got a radical idea!”

“More radical than Alan’s?”

“The Merry Men are over. We’re Robinhood’n’littlejohn now. And I’ll take one for the team and let my name be second on the branding. But we aren’t the same group we used to be, our dynamics aren’t the same, we don’t operate the same way that we used to… we’re not who we were. Time to start reflecting that.”

“And what if those lads decide to join us?”

“They won’t.”

“How are you so sure?”

“They shouldn’t. They’re fourteen. They should be dropping rocks off highway overpasses or making IEDs out of toilet bowl cleaner and Coke bottles, not hanging out with two guys in their thirties who keep almost getting killed and keep breaking out into long-winded conversations about how our little bromance isn’t turning out like we’d hoped.”

“...Well, for what it’s worth, Johnny, I have had sort of insecure feelings -- in this last week
especially -- that I’m not good at being a good friend.”

“...I… I acknowledge that you’ve said this. And I-- different parts of me want to say two different things. One part of me wants to say, ‘hey, I’m sorry if I made you feel that way about yourself, I appreciate all the times you’ve been there for me, I know you’re doing your best’... and the other part of me wants to say, ‘good, you should feel bad, either you’re not trying your best or your best won’t do, I shouldn’t have to tolerate this, just be better.’ Okay? And instead of committing to one or the other, I’m just gonna tell you that they’re both in my head and I want to say both of them, and that’ll be that.”

“...I understand completely.”

“...You know, honestly, we can probably both do things to be better as people… God help me if I can figure out what those things are, though…”

“Hear, hear.”

“Heh, never thought I’d live to see the day when you’re hear-hearing me.”

“There’s a first time for everything, Johnny.”

“...So how’s the arm?”

“Absolutely knackered.”

“In English?”

“Dreadfully knackered, old chap! Cor blimey, cheerio!”

“In American English?”

“Now ya’s listen here, John-Boy, my arm ain’t hurt this dag-nasty since’n the day I pulled out a corn-cob from my tractor’s lady-parts. Yee-haw! Roll Damn Tide!”

“I’ve taught you well. Nice to see you back in good spirits.”

“But in all seriousness, I’m going to take some more medicine as soon as we get to the van.”

“...Rob, didn’t you just take some when we started walking?”

“Yes, and it’s worrying me that they’re not having any effect.”

“Well, go easy on them. How many you got left?”

“At last count, two of one and three of the other.”

“Fine, one more of each at the van, just to put you to sleep, then one more of each when we wake up. If we go to bed now, we can probably wake up in time to get to Thor’s place before he jags off and goes to bed around sunrise.”

“It will be a miracle if we can sleep in that van in the sweltering heat.”

“Hey, if anything, the heatstroke might knock us both out quick.”

“Yes, but then I’ll be concerned about us never waking up.”
“Well… as much as I would like to… I don’t think it’s safe to sleep here.”

They stepped out into the clearing and assessed the further damage. There were some spots of grass that were stained a dark color, but to an unaware observer it may simply have seemed to be dirt rather than blood. But what they were really worried about was the deep, dark gash sliced right into the base of the Major Oak; although the tree was immense and its trunk was wide, the cut still went a solid quarter of the way through.

For a moment, they simply stared at it. Little John was the first to speak.

“Trees… don’t survive that, do they?”

“I… don’t believe they do. I-I… I think it won’t be immediate. But it would only be a matter of time.”

“We… we can’t…”

“…stay here… anymore.”

They kept on staring, trying to come to terms with what they were looking at. The scene was doubly upsetting; it was like they had both watched the death of a beloved friend and witnessed the end of an era they thought would never end. Even if the tree could survive so many of its arteries being severed, the authorities surely knew for a fact by now that this was the exact spot that they called home.

Without saying a word to one another, they both simultaneously stepped back from the tree and looked around the rest of the clearing. They saw the branches they hung clothes on, the pits and stands they cooked on, the stumps they sat and made merry on, the homemade benches they played music on, and the grass they laid on as they stared at the sky, watching the clouds go by, talking to one another about how even if they died that night, they would always have had enjoyed the moments like these, and wasn’t it just so awesome to be alive? Wasn’t life itself just amazing? Wasn’t it great that they had been so fortunate to find friends such as each other and spend the little moments like these appreciating what nobody else takes the time to appreciate? Wasn’t it incredible just to be?

They looked around the clearing. Even though they had known every nook and cranny of this forest like the back of their hand for years, they still wanted to make a point to take in every single detail of this clearing they could, just in case there was some small thing they had always missed, for they did not know how soon it would be before all of this was nothing more than a pleasant memory.

“Oh,” said Little John, looking at a tree about twenty feet outside of the clearing. “Before I forget.” He walked over to the tree and reached into a large knot hole, barely larger than his hand. He extracted a very familiar pistol and held it up for Robin to see. “Don’t worry, for emergency use only.” He started to stick the thing in the back of his pants, but then stopped and decided to open the barrel. “Four shots left. Hopefully we’ll never need to use a single one of them.” He closed the chamber and holstered the gun. “Do you even know how to shoot one of these?”

Robin shrugged coyly. “Hopefully, I’ll never have to!”

“I mean, if you can shoot a bow and arrow, you probably can’t be that bad,” John said as he walked over. “I mean, the aiming is different, but you still know the fundamentals of aiming in general, so you’re halfway there.”
“Good to know.”

“But yeah, I hid that thing away from camp just in case the cops rolled through here while we were out. I also put Will’s sword and the chainsaw up on the shelf.”

“Good thinking, Johnny.”

“Hm, come to think of it, I should probably check to make sure they haven’t found the shelf yet,” John said as he made his way over to the tree and started climbing. “So… how long after a tree dies is it dangerous to climb?” he asked as he ascended.

“Not sure myself, honestly. Strange as it sounds, you’re probably more of an outdoorsman than I am.”

“Hm. Well I’d bet by now, we’re more outdoorsmen than anybody we know!”

“I’d agree… You know, it’s ironic, the original Major Oak back in England is also in quite the state of disrepair.”

“Original Major Oak? There’s another one?”

“There is! The original Major Oak in the original Sherwood Forest outside the original Nottingham in the original England.”

“Is that what you named this after!?”

“That it is. Went to see the original Major Oak as a lad. After a few thousand years, it’s being held up by stilts, and it’s roped off. I’m fairly certain it’s a criminal penalty to touch it.”

“Wait… is that the tree from the Adam Bell story?” Little John was almost at the top.

“No, that’s the Grand Oak in Inglewood Forest near Carlisle. The Major Oak and Sherwood Forest are mostly known for pagan and druidic rituals a long time ago; entire forest is said to be haunted, the tree especially. But back when Adam Bell would have been running around, Sherwood Forest was much larger in scope and scale before we decided to start cutting into it!”

“Ooh, nifty. I was gonna say, it’d be pretty weird if our lives were exactly like Adam Bell’s right down to the little-shit details… Uh, yup! They’re still here, Rob! Safe and sound!”

“Splendid! Come on down, Johnny!”

Little John started making his way down the tree, but reached the ground a little more quickly than he was hoping.

“Oh, shit--”

“Johnny!”

**THUMP.** “Ow…”

“Johnny, are you alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, just a bruise, probably.”

“Thank goodness. Can’t have the both of us breaking bones, and heaven knows I can’t carry you back to--”
“Over here! I heard a loud noise from over here!”

“That-a-way!”

“Awww, hell,” Little John grumbled as he jumped to his feet.

“C’mon, Johnny, let’s go!” Robin ordered in a harsh whisper as he took off running due northwest.

“All the way to the junkyard!? We’ll never make it!”

“Well, I can’t climb a tree right now!”

“I hear them screaming at each other!”

“Wait!” Little John panted as he tried to catch up; like many of his species, he was a deceptively good runner for his size, but he never did learn the trick to running and speaking at the same time.

“There’s no time to wait!”

PPPPPbbbbb!

“Ronnie, don’t shoot your gun this far out, you fucking idiot! You might hit another civilian!” This voice had a familiar Southern twang to it.

“There’s really no time to wait!” Robin repeated.

“But I have… an idea!”

“No time for talking!”

“But Rob! …We’ll never… make it!”

“Not with that attitude, you won’t!”

It actually worked quite nicely; the exact moment that John had caught up to Robin was the exact moment he decided he was done being bossed around.

“Goddammit, Robin!” John grunted as he picked Robin up under the armpits and hugged him against his chest, and took a hard right back north.

“Johnny, what are you--!?"

“Shut the fuck up for once, will ya!?”

“I’m radioing for backup! They’ll surround the perimeter! ” said the same familiar voice. “They ain’t escapin’ again!”

And Robin, between the broken arm, lack of weaponry, and now being carried by a grizzly bear against his will, was feeling especially powerless. So he closed his eyes to try to get away from his present situation, and let Little John take him wherever he was going to take him.

All of it happened in what was probably less than a minute. At first, all Robin could hear was the sound of Johnny’s rushed footsteps, his labored breathing, and his heart thumping against his own back. Then he started hearing the voices coming closer. Then he could faintly hear the beeps of walkie-talkies and the crackly, staticky sounds of voices on the far end of the frequency. But then he heard the familiar and strangely comforting sound of rushing water.
He opened his eyes just as Little John had left the treeline and rushed out into the open toward the shoreline. Robin looked as far left and right as he could; he didn’t see any police around, at least not yet.

Little John slowed down as he carefully maneuvered along the narrow pathway between the water and the wall of rocks. With his size, they both got in the way of the falling water as they finally made it to the entrance of the cave, but as they entered the half-light of the cavern, a little moisture wasn’t going to bother them.

As John turned Robin around and leaned down to put him on his feet, he forgot about the curvature of the cave’s ceiling. “God, da--!” he yelped as he bumped his head, dropping Robin on his behind as he did.

“Argh!” Robin grunted as he landed. “Are you alright, Johnny?”

Little John collapsed on his own posterior and sat up against the wall of the cavern, catching his breath. “Yeah… I got a hard head… You alright?”

“Yes, I… should be good.”

“We’ll… we should be safe here. And… you can probably sleep here… without suffocating…”

“I, er… it really was a brilliant idea, Little John.”

“There! Now… will you fucking listen to me!?”

“I—I’m sorry Johnny, I’m not feeling myself, so when I heard them, I panicked, and you know I don’t usually panic like that, and I--” Robin realized he was stammering and calmed down for a second. “--If I hadn’t been so panicked, I probably would have been able to think about being more… fair to you, I suppose is the word.”

“Naw, naw… I get it…” Little John had mostly caught his breath by now, but now he was pausing in the middle of his sentences to find his words. “You had a legit reason to not be thinking straight. You’re off the hook… Oh, and by the way…” He reached for the back of his pants. “…if they do find us… we’re not completely defenseless,” he said as he held up the pistol, then put it on the ground between them. “Remember, with these you don’t have to accommodate for the weight of the ammo like you do with arrows. Shoot straight and Bob’s your uncle.”

“I’ll remember that, Johnny, but with my good hand busted up, I’ll leave that item to you.”

“Man, I’ve seen you shoot an arrow left-handed -- hell, you taught me how to shoot an arrow left-handed, and it turned out I was better at it that way! How’re you gonna tell me Mr. SuperFox can’t do with his left anything he can do with his right?”

“I can use bows and swords ambidextrously because I was taught how to do those two specific things ambidextrously,” he said rather modestly. “I am a mere mortal, Johnny.”

“Rob, you should probably lay down and I’ll keep watch. How’s your arm feeling now?”

“I’ll be honest, Johnny, all that blood flow is really putting pressure on my wounds.”

“Alright, screw it, take some more of the--”

“You guys still got eyes on them!?”
“Naw, but I found some pill bottles on the ground!”

Robin looked down at the pockets of the paper scrub pants they had put on him at the hospital to replace the ones that were soiled; sure enough, the pill bottles were no longer there. He looked up at Little John, who just looked somber.

The constant sound of the rushing water acted as a sort of white noise, which was likely the only thing that helped Robin eventually fall asleep. When Little John went to lay down about an hour after he last heard any signs of the police, he also tried to focus on the persistent hiss of the waterfall to take his mind off the sounds of the last person on Earth who still had his back whimpering in pain every few minutes until the sun had almost gone down, and to try his best not to let those whimpers remind him of the dream he’d had last night. They couldn’t wait until they woke.

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* So this was another chapter that got out of hand, so it gets cut in two at a logical stopping point, but this and Run with the Hunted, Pt. 2 ought to be regarded as one linear chapter (though I'm not necessarily sure it's coming next). Keep that in mind as themes from Pt. 1 carry over; hopefully the chapter title will make more sense that way. And if any of you heard me allude to a supporting O.C. coming in for this chapter… I wasn't even thinking about fleshing out Dr. Fort until it just sort of happened; you know how writing often goes in new ways you'd never expect. So yeah, it wasn't him, but he'll probably come back someday as well.

By the way, I just need to point this out. I was trying to think of a route number for the highway we first saw in Chapter 2, and I was brainstorming numbers, and I think "oh, I like the number 23, and I haven't used that as a significant number yet, let's see if there's a Delaware State Route 23 in real life." Turns out there is – and it takes roughly the same route as the one in this universe would. And then I remember that this is the 23rd chapter. The 23 enigma is real. You have been warned. Share this with your friends who're bored during the quarantine and stay safe out there. -Doby
Chapter Summary

An old video shows three girls playing a fabled board game in their mobile home.


The following is a transcript of a video provided to our editors by The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), a Warwick, Rhode Island-based paranormal investigation organization made famous for their television show Ghost Hunters, originally airing on the Sci Fi Channel. Our contact at TAPS (who wishes to go unnamed) said they were with the organization at the time that the video was submitted and was kind enough to share with us what they recalled about it. According to our contact, the team received the videotape in the mail shortly after the second season of Ghost Hunters began airing; the package’s return address was to a trailer park in Peach Creek, Delaware. The tape was sent without any sort of accompanying letter or explanation of its contents, and the crew was originally hesitant to watch the tape for fear that it was a prank and the tape’s contents were inappropriate or possibly even contraband. However, at the behest of Ghost Hunters’ producers, they were encouraged to view the tape anyway so as not to miss out on any opportunity for a good episode, as it was especially rare that prospective clients sent footage rather than simply a letter or an email. The footage depicts a supposed paranormal incident occurring in the kitchen of a private home, presumably a mobile home; in the video are three teenage girls who at first appear to simply be friends but who are soon clarified to be sisters, likely adopted: a coyote (“Lee”), an opossum (“May”) and a raccoon (“Marie”). The details of the encounter will be recounted in full in the transcription below. Our contact tells us that many members of the team watched the footage together and were divided on whether they were convinced of its authenticity, the skeptics claiming that the events were so “over-the-top” that it was either a clear fakery or the most convincing piece of evidence of the paranormal ever recorded, and for the sake of TAPS’ credibility (“which at that point was still intact,” our contact joked, after which they reiterated their request for anonymity), the group chose to err on the side of caution. However, many of those who believed in the authenticity of the video were also hesitant to pursue the case; some argued that the “poltergeist-like” nature of the event was such that there would be no replicable paranormal activity to record if an on-site investigation was launched, while others noted the teenage sisters’ “excessive roughhousing,” their explicit and “very politically incorrect” language, and their constant and frank discussion of their adolescent libidos and their attraction to boys and men of varying ages may have made the episode a particularly uncomfortable one to record and to watch and may have even made the episode hazardous for the crew to film if the home’s inhabitants regularly behaved as “reckless[ly]” as seen in the video. Our contact theorizes that Sci Fi Channel executives were unlikely to ever pursue the case for a television episode anyway as the show largely moved away from investigating private homes after its successful first season, but this person also notes that the team’s minds were effectively made up for them when they could not get into contact with a responsible adult at the residence.

VIDEO BEGINS

The timestamp reads “WED JUN 15 05 10:07 PM”. The camera is pointed at a refrigerator and some cabinetry. An opossum’s hand opens a high cabinet and the camera shifts quickly several times as it is placed on a cabinet shelf. As this is happening, the following dialogue can be heard
(voices matched to names later revealed):

LEE (O.S.): --any better ideas for what we should do tonight!?

MARIE (O.S.): Ooh, look at me, I’m Lee, I believe in spooky ghosties and I’m gonna talk to them with a game I bought at Toys “R” Us!

We can now see the kitchen. May (the opossum) is in front of the camera and looking right into the lens, smiling. Her sisters Lee (the coyote) and Marie (the raccoon) are sitting at the kitchen table, where there is a Ouija board set up. Because of the angle of the camera, viewers can but barely read the board.

Lee grabs the planchette and leans over the table toward Marie. She grabs Marie’s ear and looks into it with the planchette like it’s a magnifying glass.

MARIE: AAAHHH! Lee, let go!

Lee moves Marie's head away from her own. May moves to the left out of frame.

LEE: I’m just checking if you got something blocking your ears, because you didn’t answer my question!

Still holding her by the ear, Lee slams Marie’s face into the table. Marie promptly raises her head again.

MARIE: Well, bitch, you didn’t answer my question either!

LEE: I’m not waiting ‘till Halloween to find me a man who’s gonna treat me right!

Marie turns to face left of the camera, presumably May.

MARIE: May! Back me up he--

Marie notices the camera and stares straight at the lens.

MARIE: May, why the hell did you set up the camcorder!?

Lee now also notices the camera and looks straight at it.

LEE: May, what did I say about recording me without my permission!?

Lee gets up from her seat and walks toward May.

MAY (O.S.): But you’re always saying we need more home videos!

Lee has walked off-screen to the left. Marie is watching her.

MAY (O.S.): Don’t you? AAAHHH!

We hear a blender running. Marie looks visibly shocked. The blender stops, and we see May thrown across the screen from left to right, completely airborne. Marie watches her go by in horror; she looks back at Lee as she moves in front of the camera to inspect it.

LEE: Hm… You know what? This might be a good idea! Maybe we can use this to show our boyfriends how to behave!
May walks back into frame from the right.

MAY: You see? I told you I have good ideas--!

Lee grabs May by the neck.

LEE: But don’t you see anything wrong with this, dear sister?

May shakes her head.

LEE: May, don’t you know anything about good camera angles!?

Lee throws May onto the table violently. Marie seems much less fazed by this.

LEE: Aw, hell, I’ll do it myself. Take your seat, May.

Lee goes off-screen to the right; we hear a grunt of effort, and then she and the refrigerator are now at the far edge of the frame. As she does this, the other two talk.

MAY: So why are we playing with the Ow-idge-uh Board again?

Lee moves off-screen to the left; the opening of a drawer and the rummaging of items is heard.

MARIE: It’s pronounced Wee-jee, you dumb bitch. And we’re doing it because Lee could open her legs in the middle of the interstate and she still couldn’t get a guy to put her dick in her!

Lee walks back onto screen holding duct tape, walking up behind Marie and stretching tape around her mouth. We hear Marie’s muffled screams of protest.

LEE: You shut the fuck up, Marie!

Lee tears the tape and walks back to the camera. She speaks as she picks up the camera, carries it to the refrigerator, and starts taping the camera to the refrigerator at a slightly downward angle:

LEE: Just because you’d let just any guy stick his cock inside you doesn’t mean I would, you little skank! I can get any guy I want! But I only accept the best!

Marie is mostly obscured by Lee’s head in front of the lens, but we can hear the ripping of duct tape.

MARIE: Right, that’s why you chose Eddy!

LEE: And you chose a guy who’s afraid to take his hat off!

MARIE: At least my man passed science class!

LEE: Get back to me when he passes gym!

MAY: You’re both just jealous because my boyfriend’s the biggest and the strongest!

Lee and Marie glance at one another looking bored; a moment passes before they burst out into laughter. May looks visibly embarrassed. Lee walks away from the camera as the laughter subsides.

LEE (O.S.): Aw, May, we’ll let you believe that if it makes you feel better about yourself!

Lee reappears, taking a seat at the table. Note the table only has three chairs. With the new
camera angle, we can see a wider view of the kitchen, and we can read the Ouija board much more clearly. Note that we can also see a dark doorway behind May.

LEE: But you know what, girls? I think all of our boyfriends have some things they can work on. So in the meantime, we’re gonna get ourselves a side-piece from the 1800s, back when men were gentlemen and ladies were pampered!

*May looks offended by this, crossing her arms and turning her nose at the Ouija board.*

MAY: Hmph! I’m not cheating on my beloved Ed with a smelly old dead guy!

*Lee grabs May’s arms and head and forcibly uncrosses her arms and turns her head back to the table.*

LEE: Well if you tell Eddy I did, then I’ll tell Ed you did, and we’ll see who they believe!

MARIE: Chill out, May, this Ouija stuff’s all fake anyways.

*Marie glances at the camera.*

MARIE: What’cha do to the camcorder?

LEE: Ain’t no way I’m gonna read every letter out loud! If our new boyfriend wants to talk, he’s gonna talk for himself!

MAY: Don’t we have to turn the lights off for this?

LEE: *(leaning in to scream at May)* How’re we gonna read the board if there’s no light!? How’s the camera gonna see what our new side-piece says if there’s no light!? Did you think about that!?

MAY: ...No…

LEE: Jesus, May, how’d you ever get to be so dumb?

MARIE: I’d bet May secretly gets more than all of us and now she’s got brain damage from some guy giving her syphilis!

*May looks offended, Lee just looks confused.*

May looks offended, Lee just looks confused.

MAY: I do not!

MARIE: But don’t worry, May, we’re both jealous that you’re getting more guys than both of us!

LEE: Marie, what the hell you talking about, ‘getting brain damage from syphilis’?

MARIE: Syphilis causes brain damage! It’s true, look it up! That’s how Al Capone died!

LEE: Where in the hell did you learn that?

MARIE: There’s benefits to having a genius for a boyfriend, Lee! Sorry you wouldn’t know it!

LEE: Aw, I bet Double-D’s got syphilis himself from all the teacher’s dicks he has to suck and pussies he’s gotta lick to get straight A’s!

MARIE: Don’t you question my boyfriend’s smarts, you stupid hoe!

LEE: Then don’t set me up for it, alright, sweetcheeks? Alright, girls, hands on the talker thingie.
Lee and Marie put their hands on the planchette, Marie rolling her eyes as she does so. May also puts her hands in a moment later, looking very hesitant.

MAY: I’m scared, guys.

LEE: Don’t worry, May, if our new boyfriend is gonna possess any of us, it’s gonna be Marie because she looks the most like a guy.

The planchette starts moving across the board, but none of the three seem to notice.

MARIE: Big words for someone who looks like a lesbo!

LEE: I ain’t never seen a girl with her hair dyed blue who wasn’t a dyke!

MARIE: How can you see anything with all that hair in your eyes!?

May seems to notice the planchette.

LEE: Why, I oughta--!

MAY: Guys, the thingie’s moving!

Lee and Marie also notice the planchette. Marie seems startled, Lee seems intrigued. Marie throws her hands up.

MARIE: Gah! Lee, cut that shit out!

LEE: I’m not moving it! It’s moving by itself! Don’t you know how these things work!? Now put your hands back on it!

Marie crosses her arms and sneers her nose away from the table, not unlike May a few moments ago. Note the planchette has stopped moving.

MARIE: You can’t make me!

LEE: Fine! Then May and I’ll share this guy without you!

MAY: We’re gonna share him?

LEE: Just like we did when we captured Kevin… Marie! Are you in or not!?

Marie turns back to the table and reluctantly places her hands on the planchette.

MARIE: Just because I wanna see what kind of stupid shit you come up with for your made-up boyfriend.

LEE: Alright, girls, let’s go a-boy-huntin’! YO, SPIRIT WORLD! KNOCK KNOCK, ANYBODY HOME!?

The planchette starts moving again, going slowly in a circular motion.

MAY: The thingie’s moving again!

LEE: No shit, it’s supposed to!

MAY: Wait, what’s the thingie called again?
LEE: It ain’t got a name!

MARIE: It’s called a *planch-it*, you bimbos!

*Lee picks up the planchette and smacks Marie across the face with it.*

LEE: Nobody asked you, Marie!

MAY: I did.

*Lee backhands May across the face with the planchette. Note that as she does this, a small orb can be seen floating across the bottom-right corner of the screen, though this may simply be dust or an insect.*

LEE: Well, you shouldn’t have! Hands back on the thingie, girls.

*They oblige.*

LEE: HEY, SPIRIT WORLD! YOU GOT ANY ELIGIBLE BACHELORS UP THERE!?

*The planchette begins moving again; after a few seconds, it arrives on “HELLO.” May gasps.*

MARIE: Big surprise.

LEE: I swear to God, Marie! This thingie’s got three points and you only got two eyes! If I were you, I wouldn’t be liking your chances!

MARIE: Would my chances be better if I had three eyes like you!?

*Lee jumps over the table at Marie, but Marie crouches in her chair and Lee starts to fly right over her. As she does, Marie grabs her by the feet and slams her over her head and onto the table. Marie then jumps onto the table herself, grabs the planchette, and jabs it in a spot on Lee’s forehead which would logically be between her eyes; Lee nevertheless reacts as one would when poked in the eye, grabbing the area with her hands.*

LEE: OW!

MARIE: Hey, I did you a favor! Your little ghost side-piece isn’t gonna want to go out with a three-eyed freak!

MAY: Girls, don’t fight! You might scare away our new boyfriend!

LEE: Your sister makes a good point!

*Lee pushes Marie backward off the table with her legs.*

LEE: Boys are intimidated by girls who can kick their asses. We don’t wanna be too threatening. Back in your seat, Marie!

*Lee and Marie get back in their chairs and they all put their hands back on the planchette.*

LEE: So we got a guy on the line, right?

*The planchette floats over to “YES”.*

LEE: Alright, honey, what’s your name?
The planchette slowly makes its way to the letter “W”.

LEE: Wait, that’s not right.

MAY: What’s not right?

The planchette goes to “I”.

LEE: His name was supposed to be Fabrizio!

MAY: Is this real!?

It goes to “L”.

MARIE: Lee probably realized that she can’t spell ‘Fabrizio’ so she went with something easier!

LEE: You won’t be able to spell nothing when I’m done bashing your brains in!

The planchette goes in a small circle and arrives back at “L”.

LEE: Seriously, girls, I’m not doing that!

May whimpers.

MARIE: HA! So you admit you were controlling it earlier!

LEE: Of course I was! I wanted to fuck with you! But now I wanna see where this goes. So, your name’s Will, huh?

It goes to “YES”.

LEE: Alright, Willy, so here’s the deal. We got ourselves some boyfriends, but they don’t know how to be boyfriends. They run away whenever we try to kiss them. So that’s where you get to slide in! It’s your lucky day! Okay, girls, what should we ask him first?

MAY: Uh… should we ask him what kind of guy he is?

MARIE: Yeah, knowing the kind of guys Lee attracts, he’s probably into dudes!

MAY: That’s not what I meant!

LEE: Marie, stop interrupting, I’m running out of ways to hit you! Alright, Willy, we gotta visualize ya. Species, let’s go.

The planchette moves and lands on “F”.

MARIE: Aw, Lee’s still controlling it!

LEE: The hell are you talking about!?

MARIE: We both know you got a thing for foxes, so the next two letters are gonna be O-X!

The next letter is “O”.

MARIE: Ha! Called it!

LEE: How’d you know that was gonna be next!?
MARIE: Name another species that starts with an F! I’ll wait!

LEE: ...FLOUNDER!

MARIE: FISH CAN’T TALK, BITCH!

The planchette arrives at “X” and then stays there.

LEE: I think you’re controlling it!

MARIE: No I’m--!

Marie throws her hands up.

MARIE: Fine, let’s test it! Lee, hands off! May! Ask it if I was controlling it.

Lee takes her hands off, leaving May alone on the planchette.

MAY: Uh… h-hi, Will, um… was Marie pushing the planch-it thingie?

The planchette moves to “NO”.

LEE: Ooh, so there is a real fox on the other end of this! Hubba hubba! Back off, girls, he’s mine!

MAY: Guys, I’m scared! I wasn’t moving the thingie, either!

MARIE: Don’t be scared, it’s just Lee getting the answers she wants! She made you push it to “No” because she fucked with your head! Power of persuasion and all that.

Marie and Lee put their hands back on the planchette.

LEE: Hey, if it were up to me, I’d’ve found us a rich guy to leave us his secret fortune by now!

MARIE: You know what? Fine. So, hey, Foxy, how tall are ya? Lee needs to know because she’s got a fetish for midgets!

LEE: Don’t you talk about my Eddy that way!

Meanwhile, the planchette starts moving again, now toward the row of numerals.

MARIE: You’re not even saying I’m wrong, you’re just saying you don’t want to hear it!

The planchette arrives at “4”.

MARIE: ...Four what?

The planchette moves slightly to “5”.

MARIE: ...That can’t be right.

LEE: Yeah, I wouldn’t even make up a ridiculous number like that.

MARIE: Wait! Maybe he means in inches!

The planchette rather quickly scoots down to “NO”.

LEE: The fuck you mean, ‘No’? The hell kind of numbers you giving us?
MARIE: Lee, you’re just getting your cervix in a twist because you’re the only girl in the world who’s turned off by guys taller than you!

MAY: I know! He’s trying to tell us the year he died in!

LEE: Hey Willy, you die in 1945?

*It circles around back to “NO”.*

MARIE: 1845?

*It circles around back to “NO”.*

LEE: Huh? Then when did you die?

*It moves to the number “2”.*

MARIE: Two?

*Then it moves to “0”, then circles twice back to zero. The others look at one another, confused.*

MARIE: That was, like, not that long ago.

LEE: Yeah, we were little girls when this guy was still kickin’ around!

MAY: And we were babies before that!

MARIE: Wait, how old’s this guy even?

LEE: Yeah, Willy, how old were ya when ya kicked the bucket?

*The planchette moves back to “2”, then goes in a small circle back to “2”.*

MAY: Twenty-two.

LEE: Hey, he ain’t that old. Good, I didn’t want a crotchety old man anyway!

MAY: Lee takes her hands off the planchette to animatedly protest this remark. Note the planchette is still moving with just May and Marie holding onto it.

MARIE: Well, so much for getting an old-timey gentleman, Lee!

LEE: Hey, don’t give up on him yet! If he ain’t a gentleman, we can tell him to fuck off. Plus he might still be rich! Hey Willy, are you rich?

*The planchette moves to “F”, then “A”.*

LEE: “F”, “A” -- It’s a yes or no question, Willy! Are you loaded or not!?

*The planchette goes to “T”.*

MARIE: Damn, Willy just called you fat!

*Lee takes her hands off the planchette to animatedly protest this remark. Note the planchette is still moving with just May and Marie holding onto it.*

LEE: Oh, no you did not just call me fat, Willy! You’re lucky you don’t have a body for me to pound, or I’d--!

MAY: It’s still moving!
The planchette goes to “H”, then “E”. Lee is still keeping her hands away from the piece.

MARIE: “H”, “E”...?

It arrives at “R”.

MAY: “Her”?

LEE: Ha! He wasn’t calling me fat, he was saying one of you two are! Fat her!

At this point, all of them have their hands off the planchette.

MARIE: That doesn’t make any sense!

LEE: Sure it does! First he called someone fat, you stupid girls thought it was me, and then he corrected you and said ‘no, her!’

MAY: Well I don’t think it’s very gentlemanly to be calling us fat!

MARIE: You’re just sore because you know he was talking about you, May!

LEE: Maybe he meant he ran the company that made May’s fat-chick clothes!

MAY: I am not fat!

The planchette seems to move suddenly and independently down to “NO”. The others notice its sudden movement and are visibly shaken by the sight.

MARIE: Did… did it just move by itself? Lee, did you kick the table!?

LEE: No, I didn’t. What’s it say now?

MAY: “No.” See? He wasn’t trying to call me fat!

LEE: Then what else could he have possibly meant when he said “Fat Her,” smart one!?

The three visibly ponder for a few moments.

MARIE: Uh… when we asked if he was rich… was he trying to say his… father was--?

The planchette again seems to move quickly and independently, this time to “YES”. The three of them scream, May falling out of her seat. Lee stops screaming the first.

LEE: WAIT! Girls!

The other two stop screaming.

LEE: If he was twenty-two when he died five years ago, maybe his rich daddy’s still alive.

MARIE: What, you wanna go be some old rich guy’s sugar daddy?

LEE: No, I wanna see if we can get some money out of him from this! And maybe his dad’s hot anyway! Alright, girls, hands back on the talker thingie so Willy doesn’t have to do all the work!

They reluctantly obey.

LEE: So Willy, your dad’s loaded. How’d he get rich?
The planchette moves to “L”, “O”, “T”, and “S”.

MAY: ‘Lots’? Did he sell parking lots?

MARIE: No, I know! He got rich in a bunch of different ways!

It moves back to “YES”.

LEE: You see, girls, this is why I’m into foxes! They’re clever business moguls and one day my wittle Eddy is gonna make me his filthy rich trophy wife!

MARIE: Oh, dream on, sister.

LEE: But I’m curious, Willy, if you had to pick one thing, what made your dad the most rich?


MAY: What’s so funny? Cloth-ies? I don’t get it.

MARIE: He did get rich making clothes for fat chicks!

LEE: Aw, man, you just can’t write this stuff!

MAY: He didn’t say fat chicks!

Lee puts her hands back on the planchette, and the other two follow.

LEE: Hey Willy, did he make clothes for fat chicks?

It moves to “NO”.

MARIE: Aw, alright, you win this one, May!

LEE: Yeah, sorry, May, looks like Willy won’t be able to hook you up with some clothes that’ll actually look decent on you for once!

MAY: You don’t even know who he makes clothes for!

The planchette starts moving under their hands; the girls all look surprised. It spells “F-O-X-E-S”.

MAY: There! “Fox-ies”! He doesn’t have anything that could make you look good, either!

LEE: Eh, makes sense. Fox makes fox clothes. Maybe he can get my Eddy something besides that stupid shirt with the stripe!

MARIE: Okay, Willy, if we wanted to go shake down your dad for money, where can we find him?


LEE: England?

MARIE: Aw, hell, there’s no point in swindling him if we gotta spend five thousand dollars just to find him. And I was serious about selling him a copy of this tape or something.

LEE: Well, look on the bright side, girls! Maybe we gots us a gentleman after all! You know how
they’re all well-bred in England! So Willy, you’re from England, huh?

*It moves to “YES”.*

LEE: And would you consider yourself a gentleman?

*It shifts to “NO”.*

LEE: ...No?

*Then it shifts to “YES”, then back to “NO”. It quickly shifts back and forth several times (leaving the girls visibly confused) before finally coming to a rest between “YES” and “NO”.*

LEE: I think we got a broken ghost.

MAY: Maybe he’s shy and he doesn’t want to call himself a gentleman because that’d make him seem stuck-up!

MARIE: Or maybe he’s saying “kind of”.

*The planchette quickly moves to “YES”. The girls are again surprised by this.*

MARIE: Hm. I guess I understand Willy in a way you two don’t!

LEE: Aw, you might understand him, but that don’t mean he’s attracted to ya! So whaddaya mean “kind of,” Willy?

*The planchette spells “R-O-G-U-E”. After it stops, the girls stare at it, as if expecting more letters.*

LEE: And just what the fuck is a “rog-yoo”? Is that one of those fancy Britishy words we don’t use in normal English?

MARIE: He said rogue , ya dumb bitch! It means like a rebel or something, like Han Solo or Adam Bell or someone like--!

*The planchette quickly moves back to “YES”.*

MARIE: ...that. See? Toldja I understand him in a way you can’t!

LEE: Well I’m sure he’s very turned on that you know Star Wars and Sidney movies!

MARIE: Hey! He’s from England! He probably doesn’t even think of Adam Bell as a Sidney movie! You know what? Let’s ask him.

LEE: No, Marie, we’re not scaring off our new boyfriend with your boring-ass questions! How ‘bout this, Willy: tell us how you were a rebel.

*It spells “R-O-B-B-I-N-G”.*

MARIE: Robbing?

LEE: What, like mugging people on the street?

“YES”.

LEE: Ooh, I like a bad boy! I’m gettin’ hot flashes here just thinking about if Eddy quit dicking around with his stupid scams and just started stealing like a real man! Then he’d be a loveable
rogue!

MARIE: Lee, you said fifty times you wanted a gentleman, not a thug! Make up your mind!

*Again the girls are startled by the planchette moving under their hands. “C-H-A-R-I-T-Y”.*

MAY: What does that spell?

MARIE: Jesus Christ, May, you’re useless. He said ‘charity’!

LEE: So what, he robs people for charity?

“YES”.

MARIE: ...Alright, well I guess that’s kinda rogue… and kinda gentlemanly...

LEE: Guess I get to have my gentleman and my loveable rogue! And he’s a handsome little fox!

MARIE: Yeah, yeah, control your ovaries! Alright, what else do we wanna ask him?

MAY: Wait, how do we even know he’s that handsome?

LEE: Let’s ask him! Are you a beefcake, Willy?

As Marie speaks, the planchette starts shifting between “YES” and “NO” again. Only May seems to notice at first.

MARIE: Why does it matter? He’s invisible!

LEE: I’m trying to boost my boyfriend’s self-esteem, Marie! I’m trying to do my part as a partner -- maybe if you knew how to do that, you’d be able to find yourself a decent man!

*They finally notice it shifting between “YES” and “NO”.*

MARIE: Is he trying to say “kind of” again?

*It stops moving, then scoots over to “YES”.*

MARIE: So much for his self-esteem.

LEE: Not gonna lie, Willy, lacking confidence is kind of a turn-off.

MAY: But what if he has a big johnson?

LEE: Jesus, May, and you answer the phone with that mouth!?

MAY: She would, but there aren’t any boys calling her!

MAY: I don’t hear the phone ringing with your boyfriends calling, either!

LEE: Sure they do! They always call while you’re busy crying in the shower! But the girl poses a good question. So, you got a big willy, Big Willy?

*Again the planchette shifts between “YES” and “NO” rapidly.*

Marie gets up and leaves the table, walking offscreen.

LEE: Marie, where ya goin’!?

We can hear a drawer opening and kitchenware shuffling.

MARIE: Hold your fucking horses, will ya!?

Marie returns to the table with a Sharpie, with which she writes “KIND OF” on a blank space on the left side of the board.

MARIE: There. “Kind of”.

Marie puts her hand back on the planchette, which moves to “KIND OF”.

MARIE: Just like a gentleman! So honest and truthful that it’s honestly kind of annoying!

LEE: Fine! Then I’ll have him all to myself!

MAY: But what about me?

MARIE: What about you, May?

LEE: It’s alright, Willy, I appreciate a man who’s honest and upfront with me! And I’m sure you’re plenty handsome enough for me!

MARIE: Yeah, Willy, any time Lee sees a fox who could fit in her pocket she needs to hang her panties out to dry! Honestly, Lee, that’s kinda creepy. I can just imagine you’re gonna turn into one of those forty-year-old chicks who’s still hitting on middle-school boys!

LEE: Hey, at least I’m not into a dorky wop wolf who’s a literal beta-male!

Marie stands up in her chair and starts pointing as she screams at Lee.

MARIE: He might have the body of a beta but he’s got the brain of an alpha, and one day you’re gonna wake up and realize you’re an idiot for dating guys who think they’re smart just because they’re con-men and they’re not even that good at being con-men, you stupid hussy!

Lee, keeping her hands calmly on the planchette, just stares at Marie for a second before turning back to the board.

LEE: Hey Willy, were you good at being a con-man?

Without Marie holding it, the planchette moves back to “YES”.

LEE: Now there’s the self-esteem I’m looking for in a man! You can sit down now, Marie.

As Marie begrudgingly sits down, she says:

MARIE: Yeah, well if he’s a con-man, how can you tell he’s not just lying about being a good con-man?

LEE: Then he conned me, and that means he’s a good con enough!

MARIE: That doesn’t make any fucking sense--!

MAY: I have a question for him: how did he die?
MARIE: Ooh, that’s a good one!

LEE: Tell us, Willy.

*The planchette spells out “S-W-O-R-D”.*

MAY: What’s a--?

MARIE: May, if you ask “what’s a suh-word,” I’m gonna smack you upside the head.

MAY: But… what is it?

*Marie leans over and starts winding up her arm to smack May.*

MARIE: He was spelling *sword*, you stupid--!

*Marie tries to smack May, but May grabs her arm, leaving Marie momentarily shocked before May swings Marie around by the arm, sending her flying offscreen to the right and (presumably, judging by the sound as well as the shaking of the camera) into the refrigerator.*

MAY: It’s not *my* fault Will can’t spell words right!

LEE: But it *is* your fault that you can’t *read* words right! Get back to the table, Marie, I wanna drill Willy about this sword thing! What, was he some kind of nerd who collected old weapons or something?

*Marie gets back into her seat and puts her hands back on.*

MARIE: Yeah, what’s all that about? Like now I’m imagining someone dressed like Samurai Jack stabbing himself in the gut or something.

MAY: Did he rob people with the sword?

*They see the planchette move to “YES”.*

MARIE: Ooh, May got something right for once!

MAY: So he killed himself with his sword!

MARIE: I mean, I guess that makes sense. In ghost stories it’s always the people who killed themselves.

LEE: So Willy, didja off yourself?

*The planchette moves to “NO”.*

MAY: Sorry, May, I guess you being right about two things in a row is just too much to ask for!

LEE: So, what, did he trip and fall on it or something?

MARIE: Or maybe somebody stole his sword and killed him with it! Murder victims make good ghosts, too!

LEE: You heard the nice lady, Willy! Were you murdered?

*The planchette starts to move and at first it seems to move in a circle back to “NO”, after approaching it very slowly but not fully landing on it. The girls look disappointed.*
MAY: There! Now who’s dumb, Lee!?  

*Unbeknownst to the girls, it starts drifting away from “NO”.*

LEE: Shut up or I’ll rip your--

MARIE: Hey, it’s still moving!

*They look on as it slowly makes its way to the scrawled “KIND OF”.*

LEE: He was kind of murdered?

MARIE: Ooh, this one’s getting juicy! I don’t know which one of you two is controlling this thing, but I like where this story’s going!

LEE: It’s probably May. And her self-esteem’s so low she won’t even let herself be right about the things she guesses!

MAY: Guys, I swear, it moved by itself!

MARIE: Yeah, yeah. So it was a kind-of murder, huh? What, was it like involuntary manslaughter or something?

LEE: Or maybe it was a booby trap, like somebody put cyanide on the handle or something! I dunno, May, what kind of crazy horseshit are ya gonna come up with next?

*As the planchette starts moving:* 

MAY: But I’m not controlling it!

*The planchette starts spelling out “A-C-C” before Marie speaks.*

MARIE: “A-C-C-”, are ya trying to spell accident, Willy?

*The planchette stops moving for a moment before diverting its course and going to “YES”.*

LEE: It’s not very ladylike to cut a man off, Marie! You know how insecure boys get about that!

MARIE: Well I just wanted him to save time and spit it out!

LEE: ...Hm…

MARIE: What?

*Lee takes her hands off the planchette and shakes them out.*

LEE: You know what? All this keeping my hands on the planch-it thingie’s making my arms fall asleep. But you give me an idea, Marie! So May, you want us to believe that you aren’t rigging the game?

MAY: What game?

MARIE: The Ouija board, dumbass!

MAY: I’m not controlling it!

LEE: Then let’s put that to the test! Be right back, girls!
Lee hurries out of the kitchen through the visible doorway. Alone, May and Marie relax their arms as well.

MAY: Yeah, I’m all pins-and-needles-y in my arms, too!

MARIE: Well, sucks to suck, I guess.

MAY: Hmph… one day you’re gonna get sick of Lee bossing you around and you’re gonna wish you sided with me against her!

Marie looks away from May, who continues glaring at her. Six seconds of silence pass before we can hear footsteps coming closer. Shortly, Lee returns with a small button-eyed doll of an orange and tan fox wearing a yellow shirt with a button and a red stripe down the side as well as blue pants and black shoes; the doll also appears to have a pull-cord in its back. Lee comes to the table between May and Marie and sits the doll down next to the Ouija board. Note that Marie looks visibly displeased by the sight of the doll.

LEE: Alright, Willy, if you wanna talk, you can talk through this doll right here! Even has a voice-box for ya!

Lee pulls the string on the doll. The doll laughs with a raspy but youthful voice, and seems to have an American accent.

LEE: If you’re telling the truth, May, he should have no problem talking through this thing!

MAY: Well, how do you know he can do that sorta thing?

LEE: How do you know he doesn’t? Unless you’re making this all up! So what’s it gonna be, Willy? You wanna tell us about this little accident with the sword?

Lee pulls the cord again.

DOLL: (same voice as before) Money!

LEE: Don’t sound too British to me!

MARIE: If you wanted to have him talk through a doll, you shoulda used Double-D Junior instead of Eddy Junior! Willy’d probably be able to tell that my man’s a lot closer to an English gentleman than stupid Eddy!

LEE: Aw, what do you know about English gentlemen?

MARIE: I know they don’t have a problem with calling a bitch like you a cunt!

Lee lunges at Marie.

LEE: Come here and say it to my face!

Marie jumps out of her chair and runs offscreen to the right.

MARIE: You’re gonna have to catch me first!

Lee runs off the screen in the opposite direction. We hear a drawer opening, then see a tray of plastic utensils flung across the screen from left to right. All throughout this, May is simply watching the action.
MARIE: OW!

A toaster is thrown across the screen from left to right.

LEE: AARGH!

Lee runs from left to right across the screen, holding a frying pan. As she runs past, nobody seems to notice a cabinet next to the doorway behind her and May appear to open on its own accord. Lee re-emerges from the right side of the screen holding Marie up by her tail, as Marie squirms in protest; Lee throws Marie up in the air and swings the frying pan like a baseball bat as Marie comes down to send Marie flying across the room. Lee runs back to the left edge of the screen toward where Marie landed. Note that as May is watching her sisters, the planchette moves slightly without anybody seen touching it; it does not seem to move to any specific spot on the board. Lee and Marie reappear from the left edge, Lee flailing as Marie has her feet in Lee’s back and a dish towel pulled over her snout; Lee trips and falls below the table, and Marie falls with her. At roughly the same time that they fall to the ground, the camera moves with a low grinding sound, suggesting that the refrigerator it is attached to has moved; however, distracted by her sisters fighting, May still does not seem to notice this strange activity. Lee and Marie get up and are still brawling as they disappear off the left edge edge of the screen. At this point, the fox doll seems to shift slightly, rotating in place, which does seem to catch May’s peripheral attention, but she does not catch it actually moving. Lee reappears from the left, seeming to punch Marie into a microwave as a way of stuffing her into it; she slams the door shut and dropkicks it across the room and offscreen to the right. Lee looks as though she is about to charge the spot Marie would be before she is interrupted by a pan flying past her, coming from behind her, offscreen to the left. May also sees this. The pan lands on the floor in front of her.

LEE: Wait, who threw that?

Marie reappears on the right, dragging an oven and seeming to try to lift the thing, seething with rage. She starts to lift it, screaming with exertion, and gets it above her head before Lee interrupts her.

LEE: Hold on, Marie! You see this pan?

Marie stops and looks at the ground where the pan presumably is. She drops the oven behind her head, slamming to the ground.

MARIE: What about it?

LEE: I didn’t throw it, May was sitting right here, and you were all the way over there.

MAY: It’s true, I saw it!

MARIE: Then where’d it come from?

LEE: That’s what I’m say--!

A glass falls out of the open cabinet behind May and shatters on the ground; they all see it.

MARIE: Wait, did that glass just--?

Another glass falls out of the cabinet.

MAY: It’s an earthquake!
LEE: Must be us shaking the trailer--

About half a dozen other pieces of glassware fall out of the cabinet and shatter on the ground.

MARIE: ...Um--

The cabinet door violently slams shut, and the neighboring cabinet opens. The girls jump as the table shifts a few inches, loudly scratching the floor. The lights flicker*, causing the girls to scream and flinch.

*(When reinterviewing our contact at TAPS about a specific point in the video [see below], they mentioned the part where the lights flicker as being the part that several crew members found particularly unsettling. According to our contact, when the team was watching the video, one member swore they could see what appeared to be the figure of a very tall fox wearing modern clothing appearing in the girls’ kitchen doorway as the lights flickered, especially toward the end of the flickering episode when the lights take on almost a strobe-light effect for about one second. Upon rewatching the footage, several other members of the team said they could also see the apparition, though others still could not; those who could described it as appearing in grayscale and being extremely faint and translucent, some arguing that it would be better described as a silhouette than a fully-formed figure. Upon seeing this, the team attempted to slow down the footage frame-by-frame, but oddly, there were no anomalies visible in any particular still-shot; the apparition was only visible when played at normal speed. Several team members, both those who could and could not see the figure and both those who did and did not believe in the authenticity of the tape, posited that perhaps it was a bizarre trick of the light caused by the technical difficulties of filming darkness, with the shifting of different shades of dark-gray spots in the negative space of the doorway causing a sort of composite illusion when the frames were played at full speed, sort of like a flipbook or animation effect, best viewed when not looking directly at the doorway but rather with one’s peripheral vision, with some likening it to a subliminal message -- our contact said they personally could only see the figure when they treated the full-speed footage as a sort of “Magic Eye” teaser. Nevertheless, those who could see this anomaly conceded that it was just as likely that this was a glitch in the videotape as it was likely that this was a case of a spirit manipulating technology. Our editors viewed the relevant scene with this information in mind, and were similarly split on our abilities to see the purported apparition, with our narrator requesting we take note here that he is unable to do Magic Eye puzzles.)

Finally, the chair Lee was previously occupying quickly falls backwards, almost “flying” into its fall. The girls look around the room as if waiting for something more to happen.

MARIE: Is... is that it? Is it over?

Lee picks up a frying pan from the ground and again holds it like a weapon.

LEE: Alright, come out with your hands up, whatever you are!

May looks at the fox doll.

MAY: Willy... was... was that you?

May reaches to pull the doll’s cord.

LEE: May, what the heck are you--?

DOLL: (speaks)*

*(Our editors reached out to our contact at TAPS once again to ask them about this scene
specifically; after digitalizing the videocassette, we emailed that person the footage again to refresh their memory. Our contact does recall the team’s discussion of what the doll said and did ask some team members who were nearby at the time they replied to our correspondence to watch the footage themselves and add their own input. This person says that all members of the team agreed that the voice sounded nothing like the voice heard earlier. The voice was noticeably distorted, whereas earlier it was impeccably clear, as though the doll’s voice box had become damaged since earlier; the voice was also noticeably deeper, with members observing that it seemed more “adult” and “mature”. Many members of the group also said that the voice did seem to have a British or specifically English accent, although several did acknowledge that this may have been confirmation bias influenced by information previously claimed about the entity during the Ouija board session. Similarly, when trying to decipher what the doll was saying, while a few believed that the voice was simply unintelligible grumbling, the majority remainder of the team universally agreed that it sounded like the doll was saying “ROBBING”, which the Ouija board had spelled earlier, and that this may be a delayed answer to the girls’ interrogation about the entity’s fatal “accident”, although these members also acknowledged that this could again be another case of confirmation bias. We replied to our contact again to ask whether upon rewatching the video it sounded like it may have said something else that sounds similar, like perhaps a name; they said that the thought had not crossed their mind, but upon rewatching the footage for the first time in nearly fifteen years, they could understand how our editors heard something else, agreeing that the two words sound very alike.)

The girls scream and hastily make their way out of the room.

MARIE: I’m getting out of here!

LEE: Don’t ever call us again, Willy!

They are now out of the kitchen.

MAY (O.S.): But we called him first!

LEE (O.S.): Shut the fuck up, May!

Rushed footsteps are heard growing more and more distant until a door is heard being opened and then slammed shut. The camera captures a still scene in the kitchen. One minute and twenty-one seconds later, the planchette again moves by itself, landing on “GOODBYE”. Four seconds later, an orb can be seen rising from the vicinity of the fox doll and rising to the ceiling; this orb is much larger than the one seen earlier in the video, though it is still fairly small and may again simply be an insect or dust particle. Seventeen minutes and two seconds later, the fox doll falls over onto its side from its sitting position. There is no apparent movement on screen again until the tape runs out forty-seven minutes and twenty-nine seconds later.

VIDEO ENDS
Chapter Summary

As several characters grapple with their pasts, new information about their presents makes them question their futures.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Author’s Note* I write this on April 11, 2020, the day after posting Chapter 24, which today I learned is also the day after Disney announced that they would be making a live-action remake of *Robin Hood* exclusive to Disney Plus.

To the Disney Company, their executives, their employees, their artists, and their fans, this may well sound extremely sarcastic and backhanded. But I implore you to trust that I write this in complete sincerity. To Disney, I want to thank you for making this film direct-to-streaming. Allow me to elaborate:

It’s ironic, in the last few chapters I was debating adding a quip in the author’s notes saying something to the effect of “Hey Disney, don’t remake this one until I’m famous enough to be part of it.” Just a tongue-in-cheek little half-joke, purely cathartic, on a bizarre little fanatic they’ll likely never see. Because I really didn’t know whether they were going to touch this one; on the one hand, they’ve been mostly ignoring it for decades, but it’s by no means forgotten, so in my heart of hearts, I think part of me knew this was inevitable. And my knee-jerk reaction to hearing news of the remake was “Aw, hell, this was my one chance to work with a piece of media I love in a socially-acceptable way, and I missed it.”

Because for me it was never a case of “I have a public and unhealthy obsession with a kid’s movie and I don’t want its parent company to ever revisit it because I want to pretend it’s mine and mine alone and hold it in a place of sanctity,” it was a case of “strange as it sounds, this kid’s movie has profoundly affected my life as an adult and given me a positive role model neither real life nor mature fiction ever gave me, consequently the Disney versions of Robin Hood and Little John are near the top of my list of dream roles and I can’t imagine they’re ever going to remake it more than once in my lifetime (and playing those characters as live-action humans is out of the question since I don’t physically look like either one, ergo animation is my only way in) so my only hope is they wait until I can get there.” Yeah, I want to make my own art with my own characters and stories, but I want to also create art with these specific versions of these specific characters because I have a personal connection with them, you know? God knows that’s why a lot of “grown up” movies get remade (besides, y’know, money).

But the more I think about it, the more I think this is the best solution for everybody. Disney gets to expand their library and renew their copyright, the people who do want another *Robin Hood* movie can have it, and since it’ll be confined to a Disney Plus exclusive rather
than a wide theatrical release (at least that’s the known plan at the time of this writing), maybe in 20-30 years they’ll be open to reimagining the concept again, this time going a little more off-model from the original with some ideas I have as well as ideas from the original that had to be scrapped (and going back to 2-D animation, and if I ever have the sway to do this then hopefully I’d also have the money to say “screw it, I’ll pay for the animation budget myself”; despite the moral of the Robin Hood story, there’s one reason and one reason alone why I’d ever want to be a rich miser and that would be saving up to do this), and you know what, this will probably buy me some time to hone my skills on both sides of the camera so that I can become someone whose involvement actually fits with the project instead of being some random dude who comes out of nowhere and says “Hey Disney, just... let me do what I want with your IP.” And hopefully by then nobody will remember that back around 2020 I wrote a really bizarre Robin Hood fanfic which included a cringe-a-licious out-of-character author’s note where I lamented that I blew my shot at getting to be part of a children’s cartoon which I had come to think of almost as my own since its parent company didn’t seem to want anything to do with it, only to find that they did have interest in renewing it after all - - and if the world does remember by then, hopefully they’ll appreciate that I’m self-aware and own who I am confidently; if they don’t then I’ll tell them why they should. That seems like what Robin Hood would do.

So Disney, wherever you are (good god, this is so goofy), I appreciate that you did what you had to do from a business standpoint in a way that gives the people what they want and still leaves the door open for my stretch goal in life. To the people looking forward to the movie, I hope you enjoy it. If by some miracle there’s someone involved with Disney reading who’s SOMEHOW actually intrigued by this and the cast and writing staff for the movie hasn’t been locked yet, well, uh... I might not be the most qualified at the moment but I’ll work for cheap, just get me my SAG/WGA cards and I’ll be content (hey, if you don’t ask, the answer’s always no). And to all my readers present and future... well, wish me luck. ;)

-The Artist Sometimes Known as Dobanochi

Revised April 12, 2020

25. “Run with the Hunted, Pt. 2”

Many would posit that another reason for the prevalence of the old adage that “a fox and a bear make a good pair” -- especially a red one and a brown one, respectively -- is that their species are on opposite ends of the size window of species that would conceivably hang out with one another’s kind.

Yes, there were other contributing factors; one species being distrusted by broader society for being duplicitous and conniving and the other being distrusted by broader society for being aggressive and brutish may have also helped the two gravitate toward one another in that “us against the world” sort of way. Indeed, many would say that the be-all-end-all origin of the idiom may be the myth of how the bear “lost” its tail at the hands of the fox. The folktale, which some source to North American indigenous mammals while others trace to ancient Germanic tribes, posits that bears once sported tails that rivaled foxes’ in their sheer opulence, but long ago, a fox, needing to get his trickery fix, decided to fool a bear into ice-fishing with his own tail, causing it to freeze in the water and ultimately snapping off when the bear tried to move, thereby cursing all of his ursine descendants to have stubby little fragmented tails forever. Somewhere along the line, however, the vulpine and ursine peoples realized that the story had not been progenated by the
opposite species, but rather by all the other species in tandem, who had created a story that upheld their prejudice that bears were easily-duped dimwits and foxes were sociopaths who recreationally played games of psychological torture because they were bored. Upon the realization that the story had been borne of a concerted effort to vilify the both of them, it is thought that this may have been when the two peoples started an informal alliance lasting for generations; to this day, fox parents taught their kits that if there was once species bears wouldn’t be belligerent bullies to, it was foxes, and bear parents told their cubs that if there was once species foxes wouldn’t screw over for no constructive reason, it was bears, with the bigotted background of that story often being cited as the reason why. And the fact that other species could often see a fox and a bear as a pair and again assume the archetypal “brains/brawn” dynamic was at play only strengthened this resolve between the two peoples.

While this does much to explain the reasons why foxes and bears typically get along like Poles and Hungarians, it is likely not the full story as many think it to be. Truly, there are certainly other species stereotyped to be shifty liars or mindless bruisers who don’t gel nearly as well as these two peoples do. That said, many mammalogists have theorized that, in addition to the pan-vulpine-and-ursine allegiance described above, red foxes and brown bears specifically likely also bonded over the way that they were at the exact opposite extremes of society’s “normal-sized species” window.

The fact of the matter is that much of the world was built for the convenience and comfort of medium-sized mammals, and although there were some parts of the world that were trying to be more accessible to all peoples regardless of their biology (most famously Zootopia, Oregon, which was built up in the 1960s and ‘70s under the guidance of civil rights advocates to be equally accessible to all shapes and sizes of mammals -- and which now had its own racial conflicts brewing unrelated to size, but that story would be told in a film loosely based on events which occurred there ten years after our story on the East Coast), on much of Planet Earth, very large and very small mammals had their own spaces. They had their own sections on planes, trains, and buses; they had their own neighborhoods with homes and businesses to accommodate for their size; they even had their own sports leagues. They generally lived lives where most of the people they saw everyday wouldn’t be too much bigger or smaller than themselves.

For centuries by this point, members of these species have been arguing that this way of doing things was segregation in its purest form that forced these species out of mainstream society, to which detractors would say, yes, the implications were damned unfortunate, but it was a matter of incongruent geometry, not simple bigotry. Indeed, if a mouse and an elephant wanted to buy something from a convenience store housed in a hundred-year-old building, they wouldn’t be denied service on the grounds of size, but the mouse would likely have trouble completing a transaction from far below the counter and the elephant would likely have trouble just getting through the door; whether the cashier had any personal prejudice in this case would be quite frankly irrelevant. Most species smaller than a red fox or larger than a brown bear would be species that found themselves forced into their own little corner of the world, not as a product of malice, but of circumstance -- and even then, bears and foxes still found themselves to be a little too big or a little too small for everyday things every once in a while, likely another thing they bonded over as they recalled that old tale about their tails.

For example, Little John’s adult experience seemed to perfectly epitomize life on the border of the window. If you took members of the famously gigantic indigenous Kodiak tribe out of the equation, Little John was nearly a foot taller than your average adult male brown bear. However, because society and media portray bears to be these big monstrous things, if you asked a typical non-ursine citizen what they thought the average height of an adult male non-Kodiak brown bear was, they would probably say eight feet on the dot, despite that being well above average. Being pressured with that number his entire life and cursed with a most anomalous pituitary gland, Little John was immensely grateful to finally hit that mark at nearly the age of twenty-seven, even though
he was well aware that it was quite literally a high bar to reach. But after spending much of his early adult life still looking like a cub (and still spending a few years after that looking like a teenager), he was very content with playing the part of a big fish in a small pond. He could operate just fine in a medium-sized mammal’s world: he could duck under doorways and suck his gut in to enter sideways; he could take advantage of his own sloppy posture and just let his ears brush against a ceiling that would be a smidge too low for him if he were standing all the way upright; he could lift the armrest on the bus and sit next to his fox buddy instead of feeling small in the oversized seats with the rhinos and hippos in the back -- besides, other large species were dicks who always had to turn everything into a size contest. It took forever for him to get there, but Little John was now roughly the same height as his twin brother, roughly the same height as society expected him to be, and his medium-sized friends knew him as The Big Guy, so despite being raised to have an unhealthy obsession with his size (and by that token, everyone else’s size), Little John was now finally content with his body and probably wouldn’t want to be too much larger; maybe another few inches to one-up his brother, but he definitely wouldn’t want to be a Kodiak or a polar bear. Those guys didn’t have the option to just put the armrest up on the bus and sit in the medium-sized section; they had to sit in the back out of physical necessity. Even his own father, the giant of a bear who was the first to instill an ursine sense of size-consciousness in him, was a foot and a half taller than John and his brother thanks to Gramma Inger being a polar bear, but Little John didn’t have much desire to be quite that huge; Papa Bear would often brag that nobody in the world would fuck with him on account of his size, but in Little John’s observations of how Harry went through life, it seemed like it was the world itself that fucked with Harry on account of his size. Little John thought that he was just in the right spot to be as much of an imposing figure as he could without being too big for society, and for that he was immensely grateful.

That’s why Thorbjorn Hviid never could have joined the Merry Men, even though he was one of the few people they had actively considered recruiting. He was just too goddamn big.

Granted, he eventually wound up filling a role that required him to have access to an indoor space for the purposes of making projects, so living full-time in Sherwood Forest was ultimately out of the question. But let us pretend that he was open to the idea of hiding in plain sight in his apartment in a large-mammal housing block on the Southwest Side down at Illinois and K, only to then meet up with the outlaws during their adventures and going back home afterwards. No, his size was bordering on being a liability. Heaven knows that the only reason he ever was receptive to cooperating with the Merry Men in the first place was because his inability to hide had directly resulted in his being unemployable.

Thor, as he was called, very well may have been deported by this point if not for the sheer accident that he was born under an American flag. The son of an Inuit Canadian mother and a Danish-Faroese father, Thor came into the world on Christmas Day in Nome, Alaska, a city which was the closest thing that Arctic-Americans had to a metropolis of their own. His parents were in town to see family for the holiday, and that was when Thor decided he wanted to be born a week ahead of schedule. The Hviid family was in Nome for a little longer than expected as they got the documents sorted out so they could take their newborn Yankee son home to Churchill, Manitoba, a city on the Hudson Bay which itself was like Canada’s answer to Nome, though that wasn’t saying much.

Thor’s parents were both physicians, his father a general practitioner and his mother a pediatrician. They stayed in Churchill because it was a remote city with limited medical access, so they felt a sense of duty in staying there to serve the community, but educational access was also limited for the same reasons of remoteness. They were on the fence about staying when their cub was about to start school, but then they heard that Thompson, an inland city and the hub of Northern Manitoba, did not have many doctors who could deal with the visible-minority population of polar bears, they moved there to serve their own kind as well as to give Thor a better schooling experience.
Then, when Thor was in middle school, his parents heard about Flin Flon, a goofily-named mining town on a bump in the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border. That place had almost no doctors at all because the location was just too unappealing to too many people, let alone to anybody with a secondary education. At least Churchill, Canada’s Arctic mecca, had a small but consistent stream of residents becoming doctors to serve the community. Flin Flon didn’t have that, but the education was still fairly decent, so the family moved once again.

Flin Flon also didn’t have much of a large-mammal population -- actually, scratch that, there was exactly one species which gave the Hviid family a run for its money size-wise, and they were very prevalent in that part of Canada: moose. Flin Flon had the infrastructure to accommodate mammals ten or more feet tall (and with antlers as wide as half their height), but those same moose didn’t very much like polar bears. Just didn’t trust ‘em. They were rivals in size and they were predators and they weren’t from around there. There weren’t even many grizzlies in that part of Canada to hang out with, and the black bears preferred the company of the medium-sized species. So while the large adolescent cub and his family had no trouble fitting in physically, they found that the community that they had come to help was skeptical of them.

So Thor took an interest in his parents’ work, seeing as the other kids wouldn’t have him around. That’s when he discovered something: no matter where his parents worked -- Churchill, Thompson, or Flin Flon -- the problem with healthcare in remote places wasn’t just the number of available doctors; there was also the availability of medicine to worry about. This notion was merely what got the ball rolling; what sealed the deal was the cartoon movie he saw on his eighteenth birthday. The movie was about a wolf who delivered medicine to Nome in the ‘20s when a bunch of kids got sick and nobody else could get the delivery there fast enough, and as he sat there in the Flin Flon cinema (way in the back corner, knowing that the others in the theater didn’t want their view obstructed by a giant polar bear) (embarrassed that he was now an adult watching a children’s movie) (alone) (on his birthday) (which was also Christmas Day), a thought occurred to him: what if he could be the bringer of hope and healing?

The very next day, he started looking into colleges all across Canada to see where he should start applying, and just to widen his net, he looked at schools in the States as well. A lot of schools weren’t impressed by the low quality of the high school he went to, but one college that let him in was the University of Southern Delaware -- hell, they gave him a scholarship to cover about forty percent of his tuition, which combined with their stellar academic reputation more than made up for the higher cost of American education. And they let him double-major in both pharmacy and pharmacology, so he could learn how the medicine was made as well as how to use it. And he was burning up the track, on pace to get his four-year undergrad degree in three years. But two-and-a-half years into college, he made a mistake that irrevocably ruined his life forever.

Thor had been busting his ass all throughout college, so when his twenty-first birthday rolled around and he could now legally drink, he decided to indulge and see what all the fuss was about. He had stayed in Nottingham for Christmas break to knock out some required classes during the condensed winter semester, so on December 26th, when all the liquor stores were open again, he went out and bought himself a tallboy. Not looking for any brand in particular, just whichever one had the most aesthetically-pleasing can design. He went back to his dorm and tried the can while he read a textbook. He thought it tasted revolting. He kept nursing the thing all the same, seeing as he paid for it, telling himself that he needed to acquire the taste so he could drink socially in the future. But it was a challenge; he told himself he was doing good to force himself through this, but time would soon prove that he should have quit while he was ahead.

He left his dorm on the way to the grocery store, feeling completely fine. The guy weighed a literal ton, so he hadn’t had even remotely enough to get him drunk. But intoxication wasn’t what he should have been concerned about, but rather how the alcohol had passed right through him.
This was back when grocery stores still made a point to hide their bathrooms; they were there, and they were publicly accessible, but you would have to ask an employee and then they’d basically have to hold your hand and guide you through the back storage area until you arrived at a dimly-lit lavatory that was tucked away in the most remote corner of the building. Thor was shy after all those years of rejection, and even if there was a bathroom he just wasn’t seeing, there was no guarantee that he’d be able to fit inside it.

So he didn’t ask. He dropped his basket full of groceries and hurried out, looking for an alleyway. There was no time to be picky. After wrapping around the back of the store, he found a little nook between two dumpsters that seemed like it couldn’t be seen from any street -- and it couldn’t be, but visibility wasn’t what screwed him over. He ran over, unzipped, and let loose.

That’s when he heard the screaming. The shrill cries of protest from a homeless mouse who had been asleep down by his feet. Thor apologized profusely to the man he had just violated, but perhaps he shouldn’t have. It ironically wasn’t the mouse’s high-pitched shouting that caught the ear of a police officer passing by on the street, but rather the bear’s own booming, bellowing voice that resonated through the alley and carried its way around the corner and out to the street, whereupon it piqued the officer’s curiosity of what sort of creature could have a voice that was deeper than the depths of hell and yet somehow still sounded fundamentally timid. Thor’s member was still in his paw when the officer materialized behind him. The cheetah officer drew his gun with one hand while calling for backup on the other, telling dispatch that he was probably going to need some help bringing into custody a gigantic polar bear whose mugshot would later tab him to be precisely ten feet, nine inches tall.

You can imagine his unpleasant surprise when the judge told him that many jurisdictions in the United States considered public urination to be a sex crime, including the City of Nottingham, and because of laws saying that states, counties, and cities would respect the laws of other states, counties, and cities, that meant he was going to be a sex offender anywhere in the United States. He tried to appeal on the grounds that his size meant he had fewer options for places to legally relieve himself than a smaller mammal, but the appellate judge told him that in such a situation someone like Thor needed to “be an adult” and deal with the discomfort until they found a legal repository for their waste. Because he had tried and failed to appeal it once, he was precluded from appealing for another ten years, per contemporary laws on sex crimes. He was now a sex offender and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was around that time that everybody in his life politely told him to get lost. First it was his school. They told him that they understood the controversial nature of the law and the sheer bad luck that fell upon him, but they had a strict policy that anybody who was convicted of a felony while studying at the university would be immediately expelled, and if they made an exception for him then they’d have to make an exception for all the kids who got kicked out every year for drugs and DUIs and weapons crimes and the like. Of course, between the initial fine the NPD slapped him with and all the money he had spent in court, he was far in the red and couldn’t afford to be a full-time student anyway.

Next, the entire country of Canada asked him nicely to never come home again. Because he was technically an American citizen who had emigrated up north, they saw him as someone who had gone home to his native land and committed a heinous crime. He even took a Greyhound bus to the Canadian embassy in Washington, where they told him, almost seeming proud of the fact, that they regularly turned American citizens away at the border for petty misdemeanors far less than what he had been charged with. When he reminded them that he technically had dual citizenship and was naturalized as a child by his parents, and that his mom was a native-born Canadian no less, they asked him with very professional-looking smiles if he’d like them to revoke his Canadian citizenship to avoid future confusion. When he started physically panicking, they sicced half a
dozen security guards on the guy to get him out of the building. Ever since that experience, he would be the first to tell you that his fellow Canadians were not nearly as polite as they wanted you to think.

Then there were his parents. They simply didn’t believe him. They did not believe that there were parts of the United States where pissing in an alleyway would yield the same punishment as forcing oneself upon another person, so when he told them he was a sex offender now, they thought that the “public urination” thing was just a lie to cover up the fact that he had done something far worse. He implored them to simply investigate themselves, but despite being medical experts, they were not too internet savvy, and rural Canada did not have the best internet in the closing years of the twentieth century anyhow.

When his conviction was finalized and he was expelled from the USD dorms, he took all his worldly belongings to a Super 8 in Harbeson which made most of its money lodging people like him who found themselves suddenly homeless. He then went promptly to the place where he had to physically go to register as a sex offender, where they warned him that he was no longer allowed to live within 1,000 feet of a school nor within 500 feet of a school bus stop (and since school bus routes changed every year, he would have to check every August to see if he had to relocate) and that he was legally required to tell all of his neighbors within a block of his house that he was a registered sex offender, and they mentioned that those neighbors were not likely to believe that it was simply a public urination charge, but in this event he should refer them to his publicly-viewable webpage on the Delaware Sex Offenders Database where they could see his official charges, him being listed alongside all those people who really did tangibly violate another living beings. They reassured him, however (with the most disinterested of looks on their faces), that it was illegal for civilians to harass him on the grounds of him being a registered sex offender, as if that was supposed to make him feel better.

As he left that wretched place and started hoofing it to the unemployment office, all he could think about was that his life was effectively over. He would never be able to get a decent job. He would never be able to leave the country again. He would never be treated like a regular person again. He had been kicked out of his home, kicked out of his homeland, and his family had told him in no uncertain terms that he was never to consider their presence home again. He had lived up to the dreaded stereotype that nerds do not in fact grow up to be successful bosses and leaders but actually grew up to be creepy weirdos and perverts, and to top it all off, he had disqualified himself from ever achieving his one true goal in life. And all he ever wanted to do was to help people.

He did the math in his head and realized that if he skipped meals, he could maybe afford three nights at the Super 8 before he ran completely out of money. And with all this weighing on his mind, he found himself collapsed on a bus stop bench, keeled over crying, as dozens of other people walked by ogling at the bawling behemoth but not bothering to ask what was upsetting him.

Until someone did. A few people, actually. Two really tall foxes with British accents, a really tall and really obese badger, a fairly tall brown bear, and a coyote who was the only one among them who was of average size. This motley crew of individuals materialized before him as he raised his head from his paws and looked up. They asked him what was up -- the taller fox seemed to be doing most of the talking -- and seeing as he was going to have to spill the beans to everybody in his life now anyway, he just went ahead and told them that he had made an honest mistake that had cost him his livelihood. They asked him to elaborate and he confessed that he had inadvertently broken a law and now carried a permanent criminal record, even though all he ever wanted was to be a good person. That’s when they consoled him by mentioning that they knew how he felt -- they were criminals who were just trying to do the right thing, too.

And at first, Thor was unnerved by this. Yes, he was a criminal now, but that didn’t make him feel
any more comfortable in the presence of other scoundrels. But they asked for him to join them away from the crowded street on that cold January day and into some place more private, and in an isolated corner of the Harbeson branch library, they gave him the run-down on exactly who they were. At that point, Thor felt comfortable enough to tell them all of the above.

(And at the risk of again breaking immersion, Dear Reader, this narrator needs to clarify that “all of the above,” is meant quite literally to mean that that was the version of events that he told the Merry Men as well as the version he told this narrator. However, after paying for a copy of Thorbjorn Hviid’s public record, one discovers that he neglected to mention that in addition to public urination, he was charged with “Sexual Assault - Bodily Fluids”; upon digging through other public records which offer more specific details, one finds that this does refer to his urinating on the homeless mouse and that his telling of the events of that specific day are, as much as can be determined, true. However, when this narrator questioned Hviid about the inconsistencies in the story of his subsequent conviction, he responded that he always told people that he was a registered sex offender for public urination because people would not believe the truth about the homeless mouse if he told them he was charged with sexual assault, and offered to submit to a lie detector test if our editors did not believe him. It is not the place of this narrator to judge Hviid for omitting that he was charged with a higher crime or to surmise how much or how little of the rest of his story is fabricated, but it is the place of this narrator to report all facts that could be found, and to that end it must be noted that while Hviid was indeed charged with both public urination and assault with bodily fluids occuring on December 26, 1998, and while there are several jurisdictions in the United States where public urination is considered a sex crime, there is no record that the City of Nottingham, Nottingham County, nor the State of Delaware are such places now nor were circa 1998.)

Upon hearing the story, the outlaws immediately had two responses: that it was obscenely bogus that a guy would be lumped together with rapists and child molesters just for taking an emergency leak in an alleyway; and that his background in pharmacy might prove useful. As they put it, they were making great strides with working out the kinks in their operation, and were hoping the upcoming spring would be their breakout season, but there was one issue that they had not resolved, and that was how to safely rob people without being found out, or more specifically, how to not have their likenesses remembered by their victims. Their present strategy was simply to do their thing in elaborate costumes and run like hell when they were done, hoping that their “donors” didn’t catch enough clues to simply report them when it was all over. So far, they had gotten lucky, but they had the feeling that they were pressing their luck. In more covert, risky missions, they had experimented with drugging their targets with pills that were supposed to wipe the victims’ memories, but not only did they not feel comfortable associating with the kind of people who dealt such drugs, but they found out that such drugs only prevent new memories from being formed after the drugs were administered, thereby defeating the entire purpose; and in absolute emergencies they had simply punched the donors’ lights out, but they were worried that this wasn’t reconcilable with their aim to not do any permanent physical harm to their enemies if at all possible (after all, they wanted to make it as clear as possible to all third parties that the Merry Men were not the bad guys, and the more damage they caused, the more likely that conflict would escalate out of their control). They noticed that Thor seemed a bit confused as he nodded along to their story, so they cut to the chase: could he make them something that could wipe people’s memories even before the moment of dosing, preferably something that wouldn’t cause brain damage?

The short answer was maybe. The long answer was that they were going to have to help him get some equipment to work with. The five of them responded by saying that that shouldn’t be a problem. They walked him back to his hotel, paid the front desk for a week’s lodging in advance, and the rest was history.

Specifically, it was history worth poring over in extreme detail. By Easter, Thor had found himself
in a fairly comfortable spot with an apartment and a part-time job, and as the Merry Men began what would be the most fulfilling summer of their lives together, Thor found himself with a fulfilling hobby of his own as he made the “night-night pills” that greatly helped the outlaws streamline their process and cover their asses. With the equipment they had procured for him, he also started experimenting with making his own versions of common prescriptions that the same people the Merry Men sought to help may need but not be able to afford. Of course, being the kind of person who was so shy and awkward that they would omit details about their past even when they were legally required to disclose them because in their anxious paranoia they would rather hope their audience never found out the truth than gamble with their audience rejecting them for telling them the truth, Thor needed the Men’s help to connect him with the people who needed the drugs, but when they did, the smiles on their faces were all he ever wanted to see. That said, because these people trusted the Merry Men and therefore believed it wholeheartedly when they explained that their polar bear friend was only a registered sex offender because of terrible misfortune and the indifference of authority, these people often tried to pay him at least a little something for his troubles, whatever they could afford to give. Therefore Thor started setting a “recommended price” for each of his products, with the prices being exactly what he estimated the cost for him to manufacture it, often being a sliver of a fraction of the cost of the real thing, and still maintaining that any friends of the Merry Men were under no obligation to give him even a cent if they really needed it. The deal was so reasonable and the prices so dirt cheap that most of these people would pay the price anyway, many adding a tip of hundreds or thousands of percentage points when the recommended price was less than a few bucks -- and in the event that the consumer still couldn’t (or, rarely, simply wouldn’t) pay the asking price, the Merry Men would often cover it themselves, again tipping handsomely. With his profit margins well above zero, Thor was able to get more of the raw materials he needed from the shady sites that were scarcely regulated in those early Wild West days of the World Wide Web, and was able to experiment more and further expand his list of offerings, all while having a little left over to supplement his income from washing dishes on the weekends at the comedy club on the bay in Oak Orchard Beach. This was how Thor came to start branding himself as a “freelance medicine man” -- a term he much preferred over “illegal drug dealer”.

And he was starting to feel more confident as a person for the first time in his life. They say that a fox and a bear make a great pair, and much like how Robin helped Little John come out of his shell, Thor found that he was oddly comfortable in his own skin when Will was around. And it made sense enough: the two of them were about the same age; if they had grown up in the same neighborhood, they likely would have been in the same grade. Thor admired Will’s bold and brash take-no-crap attitude, as that was what Thor himself had always wished he could be but never felt like that was really him, and Will -- who had been forced into an even higher-brow education than Robin had and certainly more-so than the Americans -- was happy to finally have someone in his life who would understand his infrequent but recurring references to 19th-century literature or complex scientific concepts or the politics of Benjamin Disraeli and didn’t simply write him off as a nerd. Plus they were both unashamed to say they were adults who still loved cartoons; Will had invited Thor to go see that underrated movie about the giant alien robot before he even thought about asking his brother and Johnny, but it turned out that Thor had already seen it on opening night (he gave it a rave review). And for bonus points, Thor took great pleasure in providing Will with homemade antihistamines that worked better than Zyrtec or Claritin to fend off the pollen allergies which were another thing Will had always feared would make the world see him only as a weak little twerp incapable of heroics. Neither of them had ever referred to the other as their best friend, but anybody who knew the both of them could see that they were as tight as two guys in their situations could be. Indeed, if there was one person in the world who made Will feel like he was succeeding in being the badass he always wanted to be, it was Thor Hviid, and if there was one person in the world who could give Thor a birthday cake with “I’M SORRY YOU’RE A REGISTERED SEX OFFENDER” written in frosting and make him laugh instead of cry upon
The others truly believed that Thor would have made a great sixth member if only we weren’t so inconveniently enormous. They even had the thought to ask him if he’d like to formally join them when they invited him to Robin and Johnny’s joint birthday celebration that Halloween (since Thor was legally required to turn out all his lights and ignore any trick-or-treaters at his door that night, he had no hesitation in overcoming his social anxiety and coming to join them), but when Will went to guide him through the woods and to the Major Oak, he spoke privately with each of the rest of the Merry Men when he got back, telling them that they ought to call off the proposition on the grounds that it might just not be feasible to run with a guy who had to duck under the branches of every single tree until he eventually gave up and started walking on all fours like an animal. Johnny, Alan, and Tuck all agreed; Robin didn’t, and toward the end of the night Robin called everyone to attention to toast Thor and all his contributions to their mission, contributions which, for all they knew, were directly responsible for Robin and Little John each being able to celebrate another year of life, and then in front of the Merry Men and the rest of their guests, Robin put Thor on the spot and asked if he wanted to become their official sixth man. As everyone stared at him, Thor choked out a “no thanks” and explained that he was quite comfortable with his arrangement of being an ally rather than a fully integrated member. The party ended awkwardly after that, and in a rare moment of all four of the other Merry Men not being cool with Robin’s actions of attempted leadership, they cornered him and told him not to speak on their behalf against their wishes like that ever again. The next time the five of them saw Thor, Robin did apologize for if he had embarrassed him, and Thor apologized for denying what was surely a heartfelt invitation, and then they got into a bit of banter about whether Thor had anything to apologize for before Will and Johnny interrupted with an idea of their own: if they ever had a job to do that required infiltrating large-mammal spaces -- spaces for people larger than even Little John -- they would welcome Thor to work with them. Thor said sure and that seemed to be that, but on the way back to Sherwood, Robin told Will and John that that was a foolish arrangement because Thor would be no help without regular training in their ways, and Will and Johnny said hey they were just trying to make it up to the guy so he didn’t feel excluded, and Robin said that despite their good intentions they were setting Thor up for failure and besides he had already voluntarily excluded himself, and Will and Johnny said hey you don’t know what he’s capable of either, and Robin said Thor also had major anxiety issues to overcome like the worst Robin had ever seen, and Will and Johnny said okay then why the fuck did you think it was a good idea to invite him in the first place, and Robin said because he thought he could teach Thor self-confidence himself, and Will and Johnny said Rob you’re gonna feel like such a jackass if there’s something clinically wrong with his brain and nothing short of modern medicine can cure his chronic nervousness, and Robin said well that’s fine because Thor could make his own modern medicine himself, and so on and so on as the two older guys walked ten paces behind them and talked about literally anything else that crossed their minds.

Was Robin embarrassing Thor at the party the sole reason why Thor stopped being as close to the Merry Men as he previously was? Probably not, but it was a contributing factor. After that, winter came, and the Merry Men had to scale back operations, ergo, they saw Thor less often than usual. Then the spring came and things seemed to be off to a great start, the Merry Men’s missions having a near-perfect success rate, but not for lack of internal tension. Robin and Will seemed to be going at one another more than usual, and in a group where Alan and Tuck often stuck together and Robin preferred Little John over his own brother, Will felt like the odd man out, and whenever they were even remotely in the neighborhood, Will would always insist on going off on his own to pick up more allergy medicine, always using it as an opportunity to confide in the bear about how much of an egomaniac he thought his brother to be and how much it frustrated him that everyone else always seemed to side with Robin, them calling him the more “mature” one. Will even claimed that Robin’s original plan when he got off the bus in Nottingham was to simply panhandle
like crazy, and it wasn’t until Will himself showed up out of nowhere and pushed his more rebellious idea that Robin had the guts to start actually live up to his homonym and start robbing people, with Robin now refusing to give Will credit, and although Thor had no way of knowing whether or not this was a fact, a lie, or an embellished half-truth, he trusted Will and believed every word of it. Each time Will came over to blow off steam, Thor outright asked Will if he wanted him to think less of the other Merry Men for making him feel ostracized, and every time, Will said no; he still believed they were good guys, they were just foolish. Nevertheless, while Thor didn’t stop liking the other Merry Men and regarding them as friends, he did find that he couldn’t help but see them as the people who were responsible for making his closest friend feel bad, whether they meant to or not.

Then June 28th came. It was a Wednesday, the last day of Thor’s “weekend” from his “real” job, and earlier in the day he had ordered a birthday present for Will off eBay -- a new bandana incorporating the designs of the American and British flags -- and he was doing his best not to worry that it wouldn’t arrive in time for Will’s 22nd birthday in six days. Sometime around sundown, he got a knock at the door; he rarely got visitors besides the Merry Men, so he anticipated it would be some permutation of that group, and expected that Will specifically would be a part of it. Instead, when he opened the door and looked down at the mammals who barely went up to his belly button, the only ones there were the badger and the coyote. They explained that Little John stayed back at Sherwood to make sure Robin wouldn’t be left alone. Thor asked where that left Will, and the two of them said that was what they were there to talk about.

As badly as Robin was shaken by losing Will, Thor probably gave him a run for his money. When the surviving members were ready to get back into work, they found their grieving process extended when Thor simply had not made any new pills for them to use. It was telling that when Robin finally worked up the heart to speak his version of the events, he waited until Thor was present. Robin had been the last person to see his brother alive, and on the day that it happened, all the others knew was that the two of them were alone before they heard Will scream once and Robin scream several times shortly thereafter, at which point they rushed to the source of the noise and found Robin collapsed in panic at the sight of his brother’s body, and after forcing him to say something, anything about what he saw, Robin finally murmured something about how he had “found him like this.” But several days later, knowing that telling a full story would give Thor some much-needed closure, Robin told him a more elaborate testimony: after Will accidentally slashed the volunteer who wanted to join the Merry Men, Robin went to talk with him in private, Will called Robin cocky and condescending, Robin called Will reckless and juvenile, they raised their voices at one another, and Robin told Will off with a long monologue, saying he couldn’t hold it against Will that he was so maladjusted and that he pitied that his brother had to grow up in Robert Scarlett’s loveless home since it had truly made Will into their father’s son; at this, they simply glared at one another, and without a word Robin went off back toward the Major Oak to leave Will alone with his thoughts, only to hear not ten seconds later the sound of Will screaming in agony, at which point Robin turned around and immediately regretted every single word he had said. Robin said plainly that fear of becoming who he never wanted to be had driven Will to take his own life, and the others believed him. And as Robin said this, he wept all over again, and Thor and the others wept with him.

This tale did indeed give Thor closure, but it did not completely heal the rift between him and the other Merry Men. If anything, it solidified that they would never again truly be his friends, but merely his business partners. And it wasn’t their fault -- well, mostly; yes, he blamed them for making Will feel like the fifth wheel, but he knew that wasn’t an act of premeditated malice and he tried to force himself to look past that. Still, he had been starting to form a sense of fraternity with Will much like what Little John had with Robin, and seeing the other four without his best friend there just wasn’t the same; Will was his main connection to the group, and without him, he would
never again feel that kinship.

It’s debatable whether Thor ever truly got over Will’s passing. He did indeed become functional again, but some would argue that the quality of his functioning was not what it ought to have been. For one thing, if he had been shy and reserved before meeting the gang, he was simply antisocial now, devoting himself wholly to his work and never meeting up with the Merry Men for a good party, being noticeably absent during the archery contest and the subsequent hoedown in Sherwood, insisting that he’d had to work at the comedy club that weekend (though as far as his tendency to miss parties in recent years went, one could argue that the Merry Men weren’t making merry as often as they used to, anyway); whether he was doing anything to try to make friends in other parts of his life, Robin and John did not know, but they doubted it. He also stopped delivering the regular updates he would give them into his research into how to overturn his sex offender status, leading many to believe he had given up and was resigned to this fate for the rest of his life. But most notably, he went from leaning toward being a night owl to being fully nocturnal; while his “legal” job required him to work at the comedy club that weekend, he used to wake up late in the morning and go to bed immediately after returning home from work, but now he often woke up to an alarm well into the afternoon right before he had to leave for The Chuckle Bunker, staying up until sunrise.

And if Robin and John had fallen asleep immediately in that cave under the waterfall, they could have woken up and still been fully-rested well before dawn and made it to Thor’s place before he went to bed. Their plan half worked out: after the pain kept Robin awake until he passed out from exhaustion around sunset, that same pain returned and woke him up after just a few hours. And Little John, who wasn’t usually a light sleeper, couldn’t help but be awakened by the sound of Robin mewling.

As soon as they got to civilization, they went straight for the nearest convenience store they could find. They picked up travel-size bottles of Tylenol and Advil at a 7-Eleven, and since they were going to have to stay awake for the rest of the day, they decided to caffeinate themselves; neither of them particularly liked coffee, so perhaps predictably, the heavyset American got a Cherry Pepsi and the slender Brit got a Brisk Iced Tea (lamenting that there weren’t any options that weren’t horribly over-sweetened). The two then went right for the 70th and Montana TAN station, the terminus of the TAN Green Line subway. The TAN trains ran all night, but between 1:30 a.m. and 4:30 a.m. they only ran once every half hour on the half hour, and when the duo finally got downstairs to the platform, it was 3:04. The next train pulled up and opened its doors about ten minutes later, but it still wouldn’t get the green light until half past. As they sat alone in the idle train car staring at the ceiling, a scruffy-looking wolf waltzed in and sat across the aisle from them, and although the man didn’t seem to recognize them, they had a friendly if awkward conversation, the man even being courteous enough to ask if Robin’s arm was feeling okay (to which he politely lied and said it was), and the two of them were about to toss the guy a baggie of cash before he pointed at the backpack containing the bandit’s implements for their later activities and said the magic words: “You guys got any cocaine I can buy off ya?” They told him no, acting sorry that they didn’t, and if they were thinking about getting up and moving to another car to be away from the guy, they didn’t have to worry about it, because the wolf got up first, looking annoyed that they didn’t have any blow to spare, and walked right through the emergency doors to the next car, where there was a TAN employee who immediately reprimanded the man for using the emergency doors in a non-emergency situation, upon which the wolf turned around and went back into Robin and John’s car just for the employee to follow him and radio security to have him removed. It was a tough scene for the Merry Men to watch, but they silently agreed that considering what they saw on a regular basis, this hardly qualified as an injustice, and if the brief time they’d spent with him was enough to judge by, the guy seemed like he was probably going to get busted for an actual crime sooner or later. Then the train finally started moving, and as it did, its motion caused a series of vibrations to rumble through its scattered passengers, and that was when Robin realized
something: that over-processed bottled American tea had had a diuretic effect on him. He needed to take a leak. The urge wasn’t too bad at first, but he immediately knew it was going to build quickly, and if the shakiness of the train wasn’t bad enough, it was going to be a long journey to Thor’s place, easily an hour and likely more if their transfer didn’t go smoothly. Sure enough, the Green Line train had to tread slowly through a construction zone, and by the time they got to the Carlisle station to transfer to the southwest-bound Yellow Line trains (the name of which seemed to be mocking Robin), that train had already left. The walk between platforms was excruciating, and as per the anti-homeless sentiment that most major American cities harbored, you’d better believe that there were no public restrooms in any Transit Authority of Nottingham stationhouses. By the time they got off the subway at Tennessee Avenue, there was no way Robin could make it all the way to Thor’s house, so he ducked into an alleyway, had Little John keep lookout, and prayed that he didn’t fall victim to the same absurd misfortune as the polar bear had. He did indeed make it through unscathed, but he did make a point to check for any homeless rodents at his feet. And the sensation of operating everything down south with his left hand just didn’t feel right.

With each floor having very high ceilings to accommodate for its residents, the six-story building was as tall as a regular ten- or twelve-story building. They walked in and went to the elevator, and were a bit surprised to see it wasn’t waiting on the ground floor ready to go. After waiting the better part of a minute, the doors finally opened, and out waltzed an enormous brown bear, probably around the size of Little John’s father, giving the two of them the side-eye -- mostly Little John. He didn’t seem to recognize them either.

“Man, I know your little asses don’t live here!” the stranger grumbled.

“Yeah, I’m here to see my girlfriend!” Little John retorted as he walked into the elevator.

The giant simply pointed at the fox. “The fuck’s he doing with ya, then?”

Robin simply stepped ahead into the lift; he was pretty sure he could verbally handle himself with this guy, but he knew to leave conflicts like these to Johnny, if only for his pride.

“He’s gonna film us!” John jeered. “A dick as big as mine was made for show business!” And then he pressed the Door Close button and the button for the floor he wanted, a trick to immediately close the doors and go straight to the desired floor which worked in about half of all elevators, and from experience they knew this elevator was one of them.

“You fuckin’ think you’re tougher than me !?” the stranger growled just as the doors started closing. He reached his arm as if to grab Little John by the throat, but the mechanism saw to it that he didn’t reach it. “God-- DAMMIT! ” He retracted his arm and grasped it with his other as the door reopened slightly, held for a moment and closed again. “Get out here and say it to my--!” And as the doors closed, they never saw the unpleasant stranger again.


“Oh, you needn’t tell me, Johnny.”

“Yeah, but I feel the need to say so anyways.”

“And I appreciate your resolve. If there were to be a single ambassador for the Grizzly people, I would nominate you.”

“Well, I appreciate it.”

They were silent for a moment as the rickety old elevator moved very, very slowly.
“Uh… you do know…” Little John mumbled, “most brown bears you see on the street ain’t necessarily… grizzlies…”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know that?”

“I’m sorry, Johnny, I’d just been under the impression that it was just a North American thing that brown bears over here preferred to be called grizzlies. As opposed to the brown bears back on the other side of the Atlantic.”

“Well, hey, I’m not offended, I’m just surprised you didn’t already know that. You seem like you know everything…” The elevator was moving distressingly quietly. “…But, I mean, you’re half right, almost all of us in America’ve got some grizzly in us because the Europeans mixed with the natives, but, y’know, unless you’re in Alaska or bumblefuck Wyoming, you’re probably not gonna meet a full-blooded grizzly. I mean, it’s kinda the same as what happened to the foxes when they came over, but your guys’ Native cousins were spread out all over the continent and my people were just in the northwest.”

“I think I see what you mean.”

“But yeah, we honestly just let you call us grizzlies because it’s not worth explaining the whole thing. And then there’s the whole thing where mammalogists say Natives who lived on the coast weren’t technically grizzlies either, and at that point even most of us get confused, so, y’know….”

Another moment of near-silence passed. Little John put his ear to the wall. “Goddammit, is this thing even moving?”

“I was about to say…”

“Yeah, she’s humming. God, I hate this thing. How can Thor live this way?”

“I’m sure he’d rather not.”

“Heh, ain’t that right?” More silence passed. “But yeah, like, I know I ain’t more than a quarter grizzly myself. My mom was full-blooded European -- Irish and Dutch and Swedish and maybe some other stuff. But my grampa on my dad’s side -- he still had some English and German in him, but he had a lot of Native in him, too. Apparently he played a Native American grizzly at least once in some TV movie I’ve never heard of. And then he had a fetish for huge chicks so he hooked up with some polar bear actress from Norway and two generations later, you get me.”

“I’d like to know more about this famous grandfather of yours.”

“Hey, man, so would I. When we were kids, my brother and me thought our old man wouldn’t let us watch Sidney movies because he thought they’d turn us gay. Then I found out years later that his daddy who left him was in a few of those old cartoons, and I thought, oh, now I think I know the real reason why.”

Seemingly in unison, they both looked at the floor indicator above the door for the first time. Far from a modern one with a digital display, this was an old one with lights behind a metal stencil plate. Except this time the light wasn’t even on.

Little John was the first to comment: “If after all this we get busted because we got stuck in a broken elevator, I’m gonna die angry.”

And while Robin would usually try to be the optimistic voice in a moment like this, he had
something he needed to confess: “I’m afraid I’m going to have to take a slash again.”

It took Johnny a few seconds to rolodex through his mind for what the fuck that particular piece of British slang meant, but when he did, he was very tempted to force the doors open with his bare hands. But instead, he settled for kicking the plate covering the electrical wiring. The plate fell off its hinges and clinked on the metal floor.

--III--

The timing was impeccable. The precise moment he closed his browser was the precise moment he heard the knock at his door.

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ…” he fretted. “C-coming!” He tried to speak loud enough for his guests to hear but not so loud as to wake his neighbors; after all, he knew how his voice carried. He waddled into the bathroom with his pants around his ankles, his back hunched so he could use one paw to keep it from dripping while carrying the evidence with the other.

He heard the knocking again. “Yeah, yeah, I hear ya! I’m just, uh… in the bathroom!” he said, louder this time.

Rob and Johnny could hear a toilet flush from somewhere inside his apartment.

“I think we caught him halfway between a tug and a snooze again,” said Little John, markedly unamused.

“It would seem so,” Robin said flatly. All morning he had been nowhere near his usual chipper self, and it wasn’t helping that he wasn’t particularly proud of what Johnny had insisted he do in the slow-moving elevator.

“How does this keep happening?” John wondered aloud. “Don’t matter if we’re here at twelve-thirty or four-thirty, there’s always, like, what, a twenty percent chance that we interrupt him? Unless he’s doing it multiple times per night.”

“I’d always thought it was just convenient for Will to ask him to print him out screenshots to use back at camp because Thor had access to a computer, but now I’m beginning to think old Thor may be a... a connoisseur of this type of art.”

“You’re just starting to have these thoughts now? Jesus, Thor, ya gotta let those batteries recharge sometime,” John mumbled, his face twisted in disgust. More awkward silence passed, and Little John was all ready to fill the dead air with the same tired old quip that he’d made at least a dozen times before, remarking that it was painfully ironic that Thor was a registered sex criminal and (as far as they knew) still a virgin, followed by the obligatory disclaimer that John knew he wasn’t one to talk because he’d only ever had one intimate encounter himself and he didn’t think it counted considering the circumstances, but then they heard a voice from inside the apartment.

“Uh, wh-who’s there?” Thor’s apartment door did have a peephole, but it was eight feet in the air, so his only chance of seeing them was if John was standing right in front of the peephole, which he wasn’t.

“Domino’s!” quipped Little John. “Somebody ordered a large anchovy pizza with a side of open the fucking door.”

They heard the deadbolt disengage and then the knob lock, and as the door opened slowly, a timid-looking giant peeked his head out. “Y-y’know, it… it woulda been more fitting if you said you
were from Papa John’s.” Come to think of it, Dear Reader, a good way to describe Thor’s voice would be if someone with the neurotic and nerdy speech patterns of our friend Double-D Lupo had the vocal timbre of Satan himself.

Thor and John simply stared at each other, waiting for the other one to say something interesting, and Robin stared at them staring at each other.

“‘Cause… y’know…” Thor gestured, “…John’s.”

“I get it, Thorbjorn, I just ain’t laughin’,” the pseudo-grizzly named John grumbled. “But that would’ve worked even better if I was somebody’s papa, and I better not have any kids running around who I don’t know about. For their sake and mine.”

“Uh… yeah, that-- that makes sense, I guess.”

“Hey, listen, man, I’m sorry for coming on so strong, but we’ve had a seriously rough last couple of days, and I don’t mean to take it out on you, but goddamn, even on the ride over here, I was liable to blow a fuckin’ gasket.”

“Well, uh, I appreciate that you, uh… aren’t consciously trying to hurt me.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, bud.”

Thor glanced down at Robin, who hadn’t said anything since he’d opened the door. “Hey, how’s it goin’, Robin?” Thor asked with a blank expression as he extended his paw for a handshake. “You’ve been awfully quiet today.”

Robin put his hands up as if he were being interrogated. “Er-- please don’t take it personally, Thor, but I think it’d be best if I washed my hands before we shook.”

“Jesus, man, what happened to your arm!?"

Little John hushed Thor. “This and many other riveting stories can be discussed inside the privacy of your pad.”

“Oh, uh, sure. Co-come in,” Thor said as he made way.

“And on a completely unrelated note, the next time you gotta leave the building, take the stairs. Elevator smells like piss.”

Walking into Thor’s apartment was always a surreal experience. For Robin and John, it was like stepping into a really weird nightmare. It wasn’t just that the furniture was oversized, there was a strange dearth of furniture in general. His kitchen table was pushed into a corner and only had one chair, his mattress was right on his living room floor next to his computer table, and the walls were almost entirely barren; the guy didn’t even have a calendar on his walls. It was like the mammalian brain was trying to conjure an image of an apartment but it could only muster the barest details. And of course seeing all of this in the first place was a challenge since Thor kept his place dark to keep his electric bill low; there was yellow light coming from a dusty light bulb in his kitchen and the backlight coming from the computer’s screensaver image of a rolling green hill under a clear blue sky and that was it -- as Thor would tell you, his people were from a part of the world where it got dark and stayed dark for months on end, so he had no qualms with this arrangement.

Of course, he knew how to make his abode more inviting to his guests. “H-hold on, let-lemme turn the lights on for ya.”
Just as their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, they had to adjust back to the luminosity of the ceiling light in the living room. One could hear the faintest yelps of discomfort from under their breath.

“Er, th-thank you, Thor,” said Robin. “Now, may I use your sink?”

“Oh, sure. You need a stepstool?” Thor asked as he grabbed his kitchen chair and started for the bathroom, not waiting for an answer.

“Please. Thank you.”

Thor set up the chair at the sink, which was something like five feet in the air, and let Robin grab on to his arm to climb up. Little John stood in the doorway.

“So what’s with the cast?” Thor asked.

Robin had the water on low so it wouldn’t be too loud to speak over. “Well, it would seem either we’ve run out of luck or I’ve run out of talent.” This was the first time he was washing his hands with a cast on his arm and he was struggling to circumnavigate it; he wasn’t sure how wet he could get it, and the sheer act of rubbing the liquid soap between his paws was putting uncomfortable pressure on his fractured wrist. “One thing’s for sure: I have a new challenge to overcome. If I can’t overcome it, it will be my downfall, but if I can overcome it, it will make my biography all the more compelling.”

In his periphery, Robin saw Little John roll his eyes.

“And that sounds nice and philosophical and all,” said Thor, “but I still don’t know what actually happened.”

“Fell from a tree.”

“Huh. Surprised that that’s the first time that’s happened after all these years.”

“You and me both, my friend.”

“And don’t forget how you almost got your tail curtailed with a chainsaw!” Little John added as he grabbed Robin’s fluffy end-piece to show Thor the stitches.

“Gah!” Robin twitched as he felt his tail being grabbed, his nervous system moving it out of the way.

“Guh!” Little John made a similar sound as the sudden movement spooked him.

“I’m sorry, Johnny, but please don’t do that. It’s, er, like a primitive instinct that if something’s got me by the tail, then I must be in grave danger.”

“Well Jesus, man, don’t move it out of my hands like that, either! Fuck, sometimes I forget you can control that thing. Like a snake lurching at me.”

“The double-entendres of this conversation are killing me,” said Thor, fully aware that such a comment would be construed as having made things even more awkward but not believing he was capable of speaking without making things awkward. After the other two didn’t add to that remark, he continued, “But if you guys could molest each other somewhere else, I don’t wanna risk getting
tied to another sex crime.” One of the things Thor had always admired about Will was his bold and boundary-pushing sense of humor, the spirit of which Thor tried to revive when he was feeling courageous enough to do so, though even the biggest fans of edgy comedy would admit that Thor didn’t seem to have the best handle on how to make such jokes work.

“Don’t worry,” said Little John. “We have a vested interest in making sure the cops never find out what goes on within these walls.” He knew Thor was speaking in jest but he just didn’t feel like entertaining the thought.

Robin turned off the water and dried his hands on a hanging towel. “And this brings us to the reason for our visit.”


“Actually,” said Robin, “we were hoping to ask you for more than just one baggie of the goodnight pills.”

“Oh, you… need some extra?”

“Yes,” said Little John, “and also something else, if you can.”

“Uh… wh-what’s that?”

Robin held up his broken arm. “The good doctor who patched me up did his best, but given the way we had to do things, he couldn’t follow protocol as closely as he’d have liked. He mentioned that he’d typically give his broken-bone patients hard painkillers for a time, but he didn’t have any way of getting me any.”

“And the doctor tried warning him and I tried warning Robin, too,” added Little John, “that those pills can fuck you right up even if you’re being careful with them. But we talked it out and, yeah, with the nature of our work, it behooves us to not have half our team be writhing in pain twenty-four-seven.”

“So wait,” said Thor, “this guy didn’t give you any painkillers at all after you broke your arm?”

“Oh, he gave us some over-the-counter drugs which he said were what he’d usually prescribe after the hard stuff,” Robin clarified. “Drugs that we promptly lost -- another incidental hazard of our hectic lives.”

“And this morning we just bought some Tylenol and Advil at a gas station,” added John, “which… I think it’s doing fine for now. You tell me, Rob, how’s your arm?”

“As you said, Johnny, fine for now.”

“Yeah, well, that’s after he double-dosed on both,” Little John explained to Thor. “That’s not healthy and, I gotta say, that stuff is a helluva lot more expensive than I remember. It probably wouldn’t put too much of a dent in our donations, but still, you know, the less money we spend on ourselves, the better.”

“So to cut to the chase, Thor, what we think would be the best solution for everyone would be -- if it’s within your power, of course--”

“--if you can make replicas of these painkillers that aren’t homewreckingly addictive. I mean… you mess around with trying to make new drugs, don’tcha? You ever tried making these?”
Thor had predicted several sentences back that that was where they were going with this, and he was very afraid to be right. “Uh, um, what… what kind of drugs was he talking about?” he asked. “Please don’t say oxy--”

“Oxy,” Little John said flatly, knowing entirely why not to take those three letters lightly. “Or Vicodin, or Percocet. Like we said, we both understand these aren’t things you just fuck around with willy-nilly; as I was telling Rob and the doc, Oxy did a number on my dad and it made him do a bigger number on me and my brother, so it did a number on us by proxy -- Oxy by proxy, fuck, that rhymes. But hey, you’ve been workin’ for years to expand your repertoire, ain’tcha? To make prescription drugs that’re affordable and -- with any luck -- safer? Thor, we know you know your shit with medicine. If anybody can make a knock-off Oxy that isn’t pure-ass evil, I’d put my money on you.”

“Think of it this way, Thor,” said Robin. “You started down this walk of life because you wanted to be the one to provide the medicine that could heal the world, correct? Well, if what Johnny and Dr. Fort tell me is correct -- and I have absolutely no reason to believe it isn’t -- then it sounds to me like a non-destructive high-potency painkiller is something the world needs which nobody else has been able to find. Surely it isn’t just me. Surely all these impoverished people we help -- surely some of them could greatly benefit from this being in their lives. This could be your moment of truth to do something great, Thor. So… will you rise to the occasion, or just let the moment pass you by?”

Thor simply gave Robin one of those pensively-frustrated looks not unlike what Dr. Fort had given him yesterday when they were haggling over when to perform surgery.

Therefore Robin kept speaking: “And I’ll volunteer to be your guinea pig. Not just because I’m a dirty low-life criminal who’s surely living on borrowed time, not just because there are many who would argue that our methods are making things worse rather than better and the loss of me would be no loss at all, but mostly because…” And Robin allowed his face to melt into an uncharacteristically vulnerable look. “…I have never felt pain like this before in my entire life, Thor. He cut into my muscles and drilled into my bones. It hurts, Thor. It really does. The over-the-counter stuff is doing enough so I can stop whinging out loud but I still can’t take my mind off it.”

Seeing the look on Robin’s face as he stood on the chair by the sink, Little John wanted to try an experiment of his own. John -- who still only went up to the polar bear’s chest -- picked up Robin around the torso and held him a few feet above his own head, putting the fox’s nose just a few inches in front of Thor’s. “C’mon, Thor. How ya gonna say no to a couple of puppy-dog eyes like that?”

“He’s not a puppy dog, he’s a fox,” said Thor, genuinely confused.

“Well they’re cousins or something!”

And the polar bear did look into those hurt canine eyes and could clearly see that Nottingham’s most beloved hero was in a crisis he could not simply will himself through. But as he reciprocated the look, it was not a moral or ethical issue that troubled Thor, nor even a matter of doubting his own abilities, but rather acknowledging the limitations of the natural world. He knew modern science could put a mammal on the moon, but he also knew modern science could never bring the moon to Earth. Perhaps many centuries from now it could, but not in the Twenty-First Century. And so also this dilemma.

“You guys don’t know how badly I wish this was my chance to make my mark on the world,” Thor sighed. “I really do. But I’ve already tried that. It didn’t work.”
“You have!?” Robin and John said almost in unison. Little John went to put Robin down on the floor, then thought better of it and put him back on the chair so he wouldn’t strain his neck too much looking at Thor.

“Uh-huh.”

“You never told us you experimented with that,” said Little John, seeming almost offended by this revelation.

“Well, I did.”

“Well, perhaps it’s time to try again,” suggested Robin.

“I already did. It didn’t work that time, either.”

“What exactly did you try?” asked Johnny.

“Well… the first time was years ago. Right before Will died, I think.”

Robin and John glanced at each other, regretting for everyone’s sake that they’d forced the issue.

“That time, I just tried recreating Oxy straight -- I was still meeting my clients through you guys exclusively at this time, so I just assumed that anybody who was a friend of yours would probably be responsible enough not to abuse this stuff, but before you say anything, yeah, now I know that these weren’t necessarily your friends, they were just… people you met. And to be fair I guess I shouldn’t frame it as them being irresponsible with the drugs because the thing about narcotic painkillers like that is that for them to work like they should, they basically have to be inherently bordering on habit-forming, because they work by--”

“Uh, Thor-- It’s cool, man,” said Little John. “Dr. Fort already explained the whole catch-22 about all this.”

“Oh, uh, alright… but yeah, I don’t want to make it sound like I’m blaming these people for getting hooked on it, because it was the nature of the beast, as it were. So when Will died and I stopped producing, I got a bunch of angry calls and emails from people demanding more, and okay, some of these people needed it for chronic pain, but a lot of them only needed them for temporary things like breaks and sprains -- like you, Robin. So when I was ready to get back into action, I did the math in my head and I thought, wait, a bunch of you guys should be off this stuff by now. So I insisted they meet up with me in person and bring their medical notes if they wanted any more, and some of them said they didn’t have notes because they couldn’t afford a doctor and that’s why they needed pills from me in the first place, and okay, that makes sense and all, but for ethical reasons I cut them off then and there, and as for the people with breaks and sprains and stuff, yeah, some of them confessed they were past the point of needing it, some of them tried to put up a fight and tell me they still did need it, and some of them -- I don’t know where I’m going with this, but I wound up giving them smaller and smaller doses until I was basically microdosing them, trying to wean them off. And then I swore not to touch the stuff for a while.”

“Man, that’s a bummer,” John murmured, wishing there was a place for him and Robin to sit down.

“And I tried it again a few years later, and this time, it was your buddy Otto.”

“Otto?” asked Robin. “I don’t recall him ever telling us about that.”

“Hey, I don’t doubt it. He seems like the kind of guy who wouldn’t want to broadcast that he’s in
the clutches of drugs. But this was that one year where he was hobbling around with a busted foot all summer.”

“Now _that_ we remember,” said John.

“So he was a good friend of yours, he was self-employed so he didn’t have insurance, he had enough money to pay for the ER but not the painkillers after that. So I decide to take another stab at it, but this time, I’m careful, because I’m still thinking I might’ve made the pills _too_ addictive the first time, even more than usual. So I’m thinking, shit, how can I make these work without making them life-ruiningly addictive? And I’m wracking my brain and I’m trying a bunch of different compositions, and he’s trying them, and I’m intentionally keeping them weak but Otto’s telling me that they’re not much better than just taking paracetamols -- Tylenol, I mean, -- and then I just say fuck it and roll out all the stops. I make them with the same formula as I did the first time, but I add some garnish so the pills taste like honest-to-god asscrack.”

“Ew,” the boys winced.

“And at first, I thought that worked. Otto says they get the job done like a charm but he hates taking them, actively dreads consuming them. So with that, I dare to start giving them to other people. And then something terrible happens.”

“What’s that?” asked John.

“They stopped minding the taste.”

“Er… so we see,” choked out Robin.

“You guys know how many people overcome their fear of needles because they’re hooked on heroin? I do, now. Addiction’s a hell of a thing. This time I didn’t bother giving them smaller doses to come down off of, I just told them to get lost and leave me alone. Thank God these people don’t know where I live.”

“I… don’t think you gotta worry about anybody knocking on your door and pickin’ a fight, Big Guy,” said Little John.

“I’m not so sure, man. My crotch is level with a lot of people’s fists. They could take me out in one swing and my god-for-fucking-saken arms are too short to block a punch down there!”

“Alright, Thor, we get it,” said John in disgust. “You’re makin’ my nuts ache just thinkin’ about it.”

“Same here,” Robin mumbled, trying not to think about it. “But we understand, Thor: you’ve good reason to be skeptical that it can be done. But we encourage you to have another go of it. Just like I’m telling myself with this broken arm, a hero whose story doesn’t involve overcoming failure is no hero at all. And don’t they say, third time’s the charm?”

“Uh… they do say that,” said Thor. And he was about to mention that just because that’s an old saying didn’t make it true when the conversation went on without him.

“And if you need new ingredients to perform new experiments, maybe there’s something we can do to help you get them,” offered Little John.

“I mean… maybe, but it would take a while. It might be by the time I have something that works, you won’t need them anymore. Or at least you’d be at the point where you _shouldn’t_ be taking something so strong.”
“Understood,” said Robin. “But then you can always pay it forward to the people of Nottingham, could you not?”

“Necessity’s the mother of invention,” said Little John, though he internally cringed a little at that old saying since one of the words reminded him of a stupid song his brother wrote once. “Nothing ventured, nothin’ gained.”

“You’re just full of relevant old sayings today, aren’t you, Johnny?”

“Fuckin’ A I am. Darn tootin’.”

Thor still looked uneasy at the prospect of experimenting with opiates again. “I-I mean… the supply line isn’t a problem -- at least not yet. Maybe if the FBI shuts down the Russian websites I use tomorrow, but for now, anything I need, I can probably find online and get shipped to me under a fake name three degrees of separation from my real identity.”

“Thor, doesn’t the government monitor your computer anyway?” asked Little John. “On account of your, uh… ‘status’?”

“What? Oh, n-uh-no, tha-that’s only for, uh, that’s for people who get busted with, uh… y’know, the kinds of things you can theoretically find online. Y-y’y’know… contraband apropos of sex crimes--”

“We, er… we understand, Thor,” Robin interrupted.

“Although that makes a lot more sense now,” John added. “We’d been wondering about that, but we were afraid to ask.”

Thor was looking at his feet, hoping that this might inspire them to change the subject -- not necessarily change the subject to *that*, but to anything other than browbeating him into doing something he wasn’t comfortable with. And the other two could tell, so they would not let the silence relent until he gave them an answer one way or another.

Thor looked up. “Well?”

“Well, what?” asked Little John. “We’re waiting on you to give us an answer. Did you just forget that?”

Thor glanced at Robin; Robin returned his glance with a gesture of *so what’s it going to be?*

The polar bear’s look of resignation was much like the look on the St. Bernard roughly twenty-six hours prior, though whereas the doctor looked more angry, the pharmacist looked more sad. “I’ll *brainstorm* … and if I can think of something, I’ll try it; if I can’t think of something, I won’t. And I’m not promising you nothing -- if I can’t even come up with a prototype for it, I don’t want you two acting like I failed you, because even offering to *attempt* this is doing more for you than I owe you.”

“And we understand completely,” said Robin. “And we thank you, Thor -- I thank you. Even taking the first step toward this is more than we could have asked for.”

“You’re a good guy, Thor,” John added. “You got this.”

“Well, I appreciate the support,” Thor muttered dejectedly; truthfully, he was hurt. He felt like two people he trusted and who the city at large adored had just violated his trust by bullying him out of his comfort zone. But of course, he didn’t have the nerve to outright say that, for fear of making
tensions worse. Not that he needed to say anything; Robin and John could tell that Thor had taken their cajoling much worse than Dr. Fort had, and they weren’t happy about having made him feel bad, but they were in a crunch and they needed to give him a push, resigned to the idea that this was just the kind of person Thor was, and while they would have loved to have worked with him to help him build his own confidence and become the kind of person who chooses to challenge himself so they didn’t have to force him to, they simply had no time for it.

“But, uh… hey…” Thor mumbled again as he opened his medicine cabinet and pulled out a gigantic bottle of Tylenol with a photograph of an elephant on the label. “I guess… for now, maybe I can lend you some of these for emergencies -- and I mean emergencies. Because these are literally just regular Tylenols at exponential strength -- okay, maybe not exponentially, but you know what I mean, several magnitudes more-- well, wait, that basically means the same thing--”

“Thor,” Little John cut in. “We get it. They’re for big motherfuckers like you and me and this little guy should be careful with them so he doesn’t OD on Tylenol of all things.”

“No. Not for big motherfuckers like you, only for really big motherfuckers like me. Does the weight on your driver’s license have a comma in it?”

“Hm… Hook me up with some gift cards to fast-food joints and I could probably get there within a month.”

“But you’re not there yet, so really even you shouldn’t be taking these. At least not regularly. Now, for you, Robin, luckily these are the old-fashioned solid pills and not the capsules so I can probably cut a couple of these in half for ya and send you on your way.”

“With the goods we came here for,” Robin added. “As much as you can, because in my present state, I don’t know if we can risk coming all the way down to your neck of the woods as often as we usually do.”

“Right. Sounds good. Got ‘em in the other room.”

The room that was meant to be the bedroom was instead where Thor had his lab set up. A large table was placed squarely in the center of the room, not against any wall; it was littered with all number of tools and instruments, including tweezers, razor blades, an old-fashioned mortar and pestle, an old manual scale with an analog meter as well as a new electric one with a digital display, a mountain of boxes of Ziploc bags and extra-extra-large vinyl gloves and medical face masks, disinfecting wipes and paper towels, and a whole bunch of other things that Robin and John didn’t know the names of and which this narrator couldn’t remember after Thor told them.

The polar bear cleared off a space and placed a cutting board in front of the only part of the table with a chair anywhere next to it. He sat down and gently poured out about half a dozen of the extra-large-mammal paracetamols. The other two watched him do his work, both thinking to themselves that the size of these pills exceeded even what they thought of when they thought of ‘horse pills’, and yet they still looked miniscule when compared to the size of the Canadian’s gargantuan paws; indeed, in a story where it may seem like every single one of our male characters fears that their size and stature was insufficient, Thor would have gladly swapped bodies with someone Robin’s size if given the chance, because God knows that it would have made his work a lot easier. Thor put on some gloves and took the thin cardboard wrapping off a fresh razor blade, then grabbed the forceps with his left hand to steady the pills which were far too small for him to grasp with his fingers, something he especially wouldn’t want to risk while working with a razor blade. And he got to slicing.

This wasn’t the first time the Merry Men had seen Thor do his thing, and indeed they weren’t even
witnessing him doing something as impressive as formulating medicine from scratch, but it was the first time they’d seen him work in quite a while.

“I… thought all you guys were left-handed,” remarked Little John, who as a consequence of his own fucked-up childhood wouldn’t necessarily notice someone’s handiness every single time, but would absolutely remember somebody’s handiness forever when he did notice.

Thor didn’t even look up. “That’s a myth,” he grumbled under his breath; with the depth of his voice, it was actually kind of challenging to make out his words when he was too distracted to properly annunciate.

He worked slowly and methodically, trying to make sure that he was cutting them as equally as he could, spacing his cuts equidistantly and making sure that not too much crumbled away from the pill fragments.

He cut the first two pills into thirds, then leaned back in his seat and looked at his creation with a sideways look, puzzled, one eye wide open and another glaring, his mouth pursed into the space between his thumb and index finger as the rest of his fingers scratched the bottom of his snout absentmindedly. He leaned back in and reached for his razor and another pill before putting them both down and assuming the same puzzled position.

“Uh, Robin…” Thor said without taking his eyes off the table, “ki-kind of a personal question, but it’s important -- how much do you weigh, exactly?”

Robin winced as he turned to look into space and shook his head slightly. “Er… I don’t know, really, haven’t checked in years. I’d say about eight stone.”

Thor stopped looking at the table to turn to Robin and give him one of those really, man? looks. “I have absolutely no frame of reference for what the fuck that means.”

Little John half-playfully smacked his British friend on the back of the head after that remark -- only half playful because he was seriously confused how Robin was still getting his wires crossed after all these years stateside, but then again, he understood his friend probably wasn’t in the best headspace. “You stupid limey bastard,” Little John quipped. “Next you’re gonna answer in kilograms, ain’t ya!”

“Er-- my bad, Thor,” Robin answered, “weight isn’t something I discuss very often.”

“I’m still waiting on a number I can actually use,” said Thor, still unamused and showing uncharacteristic nerve in presenting himself as such.

“Erm…” Robin took his good arm and felt his stomach under his shirt. “I could say anywhere between… a hundred and one-twenty? I dunno, on the one hand, we’re constantly getting our exercise, on the other, we don’t always have the luxury of eating the healthiest. Then again, maybe we’ve actually built muscle from all the--”

“Alright. I got it. Good enough,” Thor barked. “Nyeh, I’m Robin’ood, not only am I a great hero, but all my hero-ing makes me even STRONGER! ” he grumbled aloud, feeling like Will would have wanted him to make such a remark in his stead. Of course, Robin and Little John didn’t know that, so they heard that quip and wondered what the hell was up with him.

Not that Thor saw their confused faces, because he was glaring again at the pills. A moment passed before he shoved the partitioned pills to the side and started cutting up the rest, this time into quarters. The outlaws kept watching in near-silence, both separately glancing up to notice that
Thorbeyond the shut curtains, the sky seemed to be getting lighter.

Thor stared at the sixteen fragments that lay before him. “Aw, hell, I probably made too much… whatever,” he scoffed as he grabbed a plastic baggie and started filling it. “Now, I’m serious,” he said sternly, quickly glancing at Robin but mostly keeping his eyes on the pills, “One of these a day -- one -- and if you don’t finish them all, that’s fine by me. You can match them with an ibuprofen if you absolutely need to, but whatever you do, for the love of fuck, please don’t mix these with alcohol.”

“You have my word,” Robin affirmed.

Thor pressed the seal shut and Robin reached out to accept it. Thor didn’t even look at Robin as he held out the baggie to Little John. “Johnny. Take it.”

Robin and John were both surprised by that. Reluctantly, almost feeling like he was doing something wrong, Little John took the bag. “Uh-- okay,” he murmured.

“What, you don’t trust me with my own medicine?” Robin asked with a playful smile in his voice and on his face to conceal the fact that he actually was quite a bit offended by that move.

“Nope. I don’t,” Thor said in complete unfazed sincerity; he was said to have two modes, ‘anxious and neurotic’ and ‘disconnected and apathetic’, and as he was forced into making tough decisions right as he was ready to hit the hay, he was certainly in the latter. “Don’t choose to take it personally. I know this stuff and I know how it works. It’s not a character flaw of yours that you might wind up hooked on something that makes your brain feel good, it’s just how your brain works -- it’s how all of our brains work. Hell, common people don’t realize how dangerous painkillers are. I wouldn’t be surprised if before long, even Tylenol and stuff like that became regulated again, because--”

“Again: Thor, don’t worry,” cut in Little John. “The doctor already gave us a similar spiel about this stuff. With all I’ve learned about medicine in the last two days, I swear I feel like I could become a doctor myself right now.”

“This has truly been an educational experience,” said Robin, a bit drier than may have been expected since he was honestly still miffed about the pill hand-off.

“Alright, alright,” Thor conceded, “Dr. Ford already talked enough for the both of us, I guess.”

“Fort, buddy, Fort,” John corrected. “His ancestors made army outposts, not pickups and sedans.”

“You’re from Canada, yes?” asked Robin. “Remember it this way: he’s a big dog and his ancestors sont forts. They parlent le français.”

“Man, foreign languages were always my weak point,” Thor moaned, back to being nervous and neurotic again. “My parents tried to teach me their ancestors’ languages, but it didn’t stick -- not that I’m missing any big opportunities in life by not speaking Faroese, but... you know how it is. And don’t get me started on French class…” And the two outlaws looked uncomfortably for a moment at the drug dealer, who leaned forward in his seat and stared at the floor with his hands clasped, and everyone expected everybody else to say something before Thor finally looked up and spoke again: “So this Dr. Fort guy who patched you up, did he do it for free? Or are you guys in the hole for paying him back?”

“Oh no,” said Robin, “he copied some insurance information from a patient who he swore
wouldn’t notice. *Then* he took us to his place to perform the operation.”

“At his house!?”

“Yessir. With Johnny here as his nurse.”

“More blood came out of this little shit than I knew he had in him!” John remarked.

“Hm. Well that was nice of him…” Thor seemed to be thinking again. “Y’know, you bring this guy up every so often and mention how he saved your asses; should I meet this guy?”

Robin and Little John glanced at one another, nonverbally confirming to the other that this question did indeed sound oddly familiar.

The fox went first: “Er… maybe! I mean, I could see your skills with medicine and his skills with surgery matching up quite nicely!”

“And it might actually be good for you to meet him,” John added, “because, uh… he’s actually kind of a lot like you, except… like, a lot less self-contained. It might be good for your self-esteem to meet someone who’s just not content with who they are.”

“Come to think of it, Johnny, whereas Thor here would be a champ and take it on the chin when somebody rubs him the wrong way, old Geoffrey would more likely snap at people and just escalate the conflict, and it might be good for Thor to see what happens when someone *tries* to present themselves as more confident than they are but has a very corrupted idea of what self-confidence actually is.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point, Rob. ‘Cause Thor here’s already had to be diplomatic in cutting off clients who he thinks are abusing his drugs and demanding more; I don’t know if Geoff would be able to navigate a conflict like that without just losing his shit and making everything worse.”

A nasal chuckled puffed out of Thor’s snout and a smile came upon one side of his face. “Well… I guess I oughta feel better about myself now…”

Robin and John glanced at one another again, knowing they would be dissecting this part of the conversation on their ride home.

“Oh!” said Thor with a failed attempt at snapping his fingers. “Before I forget…” He searched around his table until he located the prepackaged bags of his retrograde-amnesia pills, three of them, each containing about thirty capsules; depending on how conservatively or liberally the outlaws would use them, and depending how hectic their lives were about to become, these bags could last them all summer or they could blow through them in a week. Next to the bags was another baggie off to the side, seemingly still in the process of being filled as it only contained a dozen or so; Thor grabbed this one with the other three and handed them over, this time to Robin.

“Hopefully you won’t need to use these as much as you think you will. And you guys have my phone number somewhere, right? Call me from a payphone somewhere next time and give me a head’s up before you show up. You can call collect, I don’t care.”

“Great idea, Thor!” said Little John, pointing at his fellow ursid encouragingly. “I assure you we’ll forget to do that! Again!”

“Erm, pardon me, Thor,” squaked Robin, “we’ll be out of your hair soon, but if I may use your facilities before we leave?”

“Uh… sure, I’ll move the chair for ya,” Thor said as he stood to make his way to the bathroom.
“Jesus, Rob, you got a bladder infection or something?” asked Little John.

“I wouldn’t say that yet, Johnny, but I’m not ruling it out,” Robin said as he followed Thor to the lavatory.

Little John was alone for a second, listening to the muffled sounds of the chair squeaking across the linoleum floor in the bathroom, trying not to overthink things; now he was feeling slighted by Thor giving the amnesia pills to Robin. He told himself to give Thor the benefit of the doubt, that he should just assume that Thor gave them both something to carry specifically so neither or them would feel neither burdened nor slighted, but he couldn’t help but think that if Thor also subconsciously (or consciously) thought of Robin as the head honcho, then Thor would probably have acted the way he did. And the conversation he was about to have with him only messed with his head further.

Thor walked back into the lab and stood leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room from where Little John was standing. “I didn’t need to see his puppy-dog fox eyes to see that he’s in it bad,” he said quietly. “He just doesn’t seem himself.”

“You are far from the first person to say that,” John answered. “Course, neither of us’ve been… really at the top of our games recently… shit, we haven’t told you anything about the last couple days, have we?”

“Nope. Besides the falling-out-of-at-tree part.”

“Well, he fell out of a tree because-- excuse me, he fell out of the tree, the Major Oak, because the cops finally located it and actually remembered where it was -- took ‘em long enough. And after all these years thinking we had some legal backup in the sense that Sherwood was a jurisdictional gray area, the slippery sons of bitches just fucking circumvented the problem by merging the city and county police departments after they staged a vulgar display of power where the old county sheriff and deputy beat some kid into a coma -- the kid had his own issues, he found me and Rob hardly five minutes prior and threw rocks at us and called us faggots, but Jesus God Almighty, I dunno if he deserved that.”

“Hm,” was all Thor said. He was very fascinated to hear this side of the story about the kid beaten in the woods, of whom he had heard plenty, all of it sympathetic. Of course, he was going to have to force this out of his head by the time he saw his manager at work that night, lest he be unable to look at her straight. Thor wanted to ask more details, but Johnny just kept rolling right along:

“And I know I sound like Alan bitching and moaning about the police, but these specific police, yeah, fuck ‘em, fuck them and their corrupted little system. They’ve got more of a run on us than they ever have, and if morale wasn’t bad enough, we keep running into civilians who don’t believe in our cause anymore -- yeah, we’ve had people like that this entire time, but I swear we’ve had way more than usual this week alone, up to and including the motherfucker with a chainsaw we ran into at the Major Oak, sent there to chop it down, and I know, I know, he’s just following orders, he has no personal politics in all of this, is what I thought before he tells us off for failing to make any progress until we twisted his arm into losing faith in us, and then he tried to Texas Chainsaw Massacre my friend, who escapes by climbing up a tree, only to fall right out of it. There! And it all comes back full-circle.”

“...Wow.” Thor had a lot of questions, but he was too flabbergasted to verbalize any of them.

“Tell me about it. And I’m seriously wondering if this is the first time in Robin’s life that he’s had a challenge he didn’t really believe he could overcome. And you know what? Good for him that he’s gone this far in life without losing his nerve -- if only we should all be so fortunate. But good
goddamn, man, this is not the time to be having your first mental breakdown. There’s a name for it, Alan told me about this concept before he lost the ability to talk about anything other than politics -- ‘The Curse of the Happy Child’ is the traditional name I think, but in Rob’s case, let’s call it ‘The Curse of Superman’: he’s so used to being talented at everything and having success at everything that when he finally encounters a problem that hard work and hard thought can’t fix, he doesn’t know how to handle it…” At this point, Little John realized he’d been talking for a while. “ROB, ARE YOU STILL IN THERE!? ” Thor tried to shush him, but Little John either didn’t hear him or simply ignored him.

“Every time I think I’m done, I can feel more welling up inside me!” Robin replied.

Little John glanced at Thor for a moment. “Alright, man, take your time!” he replied to his friend. He turned back to Thor: “And I could try to give him pep talks, but it wouldn’t work. He used to listen to me more -- he only proposed to his girlfriend because I fucking told him to -- but I think with everyone else out of the picture, he’s stopped seeing me as his lieutenant who could help him run the show and started seeing me as another foot soldier to be managed. He’s a good man, but he’s in that spot where he’s so good, he might not even think to improve on the flaws he does have, and the fact that he’d rather be my boss than my friend is one of those flaws. I mean, I’d bet deep down that he’d say he’s trying to be both, but quite frankly, doing what we do, I’d rather fail with a good friend than succeed with a bad one. And… the guy’s mentioned his father was an asshole, so maybe he gets it from him, but he never fucking elaborates on it, so for all I know--”

They both looked up when they heard the toilet flush. Sensing that this would be the end of their private discussion, the bears glanced at each other.

“Well, I’ve given you a lot to think about, now haven’t I?” asked John.

Thor did indeed have a lot of thoughts about all of that, but he thought the most concise response would be this: “He really ought to appreciate how lucky he is to have you as a sidekick.”

And that, Dear Reader, struck a nerve. Little John held his tongue, however, expecting Robin to leave the bathroom at any moment. But he never did.

“Oh…” Thor hadn’t been prepared to speak, but then again, he rarely was. “I mean… you know… from all I’ve seen, all I’ve heard about you guys, you’ve been loyal to him like I’ve never seen anyone be loyal to anyone else. I mean, I really don’t know if Robin could have accomplished half as much as he has without you helping him out. You’ve done a lot for him for a guy you’re not married to, and I mean that as a good thing, Johnny.”

And Little John was going to tread carefully on the topic of guys being friends, knowing Thor’s fraternity with their fallen brother-in-arms, but he needed to say something: “Alright, man, I know you said you mean well, but you’re not the first person to compare me and Rob to a married couple. Not even this week.”
“Was the other person the Lafferty kid in the woods?”

Little John didn’t know how Thor knew the kid’s last name, especially since he and Robin didn’t even know the kid’s name, but John lacked a key piece of knowledge that would make clear why Thor knew that. But whatever, it wasn’t important, and if anything that confusion helped dissipate his memories of that weird dream he’d had, so with a weird look, Little John said, “And besides him. Not just him. People insinuating that two guys aren’t… *supposed* to be as close friends as he and I are.”

“Oh, and there are absolutely people who think you shouldn’t be that close if you guys aren’t fondling each other’s dicks. I’m not gonna say you shouldn’t if you two are both okay with it, but, yeah, I wouldn’t want that for myself. I thought me and Will were tight, but I couldn’t imagine being with the guy twenty-four-seven… *forever* . I don’t know if there’s anybody on Earth I would want to be around all the time, but hey, maybe that’s just me being an introvert. And even if I did have someone in my life who I wanted to be around every waking moment -- Will, another friend, a girlfriend, anyone -- I’d still be afraid to constantly be around them. Don’t want them thinking I’m clingy.”

*Clingy?* Hoo boy, that was a word that wasn’t going to leave John’s head for a while. Thor had just managed to manufacture a new fear for Little John out of thin air. *Clingy?* Did John have to worry about Robin thinking he was clingy? Maybe not now, but if this all ended tomorrow and Rob and Marian got back together, would Robin think John was being clingy after *that*? If not Robin, would Marian have a problem with it, painting Little John as a desperately lonely little homewrecker? If they were both okay with it, would outside observers have an issue with it, and treat him or all three of them differently as a result? Should he care? Little John had never had a normal friendship before he met Robin -- hell, some would argue he still hadn’t. How often did adult friends see each other without it being weird? Was daily too much? *Weekly*? He legitimately had no idea. All he knew is that, much like how he told Otto, his main concern was that he just didn’t want to be left all alone again. But of course, he didn’t say that now, because Thor was still busy making things much, much worse.

“But Johnny, don’t worry. I know you’re not *actually* a married couple. You stick together for your own survival, I understand that. I understand you’re separate people and you’re eventually going to go your separate ways, but for now, you two have one hell of a rapport with each other, and I’m just saying he ought to appreciate it more.”

*Great job, Thor!* John thought, *You just invented two new fears for me by pulling them directly out of your fat white ass!* Seriously? ‘ *You’re eventually going to go your separate ways* ’ -- is that how this story was supposed to end? Is that what the world expected of him? Was his end goal supposed to be that he learns enough from Robin that he can graduate from him and make new friends and maybe even find a significant other while Robin and Marian live happily ever after together in their lives separate from his? He had been feeling frustrated lately that he didn’t know who he was and that he felt like his life was defined in reference to other people -- was the solution to this that he would eventually outgrow Robin’s companionship and become his own sovereign person, the main character of his own story? He didn’t want to, he genuinely loved that fox as a brother… but what if he *had* to, to save his sense of self? What if the answer to his problem was staring him right in the face, delivered by a hermit who barely understood mammalian relationships himself, and now he was being called upon to take a big risk to save himself and become his own hero?

Of course, he most certainly wasn’t going to abandon Robin *now*, when their goal was uncompleted and when his friend needed him most. But if it was what he needed to do to grow as a person, did this need to be the way this chapter of his life ended? He could just imagine it:
everything in Nottingham is fine, poverty has been solved, corruption is over, their names have been cleared, John the Worst is John the Rotting Corpse with His Head Cut Off, and all is well with the world; Robin and Marian embrace before the Major Oak, but before they can run off on their honeymoon, Robin has to take a moment to thank Little John for being the best friend a man could have ever asked for, and they hug it out, neither saying it directly but both saying things that suggest that they both know their time in each other’s lives is over, and then one of them says something at once cheesy and beautiful like “you’ll always be my brother” before Robin goes back to Marian and they walk out of the forest hand in hand while Little John walks in the exact opposite direction, off to seek his fortune and find his next adventure, and to hopefully discover a life that’s just as magical as Robin’s has been and a story that ends with his own love of his life in his arms, and someone somewhere pipes in Johnny Cash, singing ‘We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day’, and the camera pans to the sky, cut to black, roll credits, and the audience in the movie theater feels it’s bittersweet because they understand that these two characters never will meet again. No… no, it couldn’t end that way… could it? Did he have a choice?

“You, uh… you alright, man?” asked Thor.

Little John snapped back into reality. Good god, how long had he zoned out for? When he blinked his eyes back into focus, he found a distressing amount of moisture in there, but thankfully none of it had left his sockets. And where the hell did this lump in his throat come from?

Robin still wasn’t out. He wanted to interrogate Thor about what he meant by all of the above, but he knew he didn’t have time for it. He still had one more important question to ask.

“Alright, uh… let’s back it up here for a second,” Little John spit out. “So you say I’m loyal to him… but… would you say, uh… would you say he’s likewise as loyal to me?”

Thor seemed confused by that. “Uh, yeah, of course. He would’ve cut you loose by now if he wasn’t.”

Okay, no more mincing words. “Alright, it’s just that you said it like ‘you’re a good sidekick,’ and the whole ‘loyal to him’ thing makes it sound like I’m his underling.”

“Well… I mean…” Thor was gonna make himself power through this. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s just who you two are.”

That pissed Little John off. “I was saying I don’t like that Robin thinks that way about me.”

“But it’s just the way it is.” Thor was gonna make himself power through this. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s just who you two are.”

“Who we are?”

“Yeah, I mean, hey, don’t worry, man, most people don’t have natural leadership skills, Robin does, so the role suits him. And you gravitated toward that because deep down, you could appreciate that in him and you wanted to align yourself with that.”

John’s eyes narrowed, and only part of it was on account of his eyes being itchy from moisture. “I’d never choose to be anyone’s follower.”

And now Thor was starting to get annoyed that Little John was having the audacity to be this tense with him in his own house. “Man, I didn’t say it was a choice. It’s just who you are -- it’s who we
are. Hey, you told me earlier about that doctor you know who’s really insecure about who he is, and that I’m better off because I’m at peace with who I am -- are you taking your own advice? I’m at peace with who I am. I know I’m not like Robin, and I don’t try to be; I play to my own strengths and I don’t worry about my weaknesses. Do you do the same?”

“You’re supposed to worry about your weaknesses, you dumb motherfucker! And you’re supposed to try to improve on them! And while you’re doing that, you’re supposed to have an epiphany that nobody’s born great and anybody can become great if they work on it!”

Thor was not pleased with the trajectory of this conversation. First they bully him into messing with painkillers, and now Johnny was admonishing him and calling him stupid for taking his earlier advice at face value? But what should Thor have expected from the people who made Will feel so alone? “And you become great by playing to your strengths and not beating yourself up over your weaknesses—”

“—and nobody’s born a ‘natural leader’ like you say!”

After hearing that, Thor just looked like he pitied Little John. Granted, he was getting annoyed by how John was disputing facts, but so far he was treating Johnny as the victim of a bad mindset. “Johnny. Dude. I encourage you to do some research. Mammalogists’ve been doing some digging. Natural leadership absolutely exists. In fact, long-term studies following kids into adulthood show that, on average, bullies are more successful than their victims, especially if you count the popular kids who emotionally manipulate the unpopular kids as bullies. You know why? It’s thought all that desire to control others is natural leadership with no healthy outlet.”

“Great, so now you’re telling me that the kids who beat my ass as a kid are naturally better people than me!?”

“...You got beat up as a kid?”

“Yes!”

“...Somebody your size?”

“I wasn’t always my size! Where do you think my family’s last name comes from!? And even now there’s always someone a lot bigger than me! Isn’t that right, Guy Who’s A Lot Bigger Than Me?”

Now Thor was starting to become legitimately irritated by John’s offensive defensiveness. But civil discussion was the only thing that could combat that, right? “...Well, hey, leadership isn’t inherently a good thing. If we’re talking Robin or the kids who beat you up, if they ever had to work a lowly fast-food job to save their lives, they’d starve to death, they just couldn’t take orders all day long and deal with customers openly acting like they think they’re better than them. So they play to their strengths and I play to mine, and although there’s a lot I’m not good at, I have a fulfilling career and I’m a hero that a lot of people need. I’ve found a way to be happy in life.”

“You’re a registered sex offender who sells drugs for a living, lives in the dark, and has absolutely no fucking friends!”

And then something snapped. Thor had tried to be as diplomatic as possible with Little John and Johnny was still trying to tear him a new one. It was true what Robin and John said that Thor and Dr. Fort weren’t so different, because much like the good doctor, Thor had done his best to legitimately earn these guys’ respect and he felt like he still wasn’t getting it, so, much like the doctor, he decided to start demanding it. So he slowly walked around the table, eyes fixed on Little John, and decided to get right up in front of him, and, ultimately, over him.
“You got a problem with the way I live my life, Johnny?”

And all of the anger melted from Little John’s face as he looked up at the eleven-foot polar bear towering over him. Even in the dim light of the lab, Thor could see the grizzly’s eyes dilate, and they definitely weren’t dilating in love.

Little John took a few steps backward along the wall. “Th-Thor, what’re ya doin’?”

Thor took a few steps forward. “Answer the question.”

At first, John was confused. Was this really happening? “Th-Thor, I-I know who you are, I know you’re not going to hurt me.”

“There’s a first time for everything. I’ve always wondered what it’s like to beat somebody up.”

“Why would you want that!”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

In the bathroom, the toilet flushed again.

Bump. Little John had backed into the corner of the room. And all the light in the room was gone from his vision as Thor shrouded the smaller bear in shadows. With no escape now, Little John decided to try standing his ground. “Y-yes, I do think you should be trying to be more than what you are now!” He understood now how Robin felt when he had snapped at him during bathtime the other night; he could only hope this would end as amicably.

“After everything I’ve done for you, you still think of me as a loser behind my back? You think I’m gonna be okay with that?”

Little John wasn’t having full audio-visual flashbacks, but as he looked up at the bear who had almost three feet and over a thousand pounds on him, he physically felt like a frightened cub again. His heart raced and his stomach twisted as they hadn’t since those days back in the forests of suburban Nashville. He was a four-foot fourteen-year-old being sized up by a seven-foot twelve-year-old all over again. It was muscle memory. And because his body still remembered which function came next, his eyes started watering right on cue.

“I tell you about a scientific study and the insane conclusion you draw is that the guys who kicked your ass must be better people than you?” Thor growled. “I might as well prove you right then. You wanna try to hurt me? I’ll hurt you twice as hard.”

Thor was done waiting for an answer, and he was certainly done waiting to find out what it felt like to physically exert power over someone. He had been shit on enough in life; he wasn’t going to take it from someone he thought he’d been able to trust. Thank God he long ago stopped considering these people his friends, or he might have been even more hurt.

Speaking of hurt, Thor didn’t actually know how to throw a punch, and he didn’t have the leverage to wind back and sock him anyway. Ever the inventive type, he grabbed Little John around the throat with one hand, picked all eight hundred pounds of him off the ground, lifted his arm over his shoulder and threw the grizzly nose-first into the floor.

“Gu-AHHH!” Little John screamed as he writhed in pain on his stomach, holding his nose and feeling for blood. Somehow, it didn’t seem to be bleeding, but he didn’t get to feel around for as long as he would have liked before Thor grabbed his arms and put them on the ground alongside his back. He stepped on each of John’s elbows -- which he only knew was an extremely painful
pressure point because he’d read *The Outsiders* in Grade Seven -- and sure enough, Little John screamed even louder. Seeing as Thor’s short legs and John’s thick torso made for little clearance between the two, Thor just decided to sit his two-thousand-pound mass on the grizzly’s back. When Little John couldn’t breathe anymore, his screaming stopped.

Thor leaned in and held Little John’s head against the floor, not seeming to mind as the smaller bear’s face was twisted in fear, his soaked eyes bursting open and his mouth begging for air that simply wasn’t coming.

“And to think, Will said you were the cool one,” said the only one of them who could speak. “And for the longest time, I agreed, but I guess I was--”

*BANG, BANG, BANG,* came a trio of noises from the ceiling.

“Shut the fuck up, you fucking pedophile!” screamed a muffled voice from upstairs, almost as deep as Thor’s. “It’s five in the fucking morning, people are trying to sleep!”

Incensed, Thor stood stepped off of his betrayer to retort with three pounds to the thirteen-foot ceiling himself. “RICK! I AM NOT A PEDOPHILE! GET THAT THROUGH YOUR FUCKING--!”

And that’s when he felt something small, pointy, and sharp pressed against the crotch of his pants. He looked down, hands in the air, and saw the fox holding his pocket knife to his groin.

Despite the adrenaline rushing through his veins, Robin did his best to speak slowly and calmly as he looked straight up: “Now… Thor… I only overheard so much of what you two were discussing… so I don’t know the full story of what led to this… but what I do know… is that I just saw you hurt my friend… and I don’t think he did anything to deserve to be hurt like that… I’m going to have to ask you to back off, and let us leave.”

Thor was going through his own adrenaline rush, so as much as he did fear taking a blade to the netherregions, his prevailing anger outweighed it. He impassionedly pointed behind himself at the fallen brown bear as he spoke: “That… motherfucker, owes me an *apolo--!*

But then Thor turned to take a good look at Little John, who was propping himself off the ground with his left elbow as his right hand held a pistol aimed straight at him.

“You… wanna hurt me ?!” Little John’s voice betrayed that he was still clearly shaken up, trying to come back from being a cub again “…I’ll hurt you twice as hard!”

Now Thor’s fear was starting to outweigh his anger. “Y-you’re not gonna shoot me. Those little bullets wouldn’t hurt me! And if my neighbors hear a gunshot, the cops’ll be here in five minutes! You’re not gonna fuckin’ shoot me!”

“And I didn’t think someone like you was gonna get physical with me…” John’s arm was quivering as much as his voice was and his waterlogged eyes shimmered in the dim light. “…but then you did.”

Thor had nothing to say to that. Little John had made a very good point. Instead, he changed the subject: “You still owe me an--!”

“I’m not apologizing for telling you the truth. You’re a loser. Everything-- everything I said about you was true. And now… we can add to that list… that deep down… you’ve always wanted to be a bully… you just never had the nerve. You’re a bully *and* you’re a fucking coward! And by *YOUR FUCKING RULES* … Mister ‘We-Can’t-Change-Our-Nature’… that’s who you really are. Isn’t
that right?"

Again, Thor did not have a good rebuttal to that.

“I’m surprised by you, Thor,” Robin said as fatherly as possible. “Perhaps we can find someone else to connect us with medicine going forward, but for now… I’m going to have to ask you to step back, against the wall, and don’t move until we’re gone. We’ll see ourselves out.”

Thor had a thought: what was preventing him from just grabbing Robin’s arm? After all, the fox only had one good one. So Thor leaned down to reach for Robin’s arm and immediately found out what was logistically unsound about that strategy.

Slash.

“EeeughAAARGH!” He looked down to see a long gash stretching from the pad on his palm and down onto his wrist. The fur around there wasn’t white anymore.

BANG, BANG, BANG, went the ceiling. “Shut up or I’m calling the cops and telling them I can hear children screaming for their lives over your computer speakers!” Rick hollered from upstairs. “Who do you think they’ll believe!? ”

Thor stumbled backward until he backed into the wall, then slid down into a seated position, grasping his gashed hand all the way. Now he looked like he was about to lose his own composure. He only looked up when a dishtowel was thrown into his lap; he saw Little John now standing, gun still in his hand but now at his side, and his moist eyes glaring from above drenched cheeks; and Robin, who apparently had tossed him the towel, still holding his knife in his good hand, simply looking confused by how this strange creature was capable of such evil after all.

“For your wound,” Robin finally said, nudging his nose at the towel. “Good lord, just when you think you know a guy…”

And continuing with this story’s recurring motif of men crying, it was now Thor’s turn to feel sorry for himself.

“Wha… what did I--?” he choked out, staring at his palms, both the bleeding one and the unscathed one. “Oh-- Jesus Fucking Christ, I don’t know what came over me…”

“Cry me a river,” Little John grumbled.

“Now, now, Johnny,” said Robin, “he’s realized his mistake, don’t pour salt in the wound--”

“You shut the fuck up, too, Robin.”

“Oh my god, Johnny,” said Thor, “I-- I’m so sorry, man, I…”

“…You what?”

“I-I was just trying to be rational, and you were just getting angrier at me, and… people’ve rejected me my whole life, you know? And I just… I guess I couldn’t handle taking it from you, too--”

“I’ve been rejected my whole life, too, asshole!” Little John growled. “So I would expect you to know better than to ever treat me that way! No shit I was getting angry at you, you were telling me that I couldn’t control who I was! You think that’s a good life lesson!? ”

Thor wasn’t answering, simply staring.
“HUH!? ” Little John repeated. And Robin wanted to tell him to calm down again, but he was starting to get the impression that John may have been affected by this incident more than he could understand.

“Alright, I’m calling the police…” said Rick through the ceiling.

Thor, his tongue silent and his eyes runny, buried his face in his paws and wept, smearing blood all over the right side of his face.

“C’mon, Robin…” Little John said, sounding like watching Thor go to pieces was making him feel distressed all over again. He took two steps toward the door before Robin spoke.

“Johnny, I’m only going to check to see if he needs stitches,” Robin said calmly, making it clear that he wasn’t going to fraternize with the enemy. Johnny, for his part, seemed to be okay with the olive branch.

Robin walked up to the blubbering polar bear and grabbed his right arm, gently pulling it toward himself. “Let me just see how bad it is,” said the fox, trying to not sound too vindictive but also not too merciful. The wound was long, but miraculously, it wasn’t that deep. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches. Some gauze and adhesives oughta do ya. If it doesn’t heal right, get into contact with Geoffrey Fort at Bethlehem General, Geoffrey with a G ; he’ll recognize your name when you introduce yourself.”

“Y-you guys need to understand,” Thor coughed, “I’m terrified… because I don’t know where that came from. Johnny, I’m so fucking sorry I did that to you, but… you aren’t the only one all fucked up by this.”

And Little John wanted to dispute that statement, but he decided to try to be more understanding, if for no other reason than to make sure Robin didn’t think he was immature. “And I’m not trying to pour salt in the wound, Thor, but you gotta understand that it’s gonna be awhile before I can have a friendly conversation with you again.”

“I… I understand. I… I guess that’s fair.”

“You’re afraid because this brought out a new feeling in you? Well I was afraid because this brought out an old feeling in me, one that I was hoping I’d never feel again. So thanks a lot for that. That’s what I needed to start my day, some P-T-fucking-S-D.”

Robin simply kept glancing at one bear and the other, feeling like he was meant to take control of this emotional dilemma but not knowing how.

“But seriously, Rob, let’s go,” Little John continued. “You heard the guy upstairs say he’s calling the cops, and it didn’t sound like he was bluffing.”

“That’s Rick,” Thor said to his lap. “He’s not bluffing. Not the first time he tried to frame me for having-- uh… nasty shit . At this point, the cops know I don’t have any interest in that stuff, but they still have to show up… Actually…”

He stood and walked over to the closet of what was supposed to be the bedroom, and from it he pulled out an enormous television set that had to have been at least a few feet in every dimension. He placed it on the table screen-up and popped off the frame, put some vinyl gloves on his bloody paws, and started stuffing his drug-making paraphernalia into the hollowed-out chassis. As the screen laid on the table, the light illuminated the inside of the glass to show brushstrokes, betraying that it had been painted black.
Little John decided to be the bigger man -- or at least he decided to do what he had been led to believe the bigger man would do. “You need help hiding your stuff, Thor?”

“Wha--? Oh, n-no, I… I’m good. With that elevator, I’ve got enough time.”

“Well, if you insist you have this under control, we’d best be making our exit,” said Robin, and he and his friend turned to leave.

“Wait,” Thor piped up suddenly.

“What’s up?” asked Little John as the two of them stopped and turned around again.

“I, uh… I’m gonna make it up to you. Th-the medicine. The pills, the painkillers. I-I mean, I can’t guarantee that I’ll make anything that works, I-I just gotta get lucky, but… you got enough of the amnesioids to last you awhile, right? That should leave me with plenty of time to mess around and experiment.”

Robin and John glanced at one another, not knowing what to make of this. “Er… it’s fine, Thor,” said Robin, “we can live without them if we need to--”

“No. Robin…” Thor had paused putting his stuff away. “Let me make this up to you… please.”

Robin thought very carefully about how to respond to that. “Well… Thor… it’s not I whom you have to make it up to.” He gestured to his friend. “You hurt Johnny here a lot more than you hurt me -- true, you did make me witness something that made me feel small and helpless, and watching my friend get hurt hurts me as well -- but it shouldn’t be me you’re addressing here.”

And Little John was inclined to agree. It was annoying enough that Robin had effectively had to save him like a damsel in distress and now he was even talking on his behalf, but this proved that Thor really did think that Robin was the ringleader to whom everyone had to answer. Okay, to be fair, maybe Thor got that impression from all those times Will bitched to him about Robin’s de facto running the show, but a good explanation didn’t equal a good excuse. But John had a funny feeling that if he were ever to get Thor to see him as Robin’s equal, he’d have to start acting more like him, at least when Thor himself was around. And that began now with a calm response to the polar bear: “Is there anything you’d like to say to me, Thor?”

Thor rerouted his gaze to Little John. “Johnny… I’m sorry I snapped -- first time in my life and you happened to be around for it, I wish it wasn’t that way, but here we are… but Johnny, I truly believe that Robin would be absolutely fucked without you, and you’re gonna have a big yoke upon your shoulders helping him get through this. So making this medicine is as much a gift to you as it is to Robin. Am I making sense?”

Hm, how could he say what he wanted to say without sounding too… bitter? “This can be the first part of a lot of things you do to make it up for me,” John answered.

“Uh… okay. F-fair enough, I suppose.”

“And another thing can be getting that shitty worldview out of your head. I can’t change who I am? After I already have? Really? You’re a smart cookie, Thor, and you know a lot of things, but you’re not smart about everything, and for my own sanity, I’m gonna have to tell myself that you’re a complete retard who doesn’t know what the fuck you’re talking about on this one.”

Thor wanted to refute that again in the name of science, but he knew better. “I hear ya.”

“And you can make it up to yourself by starting to have some self-respect for the way you live!”
Again, Thor wanted to fight that, but he knew better. “I’ll try, Johnny.”

“Johnny, I think we’d best be going,” said Robin, worrying that more conflict was brewing.

“...Alright,” Little John finally said. “Thor, you take care of yourself,” he added as he turned to leave.

“Uh, s-same to you, man,” said Thor.

“Until we meet again, Thor,” Robin bid. “Hopefully then under better circumstances.”

“Same.”

The duo walked to the door; for size’s sake, Little John unlocked it and opened it for Robin, who left first. John himself was halfway out the door when he stopped to add something:

“And by the way, Thor, that book you loaned us sucks!”

“Huh?”

“The book. It sucks. It reads like it was written by a crazy person.”

“Oh, well, uh… I-I can loan you something else. If you want something lighter, more straightforward, I can give you a collection of stories and poems by Charles Mookowski--”

“No, we’re gonna keep hate-reading it because we’re bored, and we’re gonna remember that you think it’s good, somehow. And we’re gonna secretly think less of you for what you like, but we’re not gonna advertise that because we’re too classy for that.” And then he shut the door and the Merry Men were gone.

When the police arrived, they were clearly expecting nothing, but they nevertheless went through all the logical hiding places looking for contraband and found nothing, neither videocassettes nor digital media, and Thor explained that the screaming came when he sliced his hand open on a kitchen knife. Having little better to do, they helped him wrap his hand in gauze before they went upstairs to go tell Rick off for abusing 9-1-1. Thor got very little sleep that day and ultimately wound up calling off work; as he dialed the phone, he told himself that no matter which of his three managers answered at The Chuckle Bunker’s office, he was going to confidently tell them point-blank that he’d had a traumatic episode and wasn’t safe to work. Karin was disappointed to be down a dishwasher, but given what she had recently gone through herself, she understood completely.

--III--

“So… how much of that did you hear?”

“I imagine you mean back at Thor’s.”

“Yup.”

They walked east down J Street as they approached the TAN station, looking toward the horizon. Any moment now, civil twilight would give way to sunrise. The forecast was another scorcher before rain came just in time for afternoon rush hour and the temperature would drop twenty degrees by sunset. Knowing this from the newspaper they’d found at the junkyard, the plan was to take the Yellow Line straight northeast to the ritzy side of town, do their thing until just past lunchtime, and get back to the van by 3 to ride out the storm, and maybe go around the West Side
distributing wealth once it passed. But they were going to have some obstacles, including accommodating for Robin’s broken arm and stopping to let him pee every five hundred feet, including twice on the way to the subway. Luckily the streets were still mostly empty.

“I heard screaming, but I couldn’t make out any actual words,” Robin said as the two of them started down the stairs to the station. No, he had heard everything after ‘You’re supposed to worry about your weaknesses, you dumb motherfucker’ loud and clear, but he wasn’t going to get into another conversation on the topic with Little John, at least not in public.

And Little John didn’t really believe that Robin didn’t hear any of the conversation at full volume, but after his conversation with Thor went far worse than the one he’d had with Otto, he was done with philosophical chit-chat for a while. “If you say so… what was the first thing you saw and heard when you walked out of the bathroom, then?”

“I skipped washing my hands to get out of there faster. I got to the doorway and first thing I saw, he’s boxing you into the corner. And he said something about you calling him a loser.” They got to the turnstiles and put their transit cards in. “And -- and I regret this, so forgive me, Johnny -- at first I couldn’t believe it myself, so I hesitated. But then, I… I could just barely see the look on your face, and… I knew something was wrong. I pulled out my knife and I was going to go for his ankles or maybe the backs of his knees, but then he grabbed you by the neck and lifted you up, and… well, if he saw me with a knife, I’d be next, and then I definitely couldn’t have helped you, so to save myself, at least for the time being, I jumped back around the door and hid. Then I peeked around the door as he was suffocating you, and by some miracle he didn’t see me, but then the neighbor protested the noise and, well… I just got lucky.”

They got on the downward escalator to the platform, Little John going first and Robin staying a few steps behind so they could be almost eye-level with one another. “You say you saw the look on my face?” John asked as he turned around. “What did it look like?” He already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from Robin.

Robin made a point to look around before answering, just in case anyone who recognized them might be in earshot. There didn’t seem to be. “Johnny, I don’t mean to embarrass you, but I’ve seen you scared. I’ve seen you sad. I’ve seen you nervous. I’ve seen you convinced you were about to die. But I’ve never seen you look like… that.”

Little John stared off to the side as he let those words wash over him.

“Er, watch your step, Johnny,” Robin warned.

Little John turned around and saw that they were at the bottom of the escalator. They stepped off and walked down the platform, where a few people seemed to recognize them but saw that they weren’t brimming with their trademark merriness and decided to give them their space.

“Well…” Little John wondered aloud, “…I guess… that’s the closest you’ll ever come to authentically witnessing me getting my ass kicked as a kid.”

“And if you’re hoping it’s given me a newfound appreciation for everything you’ve been through, it has. I assure you.” And as Robin looked up at John, who was staring straight ahead, not looking back at him, wearing a countenance that looked like someone using anger to mask sadness and fear, a look Johnny used to wear a lot in the days when Robin had first met him, and now Robin felt more guilty than he ever had for not sharing more of his own past with him. He resolved that he would; he wasn’t sure when, but he would, and he’d finally tell him the other thing, too, and probably some other things that Little John had more than earned the trust to know by this point.
“Well…” the bear began again, and this time he did look down to meet the fox’s eyes. “...thanks for having my back.”

“Oh, never mention it, Johnny. I’d never be able to forgive myself if I hadn’t done all I could to help my friend.”

“And I know, you’re a noble guy, but I’m just used to the idea that if someone’s getting their ass kicked, everyone else is gonna grab the popcorn and watch and say ‘ha, sucks to be you.’”

“Well pardon the expression, Johnny, but fuck those people! They don’t know what friends are for…”

“Well in any case, I owe ya one, Rob.”

“Nonsense, Johnny! If anything, I’m still paying you back for saving my arse at the archery contest all those years ago…” They found a nice empty spot on the platform and stood in place. “...And to be completely honest, we both need to thank that ornery fellow Ron upstairs.”

“Rick.”

“That bloke, yes. It’s a shame he seemed such a nasty personality.”

As a moment of silence passed, Little John looked around to see how quiet he had to be to have this conversation in public -- aw, screw it, if strangers were eavesdropping, then shame on them. “It’s weird... if I did have a friend like you... hell, at literally any point of my life before I met you... then I probably never would’ve met you, because I met you in a place I wouldn’t’ve taken myself if I felt like there was even one person in the world who cared about me. Funny how that works.”

“Then I just hope I’ve been worth the wait! And while I’m not particularly pleased that all those people for all those years couldn’t see how great of a lad you were, if that’s what it took for me to end up with you in my life, then I must say that I am pleased with how things worked out!”

John’s face still looked grumpy as he glanced at the schedule board; an neo-retro yellow-pixels-on-a-black-screen digital sign insisted that the next train would be there in four minutes. He couldn’t tell if Robin was buttering him up again because it was beneficial for Robin to have a ride-or-die friend in his adventures or if he was genuinely gushing over his platonic pal in public where everybody could hear him. I mean, it had to be the first one, right? For Christ’s sakes, with a slightly different intonation, Robin’s last few sentences could have been something he said to Marian -- not the most romantic thing ever, but still a testament of appreciation that people usually only reserve for their ‘one’. And Little John didn’t enjoy being so skeptical of Robin caring as much for him as he’d expect Robin to care for his girlfriend or his parents, but he had been raised to believe that an arrangement like this simply wasn’t normal. And on a related note, stupid Thor had also made him more worried that the hyena kid in the woods wasn’t as much of an outlier as they had previously thought; even if he and Robin were comfortable being better friends than most guys were comfortable being, would that matter if nobody else was comfortable with that? As Thor and Otto had both casually pointed out, even married couples who genuinely loved each other weren’t this inseparable.

“Hey, uh… I gotta ask, does it ever make you, uh, uncomfortable with the way that… I dunno, do I give you the whole ‘thank you for being a friend’ thing too often? Is it weird?”


“Thor. Thor is directly responsible for this question.”
“Were you discussing this while I was relieving myself?”

“Eeyup.”

“Well as we’ve well-established, Thor’s not one to have the best judgment, now is he? Especially in matters relating to how people get along.”

“Yeah, but… hey, if he’s right in this case, you can tell me. Because, yeah, after having no real connections with anybody for so long, I can totally understand if I come across as overbearing -- heh, overbearing, pun intended, I guess -- but, uh, yeah, I know that a lot of people might not be comfortable with how often or how… elaborately, I guess, I say ‘hey, man, I love ya, brother’ -- in the world I know, that would be called, and I quote, ‘some gay shit’ -- so if you’ve been weirded out by me telling you that as often as I do but you haven’t said so because you’re too gentlemanly or polite or because it’s in your best interest not to piss off your closest ally, it’s fine, you can tell me. I got behind the curve and I couldn’t catch up for the longest time because nobody told me what I was doing wrong.”

Robin looked at Little John with a clear disbelief that this was a serious question. “Didn’t we just discuss something similar to this a few days ago?”

“Yes, aaand now I’m not so sure it wasn’t strategic lying. In which case I couldn’t fault you for it.”

Robin glanced down the tunnel; the train still was not visible yet. “Well, to answer your question, no, Johnny, I wouldn’t toy with you like that, and if I found you to be overbearing, I’d find a polite way to tell you. Quite the contrary, I appreciate that I can have a mature friendship with you when so many other people -- our fellow men especially, but in my experience, most women aren’t off the hook for this, either -- so many other people restrict how close they’re willing to get to their friends specifically because, like you just said, they’re afraid it may come across as something else. Maybe it is just because you’re desperate deep down, or maybe you’re more secure in your masculinity than you think you are -- and with your physique, old boy, you should be! -- but one way or another, in you I’ve found a sense of fraternity I’ve always wanted myself.”

Little John noticed some gorilla just up and staring at them as they had their conversation, and not a friendly stare either. John stared back and the gorilla went back to minding their own business. “Good to know,” is all he said. Then again, maybe the gorilla was just confused why a grizzly bear would be waiting in the medium-sized mammal section of the platform.

Robin kept thinking. “I might as well clarify. Now -- and please don’t think I’m bragging here, Johnny -- I was fortunate enough to have two people I could love as my parents and a woman I could love as my girlfriend -- hopefully one day soon, my wife -- but the idea of having a brother, literally or figuratively, was something that always… teased me. And it was twofold. Part of it was Will, and how I knew he was my brother and he knew I was his brother and everybody in South Yorkshire knew we were biologically brothers but we both had to play dumb and we only got to act like brothers every so often. And the other part was… heh, you’re going to roll your eyes at this, Johnny, but… while I can’t deny I had plenty of options for playmates as a lad… I never really had one best friend. I’m talking like someone I felt I could have adventures with. I never had to want for people to invite me to kick a football around or let me sit with them in the school dining hall, but in all my years of schooling and in all those children’s books about children’s lives, it seemed all those children could point to one other lad and go ‘him, he’s by best mate.’ I could never do that. Any kids can kick a football around and call themselves friends, but who’s going to… I dunno, what do mates do?… Who’s going to go explore the forest with me? Who’s going to… who’s going to… aw, piss, I can’t even think of a second thing -- shows how much I know about having a fun childhood, you can blame Will’s father for that -- but seriously, Johnny, who’s going
to be the best man at my wedding? I think I finally have an answer for that. Does that all make sense?”

They could start to hear the train coming through the tunnel in the distance; it was probably only a stop or two away. “I hear ya, Rob, I hear ya… I’m just thinking that I ought to know if I’m good friend material so that I can, you know, also make friends with other people when this is all over. Diversify my friend portfolio. ‘Specially if -- if for one reason or another -- there should ever come a day when you just ain’t around anymore.”

“…I understand, Johnny.”

And Little John appreciated that Robin was finally sharing more about his past, but it still raised more questions, and at the risk of ruining the moment, he had to pry just a little. “…Although if I’m being completely honest, I’m having trouble believing you could have that many friends and none of them stuck out as your favorite, and vice versa. You sure you weren’t just one of those kids who had three or four best friends and you could never pick one?”

“Oh no, Johnny. If anything, I remember having a conversation once with my stepfather about how it seemed sometimes like he was my closest friend and that just didn’t seem right. Er… to be fair, though… there were two close candidates at different points.”

“…Care to elaborate?”

“Well, first was Marian herself, back when we were very young, the kind of young where nobody even cares about a little boy and a little girl being friends. But then her parents had her go to a different school for a few years, and when she transferred back a few more years later, we were older, and, well… we were suddenly interested in being more than just friends.”

“Show-off.”

“Hey, I said I was sorry, Johnny,” Robin joked. The train sounded like it would be pulling in any moment now. “The other one… I thought he would be what you wound up being, but… I guess as we grew up, we found out our real selves weren’t compatible.”

“‘Real selves’!?” Little John said with a raised voice as the train loudly pulled into the station. “C’mon, Rob, don’t be like Thor with the whole ‘you can’t choose who you are’ thing!”

“Heh, I suppose you’re right, Johnny!” Robin spoke over the noise. “But when two lads are having a tiff, they’re inclined to make the most cynical conclusions and say, *fuck that guy, that’s just who he is.*”

“Fair enough,” Little John said as they stepped onto the train.

It was still mostly empty as they looked for three consecutive empty seats -- one for Robin, two for John. They did find a spot for themselves between two zebras having a spirited conversation and an elderly German Shepherd woman who gave them a knowing wink and a wave. For politeness’s sake, Robin sat next to the dog to give her plenty of space, while the zebra who was next to the empty seat looked less than pleased to suddenly have a brown bear’s bulk spilling over next to him, but when Johnny looked down at him and gave him an intimidatingly self-assured smile, both of the zebras realized who they were dealing with and backed off. They talked much quieter after that.

In his periphery, Robin could see the old woman and the people across the aisle just then notice the Lincoln-green fiberglass on the fox’s arm. “Eh, it’s tolerable. I can’t complain. I’m honestly looking forward to when it’s safe to take one of those polar bear paracetamols, but I’ll manage.” Then he looked at their backpack full of supplies sitting on the ground between his leg and Johnny’s and picked it up with his good arm, and placed it in his lap, hiding his cast between the bag and his chest.

“How’s the rest of you?”

“Quite alright, I must say. A bit tired, though.”

“And how’s your head?”

Robin wasn’t opposed to having this conversation, but not necessarily in a subway car, especially as it pulled out of the station and it quickly got noisy. “Just a little shocked by the newest surprise thrown our way and wondering if we have to worry about more of our friends falling away from us… not so much like Alan, but like Amanda, if you catch my drift.”

“It’s still bugging you what she did to you?”

“Not so much what she said and did, but the idea that if it could happen with her, it could happen with anybody.” Robin was intentionally trying to keep the details vague just in case any of their neighbors recognized who Amanda was. “True, she had a reason to be mad, but I daresay I didn’t deserve all that.”

“Well, forget her,” John said, trying to mind his language in close quarters with strangers.

“Oh, I intend to. But, er, for now… would you mind if I took a nap for a while? I’m just exhausted.”

“Oh… okay, but, uh… what stop are we getting off at?”

“I dunno. We’ll see when I wake up.”

“Alright then. Uh… g’night.”

“Goooooodnight.” Robin said as he closed his eyes and laid his head back against the seat, and then he was silent.

And that left Little John alone. He wasn’t so starved for companionship that short intervals like this would drive him crazy, but sitting in a subway car, he had little else to do but look around and every so often smile wave to the people who recognized them and give a friendly shushing gesture while pointing to Robin, which they all seemed to understand. But aside from these brief moments of having something to occupy his mind, there was nothing to keep his train of thought from going far off the rails.

First he thought of the dynamic that he and Robin had and kept running through a mental list of famous duos, real and fictional, who would make a good comparison; yeah, he knew that the happy hippie answer is that what they were was unique, but that wasn’t very helpful in explaining it to other people. Eventually he recalled the Jack Kerouac/Dean Moriarty comparison from when he was at Otto’s house the other day and remembered when he had to read that book in high school; he knew Dean Moriarty wasn’t the real guy’s name, and he knew that Jack Kerouac gave his stand-in character a different name, but he couldn’t remember either of those other names, and none of that would have been an issue if Kerouac wasn’t a fucking hack who just repeated real-life events with the names changed and called it literature but whatever, who’s counting?
He remembered sitting in Mr. Grissom’s senior-year English class. Mr. Grissom had a reputation for being an eccentric guy, kind of like an absentminded professor but who wasn’t qualified to actually teach at the university level. He was somebody Little John kept bumping into throughout high school since his very first day, as he was Johnny’s freshman-year homeroom teacher. Mr. Grissom was taking attendance that first day of high school, meeting the students for the first time, and when he called out ‘John Little’ and saw who answered, Mr. Grissom, being a black bear himself, hypothesized in front of the entire classroom that the diminutive bruin whose last name was literally Little must surely be one of the rare but real brown-furred black bears. And the kids laughed. A fitting start to high school, all things considered, since it set the tone for a four-year period where the majority of the attention he’d get would be random moments of accidental humiliation, in contrast to middle and elementary school, where he got plenty of attention as the subject of regular beatings and intentional humiliation; the tonal shift mostly came sometime during his sophomore year, as everybody started turning sixteen, and the kids who used to abuse him stopped thinking the idea that Johnny would stay little forever was hilarious and started thinking it was depressing, so they stopped mocking and assaulting him and simply started ignoring him. Therefore the only times eyes were on him were on him were when the universe seemed to conspire to embarrass him, such as when Mr. Grissom incorrectly assumed his species based entirely upon the physical trait John detested the most, and again three-and-a-half years later when Mr. Grissom thought it would add to the conversation to point out that “Little” John Little and Ti-Jean Kérouac had basically the same nickname.

That was a poor lapse in judgment on the teacher’s part, but while the other kids -- many of whom were now eighteen-year-old adults, including Little John, who was still the size and shape of a grizzly nine-year-old -- found it unfortunate that John shared a trait with this author they all hated reading, they didn’t find it outright hilarious. However, the students remembered it, and when they “finished” the book a few weeks later (few of them actually read it), Mr. Grissom was giving a postscript about Kerouac’s writing process. He mentioned that Jack had told himself that nobody was ever going to read what he wrote, allowing him the freedom to write whatever he wanted as he wanted to write it, but when he found that people actually did want to read it, he was having some retroactive concerns about the novel’s content. One of the many concerns Kerouac had was his analog character’s bromantic infatuation with Dean Moriarty -- hell, the novel ends with a line something like “and I was thinking of Dean Moriarty.” -- and never being one to shy away from the controversial aspects of literature, Mr. Grissom just up and mentioned that Kerouac had to sit himself down and ask himself, quote, “Is this a gay novel?”; immediately after saying that, Mr. Grissom remembered he lived in Tennessee in 1986, and as he had seen every time in the last four weeks that he mentioned something about Kerouac the students found abnormal, they all turned and looked at their class’s own Ti-Jean.

Different people will surely have different opinions about how Mr. Grissom handled the situation from there, but he did what he thought he had to do. First, he clarified that Kerouac, as the author, knew well that his character had no romantic feelings for Dean Moriarty, nor did Jack himself have any for Dean’s real-life counterpart, but it was America in the 1950s and Kerouac didn’t think people would read what he wrote and think that a guy could care that much about another guy without something else going on -- and by that, Mr. Grissom meant neither the straight population nor the contemporary LGBT community would believe there wasn’t some secret undercurrent with the narrator’s feelings. Then Mr. Grissom made a point to say that Kerouac decided to be brave and publish the book anyway, letting the readers draw what conclusions they may about all the details he was unsure about, and if the self-proclaimed moral majority was pissed at him, then Jack and his beatnik friends didn’t care for them anyway, and if the gay community of the ‘50s wanted to think of the book as their own, then Jack said let ‘em. And all throughout this Mr. Grissom was speaking delicately about gay matters, aiming for something that dignified the LGBT community but wouldn’t completely burn bridges with these kids who were largely raised to be good Christian
boys and girls lest he forever alienate them from accepting gay people; again, some would say he pushed his personal politics too far, others would say he didn’t push them far enough, but he tried to talk to these kids as he would want someone with a different worldview to talk to him: civilly, but challenging. The teacher wrapped this all up with a note about how this was all one enormous moot point because very few people actually did interpret the main character as gay and Kerouac resolved that maybe his own hyperreligious French-Canadian Roman Catholic upbringing reinforced his fear of other people’s fear of homosexuality, but Mr. Grissom used this as a springboard to discuss the argument in art criticism that what the audience derives from a piece of art is in practice more important than whatever the artist actually intended.

Little John remembered that classroom being very, very dark. Part of what made people think Mr. Grissom was an oddball was his strong preference for natural lighting, which worked just fine in the mornings when the eastward-facing windows were filled with sunlight, but not so much by the time the final period rolled around at two-thirty in the afternoon. This darkness did have the benefit of making it easier for Johnny to feel hidden in plain sight when Mr. Grissom kept inadvertently embarrassing him. But in this darkness, he remembered the final bell ringing and making his way towards the door when Mr. Grissom asked to speak with him. The teacher asked John if he was in any after-school programs or other timely obligations that he needed to attend; John said no, and Mr. Grissom insisted he stay a few minutes and talk if he was in no rush. Little John’s father had done a good job instilling a fear of authority into him, so he did not know he had the option to say no.

Mr. Grissom told him to pull up a seat. He began by apologizing if the incidental detail about Mr. Kerouac and his characters had caused him any grief or would cause him any grief in the future; Mr. Grissom insisted that he knew how cruel students could be towards one another. But then he took it into an entirely different direction; he asked Little John whether he considered himself a good student. John meekly said no, expecting to be reprimanded for underperforming in class. Instead, Mr. Grissom continued, explaining that he had been paying attention to Little John for a while; awkward as he was, Mr. Grissom did not realize how that sentence may have come across, and considering the topic that he had brought up out of nowhere in class that day, Johnny was honestly afraid that he could see where this was going. But it did not go that way; rather, Mr. Grissom explained that he was also aware of how he and John had kept bumping into one another over the years, and how it seemed that every time Mr. Grissom focused his attention on Little John, the young bear seemed to be dreadfully embarrassed by something. Of course, for the first three years, Little John had only known Mr. Grissom as a homeroom proctor or a lunchroom monitor; now that Mr. Grissom had John in his actual class, he finally understood what was up with the lad: he was embarrassed that he was a poor student and thought that everyone thought he was stupid. And Little John was too timid to point out that Mr. Grissom’s hypothesis was only partially correct.

The teacher went ahead and decided to let Little John in on a little-known secret, a secret that he, as a teacher, was not supposed to let out: nerds don’t actually run the world. He posited that surely the young bear had been told countless times that ones who are called nerds as children are called bosses as adults, but that that was not actually true, and explained that while nerds were important members of society, they lacked a sense of social skills that would make them quality leaders, and therefore in any given office in America, the former nerdy kids were often the high-ranking worker bees who took home a good salary, but the people they answered to were the people who knew how to wheel and deal. Mr. Grissom explained further that he classified himself as a nerd -- he was an English teacher, for goodness’ sakes -- and as much as he sometimes wished he was somebody else, he had managed to find comfort in the cards he had been dealt; he elaborated that there was a reason why he had on several occasions refused offers to teach accelerated or AP courses, opting instead to teach the regular-pace and remedial students whom he found much more fascinating to
work with. The moral of this story, he said, was that if it simply wasn’t Johnny’s destiny to be an intellectual juggernaut, that was fine, and depending on what he wanted in life, it may even be better, because not everybody craves a comfortable life working in an office for six figures a year. He said with a smile that Little John ought to enjoy the few remaining months before graduation and not stress about his grades, because no matter where life took him, he would find something that played to his strengths and made him happy. John tried not to have a panic attack as he heard that, but luckily Mr. Grissom eagerly told him to go home and start dreaming. Little John wept openly that night, and his father was about to shut him up by beating him with a Budweiser bottle until his mother reminded Harry that it was time to take his medicine.

The next day after class, Little John went up to Mr. Grissom, saying he had questions about what he had said yesterday. The teacher obliged. John asked point-blank, if the nerds don’t wind up being the bosses, then who does? Mr. Grissom at first repeated that it was the ones who were good at wheeling and dealing, but when John pressed for an equivalent to a student clique, Mr. Grissom, absentmindedly as ever, mused something to the effect of, “oh, you know, probably the kids who make friends really easily, the popular ones, so—” and then he looked into his student’s eyes and realized that for the second time in two days, he had talked himself into a sticky situation.

He was about to say something else, but Little John cut him off and never found out what it was. John demanded to know if, according to Mr. Grissom’s wisdom, there were people who were good at thinking, and other people who were good at schmoozing, and still others were good at athletics, what was he good at? And Johnny still remembered the next couple of sentences verbatim.

“Uh… harumph… well, what do you think you’re good at?”

“Nothing!”

“...Nothing?”

“No! Nothing!”

“Oh, uh… surely you’ve found something you’re good at? Or at least something you enjoy doing—”

“No! I haven’t! I haven’t ever been good at anything I’ve ever tried in my life!”

“Oh, uh… I… I-I… I didn’t know.”

If Mr. Grissom’s thesis statement was that nerds lacked the social skills to be good leaders, and Mr. Grissom identified himself as a nerd, he was doing a damn fine job of proving his own point. The man did not reassureJohnny that he would eventually find a talent, nor did he insist that nobody was good at everything on their first try and that everyone needed to work on their skills to be successful at them, nor did he even so much as try to help Little John feel like it was okay to be who he was. He simply stared at Little John in complete silence, looking downright spooked, almost as if he thought he was the only one there who had any reason to be embarrassed. He not only utterly failed at inspiring confidence in his pupil, he made his pupil feel like he was a lost cause who could not be helped, just such a stunning case of uselessness and inadequacy that it left even an English teacher at a loss for words. Little John left without saying anything else and walked home crying, which earned him a beating at the hands of some freshman who didn’t know how old he was and didn’t care.

That had been a Friday. On Monday during fourth period, some buck knocked on the door of John’s math class and asked to take him away for the remainder of the hour. John had seen this guy in the hallways before but never knew who he was; it turned out he was the school therapist. This
deer explained that Mr. Grissom had informed him of some of John’s self-esteem issues and felt he had to hand the reins over to a more qualified person. John didn’t remember too many specific details of that session, though he did remember that the deer was clearly in no emotional place to be handling other people’s problems, at one point being deeply offended by Little John for his choice to discuss the cruel things people said to him as quotes with the profanity intact, and a few minutes later mentioning that he as a therapist still sometimes found himself bothered by the things the mean people in his own life said to him decades ago before he turned to stare off into space and not say a single syllable for a solid two and a half seconds. The therapist called the Little household later that day to ask if they were okay with John regularly attending school therapy sessions (which he didn’t have to do because John was eighteen and legally an adult who didn’t need his parents’ permission, but the therapist had just assumed the kid was a freshman on account of his size and nobody anywhere along the line bothered to correct him), his mom answered the phone, she asked his dad, his dad said hell no, and John never spoke to the deer again. As for Mr. Grissom, he had trouble making eye contact with Little John for the rest of the year, and John still theorized that Mr. Grissom only passed him as an apology for such a misstep -- or perhaps to guarantee Johnny wouldn’t have to repeat the class so Grissom would never have to face him again.

Little John was mostly over it now. He’d finally found some things he was good at (although he had to wait for puberty to arrive a decade behind schedule for that to happen, with the unfortunate effect of implicitly confirming his fear that his life wouldn’t have been worth living if his growth spurt never came), he had lucked into finding at least one person who cared about him like nobody back in Nashville ever did (not quite the love of his life, but still more love than he’d ever felt from anybody else), and he was doing something with his life that, on all but the worst days, he found greatly fulfilling. There were only two things about remembering that story that still bugged him -- well, maybe three, if you include the way it tied into the themes that bothered him earlier in the day. But for one thing, he wondered sometimes what would have happened if he hadn’t gotten lucky, if he hadn’t found a friend or a talent or a calling, but he knew there was no use in pondering what-if’s; thinking about whether or not he would have killed himself by now if he hadn’t gotten lucky was a waste of time, especially since it wasn’t totally off the table that he still might if his future was not as charitable. The other thing he wondered was whether anybody else had ever been inadvertently mindfucked by Mr. Grissom and his misplaced good intentions. Honestly, Little John thought the man had been cowardly, not necessarily for turning the situation over to a professional but for not even attempting to remedy what he had ruined for fear of making the situation worse. A fascinating character Grissom was, brave enough to defend gay rights in the South in Reagan’s America in the middle of the AIDS epidemic but not brave enough to rectify his own faux pas. Hell, Little John had to wonder if any of the kids in that class to this day though homosexuality was wrong specifically because they thought that if a socially-inept man like Mr. Grissom defended it, then it must be wrong, since if Grissom wasn’t smart enough to know how to talk to people then he surely wasn’t smart enough to be right about social issues; Johnny could imagine Mr. Grissom never being able to sleep for the rest of his life if he ever found out that his attempt at being progressive backfired as a direct consequence of his dreadfully uncharismatic personality.

And then Little John remembered the dream he had had in the chair in the emergency room. Splendid. But even still, he glanced over at Robin, the disturbing details of that dream in the front of his mind, and he still wished Robin would wake up so he wouldn’t be alone with his thoughts, left to dig up unpleasant memories. Actually, looking at Robin sit there with his eyes closed in a subway car that was rocking and rolling, poorly-wired interior lights sometimes flickering, the immediate space deafening with the sounds of the wheels on the tracks, people talking, doors opening and closing, and the retro text-to-speech program announcing each and every station, Little John wondered how the hell Robin could sleep through all of this.
Robin was not asleep. His body was completely numb and in a state of almost hibernation, and he could hardly hear the voices of the other passengers, but his mind was racing. What was eating him up was much more straightforward and didn’t require quite as much exposition as his friend’s trauma: he was nervous. Specifically, he was nervous about being nervous. Not to say that he’d never felt even a little bit nervous before, far from it, but rarely did it get so bad that he would think of himself as being “nervous” before using any other adjective, and heaven forbid it get so bad that somebody else would describe him as a nervous person. It simply wasn’t his style, but considering the circumstances, it seemed foolish to not be at least a little bit nervous. Part of it was the thought that his fractured arm would be a hindrance, and part of it was the fear that he would permanently fuck up his arm as a consequence of their daily adventures; he was still shaken by the thought that he was getting old fast and that his lifestyle was further aging him prematurely, and he thought about how ten years ago he’d hoped he and Marian would both be successful actors by this age, and his ambitions to be the modern-day Errol Flynn were going to be even more of a challenge now that he was already older than that guy was when he played Adam Bell all those decades ago. Part of it was a worry that more people had lost faith in them than they had originally thought but those people weren’t willing to admit it because they still enjoyed Robin giving them gifts like Father Christmas at any time of the year, and part of it was a worry that being seen with a cast on his arm would make the people of this city lose faith faster than they had before; he had seen the look that the old woman next to him and the people across the aisle had given when they noticed the cast, and he knew it couldn’t help inspire confidence in them. And part of it was fretting again over what Marian was up to these days, while another part of it was remembering the childhood pal who disassociated with him; it was nothing new that Robin would frequently ponder what would happen if he ever saw Marian again, oh she accepted me back once before when she had every reason not to but does that make it more likely or less likely that she’d do it a second time?, so that wasn’t anything precipitated by Johnny pressing him about who his childhood best friend was, but as long as that question got him thinking about people from his youth, what did ever happen to Much Miller, and was it a character flaw of his or Robin’s -- or both, or neither -- that caused the rift between them?

But more than anything, it was a fear of the unknown. Robin had never harbored a fear of the unknown quite like this before. He had always had a healthy respect for the unknown, the kind that some misinterpreted to mean that he dove headlong into uncertain situations without even an ounce of doubt, but while he was still a mortal and still did have his moments of fear and apprehension, he had never felt so troubled thinking about what was waiting for him in the coming days and weeks. And it was the silliest thing, because he knew he’d been through tougher things than what he was going through now. He’d been personally affected by several national disasters, he’d made a grave mistake that cost him his brother, and he’d abandoned his girlfriend before risking his life to reunite with her just to be forced to abandon her all over again. He’d been shot at more times than a mathematician could count, he’d escaped several burning buildings, he’d almost drowned a few times, he’d dangled from ropes and leapt between rooftops, he’d received punches, taken blades, and gotten at least one good kick in the head. On paper, one would think that he’d have outgrown the fundamental concept of fear. Alas, Dear Reader, he was just like you and I deep down, and what was bugging him now was not that his current predicaments were inherently worse than any previous predicament, but that these predicaments kept piling up and overlapping each other. The cops were closer to getting them than they ever had before and they were no longer safe in their own home and their public support was at an all-time low and their friends and enemies were both starting to act unlike themselves and his best friend and right-hand man was starting to lose his own mind and was beginning to doubt that he really regarded him as his best friend and, of course, his arm was broken. What he was afraid of was that he would be crushed not by the weight of one boulder, but by the weight of a million pebbles.

That was all that one could glean about what was eating Robin up as he sat there on the train.
between the grizzly bear and the German Shepherd, pretending to sleep as his body lay catatonic. Not as much to exposit on as with his friend, but do remember, this was Robin Hood, Nottingham’s greatest hero. He didn’t like speaking much about his problems; he didn’t want to worry people with them.

--III--

Robin decided to pretend to wake up when the automated voice announced that they were approaching the 55th and Portsmouth station. A nice centralized spot in the wealthy part of town. The two got off the train and didn’t have much to say to each other as they headed toward the exit. They each had very different philosophies when it came to trying to keep their minds from wandering; Robin kept his eyes fixated on the escalator while Little John walked behind him, allowing himself to take in all of his surroundings to distract himself from his intrusive thoughts. It’s a good thing he did.

“Rob,” Little John beckoned in a low voice as he stopped walking.

Robin seemed not to notice and kept walking.

Oh, of course he’s literally leading and literally expecting me to literally follow, John thought to himself, of course he is. “Robin,” he repeated aloud, still keeping his voice down but delivering the name much more sternly.

Robin still hadn’t registered that Johnny wasn’t right behind him.

No, no, c’mon, don’t overthink it, don’t overthink it... “Rob!” Little John said in a whisper so loud it came out as a regular-volume word. This did succeed in getting Robin to stop and turn around, as well as get the attention of a few other passersby, but thankfully ‘Rob’ was a common name and the strangers didn’t make any connections they didn’t like..

“What’s up, Johnny?”

“Look.” He didn’t point or gesture, he just turned his head back to face the paper on the pillar, and Robin followed where he was looking.

**WANTED**

**NOTTINGHAM CITY AND COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE**

And below their outdated DMV photographs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: Robert Edward Hood</th>
<th>Name: John Edmund Little</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DOB: 11-08-73 (Age 31)</td>
<td>DOB: 10-18-67 (Age 37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species: Fox (Red)</td>
<td>Species: Bear (Brown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex: M Ht: 04-10 Wt: 115</td>
<td>Sex: M Ht: 08-01 Wt: 844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes: Speaks with British/English or Transatlantic Accent</td>
<td>Notes: Speaks with Midwestern or Southern American Accent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alias: “ROBIN HOOD”</td>
<td>Alias: “LITTLE JOHN”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both men were reported missing in May 1998. Several reputable witnesses have reported seeing two individuals matching their descriptions over the last seven years around the city of Nottingham and the surrounding suburbs. These individuals are thought to be living in the Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve. Both men are believed to regularly engage in robbery and burglary, often in elaborate disguises. The men are thought to be armed and extremely
dangerous, especially to anybody appearing to be wealthy. Both men are thought to be fond of medieval weaponry. Other accomplices may be involved.

Anybody with any information about the two individuals is encouraged to contact the Nottingham City and County Police Department at (673) 401-1999.

IF YOU SEE EITHER OF THESE MEN, CALL 9-1-1 IMMEDIATELY!

A message from the Nottingham City and County Sheriff’s Office
Ward C. Woodland, Sheriff of Nottingham
John L. Norman, Mayor of Nottingham

Now, Little John was a slow reader; he could comprehend the words just fine, it just took his brain a while to process them. So when he was finished reading all of that, he just assumed that Robin was already done and was waiting for him to get to the end. John glanced at Robin, who was still staring blankly at the poster.

“Well, uh… at least on the bright side, that’s a lotta words, so not a lotta people’re gonna read that, eh, right, Rob?”

But Robin was still staring at it. His eyes didn’t even seem to be moving to suggest that he was still scanning the page.

John looked around to make sure they were alone and tried again. “Plus, y’know… it’s just our faces, and for better or worse, a lot of people look like us. You gotta get really close to see our stats and, like… stuff about our accents and stuff. And who’s gonna bother with that?”

Still no response.

Once more: “Heh… someone oughta tell them I’ve lost something like fifty pounds over the years. But judging by the photos, they got these details from our old driver’s licenses… I coulda gone a lifetime without seeing that picture of myself again. I kinda wish Thor knocked that disgusting snaggletooth outta my head when he dropped me…”

Little John followed Robin’s eyes to the paper and realized what he was fixated on. The fox was looking into the eyes of his own charmingly smiling visage staring back at him. John looked back at Robin and realized his friend wasn’t even blinking.

“Rob, talk to me.”

Robin did not.


Still nothing.

John gave Robin a few sturdy pats on the back of the shoulders. “Rob, seriously, you’re scaring me. You havin’ a brain aneurysm or something?”

Finally, he said something: “…He actually did it.”

“…Huh?”

“The mad bastard actually did it… never thought I’d see the day…” And Robin was still staring straight ahead at his reflection in ink.
“Y-- you mean the mayor and the posters? He’s done this before!” Well, kind of. Back during that fourth summer, the summer that started with the duo robbing Prince John’s motorcade and ended with them looting his bedroom, there was a tepid attempt by the authorities to stir up public sentiment against the mysterious outlaws of Sherwood Forest Nature Preserve. Since neither the cops nor City Hall wanted to admit to the other that they knew the names of the bandits for fear of making it look like they were willfully withholding information, they distributed wanted posters that only showed an illustration of one individual that was supposed to be Robin (a move that would have driven Little John crazy had they had they pulled it today), but not only was there no name attached, the illustration wasn’t that descriptive; it was a very good drawing in its technique - rumor had it that they hired a recently-graduated art student who needed the work -- but it was just a generic drawing of a lanky and long-legged red fox wearing a green shirt and blue jeans and holding a bow and arrow with a quiver strapped to his back, no other defining characteristics other than that, an extremely vague image that didn’t really look like Robin specifically, and if anything they threw everyone off my absentmindedly coloring in black gloves of fur on his hands and white highlights on the tip of his tail. Despite the promise of a $10,000 reward for his capture, those who were in the know kept their mouth shut, and those who didn’t have a clue thought that it was a bizarre marketing campaign for a new Adam Bell movie, since Hollywood was due to remake that story anyway.

But if Robin remembered all these details, he didn’t say anything. Little John looked around again to see if they were alone before he started talking some sense into his friend. Wouldn’t you know it, they weren’t alone; there was a TAN employee a few pillars down, carrying a stack of the posters and taping them to the support beams.

John looked again at Robin, then back at the employee, then back at Robin all in about less than the span of two seconds, wondering if the information he could procure was worth it, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought that if Prince John seemed to finally have them by the balls, then they’d have to start playing balls-to-the-wall -- that analogy made no goddamn sense, but neither did the government’s sudden uptick in competence.

“Rob, just follow my lead for once,” Little John said as he put his arm around Robin’s back and shepherded him toward the employee. “This might help us if it goes well.”

And without saying a word, Robin acquiesced, not because he thought it was a good idea to approach the TAN employee but because he found himself thinking that there was no such thing as a good idea in the position they were in.

The lion had the stack of posters balanced in the crook of his left arm. The posters were really just the size and shape of regular flyers, printed on regular white office paper, and he was taking Scotch tape to the top edge of the top sheet before picking it up by the tape and sticking it to the support beam, one by one on every pillar straight down the platform.

“Hey, there, stranger!” Little John greeted as he approached, trying slightly to make his accent sound more Nottingham than Nashville but not trying too hard lest it be too obvious a charade. He waved with his left hand and guided the fox with his right; Robin really looked like he had zoned out and wasn’t coming back.

The employee glanced at the duo, then, sure enough, it clicked with him, and he looked back at the posters in his arm and back at them a few times, making it bad and obvious that he was spooked. Despite being a blue-collar worker, he didn’t seem to recognize the Merry Men.

“Yeah, that’s what my friend and I were hoping to ask you about,” Little John continued. “We saw two guys who looked like us on a wanted poster and we thought, shit, should we be worried that
somebody’s going to think that’s us?”

The lion looked a little bit nervous, but not disruptively so. If anything, what gave him most pause was how the fox was staring straight at the posters in his arm and refusing eye contact.

“What’s with him?” the employee asked.

“Aw, it’s been a long night, man. He’s… he’s still coming down.”

“…I see…”

“So, who are these guys on the posters? It says something about medieval weapons? What’s that all about?”

The lion snuck a glance at the stack of papers again. “I-I dunno, man, I just put the posters up, they don’t tell me anything.”

“I gotta say, they cheaped out on the print job but it looks like they still printed a million of ‘em,” Johnny said as he leaned over and felt the page attached to the adjacent pillar. He rubbed his fingers back and forth on it and the ink smudged a bit.

“Yeah, uh… the cop who dropped them off did tell me that I shouldn’t worry about if these get yanked off the walls or whatever, because they’re hoping to print better versions when they have more information on these guys.”

Little John nodded, intrigued. Glad he asked.

“Hey, man,” the employee continued, “I-I’m just gonna be real with you guys, to answer your question, you two look a lot like the guys in this picture. Pictures. Th-there’s two pictures. You know what I mean. But, like… shit, how do I know you’re not these guys?”

“Because it’d be pretty darn stupid of us to come right up to you and interrogate you in public where there’s video cameras everywhere if we were those guys!”

“And that’s what I’m telling myself, but… hey, maybe if you were, you two would just be really ballsy.”

“I mean, that’s a possibility,” said John, “but you gotta put yourself in their shoes. Would it be worth the risk?”

But that question didn’t sit well with the employee, something about it just didn’t sound kosher, so rather than answer the question, he popped one of his own: “What’re your names?”

“Tom! Tom O’Malley.” Little John said confidently and without a moment’s hesitation; even before he found himself rooming with the Irish-American tiger, he had long ago picked Tom as his go-to bullshit name for situations such as this -- maybe his own name was more common in the entire history of the anglosphere, but in his lifetime, Tom was perhaps an even more generic name than John. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

And Johnny extended his hand for a handshake, but the lion did not reciprocate. “And you?” he asked Robin.

With that, Little John was suddenly worried. He had just sort of assumed that Robin would’ve snapped out of it by now. He looked at Robin, who was still taking in the picture of his face on the pillar. Edgy jokes aside, Robin honestly did kind of look like someone several hours removed from
a cocaine bender.

John nudged him, trying not to seem himself panicked. Shit, he could spoof a name for himself pretty quickly, but now he’d have to pick up Robin’s slack and feed him a line. And while he was composed enough to do it, he still did get his wired crossed.

“C’mon, Tom, tell him your name,” Little John urged, realizing what he’d just said as the words were slipping out of his mouth.

“You’re both named Tom?” the lion asked skeptically.

And Little John was in the process of opening his mouth very slowly to buy himself some time to formulate an answer, but then, a miracle happened.

“That we are,” Robin mumbled. “It’s a pretty common name, don’t you know.”

Unfortunately, Robin had made no attempt to hide his accent, so it yielded mixed results.

“I mean, yeah, it is, but…” the employee trailed off as he consulted the fliers again. “You really ain’t these guys? Then you should be worried, because… yeah, British accent, you and this guy are basically the same height, and I don’t see many foxes as big as you kicking around—”

“But you must remember, England’s full of foxes!” Robin interrupted, still not at peak chipperness but certainly doing much better. “Back home, I knew half a dozen foxes my size or taller!”

“Yeah!” John added. “The more foxes a place has, the more big foxes they’re gonna have!” He was ninety percent sure that was the point Robin was trying to make.

The employee was giving the two a look a lot like the ones Dr. Fort and Thor had given them in the last few days, pissed that he was being forced to change his mind. “Alright… fair enough… for the record, though, I’m not afraid of you, since there’s cameras everywhere and I’m an employee and not just a random civilian—”

“Aw, c’mon, man!” John moaned. “You still don’t believe us? H-here—” He leaned over and gently held out Robin’s fractured arm. “Would wanted criminals be able to get a cast set? Professionally? In America?”

“Yeah,” Robin joined in, “and if we were wanted criminals, would it be a bright idea for us to wander about wearing clothes like we’d just gotten out of a ballgame?” He gestured to his Angels shirt and Johnny’s Grizzlies shirt and Titans hat, the sportswear they’d been donning for something like forty-two consecutive hours for want of an opportunity to go back to the van and change into something less conspicuous.

“Alright. Alright,” the lion repeated, “I get it. I’m just saying, I don’t know much about these guys, but what I do know is that apparently they’re master criminals -- I mean, for Christ’s sake, they’ve been on the run for like seven years and still haven’t been caught, assuming these guys on the posters are actually them and they cops didn’t just accidentally accuse some poor dead disappeared guys -- so in the back of my mind, I’m thinking, hey, maybe these guys have the balls to just walk up to the guy taping their wanted posters to the wall because they feel invincible.

“I get it, man,” said Little John, “no hard feelings. What’s your name, bud?”

“Erik.”

“With a C or with a K?”
“...with a K,” he said after a moment of hesitation, pleasantly surprised that this stranger had taken a moment to make that distinction. “Hey, uh, c-could you hold these for a second?” the employee asked as he gestured his occupied left arm toward Little John.

“Sure thing, bud.” He took the stack into his hands.

Erik shook the pins and needles out of his left arm. “Sorry, just… arm’s falling asleep here.”

“Hey, no judgment.”

“But, uh… honestly, yeah, if you aren’t these guys--”

“We’re not,” Robin interrupted, which was odd because he’d regressed right back to being distant.

Erik tried not to overthink that outburst. “Yeah, well, uh… the best thing you two could probably do for yourselves would be to start spreading the word about these guys so they catch the real ones and you two can clear your names sooner.”

“Makes sense,” John said, and as Erik gestured to take the stack back, Johnny gave it to him. “You know what, though? Could we nab one of these off ya?”

“Uh… sure. Hell, take a few of ’em if you want to give them to your friends. Hey, maybe this is how you guys start a community-watch organization or something.”

“Could be, could be…” Little John said kindly as he took a few sheets off the top. “Well, hey, Erik, we appreciate you helping us out.”

“Hey, no problem,” the lion said as he positioned the papers back in his arm. “Uh… you all have a nice day now. Tom, Tom.” He nodded to each of them and took off for the next pillar.

And Little John nodded to himself as he watched the employee walk off; he was thinking about a lot of things at once. “Hm. Nice kid.” He looked at Robin, who was right back to staring at the poster. John stuffed the flyers down his shirt and grabbed Robin by the shoulders, turning him around to face him -- slowly this time, just in case he made the poor little guy think they were getting into a fight like they did by the creek the other night. “Okay, now I’m confused. Are you having a panic attack or not?”

Robin gave John a look that could be called solemn, but was a type of solemn that knew it was solemn and was trying really, really hard not to appear so dreadfully solemn. “I’m back to being functional again, Johnny, if that’s what you’re asking. But…” He turned and looked to the side and breathed for a second.

“Rob, look at me.”

Robin forced himself to look back at the bear. “...I’m afraid we may have wasted too much time; that’s what’s on my mind. All these years, we thought we could wear the stupid bastard down… never even crossed our minds that he might finally grow a backbone and learn how to put up a fight.”

“Dude, he’s tried posters before!”

“Once. And a shoddy job at that. Those didn’t count. But it’s not just the posters. It’s that, and… I’m really thinking the people are losing faith in us. I really do. They think if we were ever going to win this, we would have done it by now. And they may be right. And then there are the ones turning against us because they think we’re just making everything worse. Making a bigger mess.
Inspiring the powers-that-be to take their frustrations with us out on them. I think of people like Amanda, and her ‘people’ -- whether that’s her friends, her neighbors, her congregation, I don’t know -- but again, they may be right. And I see that poster and I think… I could actually conceive of somebody seeing us and reporting us. Not even necessarily a rich person; maybe even one of the impoverished people we’ve been trying so hard to help to no avail. And then you throw in this blasted arm, a-a-and… Johnny, they have our names on these. They think we’re alive. Surely our families have been contacted.”

“...Fuck, I didn’t even think about that.” Indeed, although he had thought about his family as recently as ten minutes ago, Little John had not thought about actually talking to them for nearly twenty years.

“Johnny, you don’t have to worry about me giving up, because after all I’ve put into this, it would not have been worth the effort for me not to see this through. But… if I’m being honest… this is the first time in all these years that I really don’t like our chances.”

Little John again remembered the only two times when he had really seen Robin this deeply down: one was when Robin confessed his feelings of inadequacy for Marian, and the other was when Robin felt personally responsible for Will’s passing. Both times, Little John had tried to give him a pep talk to get him back into shape; on one occasion, it worked like a charm, and on the other, he couldn’t get anywhere with him. For Little John, trying to help Robin was a complete crapshoot. He figured it was time to flip the coin and see how it would go down this time.

He glanced again at the wanted poster on the pillar, and it gave him inspiration. It was gonna hurt like hell if he stayed there too long, but Little John got down on one knee to get closer to eye-level with his short-statured friend.

“Alright, Rob, listen to me… do you remember the graffiti we saw in the warehouse the other day?”

“...I-I do.”

“Well, look. Some people… probably some kids with their whole lives ahead of them… they went out of their way… to immortalize you. And me, and Will, and Marian, and our friends. There are people out there who see us… as their heroes. And they made that memorial to honor us.”

“That was old graffiti, they may well have changed their minds since then--”

“They may have but I’d bet my bottom dollar they didn’t, and I’d bet a lot of other people haven’t either! If I bet a buck on every individual person who’s ever believed that we were going to be the ones who made their lives worth living again, I could swear on a stack of fuckin’ bibles that I think I would make a profit!” Then Johnny pointed to the poster on the pillar. “You know what that is, Rob? That’s the mayor and the police honoring you -- that’s the enemy honoring you, and they don’t even know they’re doing it! This isn’t a reason to feel afraid -- this is a reason to feel proud, like your hard work is paying off so much that the enemy needs to step up their game to keep up with you.”

Robin didn’t look inspired yet, but he didn’t look discouraged anymore, either. Though he certainly did look like he was listening intently.

“But you know what?” Little John continued. “You can tell yourself you’re doing it for... all those poor people we’re trying to help. Or you can tell yourself that you’re doing it for me, your best friend. Or for your girlfriend, or for your brother, or for all of us and everyone you’ve ever loved and everyone you’re ever going to love… but above all of them -- all of us, I should say -- do this
for yourself. This is your story, and this is the part where you overcome the greatest adversity you’ve ever experienced in your life, to be the hero who everyone needs, and most of all the hero you need yourself to be, for yourself, to prove to yourself that you can do it.”

Little John was pleased with himself that he had for the most part avoided flubbing his words in that impromptu speech; evidently hanging around an eloquent guy like Robin rubs off on you eventually. The secret to the speech’s success, of course, was that Little John was as much trying to convince himself of this as he was Robin; if anything, its meaning was twofold when those words were pointed at himself -- he was challenging himself to not only keep fighting for Nottingham, but also to help keep Robin in the fight as well.

He glanced at the poster again and pointed to it. “They’re stepping up their game… Are you gonna step up yours?”

Robin looked like he was very grateful to be hearing this.

“Are you listening?” asked Little John.

“I am.”

“Do you understand me?”

“I do.”

“So what’s it gonna be?”

“You two realize I’ve been standing right here and I heard every single word of that, right?”

Little John almost fell over as he spun around on his knee to see the lion standing about a dozen feet behind him, probably just far enough back that Little John was blocking him from Robin’s view as well even as he was hunched over to talk to him.

“…Yeah, you guys aren’t no master criminals,” Erik said as he power-walked over to an emergency call box two more pillars down. “Tom and Tom my ass.”

“W-wait,” said Little John, “Erik, buddy, we can talk this out--!” But he was interrupted when he felt a thump on his right foot. He leaned over to see around his gut and realized that Robin had tossed a bag of amnesia pills on his shoe. As he realized that, he faintly felt the breeze of someone rushing past him.

“Hey, what the fuck!”

John looked up and saw Robin picking up the pile of flyers Erik had set on a bench and taking off running toward the dead end of the platform, inspiring Erik to chase after him.

“Welp, here we go again,” Little John quipped to himself as he picked up the baggie of pills and went to follow them.

Robin only had his left arm to keep the papers in order, and the stack blew in the air as he rushed along the platform. He debated spilling the papers on the ground behind him to make the lion slip and fall, but no, he had already set up for a different plan.

Where the platform ended, there were small iron gates on either side of the wall toward a small set of steps to let employees walk along the tracks in the tunnels. The gates didn’t move, you were just supposed to hold on to them and swing yourself around them, but that was simple enough. Of
course, when Robin took off running, he had been under the impression that this station was like the ones downtown where there was a long uninterrupted platform connecting several stations that they simply barricaded off so customers couldn’t walk into the in-between areas, but whatever, he would make do.

“Somebody call the police! This is the fox from the wanted posters!” Erik could be heard hollering as Robin shimmied around the gate.

At that point, Robin had to use his good arm to give himself leverage, so he put the papers in the crook of his right arm as he swung himself over the tracks, and when they inevitably blew away, he let them. He saw them fall to the floor as he entered the narrow walkway adjacent to the tracks, and as he slowed slightly to negotiate the set of steps, he saw at least one of the flyers land squarely on the electrified third rail, sizzle, smoke, and spontaneously combust all in the time it took him to walk down four individual stairs.

When he went around the gate and down the steps, he saw Erik was a comfortable distance back from him. After he got about fifty feet into the tunnel, he heard a thump and looked back to see the lion had made up a lot of ground; he would later find out from Little John that Erik had just hopped the stairs altogether. But as he was running, he didn’t know that, and he was actually starting to wonder if he’d challenged the wrong guy to a race. Robin was an incredibly fast runner, a long-legged specimen of an already-speedy species, but perhaps he had gotten a little too used to the idea that he could outrun any given person he saw.

The idea was to make it all the way to the emergency exit -- he didn’t know exactly where it was, but he knew there was at least one between any two underground stations, this wasn’t his first rodeo -- but since he hadn’t found it yet, now he was thinking he ought to just pick one of the divots in the walls for letting maintenance workers duck into when a train passed. He glanced behind him and the lion was getting ever so closer. But the bear was visible in the background. Yeah, time to duck aside.

He tucked himself into the next cubbyhole he came across. As the TAN employee came upon him, Robin pretended to be much more winded than he actually was to make it all more believable. When Erik showed up, Robin saw again what Little John hadn’t had the chance to see: the fox’s own saliva splattered on the lion’s face. Not the classiest trap Robin had ever set, but if it worked, it wouldn’t have mattered.

“There you are!” the lion growled. He grabbed the fox by the shoulders and spun him around, shoving his chest against the wall. “You wanna spit in my face again!? Watch what happens!”

The employee grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back like a cop apprehending a suspect. So far, Robin wasn’t surprised by the way Erik was retaliating. Then Erik kicked it up a notch by pressing Robin’s head into the wall with his shoulder and grabbing Robin’s broken arm and whacking the cast repeatedly into the corner of the wall at the edge of the hole. Robin seethed and did his best not to scream, lest any authoritarian backup really was coming.

“You really thought it was a good idea to mess with me, you little shit!?”

And indeed, despite being a certifiable giant for his species, his species in general was still safely on the small side, and in moments like these, Robin still did feel very, very small.

“I’d better get a nice-ass reward for nabbing you!” The lion jeered as he kept slamming the little fox’s broken arm into the concrete.

And speaking of concrete, the way the lion kept rolling his shoulder around into the fox’s skull
was moving Robin’s head around, and now it felt like his left eye was about to burst as it was being pressed into the wall. “Johnny…” Robin murmured to himself, “where are you?”

“Here I am!”

Robin heard those words and instantly all the pressure on his body was relieved and control of his arm was relinquished. He heard a gagging sound and the groans of a bear whose arm was probably taking some teeth. Robin turned to see Little John standing over the lion with his arm halfway down the employee’s throat, waiting for the pill to work its magic. The two of them stayed there like that, Erik trying and failing to wiggle free of the bear grasping him with his other arm, until after about twenty seconds the lion’s resistance started to weaken.

“Move, move,” Little John whispered, and Robin stepped out of the cubbyhole to make space for Johnny to sit the lion down in the nook, making him as horizontal as possible so that it would be extremely unlikely for him to slump onto the railroad tracks -- which likely wouldn’t be an issue anyway since surely the cameras saw three individuals run down the tunnel, and they likely wouldn’t send any trains until they inspected to make sure it was clear.

“Sorry I couldn’t get here faster,” Little John said, “but I saw that piece of paper burst into flames and… I really didn’t wanna risk tripping in the dark and getting electrocuted. I’d’ve been no good to you then.”

“It’s alright, Johnny, I understand.” Robin looked relieved but also kind of exhilarated.

“What the fuck did he do to your arm? Is it alright?” Johnny asked, not drawing any attention to the fact that his own arm was bleeding from tooth punctures.

“It’s aching, but I’ll manage,” Robin insisted.

“You sure?” But as Little John said that, they both heard the beginnings of a very faint rumbling coming down the tunnel.

“Even if I wasn’t alright, I don’t think we can stay here for very long.”

“Fair enough. Let’s boogie.”

They walked briskly further down the tunnel until they eventually did find the emergency exit. When they did, they looked down the tunnel and could just then see the lights of the next train a good distance off, not too dramatically close but still close enough for them to feel thankful for finally finding the exit. They climbed the unlit stairwell in pitch black until Robin and John both simultaneously (because of the height difference on the stairs) thunked their heads on the horizontal metal door at the top. They fumbled for the latch, opened the hatch, and walked out onto an empty alleyway under the skies of dawn. They heard sirens in the distance, so they got running any which way their feet would take them, and when they finally found an isolated place to park up, they took a second to change out of their distinct shirts (which they agreed they probably shouldn’t wear again for a few weeks, especially since stupid Erik had to run his mouth to everybody on the platform), switch into some costume clothes, and let Robin take a leak again.

“You good to go?” Little John asked, having heard a zipper zip somewhere behind him as he kept watch in the alley.

“I believe I’m ready to roll out!” Robin said as he emerged from the alleyway. Neither of them had heard sirens for a good ten minutes.

“Hey… you sure you’re alright after all that?”
“Oh, I’ve been through worse, Johnny,” Robin assured him as he looked at his cast. It had a Y-shaped hairline crack in it, but nothing that seemed like it would immediately compromise its structural integrity. And if it turned out that it was fubar, well, they knew where Dr. Fort lived.
“What about you? Seemed like old Leo took a good bite outta you!”

“Eh, that warthog the other day was worse,” Little John muttered as he inspected his arm, which had trace streaks of his own blood and the lion’s saliva coagulated into his fur but which otherwise seemed to have stopped bleeding. “His teeth didn’t seem that sharp. Maybe he ate too much candy as a kid -- not that I’m one to shame him for that… Hey, Rob, I’m not tryna cut down your pride or anything, but… goddamn, that guy did a number on you.”

Robin leaned himself against the wall of someone’s garage so he wouldn’t have to crane his neck as much to look at the bear. “Quite the contrary, Johnny… that was actually rather exhilarating. It wasn’t our grandest or most exciting adventure ever, true, but… he had us dead to rights, he had evidence literally in his hands that we were the most wanted criminals in this city, and deep down I thought we were screwed, but I had an idea, we took a chance… and it worked. It actually worked. I mean, perhaps I speak too soon, heaven knows there were plenty of other eyewitnesses in the station, but… it certainly seems to me like we actually won this round!”

Robin was smiling again, and seeing that made Little John unable to not crack a smirk himself. “Just like we used to,” said the bear.

“And although it hurt like hell what he put me through, if you take the experience as a whole -- thinking we were completely boned and still managing our way out of it, the dramatic arc of it all -- I kind of want to do it all again! Johnny, I want to win again!”

“Well, uh… y-you won’t win unless you try, now will ya?” Johnny didn’t know what to say. A bit of a delayed reaction on Robin’s part, but it seemed as though Little John’s pep talk had almost worked too well. “You know what they say, you miss a hundred percent of the shots you don’t take!”

“Hm, I’ve never heard that one before. I like that!” Robin declared, pointing up a finger with a flourish. “It’s just like you said, Johnny: they stepped up their game; now we need to step up ours.”

Yup, it worked, and Little John was pleasantly surprised. “I’m flattered that you think I’m so good with words!”

“I must give praise where praise is deserved, Little John,” Robin said, coolly as ever. Some could call it ironic: as Robin had been standing on that platform, staring at his own image, feeling viscerally certain that this was the beginning of his end, too afraid to speak, he wanted to let it all out, to disclose all of his secrets, to tell Little John right then and there everything he had been withholding from his childhood to that cloudy day in June, but he just couldn’t, he couldn’t get the bat off his shoulder, words simply failed him, he couldn’t help but think that he’d only be making a bad moment worse; but now that he was feeling much better and sure of himself again, he had the thought that he ought to just fill in all the blanks right now anyway, as a reward to Johnny for his loyalty and companionship, but again he thought better of it, now because he didn’t want to ruin a good moment. “Now, do you still have one of those wanted posters on your person?”

“Uh… I got a couple, actually…” John said as he went reaching down his shirt with one hand and tried to push the papers up from the outside with the other; they had fallen all the way down to his belly, but thankfully he wore his shirt tucked in so they hadn’t fallen out. After a moment, he got a hold of one. “Got kinda crumpled in all the chaos, but I got ‘em.”
Robin took the piece of paper and inspected it. He tsk-tsk-tsked and shook his head jokingly. “If they wanted a good picture of me, they should’ve just called up Marian and asked her for my old acting headshot!”

“Well hey, man, your picture’s still better than mine with that stupid little tooth catching all the light and makin’ me look like even more of a gigantic eight-year-old whose big-boy teeth’re still comin’ in.”

“Oh, nonsense, Johnny, you look perfectly fine in this. Besides, it’s better to look youthful than to look aged. Why, here I see the face of a man who I’m sure will have his own Marian one day!” Robin said as he looked up from the page and showed the flyer to Little John again. “Though to avoid confusion, I only hope her name isn’t Marian, too!”

“Hey, and I’ll make a point not to hook up with any girls named Robyn either!” And now Little John was very tempted to ruminate on whether Robin thought he was weird for not having done more -- or anything, honestly -- to find his own significant other, which, hell, now that he thought about it was probably more damnably weird of him than just being tight with Robin alone, but he was going to force himself not to ruin the moment by overthinking things again. Besides, it wasn’t like the thought of attracting a mate even crossed his mind on a daily basis anyway, but he still hadn’t made up his mind about which had come first: the lack of interest in thinking about it, or the feeling of being convinced that it would just never happen for him. And then of course this all caused Little John to remember that godforsaken dream again.

But Robin’s sudden sunniness scattered John’s cloudy thoughts. “You know what, Johnny? I’m starting to think you’re right! Whether they meant to or not, this is an honor,” he said as he held up the sheet of paper again. “I’d actually like to keep this.”

“Hey, fine by me!”

“But wait!” Robin seemed to put on an act of pondering something he was already mostly done pondering. “What if we made a game out of it? They clearly did a shoddy print job so they could afford to print more of them, quantity over quality as it were, so there ought to be plenty of these to go around all over town. Let’s challenge our friends and benefactors to start grabbing these posters off the walls and holding onto them as little keepsakes! And if they don’t want them, then fine, we’ll buy them off of them and give them to someone who does! This way, the people who don’t like us won’t be able to see our beautiful faces, and the people who do like us will have something to remember us by!”

And Little John was biting his tongue from saying that that honestly came across as a little bit narcissistic, but considering Robin had just recovered from one of his worst self-esteem crises in years, Johnny wasn’t going to risk undoing all that progress. Plus he knew that a bunch of people in this town would say in complete sincerity that someone as great as Robin had earned the right to be a narcissist. “We’ll have our own memorabilia!” is what Little John settled on saying instead.

“Precisely!” Robin declared as he started walking out of the alleyway. “And our friend Erik said that they were already planning on printing a new design, didn’t he? Let’s challenge our fans to collect them all!”

Little John followed. “Heh, it’ll be just like baseball cards!”

And as they set out on their daily adventures, they did indeed find posters bearing their likenesses all over Nottingham, which they gladly liberated from their walls, and when they delivered their bounty to their recipients, many of those people were more than eager to take a couple and share them with their friends for them all to keep as mementos of their heroes. And it was a good thing
too that they had the mind to snatch up as many of these wanted posters as possible, because that first edition of these ‘trading cards’ uniquely included something that subsequent printings would omit.

Chapter End Notes

*A.N.* So this is gonna be really confusing if anybody discovers this in, like, five years… So, how’s the weather in 2025? I hear the global warming’s nice this time of year. :P

Y’know, I really did write that author’s note at the top (which used up 100% of the allowed characters in the chapter notes box on AO3, helyeah) before I wrote even a single word of this chapter, and at the time my muse didn’t tell me we were going to get into such bizarre territory… again. “Hi prospective Disney execs, here’s a completely sincere letter to you before I put your characters through extremely not-G-rated situations!” Actually, a friend of mine insisted in complete sincerity that I “send that to Disney”, and while I hope it goes without saying that I’m not so eccentric as to actually do that, I was seriously considering posting it on Reddit, but then I couldn’t find a single thread on any subreddit anywhere even talking about the news, and then a few days after that it seemed forgotten about entirely. That said, I still might put it up somewhere if I hear news of it again; such a work of art as that letter doesn’t deserve to go unnoticed in a place like this.

But seriously, hearing about that did seriously kill my motivation to write this. It’s like, great, even as society is at a standstill, time is still moving forward, and the world is going on without me as I sit here writing this thing that nobody’s gonna see. That’s why it took me so long to write this one; it really lit a fire under my ass to start spending my time doing things that were actually… consequential, and so I did. And so I will further. I said in past chapters that production might slow, and it never did, but then this happened, and now I mean it. If production doesn’t slow down, well, that means I’m not giving the necessary attention to what I need to. As the note at the top hints, I’m in a line of work where I’m not really “supposed” to have free time where I don’t do anything constructive.

And I’m not gonna lie, I was debating making this the last chapter. I mean, several of the characters have already gone through significant change -- that’s how Infinite Jest ends, after eleven hundred pages, the novel just stops with the “plot” unresolved, but you’re supposed to realize the story’s over because the main two characters’ arcs are complete. But these guys’ (and gals’) arcs are not complete, so it would have been a move devoid of artistic integrity for me to just stop it prematurely. Not to mention I’d be giving up on the opportunity to learn more about myself through these characters -- sounds incredibly corny, but it’s true.

Therefore, I am not giving up on this. I still love this story and I do believe the best is yet to come; hell, I’ve got the next few chapters planned in immaculate detail. But if there ever should come a time where this story seems certifiably abandoned, you can point to April 11, 2020, the day I saw one of my dreams come true without me, as being directly responsible for me ultimately deciding that this was not a worthwhile expenditure of my time. I hope that I never come to that conclusion, but if it does, you have my express permission to assume this all as my rationale.
I gotta say, it’s conflicting. I alluded at the top that amid all the real people in my life and all the fictional characters I’ve seen, Robin Hood, especially the Disney version, is the closest thing to a healthy role model I’ve ever had (and depending on who you are, this can either be read as an indictment of media’s taste in designated heroes and how that reflects on real people, or as conclusive proof that I’m a manchild who should not be let outside). So with this in mind, I have to wonder, what would he, or someone like him, do in this situation? I don’t think he’d let something like the above discourage him into abandoning a passion project… but I also don’t think he’d spend so much of his life on a time-consuming hobby when there’s so much work to be done and only one person who can do it.

It’s a tough spot to be in. Wish me luck. Peace and love. -Dobanochi

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