Sandcastles

by Tinbuzzard

Summary

A month-old unresolved police report leads ZPD officer Nick Wilde back to the Natural History Museum, to gather evidence that reveals a more fundamental conspiracy against inter-species relations. Along with Judy Hopps and ZBI agents Jack Savage and Skye Winter; he embarks on a dark exploration of mammalian society's development, structure, and the many fractures that lie beneath it.

This story builds gradually for the first few chapters, but complications are coming!

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ZPD officer Nicholas P. Wilde felt sorry for himself. It wasn’t because the fox’s cubicle and desk at the far end of the row were smaller than the rest, or that he had to share it with another officer. It was because that officer’s chair next to him was as empty as the majority of the room, and his desk was piled with papers—it was day four of bureaucratic purgatory.

It was totally his own fault, as the periodic sarcasm from the rest of the department reminded him. Their newest rookie had failed to protect the good citizens of Zootopia from a juvenile vandal by partially tearing a muscle in his leg—one step into the chase. One step down onto a rain-slicked storm drain grating right where they’d stopped the cruiser. His hastily earned injury would sideline him for the rest of the week, followed by another of physical therapy. His shame was compounded by the effusive, within his earshot praise that everyone gave for his petite rabbit partner’s solo collar of the perp.

She was out there in the field right now, living the life he wanted to rejoin as soon as possible. Judy Hopps, optimistically eager to make her rosy view of the world even better, had chosen him as her first project. They had shared some tense heroic adventures and overcome a major threat to society. It had earned him some real trust and acceptance from legitimate professionals that previously would only scorn a street fox like himself. That—and an impossibly captivating country bunny—had propelled him through six months of police academy, and now almost two on the force, and he still hadn’t come to terms with it.

Earlier this morning he’d had some unexpected illumination thrown on that. Nick took a last tepid sip from his Snarlbuck’s cup and flicked it into the trash. It had first passed into his paw from a new barista; one a normal fox would have chatted up without regard to the line behind him. “Hi, I’m Leni,” said the tag on the uniform containing a frankly gorgeous gray furred vixen. Judy’s shade of gray. She had flirtatiously approved of the handsome officer before her. Of course, he did rock the look. He’d have to rock it down the other side of the street from now on, at the place that didn’t have baristas.

Why? Nobody would expect him to owe anything beyond friendship and being a reliable partner to his...partner. Except him. Opto-bunny had seen through his con-mammal, and given him a life he would have never considered or achieved without her. He didn’t know how to pay her back enough for that. At least he’d helped to save her job back near the beginning of all this. She’d accepted him as he was...and asked him to be her partner; then crushed him, got to him in a way he thought he’d never allow again. Then she came back....

Nick closed his eyes and gently pinched his muzzle. Admit it, you’ve got it bad for that bun. Unbelievable, he thought, she ran a long hustle on me and likely doesn’t even know that she did it—still, my heart is in her paws. There’s no other explanation for why you gently brushed off a hot vixen with the cowardly justification that she came onto you for the uniform rather than the reprobate inside it.

They’d grown so...comfortable around each other. If it went any further he was afraid he’d be unable to contain himself and would only frighten and lose her. He’d squandered his last chance to easily keep his distance with that stupid snarky comment six weeks ago—her matter-of-fact reply; “Do I know that? Yes, yes I do,” had kindled a smolder within him that now raged. He could never let her, or anyone else, know how he really felt. However, it was likely too late to stop the rumor
mill. Clawhauser already had his suspicions based on the spotted donut repository’s recent probing comments. Nick’s only defensive weapons would be subtle deflections and rigid public conduct when around Judy. Any more overt denial—he might as well throw a bucket of gasoline on himself.

All those descriptions he’d casually accepted for decades as his persona, slick, suave, an operator...always in control. Now he had another that excited and horrified him in equal measure, naive in the ways of the h...

“Hey Wilde! Chief says he wants you to get rid of this one too. That pile?”

“Aaaaoh!” Nick’s first reaction after his startle was to grab at his leg. He turned around to find Packard holding a buff colored file that the wolf waved teasingly. “Not helping me heal here! Yeah, that one, why do you think they’re color coded.”

Packard delicately stretched over the fox’s crouched grab at the file and added it to Nick’s shortest stack. “Thought you guys were supposed to have good hearing.” At least three Nick’s worth of imposing wolf turned and left with an exaggerated tiptoe across the carpet. “Hope for your sake you can at least hear the Chief coming. Or get your bunny back.”

That was worth another muzzle rub. Nick didn’t know the wolf all that well yet, but he’d already become a formidable opponent as an office tease. He’d have to up his game with that one. He slipped Bogo’s low-priority file under his “easy” pile and took the ones above, all things in order—of annoyance potential. The first he disposed of with a phone call, and the next two got rerouted to the Public Works department, where they should have gone in the first place. Nick picked up the last submission again and was caught by the date on the tab. Buffalo butt had sat on this for over a month?

Actual curiosity managed to flip it open and look before it died. Really, someone at the natural history museum had a citizen concern about some partial remains? If this were a police matter, it would already be in the paws of forensics. There wasn’t much more information, just a request for an interview. He understood; Bogo himself preferred a good harsh interrogation, and wouldn’t want to pull another useful officer away from their duties for this. The crippled and expendable rookie called the contact number and was invited right over by an obviously surprised feminine voice.

Nick crutched his way across Savanna Central plaza, accompanied by some overt stares at the sight of a lame cop. He stayed to the right of the fountains and pond—Gazelle’s stage had been over there—which put us about here. Thankfully, most folks had been having too much fun at the concert to care; but a few had noticed the peculiar sight of a rabbit hip bumping a fox a couple of times to keep him dancing with her.

He limped on to the classical, domed bulk of the museum. Up the stairs and inside, his badge bypassed the admission booth—which would never get old—and he paused by a familiar pit in the center of the entrance hall. It had both a new railing and new mammals in the diorama. His acting chops had certainly necessitated that; he reminisced with a canine exposing smirk. This was the first time he’d been here since a long past day of depositions and crime scene walkthroughs with Judy, Bogo, and members of the prosecutor’s office.

The lady’s voice had directed him to the gallery on the right—door at the far end. It opened well before he got there, and a skunk—apparently a double-striper who wore a generic white lab coat—watched silently until he hitched closer.
“I thought you’d probably lost my report by now. Didn’t realize they just wanted to use it to cull the stragglers from the ranks. Right in here officer Vulpes Vulnerabilis, I’m Dr. Soren.” She turned with the wave of a magnificent sable plume that rippled enticingly as she led him down a corridor lined with specimen drawers.

Nick’s habitual evaluation of the newly encountered kicked in. She was direct and somewhat peeved, but it was tempered with some crude humor; so likely smart enough to be a difficult mark. She seemed younger than him and not intimidated by the uniform, thus confident. Remarkably, there wasn’t a hint of odor about her; it showed she was personally fastidiosus, possibly helped by some very expensive musk mask. She had some attractive qualities—similar to those of a cute gray furred obsession...

“So busted. Nick managed to suppress his third muzzle grab of the day. Kudos to Dr. Skunk, he thought; she’d achieved a perfect sarcasm to annoyance ratio. Very uncool, be professional and fix this before you earn a complaint you’ll have to explain to the chief.

“My apologies, Doctor. We foxes have always assumed that we’ve got the best tails in the business—particularly our vixens. I wasn’t expecting to see such an awesome...rebuttal to that assertion.” This time, his facepalm was immediate and heartfelt; he’d actually said that. It was one thing to verbally dance along the ragged edge of tolerable at the precinct, others indulged too, and the only risk was possible assignment to drudgery duty. Here, he’d let himself ask for it from a blameless civilian. Not so slick today, are you Nicky.

She let him dangle for a few uncomfortable seconds before she broke into a subtle smile that at least cracked the ice. They made their way through a dim forest of storage racks to a small and better-lit lab that resembled part of the forensics department. Dr. Soren took a seat before a low bench and motioned him to another stool. A fancy stereo microscope occupied pride of place before her; next to it was a monitor, several neatly arranged tiny tools, and stacks of labeled specimen trays. She swiveled to face him.

“Officer Wilde, were you just assigned my police report? Good. I really don’t blame anyone for not following up right away...its just conjecture at this... It might not even be your concern; but you should know if it’s one and who to contact...its going to take some time to put this into context...can you answer some questions so I know where to start?” Dr Soren ran down, folded her paws onto her lap and sagged forward on her stool.

She’d just dropped her own professional demeanor. Her tail cascaded limply to the floor, and she stared blankly at his badge, not his face. Whatever had prompted her to initially contact the ZPD had festered for awhile—the skunk’s body language was pure resignation.

“Dr. Soren, let me start with my own question, your report mentioned remains; is this a possible criminal matter, with a recent...victim?” Nick kept his voice calm and carefully produced his notepad. It had been uncomfortable to watch her defensive facade crumble and reveal a civilian likely unglued by the seamier realities of life.

“No, not yet. I hope by all that is decent, that it never is.” She didn’t lift her gaze. “It’s actually several sets of decayed remains, and I’m not the only one that’s recently noticed evidence for a much uglier history than what’s taught to most mammals in school.”
“Dr. Soren, you seem frightened by this and I’d like to know why. You’ve got all afternoon to tell me.” Nick set his crutch more securely against the wall and settled in. He clicked his pen to prompt her.

“I’m scared for everybody Officer Wilde. I think we’ve found something that could disrupt society as badly as the savage predator crisis did. I need someone—you might be just the right one given your involvement in that—who will take this seriously, and discreetly pass it up to the proper authorities. Our department head suggested I file the ZPD report, although there was considerable disagreement from some of us.” She started to visibly fidget. “Almost nobody reads our research papers, but I’m not sure how public police reports are. Interspecies feelings are still raw; this will be a disaster if it shows up on ZNN.”

“Don’t worry doctor, there are several legal reasons why they are kept confidential for ongoing investigations. They can be more severely restricted given the right reasons; here’s your chance to give me one.”

“Alright, you’ll have to help me here officer. Do you know how many different mammalian species live right here in Zootopia?”

Nick didn’t. At the academy, they’d discussed issues and interactions regarding the major species, and had broken the rest into convenient groups. He knew that pretty much all those that mattered had their own commemorative day on the calendar—those trivial political proclamations had long ago filled out most of the year. November twelfth for foxes—all the foxes lumped together of course. So...add a fudge factor.

“Four hundred doctor? I honestly never really considered it.” But he wanted to know; it bothered him that this young skunk’s first question had caught him out like a kit in class.

“Not bad officer, for administrative purposes Zootopia recognizes three hundred and forty-one species. To put things in context for you, the federal district is next in diversity with close to three hundred. Smaller cities and most of the rest of the world are much more species-segregated. That’s what makes this place so special, and also makes it a...bellwether for sorting out societal problems between species.”

“Dr Soren, you’ve managed to trigger my sense of dread without stating what the actual issue is. You have my undivided attention.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to make you feel that way Officer Wilde. You’ll have to make someone else feel that too. Please realize that I wish I could forget this and go back to my research, or even indulge in some inconsequential tail flirting with the novelty of a cop around my own size. This, this is...I’m...we’re having enough trouble accepting this, let alone explain...convincing a...laymammal!” Her voice steadily rose until she cut herself off, breathing harder.

“Your research might be a good place to start doc. What do you do here and how did it lead you to this...threat to social order.” Nick tried to project calm and damp any potential emotional boilover from the self-trapped mammal facing him.

“I research the parallel development of grasping digits across multiple species.” Dr. Soren raised a paw and wiggled her fingers enough to show she’d regained some self-control. “There are numerous questions about how these adaptations began, and why they did in so many species! We have to find the different divergence points and measure rates of development, determine what the
evolutionary drivers were, and if it preceded or was contemporaneous with the shift to bipedalism for each species. You and I for example have been able to do this,” she picked up a small tool and deftly pawed it, “for a long time. Equines, by comparison, started their ongoing manipulative development more recently. It’s also related to intelligence; did it enable it, or was it...”

“Woah, woah, doc! I get it; it’s complicated. But didn't this happen like a million years ago or something?” Nick said. The skunk seemed to be back in her burrow--voice steadier, tail now clear of the floor. “Can you relate this to the now?”

“The now exists because of what was. Just like you, we’re detectives; we have to base our conclusions on evidence, usually very scanty evidence. Ideally, we study populations over time. That way we can determine what’s typical and what’s an outlier. We can see how small changes add up to the appearance of a new species. One fossil can be an aberration, or misidentified as to which closely related species it’s from. We need as many as we can find. Many of the specimens in this museum and others were found decades ago, but we’re only learning now what they are and how they relate to each other. The statistics we need for a good view of mammalian evolution builds up at a frustratingly slow rate. There’s now enough to force us to ask some painful questions about ourselves.

I’ve one, Dr. Soren.” Nick leaned forward a bit and propped his chin with a paw. “You’re trying to solve a mystery, right? In the ones I’ve read; you find out what the crime is at the beginning; and who the criminal is at the end. I can’t recall one where someone digs up fossils in the middle and immediately calls the cops. Please! I’m not trying to be flippant.” He held his paws up in supplication. “I just need to know which way you’re going with this so I can convince either a detective or Chief Bogo that this is worth their attention when there are plenty of...contemporary crimes for us to solve.”

Dr. Soren relaxed further and attempted a small smile. “It comes with the profession,” she sighed; “it’s hard to present conclusions based on limited evidence. To avoid criticism, we must be meticulous with our analysis and presentation. When you write a paper on some obscure topic in this field, only four or five others might ever read it, but they will argue to the death about every tiny claim or conclusion! I was trying to give you the necessary background so you would...accept what no rational mammal would want to. I’m sorry!”

“I’m sorry too Dr. Soren. Take your time to educate the dumb fox officer. Just not so much that he foxsilizes in his seat and you have to add him to your collection.” Nick offered the skunk paleontologist one of the comforting smiles he usually bestowed on Judy after a rough day. He was gratified to immediately get one in return, now confident he’d repaired some of the earlier awkwardness between them.

“Where were we? Let’s go back to species.” She patted her midnight-furred paws together. “The number of extant sentient mammalian species wasn’t too far from your earlier guess. Four hundred and thirty one as I mentioned. A little over half are the smaller species, shrews, weasels, pikas, bats and most other rodents. A different half are the uncommon to rare species. Here’s a thought experiment for you Officer Wilde. How many different species might you find or notice if you walked around Savanna Central for a couple of hours?” Dr. Soren briefly twirled a paw.

“That’s a kit’s game,” Nick told her. “Couple of hours--maybe sixty? I don’t ever remember getting more than that myself.”

“And that’s in the middle of the biggest city on the continent, one designed to promote interspecies interactions! Anyplace else, you’ll find a lot less diversity, particularly in rural areas,” she noted
with an expansive paw wave. “Now go back in time, how many sentient species were there before
the last ice age as compared to now? How many types of mammals have lived and then gone
extinct since the dinosaurs did? We have very few definitive answers since many species don’t
leave a useful fossil record. Extrapolation from those that do seem to indicate that there were far
more mammalian species alive as recently as three to six million years ago, than there are today.”

Dr. Soren put some emphasis on the last word, then paused to allow Nick a brief reprieve to catch
up with his scribbled notes.

“Here’s more; when did the first mammals develop sentience? We didn’t all develop it at the same
time. It’s almost certain that several predatory species were the first to do so. That forced the rest of
mammankind to run an evolutionary race to survive. That race hasn’t finished. The most adaptable
species have managed to maintain the pace of the leaders, while others lag behind. A far greater
number—perhaps seven out of every eight—have had their last already fall into extinction. We
don’t know how many non-sentients still remain on the course, struggling along towards their end
far out of sight behind us.”

Nick managed to close his mouth and swallow. “You mean mammal animals, alive now? That’s
just rumors or scare stories from thousands of years ago...right?”

“That’s where our...popular history had safely buried them. Beyond individual memory, almost
beyond cultural memory, hidden under ignorance and superstition. No real evidence.” She stopped
with mouth slightly agape; eyes locked onto him, waiting.

“So...you dug up something...very recent?”

“There have been several problematic finds that have started to make it into the literature. We here
possess evidence—we dare not publish yet—that likely shows the present existence of perhaps two
less advanced, likely non-sentient mammalian species. Other finds elsewhere indicate possible
recent extinctions of similar species.” Dr. Soren shifted on her stool and looked uncomfortable.
She held up a paw to keep Nick silent.

“Let me get through this. To a paleontologist, “recent” is a relative term. Looking at evolution, at
a minimum it’s tens or hundreds of thousands of years ago. Anything more...well recent...is the
purview of archaeologists or historians. You’re here because I’m afraid the past we study has
collided with our present. Even if we had enough evidence, we can’t publicly release any of it!
Society would jump to the worst conclusions and tear apart what we’ve all built up over
generations! Knowledge can’t be kept hidden; it will come out. We just have to learn more about
this and you have to take care of the problems before it does—hopefully in a controlled fashion.”

“You said this would be as dangerous as the savage predator crisis; is this another pred-prey
issue?” The skunk before him seemed to shrink slightly as she nodded, and Nick’s stomach
abruptly decided it would pass on lunch today.

“Yes, I’ve been talking about prey species. At best officer, we’re unearthing evidence of the final
extinction of outcompeted, remnant species, far more recently than we ever realized. Worse, this
could possibly be deliberate genocide perpetrated by some of our forebearers against competitors.
And we cannot exclude the ongoing exploitation of unrecognized, long hidden prey species for
food!”
A.N. Thanks to all who stopped by to check out Sandcastles. Any comments and suggestions are very welcome encouragement for me, and a way for readers to help steer the story onto a path that they will enjoy.

Judy Hopps sat spread legged in the center of the police cruiser’s capacious passenger seat, her midriff nearly hidden behind the wide seatbelt. Officer Fangmeyer, her partner for the day, pulled into the ER loading zone at Zootopia General Hospital and parked behind the EMT van they’d followed in. The silent and limp eared rabbit officer received a sympathetic look. “It’s ok Hopps, nobody is going to fault you; this sort of thing happens all too often with domestic disputes.” The tigress got out carefully, holding a paw over the slashed open side of her uniform and followed Judy over to the van.

“She’s stable now, but still out of it,” the cougar EMT told them. “Better for her to recover naturally. She’ll metabolize the tranqs overnight and be right as arrainment tomorrow morning. Should have the tox report then too.” Her coati compatriot helped push the gurney that bore a second tigress—this one strapped down and unresponsive--out the back of the van. “Just realized something officers,” said the smaller mammal in a soft voice, “was quite the ladies night out, wasn’t it?”

Judy stared up and out of the window at the deep twilight for the two-mile drive back to precinct one. They’d just entered the staff parking lot when she quietly voiced her shame. “I’m sorry, I didn’t stay in control; I panicked.”

“If you’d panicked, you would have run bun. You took down the threat.”

“Nadine! There were three kits with her! I shot their mother four times right in front of them!” Judy flinched as she recalled the dropped sandbag whump Mrs. Lankton made when she hit the floor. “She’d almost stopped breathing by the time the EMT’s got there!”

Fangmeyer found a spot not too far from the rear entrance—a lot of the evening shift was already in the field. She shut off the engine, but made no move to get out. “This your first real life weapon discharge? Yeah, thought so. All the training in the world can’t prepare you emotionally for that; it just works to reinforce your automatic reactions. You’ve been here a little over a year, for me it was twice that long before I even pulled my weapon.”

“I thought I’d missed with the first dart—the kit yowled—she clawed you and came at me; I just kept shooting!” Judy’s breath shuddered and a large paw gently settled over her shoulders.
“This’ll get resolved Hopps; family services has the kits and Mr. Lankton’s probably already been stitched up by now. You just need to make the acquaintance of some new forms, and I’ll plan a full honors memorial for my uniform.” Fangmeyer fingered the shredded fabric on her flank. “I’m sure this wasn’t intentional, the Mrs. doesn’t need an additional assault on a police officer charge. Thanks for agreeing to ah...overlook it.”

“I can’t deny it Fangmeyer, I felt the panic! I lost it and almost killed her!” Judy moaned.

“Can it Hopps, you didn’t. You were inside; at close quarters with six tigers, all larger than you. Three of us were over twenty times your size! And yes, your subconscious counted me too. You kept your cool when you had to; my report will certainly state that.”

Judy closed her eyes and let out a weary sigh. “Thanks Nadine. I might need a ride home; I texted Nick on our way to the hospital, but he hasn’t replied. Don’t think I want to walk.”

“That’s Officer Fangmeyer, Officer Hopps. And since when did Officer Wilde become Nick? Oh, so you do have ears. Let’s go in and see if we can find you someone.”

Both were surprised to see the fox still at his desk near the corner; it was already a quarter to nine. Fangmeyer stopped at her own cubical and released Judy to her regular partner with a nod. The ZPD’s smallest officer trudged down the corridor, as her ears slowly drooped behind her back again.

Nick’s complete and uncharacteristic unawareness of her proximity stopped Judy a few steps back to watch him in puzzlement. He stared transfixed at the blank back wall of the office bay as if there were an interdimensional portal open that only he could see. The end of a memory stick poked from a tightly clenched paw propped on the edge of their desk. He looked tense and likely easily unnerved. Judy rubbed her foot over the carpet several times to gently draw his notice.

“I shot somebody today Nick,” she said in a strained voice as he slowly turned towards her. “They almost died.”

That brought him back. His green eyes widened and focused on her, and he twitched a few times like a reanimated monster in a cheesy movie. “Sorry, Hopps.” He reached out awkwardly from his chair and she stepped into the hug and planted her face in his shirt. After a few seconds he started to idly stroke her ears with his one open paw, and she worked on enlarging the moist spot on his middle.

His physical reassurance seemed...forced; not like it was when they’d first reconciled. Judy hung on harder; tried to squeeze out of him what she desperately needed again, but the fox remained wire-tense. And he’d called her...

“What do you mean—Hopps!” She sniffled. “Nick, I...what’s wrong?”

“Maybe everything we thought.” He sighed like the weight of the world had pressed it out of him. “Sorry to bring this up Judy. What would you do to get a second crack at your press conference?” Nick gently pushed them apart, but kept his paws on her shoulders.

Nick! Why now—I can’t handle this today--you know I’d do anything to change that!”

“And I’d do anything to erase this, but I can’t.” The memory stick appeared in front of her face. “I want to go back to this morning when I didn’t know about this.” The stick vanished into Nick’s
paw and he leaned back. “And I spent two hours helping to write it.”

Judy wiped her eyes and took a more careful look at her partner. The cocky, confident vulpine con-artist was nowhere to be found, as was the proud, dedicated to his service ZPD officer. Instead, she saw a disillusioned and frightened adult-sized kit slumped in his seat.

“Don’t ask about this, you aren’t ready for it, especially not today.” Nick spoke carefully and seemed to collect himself for her. “Are you ready to tell me what happened...you were out with Fangmeyer...she ok?”

“She’s fine; her uniform isn’t. Domestic quarrel; family of tigers out on west pride parkway,” Judy said as Nick hiked an eyebrow. “I let things get way....”

A faint harmonic rumble from behind grew in intensity and resolved into the bulk of Chief Bogo looming over them. He gave Nick a brief, withering glare before turning a more benign countenance to her. Surprisingly, he was in his full dress uniform.

“Fangmeyer just briefed me Hopps; she felt you handled yourself well today. Per standard procedure, you will be on administrative duty until IA reviews your reports. You may start that duty with your debrief, in my office, ten thirty a.m.” The Cape buffalo’s scowl returned. “Officer Wilde. You will tell me how you frightened Clawhauser into insisting that I return here after my conference, at...nine-o-six this evening, instead of going home.”

Nick pushed himself erect and kept hold of his chair for support. “Sir, I conducted an interview at the natural history museum to close out your inactive file dated March fourth. This is our report and background information.” He held up the memory stick, but didn’t give it to Bogo. “There is no other copy of this. Your...Eyes...Only...Sir.” He finally extended his paw, and the chief took the stick to quietly contemplate it with an expression Judy had never seen from him. He too obviously wondered what had happened with Nick.

“Final assignment for today Wilde.” The chief broke out of his rumination. “Assist Officer Hopps with any preliminary notes she wants to make, then escort her home. Dispatch can arrange a ride. Report at ten thirty.”

They waited until the chief’s whereabouts had faded away before they exited to the hall that led to the lobby. “Give me a minute, Nick. I need to get a few things.” He nodded and continued to the lobby while she headed for the lockers the other way. Like their cubical, she shared the generous compartment on the bottom row with Nick for practicality reasons. She spun the simple combination open and picked up her backpack.

Judy paused to look at the gift bag that had been flattened beneath it. Selected by some of her younger siblings, it had served its purpose, but had been a little too sturdy to just throw away. She exchanged it for the backpack and shook it out. She needed her foxy friend and would suffer the embarrassment to help bring him out of his funk. It was pale blue with cartoonish clouds, and had numerous bunnies that soared, floated, or in a few cases, helicoptered with their ears among them. She stuffed her spare change of clothes and some grooming items into it, secured the locker and hiked down the hall after her partner.

She found Nick with the ram that worked night dispatch. Judy had to get close enough to read the nameplate propped on the circular counter to recall him, Officer Maitland. He was the only sheep that remained at precinct one, for some reason Bellwether had avoided him when she’d recruited co-conspirators for her savage predator plot. Even so, he’d accepted the change in shift to let any
possible animosities fade.

“Ride’s already out back...Carrots.” She was glad to hear the nickname, but he had hesitated and glanced at her bunny bag first. He’d tried, but was still obviously rattled about what he’d given to Bogo. They retraced their route through a quiet precinct building, out to an idling cruiser. Nick stretched to open the door, climbed in and stowed his crutch, and offered her a paw up. Too drained of energy to live up to her name, she accepted it. The driver was a huge, intimidating boar in tactical gear that returned their introductions with a grunt that could either be his name or state of mind. Officer Snort looked like he was on rotation from TUSK, or if not, he had to have a job title like “confession extractor”.

“Nineteen fifty-five Cypress Grove Lane, it’s just this side of the rainforest district,” she said. Nick flinched, but didn’t otherwise object. The boar punched it in to his map display, Nick held her as she stood on the seat and reached to tug the door closed, and light traffic got them there in under ten minutes.

Even though the nearest rain tower was over half a mile away, the moisture-laden air had spilled down the street to reduce visibility and halo the lights. A day like today needed to end this way, Judy acknowledged, as the incipient drizzle urged them inside. Nick efficiently stumped up the stairs and she followed him down the hall to his apartment. The sound of deadbolts banishing the world was the best she’d heard all day.

Nick now moved with silent purpose as he arranged a pillow and blanket for her at one end of his sofa. He pegged over to the fridge as she settled in, and returned to push a berry flavored juicebox into her paws. She let him fuss, realizing he needed the semblance of normality as badly as she did. Nick finally used his crutch to seat himself beside her, with his usual courteous space between them.

I can’t be alone right now, Judy knew. She felt small and vulnerable, more so than she had since her academy days. Her thin-walled, crackerbox sized apartment would be a bare cell to her tonight; this was the only immediately accessible place that could provide the solace she craved. Because it had her partner and friend—who needed her as well. “Over here,” she pulled at Nick’s belt for emphasis and he slid over. They leaned together and she soon felt his arm around her shoulders. Neither risked breaking the mood for some time.

Eventually, her need for relief overcame the comfort of her warm little burrow, and she reluctantly wriggled out and took her bag to the bathroom. Judy felt an odd sense of loss once she was out of uniform and in her looser, more anonymous clothes. It would be hard to wear the ZPD blues again given the circumstances. She smoothed, folded, and then carefully tucked them into the bag.

Nick had taken advantage of her absence and gone for comfort too. He was already back in his spot on the sofa, in khakis and tropical shirt, sans tie. She set the bag on the floor out of sight below the armrest and snuggled back into the space between it and Nick. He draped the blanket back around her and took time to tuck her in. Judy closed her eyes and wanted time to stop right then.

“10-7 Carrots. I hate to credit the chief with actual empathy, but I think he wanted me to take you home so you’d have a chance to talk this out. He didn’t specify whose home, so your good to go if you’re ready.”

She let out a small sigh and Nick’s ears pricked visibly at the sound of it—something else he likely found cute about her. Get your shame out, scaredy-rabbit...
“I panicked, overreacted, and almost killed a mother in front of her kits! They’re going to have nightmares about it for years because of me!”

“Bogo and Fangmeyer said you did ok. Can you take me through the incident? Start when you arrived.” Nick’s arm comfortingly circled her again—he carefully slid it under her limp ears—but she suddenly didn’t want it there; he’d feel her every twitch and shudder.

“Front door of the residence was open, parents were arguing inside. He had a right to see his kits; she claimed a new restraining order; he called her a liar. Fangmeyer announced us...went in first just as the missus lunged and clawed him good across the chest...he hit her back, claws in I think.” Judy took a couple of measured breaths, now dry-eyed. “He hit her hard and we think she stumbled back into one of the kits...three were in the room Nick! Maybe only six or seven. Why hadn’t she sent them away? Kit screamed and the mother roared and came back and swiped Nadine...I was just in, had a clear shot, emptied my gun and kept pulling the trigger!”

“Keep it together, carrots. There are situations you can’t control; you know that. So you were in the middle of a real catfight. How close was she when you darted her.”

“Three, four meters? It was all so fast! I thought I’d missed my first shot. She almost fell on me as I backed away! Nick, I put four darts into her, heavy tranks, the orange ones! We’re not supposed to use more than two even on a mammal that size.”

“Great Spirit Above! What did you expect to do? You said you were just in. What did you have, a second or two?” Nick’s eyes were wide with...shock?

“If I’d assessed it faster, I could’ve jumped left, darted her as she went by and covered both of them while Nadi...”

“Carrots!” Nick’s voice jumped and his eyes went even wider. “Seriously; you’re second guessing? Did superbunny fail to dispassionately evaluate the situation when she was lunged at by a roaring tiger at point blank range?”

“I have to be perfect!” Judy cried. “No matter how badly I wanted it, I wasn’t really supposed to be here. This is the slip-up everybody expected! The only reason she isn’t dead is that I have to use that small concealable gun. It’s got just four darts!”

“Did you soil yourself?” Nick asked casually.

“What—no!”

“Ok, so you’re still a pretty awesome bunny. Most normal mammals smaller than a rhino would have.” Nick paused and cupped her cheeks in his warm paws. “You were thrown into a situation that was already going south. You did exactly what you were trained to do. We’ve got your back on this so stop trying to keep yourself worked up. Just be quiet now and try to relax before you completely crash.”

Judy Hopps became aware that she wasn’t lying in bed. Seated, slouched over against something warm, she cracked her eyes to morning light from her left, not behind her as it should have been. Her chin was pillowed on a tapered dark brown muff that lightened to a russet color under her right
shoulder. It was bigger and softer—and Nickier—than her fox plushie. Mental circuit breakers slammed closed and brought her fully awake with a jerk. Nick reacted too; he immediately unwound his tail and pushed himself up, then hopped unsteadily to the bathroom, crutch forgotten.

Faint sounds of relief filtered from behind the door; he’d remained with her...all night? He’d been concerned enough to not want to awaken her...how long had he sat there stiffly uncomfortable? Guilt and longing fought to an uneasy truce over whether she deserved such attention. One thing was certain; mom and dad were never going to find out what happened yesterday, or where she’d just woken up. She knew that her parents and family were always available for emotional support, but last night she’d relied on Nick again without pause—and he’d responded; he’d cared as she’d needed him to.

Judy rubbed her eyes gently and then her scalp vigorously, trying to push away persistent feelings she couldn’t bear right now. It was morning, another day. She’d slept and hopefully processed some of her angst, but she feared her previously prescient next-door neighbor would be right about this one too when he’d said, “but it might be worse!”

“Probably will be. I’ll get the coffee going.” Nick was back and his face said that any delay would be intolerable. “By the way; Good morning miss Hopps, I hope your stay at the Foxborough Arms was a pleasant one!”

Gees, I must’ve spoken out loud, Judy thought. “Gmorning.” She watched as he brewed up the elixirs of life—for her a decaffeinated new proclivity, for him a stronger necessity.

“All I’ve got is a veggie burrito; split it?” said Nick. She nodded, then flexed away her overnight stiffness and joined him at the table where he soon set two large mugs. His had irregular, mostly vertical patterning that evoked a dark forest, overlain by the word “Primal.” She didn’t know if that was a coffee brand or his self-impression. Her cup was plain. Breakfast announced with a ding, and only with her first bite did she recall that neither of them had anything for dinner last night. It wasn’t much, but her stomach seemed momentarily satisfied by the token meal.

Clean, brushed, and ill at ease in her uniform, Judy self-consciously asked Nick to check the hall outside first. All being clear, he locked his door behind her as she went ahead. A few seconds later, another lock click from a door opposite prompted her to let out an “eep” and dash for the stairwell. Nearly down to the lobby, she heard a muffled conversation above that ended with a clearer, “Have to go Carla, got a court date.”

Nick caught up to her out front and stood at parade rest on the sidewalk—as best he could with the crutch. “Resident is a female woodchuck, single, mid forties,” he stated. “Medium brown fur, somewhat plump; will flirt with any unwary males without regard to size or species.” He finally looked over at her. “Zuber will arrive soon to maintain your propriety.”

Her ears would have wilted if they hadn’t already been draped behind her head. Judy, she chided herself, you couldn’t be more obvious about your discomfort at being seen in a fox’s den. She hoped this wouldn’t stop him from inviting her over for another movie night. The first, a month ago, had been a general invitation. Actually, Nick had co-opted his friend Finnick as an involuntary chaperone—the fennec fox had been surprised when she’d shown up, and had been frosty towards her. The second had been just the two of them, and from then on they’d decided to alternate on who picked the movie. It was a needed weekly break, and next time—assuming there was one—her choice of movie might be...meaningful.
“I’m really sorry Nick. So much for living up to my ideals.” She was disgusted with herself again; today had picked up right where yesterday had left off. “Got any forgiveness left for a selfish bunny?” She looked up, embarrassed to play the sympathy card.

“Always Carrots.” His paw on her shoulder and caring look was nothing less than a benediction from above. “There’s too much going on now—I can’t even tell you about it—this isn’t the time for introspection, we need to wait until we both get our heads back together. Right now, I just know I’m going to need my partner more than ever.” Nick’s head tilted up; he withdrew his paw and sidled away as a car approached and slowed.

“Your my ride?” said an agouti through an open window. His car was just large enough to fit a flattened-eared Nick in the front, while she had plenty of room in back. “Never had co...Officers for a pickup before. Savanna Central right?” He curved into the empty street; jerked back to keep them in the right lane, and kept the speed down. “Shit! This isn’t going to be...like...a driving test, is it?”

“Just make the U turn and drop us off at ZPD; we’re not on traffic duty,” said an exasperated Nick. The agouti twitched his whiskers and did so with alacrity. Once at the precinct, he accepted her autograph as partial payment—he’d realized who she was less than a minute into the trip, and had peppered her with questions for the rest of it.

“Ahhh, together again.” Clawhauser’s amiable voice rolled across the mostly empty lobby as soon as they’d made it through the entrance; they had his full attention. “Morning Hopps, morning Wilde, glad you finally made it in. Chief wasn’t happy I’d called him in last night, so you’re already on his schedule for the day. Want your last meal?” The cheetah reached behind, then over the reception desk with one of his ubiquitous donut boxes to show them the two survivors huddled at one end of it.

Judy appreciated the willpower exhibited by the rotund dispatcher; she suddenly did want one. They walked over to find he’d left them a chocolate donut and maple bar. Either was acceptable, so she hesitated to see if Nick had a preference. Of course he waited for her. Time stretched until, quite horribly, she started to hear a faint rumble emanate from Clawhauser as the tip of his tail began to metronome. Rabbit and fox paws darted simultaneously into the box; she went for the maple bar, Nick for the chocolate. They stuffed their faces as Clawhauser’s broad smile chased them away.

What, Judy wondered, does that cheetah get out of watching us together? We’re just partners...is he trying to promote us...as a...? She looked up at Nick to gauge his reaction. He smiled back and carefully tapped the side of his muzzle; she stretched her tongue to recover the errant frosting on hers. The fox tried unsuccessfully to suppress a chortle and she decided to let him have the moment—he needed whatever joy he could find right now.

A plain envelope was on her seat when they got to their desk. It contained a copy of Fangmeyer’s incident report and two blank forms. It was just before ten; she could get this out of the way now that she had a template to follow. A few minutes sufficed to fill in the basic data, then she was careful to keep her own narrative and diagram close enough to Nadine’s to corroborate them without the appearance of plagiarism. Nick slid over the weapons form as soon as she’d finished, and proctored her with a countdown to their appointment. She remembered to sign and date it—up against the wall—while waiting for the elevator to Bogo’s floor.

“Come in Hopps!” The door was already unlatched for her; she pushed it open, then closed, and
climbed into the hot seat. Horizontal bars of sunlight slanted through the window and blind in the back wall and striped her from head to feet. At least they weren’t vertical; she didn’t need that metaphor as her guilt reasserted itself. The hulking silhouette of chief Bogo gave her a slight nod of approval as she leaned over and put her forms on his desk. He settled his glasses on his broad muzzle, and picked them up to read, as unresponsive as a block of obsidian until he abruptly flicked to the other form. Judy had a momentary flash of fear that she had slipped the wrong one back into Nadine’s desk.

“Consider this case closed for the time being, Hopps. You will need to testify at some point since blood was drawn and your weapon fired. Did you make copies for internal affairs? No? Then give these to Beverly when you leave.” Chief Bogo passed them back and tapped his hooves together. “A more important matter requires our attention. Wilde!”

Judy slid over as the door opened and held Nick’s crutch as he hoisted himself onto the seat beside her. Bogo held up a hoof and Nick’s face went hard.

“I’ve decided to bring her into this Wilde,” the chief said firmly. “In the short time you two have been partners, you have proven to me that you’re a natural team. In addition, your unobtrusive size and prior involvement in the savage predator affair, also makes you a natural choice. Your assignments are to gather enough evidence to decide whether this,” the chief passed the memory stick back to Nick, “remains an ugly chapter in a history book, or might fracture or reduce our society to a feral state.” Bogo looked straight at her as he spoke that astounding statement, and paused to let it sink in.

“Wilde, I’ve already set a follow-up interview with Dr. Soren tomorrow morning; she wants two of her colleagues in attendance. She will text you the time directly. Hopps, I’ll let Wilde brief you. Keep in mind that this Dr. Soren managed to spook the sass out of our fox, whose own report convinced me that the savage predator crisis might just be the warm-up act for this.”

Bogo’s fatalistic expression and curt nod were sufficient dismissal; they silently returned to their desk after she dropped off her report with his AA. Nick and the chief had thoroughly stoked her sense of apprehension, whether deliberately or not didn’t matter. And now her trusted partner added the last touch of dread when he unplugged the network cable from the back of his computer before inserting the memory stick.

“I wish he hadn’t involved you,” Nick looked distraught...for her.

“Not the first time either of you have dumped something on this bunny.” Judy sighed. “At least we’re together for this one.” She climbed into his chair and started to read as Nick stood watch.
Faultlines

Chapter Summary

With so many different sizes and species of citizens, how would the Zootopian economy work? Professor Wilde explains...

“We need to go discuss this someplace more private.” That had been Nick’s suggestion after she’d read his dispiriting report. To Judy’s initial bewilderment, he’d chosen the heart of Savanna Central Square as the best place within easy crutch range, so there they sat, while he idly scanned the mid-day crowds with a pocket binocular.

She had to admit it was actually a pretty good spot to preserve their isolation. They’d commandeered a vantage atop a decorative slab of rock, close by the plaza’s central water hole and fountains. The soothing white noise splash and burble in front of them, along with their raised perch, effectively masked their conversation. To passersby behind, the sight of two uniformed cops apparently staking out the entrance to the transit station warranted their presence.

There was still a pleasant coolness to the air as the springtime sun shown upon the throng. It was much like the day she’d first arrived in Zootopia, but now her past optimism had yielded to the unexpected faults beneath their society. Judy, she remonstrated; your efforts to make this world a better place aren’t any more effective than using a fresh coat of paint to get that weather-beaten barn through another season. She knew Bogo had been right a year ago when he’d said, “the worlds always been broken, Hopps.”

“Nick, she admitted to you that the evidence is circumstantial,” Judy finally observed reluctantly. “It’s a long way from confirming old legends about feral animals. Can’t they keep this in the past where it belongs?

“No, that’s our real problem Carrots. One,” he raised a digit, “it’s almost certainly not just in the past. Two, there was enough evidence for these mammals to notice and put the pieces together, that means others will find it too. And three, if someone tries to suppress it, that will just draw attention. This will work its way into the public consciousness eventually; and they will react the only way they can, the worst possible way.”

“Again with the cynicism, Nick. I thought you’d found a more positive outlook on life.” Yeah, like the one I just lost, she reflected. “Maybe people will deal with this better than you think they will.” The slight, forlorn smile from her partner showed how ineffectually naive he thought that statement was.

“Two decades to develop it Carrots,” her fox said sadly. “Less than a year of happy bunny therapy won’t cure it however much I want it to. It’s a street survival thing to watch and read everyone around you. You learn to see their real personalities and motivations and too many aren’t very good. What we call civilization is just a façade over all of our individual prejudices, suppressed feral instincts, and old interspecies fears and rivalries. It wouldn’t take much to shatter it. Ten months ago, that psychotic sheep came closer to doing that than just about anyone realized.”
Judy gazed out at the oblivious crowds, as yet unaffected by the debilitating knowledge that had originated with this Dr. Soren; who’d infected Nick with it, who’d passed it to Bogo, and now to her. “It’s not fair Nick, why do we have to be the heroes again?”

“Cause you’re the idealist who picked hero as a profession Carrots. And decided to turn me into one. Anyone can be anything,” sarcasm fouled the fox’s voice. “Not only do you like to say that; you were able to live it to the point that you’ve convinced yourself of its truth. Well most of us can’t, that’s reality, that’s my truth; there are huge faults with this...artificial society we’ve built that can never be fixed. Some deluded mammals say we’re all equal under the law and to each other. Any kit can see through that.”

“Nick! Don’t be like this. This isn’t more than supposition, and look what it’s done to us already!” Judy tried to invoke enough outrage to cast off their self-imposed mantle of depression. “How did we let this get to us? We’ve no perpetrators, victims, or credible evidence there’s been a crime, and we’ve still blown it up into this existential threat to all of mammalian society!”

“Deflection and denial aren’t a good fit for you; I saw your face as you were reading.” Nick’s own face lost its intensity and his eyes filled with a deep sadness. Judy had seen that look once before—high over the rainforest district. He hadn’t been looking directly at her then; now, she could see every minute detail in his emerald irises.

“Do you want to know the real reason I became a cop? It wasn’t to prove myself to you or anyone else; it wasn’t to keep you from being disappointed in me; and it wasn’t because I wanted to work with my partner and be happy in your imaginary, idealistic world. I did it Judy, so I could always be with you to protect you from mine! And yesterday I couldn’t.”

She opened her mouth to gasp, but it stalled in her throat. Protect me? He really thinks I’ve been sheltered enough to need it? To her distress, she realized he did.

“Remember the day we first met?” Nick earnestly drove it home. “I gave some bunny metermaid a brutal dose of reality about the big city. Now you get the broader follow-up lesson, although I’ll do my best to be understanding about it and not invoke Mr. Nasty fox. We both have to be prepared for this. So Miss Bunnyburrow, what do you see out there?”

“I see a cit...” Judy stopped; she knew what he expected her to say.

“We see what we want to see, Carrots. To survive, some of us need to see things we’d rather not. I see fissures and fractures all through that modern, cooperative society of yours. I made my living exploiting some of them. One of the biggest divisions goes right between us!” Nick drew his paw along the smoothly worn rock shelf they sat on for emphasis.

“Savage predator, meek prey,” Judy intoned appropriately to try to lighten the mood.

“Right, and no matter how you feel about it, that divide will affect how you interact with someone on the other side.” He gave his sternum a pat. “Yeah, you can have a friend, a work...partner; but society imposes constraints on your behavior with them. This morning for example,” Nick said with a hint of bitterness.

“I didn’t think about it, it was an automatic reaction! Besides, didn’t you forgive me?”

“I did.” Nick cracked a brief smile. “But it does reinforce my point. We all live in a sea of prejudices and expectations, and they continually soak in whether we’re aware of them or not.
Some of us try to fight them off; others don’t care. There are circumstances where I would have done the same thing you did. After all, what would our moms think?

Judy had to laugh, her mood brightened at the realization she was still able to. She slid closer and they leaned together. Nick proffered an arm in comfort; she reached to reciprocate. Voices from behind. Her left ear flicked erect and twisted back; Nick’s muzzle followed it around, and he abruptly pushed her upright and himself away.

Two young female pigs in business casual watched them intently from about forty feet back; one stopped poking at, and repocketed a smartphone with an irritated snuffle. Judy’s glare was enough to send them on their way again. Great, she thought, that would have earned them condemnation from society, chief Bogo, and mom.

“Got to watch out slick, we forgot where we were and almost ended up on furbook—and here I was afraid of what your neighbor would think!”

“Ah! My country bunny; it would have also been in the “About Town” section of the newspaper with something like; “Cops Canoodling on the Clock.” The normal Nick had come back with his characteristic smirk and amusement in his voice. “Unless the tabloids printed it first—in every market and convenience store in Zootopia—in seventy-two-point headlines: Public Passion! Police Partner’s Predator Prey Perversion! Then ZNN Primetime—you would have been bigger than Gazelle for days!”

“Me? It would be us, I wasn’t here by myself!” Ears already flushed due to their narrow escape; Judy was further embarrassed by her weak comeback to Nick’s impressive ad-lib.

“You’re the celebrity Carrots, I’m not the one on the recruitment poster. I’d just be the foxy boytoy, I don’t have TV time, fanclubs, websites...”

“Now you’ve gotten ridiculous. I haven’t had an interview since you...became my...”

“Ever Zoogled yourself? Maybe you should see what’s out there about our famous ZPD officer. I’ll bet there’s more than one young mammal out there whose got a Judy Hopps shrine in their bedro... Ah, I see my bunny now understands true horror. So, ready to revisit the possible fall of civilization? It has to be way less scary for you than that. Yes?”

Nick did that very canine head tilt and prick your ears thing, and pulled another giggle out of her. Her amazing fox had recognized, and brought them back from the emotional brink to something that approached normalcy. It was another reminder of why she’d come to implicitly rely on her partner...and best friend. Whom she’d run from...and hurt because of what everybody would say...but it was for us...we have to maintain a professional... She’d also started to think of him as her fox. Judy winced and felt herself shrivel up inside.

“Carrots, don’t backslide; I need my clever bunny right now. We both freaked out about this problem, but can’t afford to any more. I want to explain why this hit me harder than you at first; why I know society’s more fragile than you think.”

“Just talk Nick, I’ll handle it,” Judy stated, unsure she really could right now. She badly wanted to do something habitual right now, like worry her nibble stick, to put her mind off those two words he’d lodged in her head: my bunny. It was just simple conversation she told herself...it’s not at all like your thinking about...my fox.
“Right,” Nick continued. “Our little performance illustrated the pred-prey divide quite well. That’s part of the broader self-enforced segregation between most species. Don’t object! Look around Carrots; see who most mammals associate with—groups of their own kind. Herd of antelope there, flock of sheep up the street. There’s only three waiting over here, but call it a pack of wolves, nobody else with them. There’s mixed pairs here and there; sure, friend’s meet, business gets done, doesn’t matter. What’s missing are larger multispecies groups; the few you see are co-workers out to lunch, school field trips, tourists, that sort of thing. Organized groups, not mixed casual socializing.”

“C’mon Nick, what about concerts, restaurants, and movie...thea...” The fox’s patronizing smile showed that she was reinforcing his point. “Yeah, that’s all in public, not personal.”

“Good examples for another divisive issue though. Theatres—the big and mid-size ones want to maximize their profit, so they put smaller mammals in front, larger in back. Now consider a theatre in Little Rodentia. Would you go to one? Course not, Lapinzilla here would have to rip off the roof to see the show. Restaurants—again, some have sections for larger and smaller mammals within limits. The priciest will cater to everyone. Others only serve mammals of more uniform size and diet. Would you really be comfortable in one that caters to hippos, elephants and rhinos? Sure, you might go, but restaurant staff would rather fill that seat with a more logistically manageable customer who wasn’t a.selldown.”

“Point is;” Nick concluded. “Physical size is the primary segregator in mammal society. Too big a difference is unbridgeable no matter how idealistic and tolerant you are! Enough so that it’s not only built into Zootopia’s infrastructure, but also reinforced by longstanding government policy and our tiered economic system. It’s just the way things are.”

Her streetwise fox—and a police academy lecturer from ZU she’d argued with—were unfortunately right. The prof had stated bluntly, “excepting special circumstances, it is almost impossible to maintain a comfortable, casual, associative friendship with someone from a species more than four or five times larger or smaller than yours.” Judy was barely half of Nick’s size; and that was fine, on the job and off. However...

It was far more awkward when she’d gone shopping that time with Fru Fru. Little Rodentia wasn’t ready for another visit from the lagomorph colossus, so they’d patronized stores elsewhere that accommodated their sizes. To facilitate conversation and safety, Judy carried the arctic shrew while in larger places, and waited outside the small shops while she browsed. At least Fru’s security guard dealt with the hassles of parking the limo.

“Your right Nick, I didn’t look for it, or want to see it. I guess we really are divided.” Sadness now reinvigorated Judy’s depression. “I’d just hoped mammalkind would be more...united here—like we are back home.”

“Thanks for the lead-in,” Nick said with more interest in his voice. “I’ve never been there—except through your homesick descriptions of bucolic bliss—so can I assume the residents are a smaller number of mid-size species in a purely tier two economy?” The fox’s expectant look forced the admission of her prior life in a far less diverse environment.

“I didn’t really think of it that way before, but you’re right,” Judy admitted. “Bunnyburrow is a widespread region with a large population of...mostly us. The only mammals you see there larger than pigs or sheep are usually visitors. And before you ask, the nearest cluster of really small mammal towns are miles away.”
“Zootopia has three hundred and forty...one species.” Nick said authoritatively; then ruined his comportment by hurriedly reaching to scratch inside the back of his shirt. “How many did you normally associate with in B Burrow?”

“Uh, fifteen, maybe twenty?” Judy mentally ticked off as many as she could remember. “It’s not as bad as it sounds Nick, I met a lot more in school. They build the newer, larger ones in between different types of towns to gather and acquaint more species with each other. Woodlands Elementary was pretty progressive, we even had a lot of predator’s kits.”

“But most of you rural mammals still live in communities with your own kind, right?”

Yep, we rural types are pretty parochial.” Judy confirmed sadly. As the fox had pointed out earlier, most normal relations between species were organized in some way. “We rarely had non-rabbit visitors at the house. Dad did his business in town at the agricultural exchange—it was more suitable for dealing with other species.”

“Ok, back to Zootopia!” Nick spread his paws to include the thinner post-lunch population of the square. “The great experiment to bring all of disparate mammankind together from regions worldwide! Except that by trying to encourage cross-species integration, its creators also managed to bolster many mammals ancestral divisions and animosities. Our bloated civil code—and our own jobs--just papers it over. And that’s what makes our potential feral, and exploited or extinct mammal problem so serious.”

“But because most of us really don’t know or care much about the species specific problems of others.” Judy realized. “I don’t know a lot about fox culture beyond my experience with you, we’ve never really talked about it. I’m sure it’s the same for you with rabbit culture.”

“Yeah, and giraffes will care about how goats socialize,” Nick said brightly. “Or marmots will show concern for the plight of an unemployed moose.” They welcomed the diversion and took a few minutes to contrive ever more absurd combinations and mismatched issues.

“Ok, enough with the pairings you weird little furball; thought you’d be worse than I am at stereotypes. But, to continue, there are higher levels of societal divisions such as group similarities; canines generally prefer to associate with other canines, felines with felines, and many others that share affinities will herd or flock together too. Environmental differences are another separator—both climactic and nocturnal. Above those is of course pred-prey. And finally, we can’t ignore the financial considerations.”

“Financial Nick? Ok, how does that influence interspecies relations?” Curious due to his prior hints, Judy played along to hear the ex con-mammals economic philosophy.

“Thank you again Carrots for being the straight-mammal. Ah! Money.” Nick’s face shifted to sly fox, and he slowly and avariciously rubbed his paw pads together before he continued.

“Different species have different abilities and needs; some of those are more valuable and exploitable than others. I assume that like most cadets, you daydreamed your way through the ‘Economics of Crime’ academy class?” Nick made a couple of figures eight with his paw in the air between them. “I, however, found that it explained and confirmed much of what I learned attending street college.

“That class wasn’t just about recognizing fraud and money laundering, the interesting stuff was about commerce across economic tiers. It’s heavily regulated, but there are opportunities for savvy
and observant mammals like those that may have...tutored me.”

“Humph; so all your BS, must be a Bachelor’s of Slick.” Judy said as she squirmed a bit to find a more comfortable position; they’d been sitting on this slab for two hours. Her stomach took the opportunity to grumble a reminder that lunch was overdue as well.

“Heard that, I’ll try not to take too long,” Nick said. “Four size based tiers, four sets of physical money, three relatively fixed exchange rates even though they’re adjustable in principle. The authorities rarely do that because one tier would benefit at the expense of the other for up or down commerce. So economic adjustments are usually made through wages, taxes, and subsidized commodity values.” Nick noticed her frown and let her interject.

“I’m aware of the tiers Nick, but practically, don’t most people ignore them? I’ve bought first tier goods with my money, it’s legal.”

“Yeah, you can. You’re never going to forget buying me that jumbo pop, are you? But think about it; for the individual mammal, inter-tier commerce is basically one way. Cash flows up, commodities flow down. It’s rarely practical to buy goods from the tier below. Tier four can’t anyway; they’re the base. The only exceptions might be things like jewels or precious metals—that’s why they have fixed prices for each tier tied to the exchange rates.

“Now on the other paw, unlike us, businesses are licensed to exchange credit and cash across tiers through the banks. They will price some retail items for the next tier down in addition to their own. They often make a small extra profit from these selldowns. What businesses can’t do is selldown bulk commodities. The exchange rates don’t fully compensate for the volume of the goods—you’d need more tiers for that. That’s why any two-tier selldown is illegal. The purchaser’s competitive advantage would be enormous.”

“Our multi-size, multi-layered economies—yes, the tiers operate somewhat autonomously and in parallel—are why various financial crimes make up most of the illegal activity in Zootopia. Some are the basics like theft, extortion, and embezzlement; that’s our concern. More serious ones for society are exchange rate fraud, money laundering, and bulk commodity selldowns. Business and banking regulators and the ZBI mostly handle those.

Many species are economically disadvantaged by their biology, regardless of how inclusive we are. They build resentments towards the rest of us—seen as unfairly successful. Just more cracks in the foundations of society.” Professor Wilde put his paws behind his head in conclusion and gazed out at nothing. “Any questions before I pass out the quiz?”

“Yesss...” Of course Nick would find a way to bring up biology. Judy tried to process everything he’d said. She’d watched him sell to mice. I’ve never seen mouse money she thought. How’d they pay him...the jumbo pop was tier one, the lemmings three, the mice....

“I threatened you with tax evasion fox,” she said harshly enough to grab his attention again.

“Seems I could’ve also gotten you on a three tier selldown, and some kind of money conversion charge.” Judy softened her tone. “All that from a rather small-scale scam. I’d really like to know how you justified and implemented that,” she said as Nick’s smile returned.

“By being quite aboveboard and legal, Carrots,” he said, confidently enough that she thought most would want to believe him. Smooth, sincere; he has a gift, Judy admitted.

“We’re both tier two,” Nick began. “Either of us would’ve been acceptable purchaser’s of the pop.
Thank you so much officer, by the way. As a non-durable good, it soon melted away, and Finnick and I made sure to leave no residue to sully the fair streets of our city.”

“But you resold it...them to third tier customers. A two-tier selldown violation!” Judy realized her mistake as soon as she’d said it. He already had her off balance.

“That would be the case if our less-than-friendly elephant proprietor had sold to them! I, however, had recast the original and sadly no longer existent frozen treat, and legally offered my new products as a legitimate one-tier selldown under the authority of my ‘Receipt of Declared Commerce’. My business profits could then—if needed—be exchanged at the bank for more wallet friendly tier two cash as allowed under that same Receipt. I then conscientiously recycled the used pawpcicle sticks as building materials.”

“Where did you get the sticks?” Judy said, aware he’d have another justification ready.

“At my local market. I see where you’re going with this. They were a tier two purchase that I subsequently sold to third-tier customers who then discarded them. Finnick took possession of the previously owned third-tier items that he then resold to a fourth-tier customer. A one-step selldown and up-convert of his profits.”

“Finnick’s a third-tier mammal?” Judy had to admire the logic behind their operation.

“Yup. The big guy’s right at the second-third transition; got a foot in both tiers. Carries two sets of cash. He handles fourth to third up-converts; I did third to second.”

“Couldn’t a prosecutor still get you for the sticks if they really wanted to?” Judy asked.
“Technically, under fourth tier restrictions they’re lumber, a durable good, a bulk commodity. And what about you delivering them; isn’t that some kind of two level for hire transaction?” There just had to be a slip-up she could find to display more of her clever bunny bona fides. Or keep up with his, and try to erase that con-fox tone from his voice.

“Ah, but they’re used, and my dropping them off was as Finnick’s temporary hire; so no delivery company, thus no waybill. New materials probably require some kind of tax or trade stamp on them, but with all of the previous owners, they’ve probably worn off.” Nick ran his tongue around his parted lips, with a slow detour around each fang, to illustrate how he’d seasoned one of his sticks of supplied red wood—with a space in the middle of course.

“Carrots, they can always find something if they want to, that risk never goes away,” Nick admitted. “It’s usually enough to keep your operation sufficiently... modest, so that what they can recover is less than their cost to pursue it.”

“Nick, you’re with the they now,” Judy gently flicked her badge. “Did you plan all of your hustles this meticulously, or just prepare this one for me?”

“Careful keeps you out of trouble, Carrots, but this was for you alone.” He gave her his best shady vulpine grin and briefly placed a paw on her shoulder. “I knew you’d eventually need some sort of closure for your introductory humiliation at my paws, so I expected you’d obsess over that and hope to find some fault with my operation. Such a victory of yours, even if held over me in a comradely fashion, would be inimical to my self-image as a successful ex-hustler.”

“If you ever get really hard-up Nick, you could always pawn that tongue,” Judy said sharply, but backed it with a smile. “Now, do you have the energy to make it to the tram platform? There’s that
Denning’s a stop away, and I’m too hungry to be picky.”

The lanky fox had gotten up onto the rock slab without too much effort, but needed to rely on her for balance to get back down. The afternoon did its best to keep their earlier glum mood at bay, with cumulous accents in the clean air and brilliant highlights from the skyline. Recognition and a couple of friendly greetings from passersby also helped lift her spirits, although Nick’s ears flattened ever so slightly at the attention she got.

The chain eatery was mostly empty post-lunch, so they had their choice of tables where Nick could elevate his hurt leg. Thankfully, her house salad and Nick’s plate of pasta, cheese, and cubed Proteo bars came quickly after they ordered. She stole his side salad without objection and added it to hers. A mutual glance and they started to shovel their food down so relentlessly that the alpaca waitress left them alone until they’d finished.

“Appreciate the effort, but we have to wash them anyway huns,” said their server as she gathered the plates and left the check. Judy felt the tall alpaca was a little too old for the amount of fur—with shaved runic patterns—that her uniform revealed. That, and the laid-back attitude, would fit the likely customer profile for the Mystic Spring Oasis. It was Judy’s turn for lunch, so she went to the cashier while Nick dug out his phone.

“Outpatient clinic can take me now for my evaluation and PT session,” Nick said as she returned. “Can I get a friendly police escort over there?”

“If you promise to follow instructions so they clear you for duty faster. Fangmeyer’s been fine with me, but I think she really wants Wolfard back.” Judy held the door for her partner and saw they’d just missed a tram.

“You think something’s going on between them? I know Benjy’s suspicious,” Nick snarked as he peg-stepped his way over to the mid-size bench at the stop.

“Rude to even consider that Nick,” Judy admonished as she sat with him. “Clawhauser’s a romance predator according to Delgato. Told me he’ll stalk any hint of it—even the deviant stuff—more avidly than he does pastries. Look at how he even watches us!”

“Yeah, that’s really pushing it, Carrots. Clawhauser’s just obvious about it; Bogo’s the really observant one. I wonder if he took advantage of us,” Nick gently patted his wrapped thigh, “to split Fangs and Wolfie, see their responses, and find out what’s going on.”

“C’mon Nick, that’s absurd! A tiger and wolf? That’s over the line for an acceptable relationship in spite of Clawhauser’s fantasies. Why would Bogo suspect them? They’re friends and partners like us; they wouldn’t risk their careers and reputations with even the appearance of anything more.”

“No, of course they wouldn’t, none of us would,” said Nick in a subdued voice that nevertheless clutched at her very core. They stayed with their thoughts for a minute or two before the constriction in her chest eased and she could continue.

“I still worry that the rumors might build to the point where it hurts them—or someone else. It happened often enough with my family. Gossip was the most productive crop we had. Lots of my siblings got grilled by mom and dad for stuff they had no idea about; things that got passed through so many others that nobody knew—or admitted—who started it.”

Even my relative lack of personal improprieties generated suspicions, Judy recalled sadly, it’s just
one of the blessings of an enormous family.

“Well, we’re just another big happy family at the ZPD, so I’m glad you’re used to it,” the fox confirmed to her annoyance. “If it’s absurd, the guys will treat it that way, some laughs and embarrassment, you give, you take. If Clawhauser gets on your case too much, ask him if he’s found a girlfriend—but do it carefully or he might ask you out.” Nick pointed and almost booped her on the nose.

“Do all males act this way, or are mature ones really that rare?” Judy huffed.

“Remember Carrots, we’re all just big kits. Growing older is mandatory, growing up is optional.” Nick’s face slowly grew pensive. “Tomorrow, I think, we get to do some more growing up.”

“About that Nick, you and that paleontologist managed to write a seriously disturbing report. I know you hate paperwork. She must have been very believable to get you to collaborate and make this so persuasive.”

“When a professional gets freaked out by evidence within their specialty, it’s wise to listen to them. Doctor Soren just reinforced a lot of what I already suspected about how fragile society really is.”

Their final tram stop was close to the clinic entrance. They were spotted as soon as they disembarked by a white-tailed deer that brought a wheelchair. Judy exchanged smiles with the attendant as she blocked Nick’s attempted evasion and pointed him to the seat with her hoof. “Policy,” she said gleefully over her shoulder as she started to push the humiliated fox inside. Judy waved goodbye and mimed a phone call to him. Someone there would see him home, and after last night she felt it was better they stay in their own places.

The sun was still high enough to give her time to walk home and think things over. A little under a mile back down Herd, then two more over on Oak would get her close and avoid the congestion near the precinct and city hall. For the moment, afternoon traffic both vehicular and pedestrian wasn’t heavy enough to be a distraction.

Judy had to admit that most of what she passed illustrated Nick’s observations quite well. A myriad of small mammal dwellings were built under and into the foundations, porches, and stairs of some of the larger ones, with more—certainly for squirrels or bats—just under the rooftop gardens of others. The mixed-size housing tended to be in complexes of like buildings with suspended runways strung between, and covered or marked walkways separated from the main sidewalks. Safety measures achieved through division of sizes.

Often she passed a whole miniature street with vehicles in the narrower alleys between structures. They usually spanned a full block between the larger streets, and had ramps near the ends that connected with the subterranean road network. That was a constant problem for both city hall and the ZPD. Some of the smallest mammals wanted the city to rapidly expand that limited network; others continued to assert their rights to use the same surface roads as everybody else. Although discouraged, it had always been legal, but there was constant lobbying for more segregated lanes and intersection bypasses due to the elevated accident rate. Zootopia’s Public Works budget debates were legendary for their acrimony.

Judy edged closer to the hoof care boutique she walked past to make way for a pair of Gemsbok as
they approached. They politely went in trail for a few steps to not crowd her, and the three females exchanged brief smiles. Still, it was a reminder of another perennial cause of disagreement between those of disparate size. It had long been codified that the responsibility to see and avoid in public always rested with the smaller mammal—for very practical reasons of visibility—that ceded their right-of-way to the larger. You’re an example of that, bunnycop. She was probably more often at risk of severe injury from large pedestrians and traffic than from any criminal activity. She gave silent thanks to her quick reflexes for several past saves.

Traffic and shadow filled the street in front of the Grand Pangolin Arms by the time Judy arrived. Ruddy sunlight skimmed over the building opposite to color the top floor of the four-story apartment block. It looked fairly well kept outside, as its size and proximity to downtown and Savanna Central Square meant the city kept an eye on its appearance. However, the inside more accurately showed its age.

She unlocked and opened her now silent door. When she’d returned from what Chief Bogo referred to as ‘your extended leave of absence,’ her neighbor Pronk had come over to oil the raspy lock and hinges to, as he put it, ‘make your re-occupancy less annoying’. At least he’d laughed when she’d suggested oiling his mouth for the same reason.

By the time Judy had showered and changed, dusk was well advanced and a text from Nick was in her phone. She sat at her lone table and opened the message.

Swelling dn. Ultrasnd better than exp. Can ditch crutch in day r 2. sore.

He’d also redundantly typed out his number, followed by:

Suicide hotline, call if u need help.

That gave her a smile knowing he was coping, and she amused herself by dutifully entering the number. It rang several times and went to voicemail.

“We’re sorry, all of our lines are busy,” said a familiar unctuous foxy voice. “Please postpone your existential crisis until the next councilor is available.”

She selected his contact and this time he picked up immediately. “How’d it go Nick?”

“They’re calling it a class two strain, not a tear. I just have to take it easy for another week. More therapy only if I think I need it. Got another text, our meeting with Soren got pushed back ‘til nine thirty, Bogo wants to see us first.”

“Maybe he’s started to look into this,” Judy said, certain it probably wasn’t good if he wanted first crack at them tomorrow. “Since it’s Friday, my parents will call if I don’t call them first. It’s also about time for mom’s introductory profile of the latest buck-of-the-month. Better get it out of the way.”

“Sounds enchanting. Try not to get hot and bothered, you need your sleep.”

“Hardly. Mom doesn’t realize it, but she’s doing a pretty good job of immunizing me against those bucks back home.” Her sensitive ears focused more intently on her iPhone; was that a subtle hitch she’d heard in the fox’s breath?

Judy turned off the light, but there was enough illumination from the window behind her bed to be
a more than adequate nightlight. That was one of the things she missed most about home in Bunnyburrow--no dark night sky. The dome of light pollution over Zootopia banished all but the brightest stars from view.

She opened the bottom drawer in her dresser and scooped out one more plushie by feel to add to the collection of rabbits on her bed. She jumped up to lay on her back among them, pulled her sheet up partway, and then gathered and arranged her surrogate kin close by.

ZPD officer Judith Laverne Hopps held up her latest acquisition, recent enough that she hadn’t yet removed the materials tag from his...tail area. The store had a larger version that she couldn’t quite bring herself to purchase— with the cop-out justification that this one had more properly colored polyester fur. It was also a more easily hidden guilty comfort. She ruffled its fuzzy torso with her thumb—you plushie pervert, whispered her internal moral guardian. He has pants; she subvocalized back, and balanced the toy fox on her stomach.

She felt for and examined several bunnies before she found a gray one and carefully braced it with her paw facing the fox. They were about the same size, equal and mutually acceptable in the world of her dim room. Her breath made the small figures slowly nod back and forth.

Relationships, limits, propriety: they’d discussed that about others, yet Nick had focused on her when he’d said, “none of us would” in that...wistful voice. Earlier, he’d flat out said that his prime motivation was to protect her—with a look like she was the only thing that could ever matter to him. They worked together seamlessly, relaxed together comfortably; he even let you hug his tail as long as you needed to... When they’d reconciled under the bridge last year, he’d been ecstatically happy immediately afterwards. Judy, that fox sees you as far more than a friend or partner; more like a... She dared not acknowledge the word as the crush in her chest returned.

This would be far, far worse than a Fangmeyer and Wolfard affair. This wouldn’t just rip them away from family; this would affect anyone who’d ever associated with them. Public opprobrium would be a rabid monster. She sniffled, then started to whimper, and the plushies wobbled—her paws tightened to steady them, then apparently of their own volition tipped them so their muzzles touched and gently rubbed against each other. She caught her breath momentarily and stared at the two toys with a mix of fear and longing. The dam finally broke; she rolled over and scattered several other plushies, then buried her face in the pillow to cry herself out.

I can never let him know how his feelings would be reciprocated. It would release his last self-constraints and destroy us both. Judy didn’t know if she was strong enough to reject him and try to save him from himself. Her paw fumbled for and tucked the fox plush beneath her, away from invisible, judgmental eyes. No, it’s too late; he’s already chosen you, a different internal voice confided. He’s yours if you want him.
Let the Fur Fly

Chapter Summary

Some new principle characters join our cast, and we explore the ramifications of the police report and some mammalian pre-history.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack Savage liked to fly—although he still had to do it as a passenger. Hints to the director about the desirability of a pilot’s license added to his qualifications hadn’t yet taken wing. Even cooler would be a rotorcraft rating to go along with the fixed-wing one. Oh well, he thought; it’s a stingy government and aviation had always been a pred heavy profession.

The JetStream 2 had started its descent some fifteen minutes ago and they’d already halved their altitude. The forward cabin bulkhead hid the Ocelot pilot, but the Serval co-pilot was visible through the access, so Jack could watch him and listen to their conversations. He had a good seat in the second row, well ahead of the swept wing for an unobstructed view. It wasn’t luck, or planning; as only five of the nineteen seats on this hastily arranged government charter had a passenger.

Across from him sat a thin, dignified goat from the Bureau of Natural Resources. Two seats further back, Skye concentrated on her laptop, and on the bench seat aft a smallish black bear and a pronghorn slouched to maintain headroom. The antelope was from the OMB directorate, and his sour bean counter expression had deepened due to his posture and the required yellow tip protectors on his horns. Tough; that’s the price you paid if you wanted to reduce the trip to Zootopia from all day to a couple of hours.

Jack leaned closer to the window and was able to see parts of the coast range ahead. He caught a strong coppery reflection to the right of the only snow-covered mountain visible; also tinted orange by the just risen sun. The jet banked into a shallow right turn that first revealed the shadow accented undulations of the Meadowlands, and then the runways of ZAT. They flew a long base leg approach and the air got choppy as they continued to descend. It’s way too early for thermal turbulence, Jack thought, so it was likely from a frontal passage.

A glance around the cabin showed that—as he expected—Skye’s laptop had disappeared and she was also muzzle to her window. The other three only perked up when the co-pilot announced their imminent landing. There were a few intermittent whines and soft clunks from behind as first flaps, then gear deployed. After a left turn to final, the feline crew pulled off a good smooth touchdown. They didn’t bother with thrust reversers and let the JetStream roll out, took the high-speed off the runway, and were able to coast most of the way to the government portion of the ramp by the terminal. There appeared to be no other activity on the field, and Jack wondered if the terminal was even open.

He was out of his seat, carry on case in paw, by the time the crew had the airstair open. A quick compliment on their landing and he was outside waiting to retrieve his larger case from the
As the others started to exit, a government limo drove up, turned and backed into position near the airstair. The driver, a large spotted hyena, came around to open the rear door and usher the aloof pronghorn inside. The well-stuffed chauffeur’s uniform then came over to select a bag from the few the bear had already helped the Serval unload.

“Is the First Deputy on his way to city hall perchance?” asked the goat. He got a grudging nod in response. “Good, I believe we three also need to be in Savanna Central.” Skye and Jack received a polite wave.

“No tag-alongs, First Deputy’s use only,” the driver said firmly and turned away. He managed a step before a slender arctic fox intervened and caught his eye with a smile.

That was Skye’s ‘I’ve got this’ smile, so Jack relaxed to watch the show. There was an annoyed bleat from the car that prompted the hyena to sidestep the fox—not even a third of his size—who gracefully managed to thwart him again.

“I believe the Deputy has failed to recall his own office’s regulation about the cooperative use of federal resources. I’m sure he wouldn’t want such a...voluminous requisition to go to waste,” Skye said sweetly—which got the desired glower from the driver, and another demand from the car.

Skye waited until the pronghorn stuck his head out the door in outrage before she produced her ZBI badgeholder and did the agent flip. Once it was recognized, she replaced it to produce her pocket camera and caught the shocked expression, car and government plate. “I think that’s all I need now for your ‘Misuse of Resources’ form. Please remind me; was it First Deputy Springer, or Sprinter?”

They got a hearty wave goodbye from the black bear as they pulled away and around the quiet terminal. The limo was a little more convenient than the light rail would have been; but oh so much more satisfying! Jack spotted another, larger jet on approach as they joined the airport loop road. Even at a distance, he could read ZHL CARGO as it settled towards the runway. It was early Saturday morning; maybe there just wasn’t much scheduled activity yet.

The goat from Natural Resources was a Mr. Dabih; he’d slipped his own shiv into the fuming Deputy up front by returning the tip protectors he’d found on the floor of the plane. With the reduced headroom there, the pronghorn needed them again. There was plenty of room in the back for the three of them—Skye and Mr. Dabih spoke inconsequentially, and Jack made use of the minibar just because he could.

Of course they wouldn’t bother to actually file the complaint on First Deputy Sphincter, just add the info to his folder. Puncturing the arrogant usually dispersed much joy among those within the blast radius, and the uncertainty and humiliation should keep him in check for awhile. Jack Savage relaxed, his long ears flopped back against the seat, and waited for the towers of downtown to appear as the road slowly dipped and rose.

Hotel check-in completed, Jack walked towards the megalithic architecture of ZPD’s precinct one and paused to check his received text notification. He hummed to himself; the number when read in reverse showed that Skye’s room was only two doors away on his floor. They both loved their little ‘International Mammal of Mystery’ games.
The activity level inside the precinct matched the final scurry to work of the crowd outside. There was even a frightened young guanaco being perp-walked to a holding cell between a wolf and bear. There was a bit of still wet red paint on the gangly bovid’s cuffed hoof, so maybe it was one of those scare-em-straight programs.

Reception seemed to have an overinflated cheetah balloon stuffed behind the counter. The portly feline licked at his fingers, and only needed a transfer to some small-town police department to become the perfect cop stereotype. Jack looked up and showed his ID once he was noticed.

“Oh goodness! I guess we didn’t get the first bunny cop after all!” The bubbly cheetah had a voice to match.

“First, it’s special agent Savage; ZBI—not a cop. Second, I. Am. A. Hare, officer...”—a large paw helpfully pushed the nameplate holder on the counter closer—“Clawhauser.”

“Well, welcome to the ZPD, your right on time. Chief Bogo’s waiting for you, fourth floor. Elevator’s just over there; then second door on your right.”

Jack turned away, only slightly miffed at the cheetah—it was that automatic look he usually got from predators that said, “how did you get a name like Savage?”

Skye was already waiting outside the chief’s office, idly buffing a claw. She’d probably exercised her sneaky fox talents, as the cheetah hadn’t mentioned her prior arrival. As usual, she was perfectly groomed and looked to him—well it’s trite, but quite foxy—although he’d refrain from any comment right now. It was that season, her summer coat had just started to come in and she looked like she’d been out digging a den. The vixen was fine with either seasonal coat, but not during the transitions when she looked patchy for a couple of weeks.

Bogo’s domain befitted the hulking Cape Buffalo behind his desk. He obviously preferred to hold court in here, and had done his homework as four seats for mid-sized mammals were lined up before it. They were highback barstools presumably borrowed from somewhere, as a much larger seat had been pushed to one side. Skye sat at the far end and he took the one next to her. They presented their credentials and Bogo barely glanced at them.

“Agents Winter; Savage; I appreciate your prompt response although even that concerns me. This matter is outside our normal scope, but its potential to foment public unrest demands that we try to root this all out before it is disseminated.” The imposing police chief slowly appeared less so as he passed them each a several page printout. “I sent you excerpts, this is the full report I received. It shows this is far more complex than the usual pred-prey issue; any suggestions on how to proceed would be welcome.”

“Your concern is quite understandable,” Jack finally said after an uncomfortable twenty-minute read. “This is the type of issue that engages us far more than the public is aware of.”

Or that you were chief. The ZBI had contacted and assisted the ZPD during the savage predator crisis, but that was only the visible part of the iceberg. Reports on chief Bogo’s leadership had been favorable; Jack felt he’d be a good asset to the team.

“Chief Bogo,” Skye filled the silence. “To the citizenry at large, the ZBI is one of the most noteworthy examples of a bloated government agency. Our size and budget are at odds with what most feel is needed in a civilized society, because most of our efforts must necessarily go unappreciated.” She deferred back to him with a fetching little whisker twitch.
“Our enforcement responsibilities necessarily overlap, but we concentrate on the larger-scale threats to society; corruption, conspiracies, species supremacists, and carnivore cults—some best kept out of the public conscious as much as possible. Frankly, the bureau never anticipated an issue with this wide a potential affect on society. We are indebted to you and your officer Wilde for recognizing how sensitive this might be. I assume,” Jack waved at the empty seats, “that he will be one to join us?”

“Wilde!” Bogo barked at the door just as it opened. A crisply uniformed red fox limped in on a crutch to Jack’s surprise, nodded to the chief, and took the adjacent seat. Judy Hopps followed the fox and took the last—with a paw up from Wilde. Both examined him with interest until Skye broke their concentration with her best upper crust, miffed sniff.

Chief Bogo took that as his cue to introduce everyone; Jack noticed that his gaze roved up and down the line—lapine, vulpine, lapine, vulpine—and where it repeatedly lingered. Hopps was well known of course, but Wilde seemed equally notorious in the chief’s eyes. His and Skye’s presence seemed to reinforce whatever that was.

“Hopps, Wilde, this investigation has taken on a life of its own, and as you see, has quickly attracted federal interest,” Bogo continued. “Therefore you will consign any notes you may have to agents Winter and Savage, brief them, and facilitate their introduction to the museum staff. They will be responsible for this matter henceforth, and you will resume...”

“No!” Jack and Skye spoke as one to everyone else’s surprise. She’d seen something too, Jack noted amid an awkward silence.

“I...we will need their assistance chief,” Jack said, as he and Skye exchanged meaningful glances, which Bogo also noticed. “We need to move rapidly on this with all of the informed staff we have; you included.” A few minutes had sufficed for him to notice enough subtle interplay between the rabbit and fox officers that they might confide in each other.

“Do these officers have your full trust?” Jack asked bluntly. Hopps eyes widened; Wilde didn’t react.

“Yes, they do. They have rapidly taken on increased responsibilities although they are both still rookies. You will find them competent, but rough around the edges,” the chief said as he scrutinized Wilde, “and rather impulsive,” as he shifted his gaze to Hopps.

“Good,” said Jack, “better than being stuck with a couple of Ranger Scouts.”

“Thanks Mr. Ravage!” The tween prairie dog clutched his notebook—undoubtedly the autograph and personalized note would end up framed in his room—and rejoined the gaggle of his class. His teacher, having obtained her own from officer Hopps, formed them up again and herded them towards the museum.

“Ravage?” asked a clueless Judy Hopps.

“I used to be a MMMA competitor,” Jack said to more bunny incomprehension. “That’s mammalian mixed martial arts. Fairly well-known for a couple of years on the circuit.”
Pleased that someone so young had remembered him, Jack was even more satisfied that a whole group of little rumor-spreaders had seen him in the company of Judy Hopps. He needed to encourage more of that.

Jack accompanied her the rest of the way across the square—and collected a few more pairs of eyes before they entered city hall. Cops and government personnel going there was routine—however, their repeatedly visiting the museum might attract the attention of some curious busybody.

He waited for a minute after Hopps had left from the side exit, then followed her over to the museum. Quite the tableaux awaited him when he stepped through the inconspicuous rear door left unlocked for them.

Three different species of female surrounded a stiffly uncomfortable fox officer—except for his tail, which hung limply down. The other three emotional flags were raised and gave off a few asynchronous twitches as...

“What other vixen,” said Hopps.

“That was unprofessional of me,” said the skunk in a lab coat.

“I thought it was a tease,” said Skye. “My apologies to you both, I didn’t know.”

“My fault entirl—-it meant nothi—I embarrassed her the other—we aren’t!” Wilde and the skunk verbally stumbled over each other as her tail drooped too. Hopps looked ready to foot thump.

Jack’s contribution to the discussion was an open mouth. There had to be something between the rabbit and fox officers, had she just realized he was seeing... No, that was absurd even by daytime drama standards.

“What we just had an awkward moment the other day,” the skunk said once she’d regained her composure. “And I wanted to make up with hi...I didn’t mean that! I meant I just chose the wrong way to say no hard feelings and it escalated. Thought it would be good to lighten the mood before we all got into it.” Officer Wilde added a couple quick nods of assent.

“I think we already did,” Skye said. “We’ll need to salvage this one over a few beers.”

“Granted,” Jack said. “But it’s past time for us to meet doctor Soren.” The skunk’s resigned sigh showed him he’d share the tab for those beers, and Skye’s frown of disapproval promised some delayed retribution for his sexism.

“Sorry doctor, my bad,” Jack admitted reluctantly. He’d uncharacteristically missed the name embroidered on her smock. Two pensive males wisely brought up the rear as Dr. Soren’s tail sashayed them deeper into the museum archives.

“This is Doctor Ryan Alder,” said Dr. Soren as they filed into a combination lab and office. A stout raccoon seated behind a desk near the back wall dipped his muzzle to them. A brown tweed coat, narrow rimmed glasses, and a fair amount of gray fur that softened his facial mask were ideal camouflage for the museum environment. “He holds the Wallace Chair of Evolutionary Biology at ZU in addition to being our head of research here.”
“Thank you for your appearance; please be seated. I would have preferred to welcome you under better circumstances.” Dr. Alder paused, as the arc of mismatched chairs in front of his desk had become an issue. There were some mutual glances and hesitation before Skye and Wilde sat on the ends and Hopps took the center seat. Jack decided it was best to sit between her and Skye. Dr. Soren stood, and left the seat next to Wilde empty.

“Well, I’m sure Doctor Barret our sociologist would have enjoyed this interaction, but he is conducting a graduate seminar today,” Dr. Alder said. “We can join him tomorrow if you still need help sorting out your social status.” He raised a paw to cut off the embarrassed responses before Jack caught his eye and finished the introductions.

“Officers, reality happens,” Dr. Alder resumed. “Doctor Soren, myself, and a few others have already had to face this and work through our own doubts and denials. You’ve all read her reports? Excellent, then I know how concerned you must feel about this too.

To put your primary question to rest; we have solid evidence that there are two species of non-sentient, solely quadrupedal mammals alive today, and are confident there’s a third.”

“Dr. Soren’s report wasn’t that conclusive!” Hopps objected with a pointed look at its author. “She said there were just a few partial fossil remains...kept using words like possible, probable, or indications of!”

“She, at my direction, was...circumspect with her initial reports. Now you can see why, and share our astonishment.” Dr. Alder gave his skunk colleague a key; she went over to a large chest of drawers and unlocked it. She carefully lifted a wide metal case out of the bottom one, and shook Wilde back to his seat with her head.

“It’s not that heavy, just awkward—but thanks,” said Dr. Soren as she waddled over to set it on Alder’s desk. She quickly reached over and drew a finger down Wilde’s forearm before he could react; and examined the reddish hairs she’d collected. “It’s April, so you foxes need labcoats and bonnets, cabinet outside the door to the left.”

“I groom daily,” Skye said with a hint of frost.

“You’re still a longhair. We don’t want anyone to shed on the specimens, we need to get these genetically tested; they’re fragile, cleaning can damage them.” Soren then released the latches around the middle of the case; then cracked the top half loose before wriggling her paws into a pair of latex gloves.

Wilde came back in a coat that said ‘Visitor’. Skye’s frown topped a somewhat baggy one around her that said ‘Dr. K. Soren’. Both fussed with the elastic bands of gauzy covers around their ears and scalps. Skye had another for the skunk, who nodded her thanks.

“Last thing,” Soren said, “anyone who wants to look closely, pat down your exposed facial fur with this tack cloth.” She pulled one from a dispenser on the wall, used it, and then showed them how much black fur it had gathered. Once finished with theirs, both foxes shared a look of dismay at the results of their efforts.

They crowded around the desk, and Dr. Soren removed the top of the case after making sure no one leaned over it. Jack’s stomach went sour as the skeleton of a hare was revealed. Still partially articulated, it was arranged on a very smooth white cloth that lined the case. Its muzzle was somewhat elongated, and one hind leg was missing; but he still recognized his own. A small gasp
next to him automatically drew his paw protectively onto Hopps’ shoulder. His rather distant cousin didn’t object.

“This is our best, most recent specimen. We wanted you to see the actual remains, not casts or images. Officer Hopps, Savage; despite appearances this is not a Lagomorph. Are you familiar with a Mara?”

Jack knew this. “That’s an Amazonian false hare!” he told Soren as she nodded approvingly.

“More likely a relative, but still a Caviomorph, like Agoutis and the Capybara. Those are all fully within the Rodentia—that’s why we’d like the genetic testing to firmly place it. Modern Maras aren’t too common up here, but this is evolutionarily far more primitive. Note the longer, narrower skull—this animal’s braincase volume is well under half of yours although you are nearly the same size.”

“You said ‘recent’ and ‘remains’ again, Dr. Soren,” officer Wilde noted. “How old is this mammal animal?”

“In evolutionary terms, it is similar to the two described Mara ancestral fossils from six million years ago,” she said carefully. “Those are probably close to the MRCA, and all were quadrupedal based on their pelvic structure—which also shows that this individual was male. From radiocarbon of extracted collagen, he met his end no more than two hundred years ago. That’s a limit, the technique isn’t well suited for such a short interval.”

“I think we’ve impressed our officers enough, Kristen,” Dr. Alder admonished gently. “I’d like to give them some basic background.”

“This institution’s vast collection unfortunately gives visitors the false impression that there is an extensive fossil record for most species. The reality is; there are fossils for around five to ten percent of living species, and no more than one percent of all the species estimated to have existed. We’re very fortunate we have anything to compare to this.”

“True fossils are older than 10,000 years and have undergone significant or complete replacement mineralization; subfossils like Wesley here,” Alder waved at the skeleton, “are younger, unmineralized and can be radiocarbon dated. With proper calibr...”

“You named him?” Jack quickly seized the unexpected gift to hopefully push the paleontologist back on track. Soren looked properly chagrined; but her superior plowed on.

“It’s a mannerism, but yes,” admitted Dr. Alder; “we sometimes name the important ones. Look closely, he has more to tell you.”

Hopps spotted it first. “His skull isn’t attached, and that groove at the very back of it doesn’t look right.”

“The first vertebra also has a depressed fracture...here,” Dr. Soren said, indicating the spot with a thin metal pointer. “Ears back!” she warned as Jack leaned in for a closer look.

The others looked in turn, his beloved Skye with her usual unabashed morbid curiosity. Fortunately, they were too interested in Wesley to notice her...parted jaw enthusiasm.

“Blunt force trauma,” she breathed, “expertly placed.”
“The university lab found traces of iron oxide in striations within the groove here. Most likely he was killed by a blow from a flat faced rod or hammer,” Soren concluded.

“We have our victim, Ca...everyone!” Wilde started to turn his attention to his partner, then quickly shifted it back to the remains.

“Do we? I don’t think the law covers this—can you murder an animal?” Skye asked.

“I’d still like to know where and when, if you can,” Wilde said. “Might be relevant.”

“Yes officer, it is; that’s the part we decided to leave out of the report. Have you heard of the Catamount ski area? You two certainly must have, you’re feds.”

“Major new resort to open next fall,” Jack took over from Soren. “About forty miles west of the Federal Center up Cold Spring Canyon,” he said for the benefit of the ZPD officers. “And?” He looked back at the skunk.

“Last summer they were extending the road up the canyon and discovered a small crudely sealed cave. Luckily, one of the foremammals took it for an archeological site and called the National Museum. We were called in after their initial examination found no cultural artifacts and assumed he was a fossil Jackrabbit eroding out. The NM tends to concentrate on recent mammalian history and leave the fossils to us. They blew it; didn’t know what they had.”

“Our team took a month for a thorough excavation due to the inconsistencies of the site,” added Alder as he pulled up a photo of a rocky slope on his monitor. Here’s the entrance after the rubble was cleared.” Another photo appeared. “These sheltered spots at the back of the cave showed several layers of soil and ash, while most of the rest of the floor—about thirty square meters—was thoroughly intermingled and...”

“We’re not here to evaluate your research,” said Jack, “just your findings...please!” Alder frowned, Soren looked miffed—maybe they didn’t get an outside audience too often.

“This is important and we’re trying to be thorough!” The skunk got somewhat testy. “Alright, we found thirty-three mostly intact bones with various degrees of burn damage, and thousands of small badly burnt fragments mixed with the ash. We’re fairly certain the majority are from his species—and all are no more than two centuries old. There was also a partially blocked but sooted...”

“Dr. Soren!” Jack snapped back. “I need a brief summation so we can define our problem here and get started! We’ll take the details when we need them.”

She gave a strong twitch of her tail, and willingly locked eyes with him. Skye eased back and sat—followed in her de-escalation by Hopps and Wilde. Jack was forced to break the staredown and join them—irked that he’d yielded to the young scientist.

Dr. Alder calmly turned his screen off and turned to Dr. Soren. “Please provide our impaigent with just the abstract for now.” Wilde audibly groaned; Jack wanted to.

“Yes doctor. We have a site with the remains of dozens of non-sentient animals not indigenous to the area.” Soren thumped a paw on Alder’s desk. “They appear—based partly on the one intact specimen—to have been killed and consumed over a long period.” Thump. “Efforts were made to periodically burn and bury the evidence of this.” Thump. “The closest town to this secluded site
was a community of predators, mostly Cougars and Ocelots.”

“Thank you Dr. Soren.” Alder waved her to the empty seat between the ZPD officers; she only took it when Hopps acquiesced and also beckoned her over. Wilde’s eyes stayed away from the skunk as she sat. Jack had to admire the raccoon’s expertise in keeping the peace—even with him.

“Now,” Dr. Alder resumed, “we scientists have a general rule that proves quite useful in most cases. We call it ‘Flockham’s Shears’—we use them to cut the tangle of possibilities down to the bare truth—the simplest explanation that works. Therefore, the incredible evidence before us won’t require incredible explanations. So what can we conclude from all of this? Anyone?”

“Predator cult that didn’t want to be discovered by their neighbors—nothing new about that,” Jack said. “Except this was back around the time that preds were trying to be accepted into most cities, wasn’t it?”

“Our hare notices a most relevant fact.” Dr. Alder dipped his muzzle to him. “Their move into the cities started around three hundred years ago at the end of the Great Predatory Food Crisis, when their populations were at a historic minimum. Due to that, we see evidence of genetic bottlenecking in several feline species today.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that!” blurted Hopps. Wilde’s expression concurred.

“So they still keep that one out of the schools,” said Alder with some resignation. “Well, I have to admit the stories told by our exhibits upstairs are also somewhat—sanitized. It pains me to have to give you an abbreviated version of our real history, but I suppose I must.”

“Imagine if you will our world, a hundred thousand or more years ago. There were far more species then than we have today, including many we refer to as megafauna—immense, wonderful, primitive mammals long vanished.” Dr. Alder steadily became more animated.

“But fundamental changes had come; many other mammals had already developed intelligence and some manipulative abilities. Predators led the way with their prior hunting adaptations like binocular vision, and ability to plan and coordinate with others. Once tool use and language were established, they had an even greater competitive advantage.

Many prey species that survive today adapted fast enough to withstand the onslaught of advanced predators, and forced that threat onto those that didn’t. The megafauna, easily found, resource rich, and evolutionarily disadvantaged by overspecialization and slow reproduction, were driven extinct within perhaps ten thousand years.

Predation then proportionately shifted to smaller exploitable species where many became extinct in turn. As food sources waned, there likely were unstable population swings among obligate predators and their less optimal prey, until...”

“Until predators learned to grow their food—to farm,” Wilde said wonderingly.

“And the clever red fox on the left sees their way to survival!” the raccoon exclaimed.

Jack was embarrassed that, like the others, he watched Hopps’ bemused expression until the rabbit’s face crumpled and ears fell.

“And those larger obligate carnivores managed those primitive species they raised in territories
kept isolated from the expanding towns and agricultural lands of advanced prey mammals. Two very different cultures co-existed uneasily for thousands of years until the less numerous carnivores slowly ran into sustainability issues,” continued Alder.

“We don’t know if it was mismanagement of their herds, disease, or conflicts with the growing number of cooperative ex-prey species. There were certainly many other factors in play, such as the much smaller size of typical predator communities.

The end result was that the total population of predatory species steadily declined over centuries as the availability of suitable meat dwindled. By the time the larger prey cities accepted their remnant populations, they were in a critical state and dependant on them to help further develop their small-scale fishing and arthroculture industries.” Dr. Alder finally paused to let them absorb it all.

“Now, with the exception of our two lagomorphs, we are all mid-sized omnivores. Over time, we too had previous small mammalian prey species become unavailable to us, but we had always been able to meet much, and now all, of our protein needs by consuming lower animals like amphibians, fish, and insects. As such, we were more tolerated, and were integrated with wider mammalian society much earlier. Without our documented advocacy at the time, many of today’s surviving large predators would be gone.

There’s a lot about early pred history that we will never know about. Contemporary predator records were nearly all disposed of before they integrated with the rest of mammalkind. Even many supposedly cooperative prey species have convenient blanks in their histories which likely hide unpleasantness between them. The more we learn about the past, the more we realize that covering it up is what holds together the present. That is no longer possible.” Alder looked at them in turn, awaiting comments.

“It’s not just this specimen is it? You mentioned two living primitive animals; you’re afraid they will be found,” Skye said.

Dr. Soren nodded, sealed up Wesley and returned him to his drawer. She brought back a stack of two smaller cases and opened them side by side on the desk. They gathered round—the first had a somewhat smaller but complete skeleton with a few broken ribs and a detached arm. The second had a leathery, wrinkled, and partially furred pelt—and a slight but undeniable stench of decay. At least to him—both foxes looked disgusted.

“Coypu. Found by an amateur prospector in a streambed between Deerbrooke and Clear Lake nine weeks ago, been dead less than six months. Seems to have washed down from higher in the foothills. We only have modern Coypu for comparison, but it doesn’t matter, it’s as primitive as our Mara. This is our real problem and what generated our report.”

The two paleontologists exchanged glances and Dr. Alder took over again.

“There are large numbers of these Coypu remnants—broken, burnt, cutmarked—found with others in middens at old predator habitation sites throughout Amazonia and here. This is no secret; everyone knows they didn’t live on roots and berries all those centuries. We’ve just always obscured what’s really in those middens and their ages. That, however, has unfortunately started to show up in the published literature.

“To the occasionally curious and revolted public, they’re the remains of poor generic prey mammals caught and consumed by the nasty predators of the distant past. They do not know that these are the remains of farmed primitive animals from a more recent past. Or that some of them
still live.

“What we don’t know is if this animal—no we haven’t named it yet agent Savage—is a member of an established population in the wild, or an isolated individual. Either way, we have a severe problem.”

“Established population,” mused Skye, “means there’s a good chance more will be found, and your profession will have to explain them. If it’s alone…”

“It was raised somewhere, and there are still clandestine meat suppliers,” finished Jack.

“Oh sweet cheese and crackers,” said Hopps. At least two other voices chuckled at her bunnyism.

“On that note,” said Dr. Soren waving her tail; “it’s almost noon. If everyone’s sufficiently nauseated; how about lunch?”

“Here’s another; did you know that hares are the only mammals with kinetic skulls?”

“You’re good doc, very few non-hares know about that,” Jack admitted. Curious looks demanded an explanation. “We have a slightly flexible joint between the front and back of our skulls that absorbs heavy shock. Quite useful in MMMA competition.”

“So that’s why you didn’t get knocked stupid…er,” Skye told him. “Ravage here used it as cover for his first few years in the ZBI.”

“I’ve started to see why you’re so fascinated by your work doctor Alder,” Judy said, “it’s a lot like solving cases.” She scraped together a last forkful from her salad bowl.

“Really cold ones,” Jack said. “Speaking of, don’t we owe each other a few?”

“I believe we do agent Savage,” Skye said. “Kristen here would enjoy cracking her’s open over your head.” Dr. Alder almost missed his pocketed ring tone due to the laughter.

“My day was booked, what does the Planning Commission want with me? Alright two-o-clock, I’ll be there.” He punished his phone for its transgression, dropped a twenty on the table, and stood.

“Seems like we’re done for the afternoon, how about nine tomorrow in the University’s History and Sociology staff lounge; it’s nicer than our department’s.” The raccoon paleontologist’s ringtail waved farewell as he waddled for the exit.

Alright gentlemammals, what beers do we need to have in our paws?” Soren said. “Or are all of you on-duty?”

“I suppose we could, Nick and I are technically both on administrative leave. Just don’t let the chief know.”

“Shouldn’t matter Hopps,” Jack said, “he seems like the type that pops one occasionally. Also, we need to blend in with our contacts.”
“Just not on the clock,” Wilde noted. “He’d skin our hides and run them up the pole. Growlch will do.”

“I’m rather partial to VB, said Skye, earning a quizzical look from the paleontologist. “That’s Vixy’s Bitter; it’s imported.”

“Oooh!” snarked Nick. “Miss high latitude is high maintenance!”

“Believe it reynard,” was Skye’s wintry confirmation. Jack struggled to outwardly maintain passive disinterest.

“Who’s buying?” asked Nick. Three feminine paws singled him out. “Hey!”

Chapter End Notes

MRCA: Most Recent Common Ancestor. The point where a species undergoes a long-term population separation; each group then slowly diverges from the other and evolves into two related species. Essentially, that’s the base of every twig or branch on the tree of life.

Genetic bottleneck: When a species is so reduced in numbers that it loses most of its genetic diversity, but does not go extinct. Modern Cheetah’s are a prime example; speculation is that at one time the species may have been reduced to a single successfully reproducing female before rebounding. Humans are also genetically somewhat homogenous; we may have passed through a wider bottleneck some 70,000 years ago.

Flockham’s Shears = Occam’s Razor (My bad; I couldn’t resist)

MMMA = Mammalian Mixed Martial Arts (Cribbed from eng050599 and his excellent story Lost Causes and Broken Dreams)
Flawmammals

Chapter Summary

We explore what the wide range in size and habitats of mammals might mean for interactions between them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Previous night—Park Savanna Hotel—Room 420:*

Skye Winter stepped out into the hall, ice bucket in paw, and toddled down to the vending machine nook at the end. Hunched over, she kept her tail tucked inside her less-than-flattering calf length skirt, and the beige headband effectively flattened her ears.

Frozen square chips clattered against plastic and each other to fill the bucket; the machine hummed to itself in satisfaction of a job well done. Might come in handy the arctic vixen thought—bruises were always a possibility.

The only floor security camera she’d found overlooked the elevator bay—its perspective limited what could be seen down towards their end of the hall. Skye duck-walked back towards it, no one would notice that she went on to stop at room 416 instead of hers. She pulled the keycard off the back of the Do-Not-Disturb hangtag, looked down as she entered a thoroughly dark room and set the ice bucket off to the side. Skye stripped off her headband, freed her tail, and waited for the door to swing...

“Click.”

Go! She quickly swept through the bathroom, its nightlight mockingly remained on but she still had to make sure of the damp shower. Clear. Closet doorslide was partially closed; she shoved it open, tail and paws questing where eyes couldn’t penetrate. Clear. Next the dim bulk of the dresser with its vague lamp and TV shapes on top—as expected he’d done away with any light from clocks and other electronics. Skye knew that just the bottom drawer was large enough; faint scent there—she started to pull it open and stopped—obviously empty. She rapidly continued the search planned out in her own room earlier.

The bed—the main scent trail led here as expected—he hadn’t overdone it this time. Its top spread felt undisturbed, all four pillows were present—he wouldn’t try that one again so soon. She had to sweep the carpet along both sides, underneath wasn’t a problem, not enough space there. Skye danced about, tail just above the floor feeling for what shouldn’t be there, under a table, behind a chair, with other senses straining. What...?

Skye lunged for the dresser—her paw reached the bulky ceramic lamp and hit soft fur with ribs buried beneath.

“Oof, Dammit! Two seconds!”
Skye reached for the ceiling light switch to reveal a furry idol still hugging his knees beneath a generically artsy lampshade. “You’re so honest dear, I thought I’d lost—with you right out here in the open.”

“How’d you notice?” said a fur—and nothing else—clad Jack Savage as he gave her the lampshade and hopped down to the floor.

“Saw your ears move, tips flipped up. Too bad if it’s involuntary dear,” she said gleefully, “this night is mine!” Skye then stepped over to gently flick one of his betakers.

“Black against black? I made it really dark in here, even you can’t accommodate in thirty seconds,” the hare complained as he restored appliances and retrieved the rest of the lamp hidden behind the TV. Its pale glazed ugliness was close to the shade of his fur.

Skye looked straight at her mate, shut one eye and kept it that way. “Held this for fifteen minutes.”

“Close your mouth Jack, I’m more interested in the buck than the teeth.” Her claw traced the dark wedges marked in the soft fur of his cheeks as she pondered his fate.

Increment +11.9 hours.

“That should do it!” Jack picked the latest wad of white fur off the comb and tossed it in the quarter full wastebasket.

“Continue, thrall, it’s only 7:54. You’re mine for another six minutes.” Skye tipped her head forward and stretched her arms above it, paws clenched. Her private groomer’s long slow strokes down her back and tail resumed, with occasional detours to her more sensitive flanks. She mostly resisted those attempts, to ration his satisfaction. This was worth a little haste later—she permitted herself another slight shiver.

“Le Rippe Oeuf in the lobby has a breakfast buffet if milady approves. That’ll save enough time,” Jack said as they dressed. “Now—since we postponed this—your opinion on our mirror twins?”

She’d given this thought in spite of earlier...distractions. “I’m fairly certain they’ve begun to realize that their definition of ‘partners’ has changed; particularly Hopps. I have some mild experience with cute bunny expressions; you should have seen hers when she walked in and caught them tail-fencing.”

“So you don’t believe her ‘conduct unbecoming an officer’ bit?” Jack’s smile said he didn’t either.

“The only one that did was Wilde, poor fox,” Skye said. “The skunk was honest, I think it was a friendly recovery from whatever happened earlier between them. It actually only lasted for a couple of seconds—right as Hopps walked in.”

“Assuming her possible interest in him; do you think Wilde is aware of it?”

“Can’t tell. He did act like a junior officer caught engaged in unprofessional conduct. My vixen’s intuition says he’s good at covering his emotions; I think this is a wait and see.”
“Both of them were pretty quiet until lunch loosened them up,” Jack noted. “

“Again, wait and see. We just met them—we shouldn’t get too excited yet. It’ll give us something to do dear since I don’t think we get to look at dead things today.” Skye pouted for effect.

The social sciences faculty lounge at Zootopia University was certainly more inviting than the museum catacombs. There were comfortable seats around an antique rodent carved oak table that held refreshments, and the room’s slight mustiness came from books rather than unearthed remains.

“...And we’ve all met doctor Alder,” finished Dr. Soren before she waved to the seats.

“These four officers are now fully acquainted with our findings and concerns, doctor Barret,” Dr. Alder said. “But before you disillusion us further, I need to mention an issue that will affect all of our further investigations. Apparently, the city has a budget shortfall and they have decided to cut our discretionary research funds. We can barely cover salaries now, and basic services already exhaust museum admissions and concessions.”

“Perhaps those on high only want you to uncover our distant past.” Dr. Barret looked up to the paneled ceiling for a few seconds, but Skye was sure that his suspicion was quite grounded. She noticed the academics’ comments had also drawn Jack’s attention.

Dr. Kenton Barret was a European badger of indeterminate age, although younger than the raccoon paleontologist. His name, along with more than a hint of a northern brogue, made Skye wonder how close their old family territories might possibly be. Badgers had always been more tolerant of foxes than other species were; she’d gotten a nice smile from the sociologist when introduced—that broadened when she’d sat beside him.

As she’d wanted, with Jack on her left and Soren beyond him as they sat in a loose circle around the table. That put the ZPD mammals-of-interest nearly opposite them, where they could be watched unobtrusively. The window behind her with its bright third-floor view of the ZU campus would aid that.

Wilde was without his crutch today, but still had a halt in his step; Hopps had stayed close, as if she could provide effectual assistance if needed. It was quite the mismatch; the doe was the smallest of their group, the todd the largest. Still, Skye noted, there’s a comfortable familiarity between them.

“I’ve been requested to place my colleague’s unfortunate discoveries in the context of today's society for you,” Dr. Barret stated. “Or more bluntly, why the risk that society might shatter into separate, combative factions over this is so real.

“Outwardly, many of us are proud of the modern culture that we live and work in. Zootopia is purportedly the shining inclusive ideal for the rest of the world to emulate. Unfortunately, no thought was given to the foundations that we laboriously built this society on. They are under assault by forces as relentless as the waves that undermine a kit’s sand construction on the beach. Tides of nature and history, swells and undercurrents of our prejudices held or endured...”

“Not again! Doctor...Barret, why does everybody assume that society is always about to fail!”
interrupted an upset officer Hopps. “He,”—she nearly poked Wilde in the muzzle—“spent most of the other day telling me the same thing. All of us mammals built it together, it works, so why do you think we can’t keep improving it. All this pessimism is going to end up more harmful than the nighthowlers were!” The rabbit officer stared around at them.

Skye held her paws up in a ‘I didn’t say anything’ gesture, as Wilde reached a calming paw towards Hopps’ shoulder, thought better of it, and withdrew. Ok, the vixen thought, that’s another check in the ‘yes they are’ column.

“Because officer Hopps, the forces that hold a large society together arose too recently to have developed their full strength; unlike the mammals who chafe under their restrictions. All those species have had a thousand times longer to develop effective and opposing instincts, fears, resentments and other behaviors that are now destructive rather than beneficial for our joint survival.

“Except for those grazing species that have always moved in large herds for protection, most mammals evolved to live in small communities or as solitary individuals,” Dr. Barret said. “Most individuals can keep significant relationships with no more than two or three hundred others of their kind—typical village size. If a village grew too much, the population would split and found a new one for sound personal and logistical reasons. This was a basic, but socially workable state of affairs that lasted for thousands of years.

“Once better technology and alliances with other cooperative species allowed larger communities, more or less separate social groups had to form within them. So, as cities grew, they divided and then subdivided us. We are forced to ignore most of those beyond our immediate circle of acquaintances lest we be socially overwhelmed. This works on the level of an individual species, as well...oh my...

“Officer Hopps? Are you from the Bunnyburrow Hopps; that very large family?” The badger’s eyes widened and Hopps also seemed surprised as she turned to him.

“Yes, you know us? I only met a few badgers growing up. There never were a lot of you guys around,” Hopps said, now composed.

“You’re quite famous in my field of study,” Dr. Barret said. “At present, you’re the largest consanguin...uh...single generation family known.” Officer Hopps visibly wilted under everyone else’s suddenly curious gaze.

“What do you mean? Is someone studying us?” Her eyes narrowed and voice rose again. “That violates our privacy! Who gave anyone the right to watch us! There are lots of other large rabbit families—the Twitchell’s have over a hundred already, the Connors’ got a hundred and sixty.” Hopps waved her briefly clenched paws; then didn’t seem to know where to put them.

“Only through publicly available records, officer!” Dr. Barret seemed rather taken aback by Hopps’ reaction, and rubbed at the wide white stripe down his muzzle. “This is just a simple demographic research project that looks at many large families across several species. They don’t actually watch anyone since there’s no resources or need for it. At most, a researcher might ask a family member to keep a journal to anonymously track family dynamics.”

“So that’s what you’re doing Jeremy,” Hopps muttered. “And Ginny thought you were writing po...” She bit off the last word.
“Since it’s supposed to be an anonymous study, does he assign all of you specimen numbers?” Wilde remarked with a disingenuous smirk.

“Niiick!” The red fox got a death glare from the scandalized rabbit and his own expression recognized he’d gone too far. Automatic first name use thought Skye—so big check.

Skye got up to draw notice and break the tension. She poured a glass of water and reached across the table to give it to Hopps—who nodded back and took a gulp. Jack, Soren and Alder also passed the pitcher to help fill in the awkward pause and hopefully reset the conversation.

“Sorry to go off on a tangent and upset you officer Hopps,” said Dr. Barret after a full minute. “That’s not my research, I just made the connection. I am curious though, how many of you are there now?”

Hopps set her glass on the table and leaned back; resigned to being the center of attention for a bit longer. “Mom and Dad have three hundred and twenty-eight of us—and that’s it! They decided that eight years ago. Grandkits over half that already.”

“Impressive. I wish all of you the best. I have a last question for you that’s relevant to my earlier comments if you’ll permit me?” Hopps nodded reluctantly to the Badger. “How many friends do you and your siblings generally have outside of your family?”

“For most of us, just a few. I see your earlier point; keeping up with family takes most of our social time,” Hopps admitted, stroking first one ear, then the other to keep her paws busy.

“Now consider all of Zootopia with its—what are we now—eighteen million? Anyway, each of its inhabitants has a limited social circle, and most everyone beyond that is just part of the background annoyance of a large city.”

“Except him,” Hopps countered sarcastically, glancing at Wilde, “he knows everybody!”

“Some mammals can have a wide but diffuse set of social contacts, but that’s a long way from everyone,” said Dr. Barret with a chuckle. “If so, it would take our fox years just to recite all their names.

“Now lets go back a thousand years. The largest social and political entities at the time were numerous city-states composed of a few cooperative and generally similar species. With simpler lifestyles and populations in the tens of thousands, there wasn’t a lot of room for interspecies conflict within the community; everyone was just trying to survive.

“Conflicts of course happened between city-states, not all of them across the predator-prey divide. There were beneficial changes during this period as well. Large numbers of species specific languages evolved through necessity into fewer, ones usable by many different kinds of mammals. Over the last millennium, the city-states slowly merged and developed into nation states with tens, then a hundred or more diverse species living together, which forced further language consolidation.

“Today we have only a few common languages and a myriad possible conflicts between all of our species.” Dr. Barret dug out a calculator. “Let’s see, Zootopia has about...”

“Three hundred and forty-one,” Wilde said. Soren grinned and Hopps huffed.
“Just so...species pairings...that gives us almost fifty-eight thousand combinations. Now, even if you group similar or compatible species,”—he gave Skye another nice smile—“we probably still have a few thousand avenues of contention for our baser natures to explore.”

“To put that problem in perspective, imagine a monoculture; how easy it would be to live in and manage a society if everyone was the same species! We’d all have common needs, a common evolution and history, and a thorough understanding of each other barring the usual interpersonal disputes. Unfortunately, our closest examples to that ideal are a few remote towns, and certain large, rural families.” Barret got a slow nod and wan smile from Hopps.

“Our reality is, we have a large number of species whose physiological differences lead to misunderstandings, annoyances, animosities, and prejudices developing between them. Then segregation both cultural and self-imposed between those species allows their base natures to fester—until something like our present problem comes up and threatens to release them.

“A good way to understand how profound those physiological differences between mammals are, would be to consider a simple reflexive reaction. If you touch a hot object, the sensory impulse travels up your arm to the spine and generates an involuntary motor pulse back down the arm to jerk it away before you even think about it. This takes somewhat over one hundred milliseconds for mammals our size, which shows that nervous system impulses propagate at a finite speed. Obviously, they will take a longer time to travel through a larger body than a smaller one. Measurements show this ratio can approach fifty-to-one between the largest and smallest mammals.

“There is another factor to consider before we arrive at my conclusion. In lower animals there is a strong correlation between brain volume and cognitive ability, but that applies weakly across the wide size range of intelligent mammals. The reason for this is found in the cells of the brain. Take a typical neuron from any of our brains; all of us here are mid-sized mammals. Now take one from a rat or ferret; it’s half the size of ours. In a mouse or shrew it’s barely a third the size.

“Bigger isn’t better here, actually all three sizes of neuron perform their cellular functions similarly. However, if we compare equal volumes, the smaller mammal can pack eight times as many of them in as we do, the smallest twenty-seven times as many. A simple three-to-one ratio of brain cell sizes compensates for most of the cranial volume differences from elephant to shrew!”

Dr. Barret favored them in turn with an anticipatory smile until Skye took the bait to get things moving again.

“So small mammals have an advantage due to their much faster reflexes and possibly faster thought processes?” Skye gave a coquettish wave of her tail to the badger’s delight, and noted a certain lack of reaction opposite her.

“Thank you Miss Winter. Now I can get to the really interesting part—which I’m continually amazed that more mammals don’t realize themselves. Everyone, what words come to mind when you think of small rodents in general? Don’t worry, you can let the stereotypes flow!”

“Frenetic?” Skye said. “Scurrying,” was Hopps contribution, “scamper...hasty...”

“Good enough,” said Barret. “For us, watching rodents go about their daily lives is no different than viewing a mild time-lapse movie. I use that phrase deliberately, as the smallest mammals experience a faster apparent passage of time—some three or four times that of ours due to their accelerated neurotransmission and metabolic rates. It might be as much as six to one from the
smallest to the largest mammals. This temporal perception disparity has been tested and verified across numerous species. It’s an active and fascinating field of research!”

“So fifteen minutes to us is like an hour to them, right?” Wilde said slowly. “They’re like overclocked computers, no wonder they burn out faster.” Hopps looked annoyed with him, then pensive.

“Real sensitive Nick; yes, they don’t live as long as most of us,” she said sardonically. “But it’s not that way to them. They have fewer days, but they experience them as much longer ones...and just see us as...slow.”

“This is probably the most profound difference between groups of species in Zootopia,” Barret said. “How do you relate comfortably to someone who perceives the passage of time differently?”

“There’s a large number of rodents working in hi-tech manufacturing,” Jack said, “this has to be their main advantage.”

“Yes, all those fast, dexterous workers in electronics and aerospace. Such labor is their most valuable contribution to the rest of society. It is also another illustration of the segregation by species that drives so much of the prejudice and discrimination in our society. Attempts to equalize opportunities for all are doomed to failure in spite of the idealists and the politicians with their inclusion initiatives.” Dr. Barret looked directly at a tight lipped Hopps as he spoke.

“I’m aware of your inspiring story officer,” the badger said, “but the reality is that you might inspire far more to failure than success through no fault of your own.”

Skye watched Hopps’ face contort as the rabbit struggled for control—what could she say to calm her? Jack thankfully interceded first.

“Hopps, society has real problems, but we have to preserve it first, flaws and all, before we can take the time to fix them. There’s no blame or insult intended, I’m sure. Doctor Barret is being blunt to make his points clear. We have to understand where we’re vulnerable so we can know how to proceed. I for one, have no idea where this will all go.”

“It’s too much! We’re still dealing with consequences from the savage crisis!” Hopps whined—paws on her bowed head; ears plastered back. “Can’t we get a break from the bad stuff? Just for awhile?” Wilde looked tense and conflicted as he sat stiffly beside her.

“Our jobs are to handle the bad stuff so everybody else can have that illusion of a break from it,” Jack said. “Do you need some time before we continue?” he said more softly.

“Well I know I need a comfort break!” Dr. Alder said as he stood. The raccoon successfully lured Hopps out of the lounge after him, and Wilde abruptly motioned Soren along behind her. Dr. Barret checked the door and they huddled around the gesturing fox.

“I’m about to break a confidence and a regulation and I need your words and silence,” Wilde whispered urgently; paws on both Barret’s and Jack’s shoulders. “Thank you. Please hold any opinions you have of...officer Hopps until she can prove herself. She...recently was involved in an incident where she was forced to...justifiably shoot someone. They nearly died. This new threat is too much of a load on her right now. I didn’t realize she was this badly overstressed until today—all these mood changes. Usually, we wait it out or I distract or talk her through it, but I can’t now! She needs your patience and discretion.”
Wilde swept out of the room and dropped to a casual saunter as soon as he was in the hall. Skye looked at Jack—the decision was mutual—they had to talk privately with them. Soon.

For now, Hopps was too messed up for Skye to get a good read on the depth of her feelings for Wilde—but that fox! Wilde seemed amiable enough when he’d engaged in casual banter with them, and even some suggestive but meaningless teasing with Dr. Soren. He was relaxed and glib with her as well, but it lacked any seriousness or interest at all.

Really, Skye thought, even Dr. Barret here had mildly hit on her; the one thing she’d never expected to experience was sexual invisibility to a presumably healthy todd. Even the mated ones would at least notice her!

The other four filtered back in over the next few minutes, and Dr. Barret wasted no time.

“I believe I need to change my approach to our discussion. My colleagues and I do tend to sermonize—we are academics after all. I’ve been trying to point out reasons for the divisions among species and society; but it might be more productive if I ask you four officers to provide a few examples, while we merely comment. Perhaps officer Hopps could provide our next one.”

Skye had to admit the badger was perceptive, and already had Hopps concentrating on a distraction.

“I guess if rodents didn’t have those faster reflexes, there would be a lot more mismatched traffic accidents,” Hopps observed. “We really don’t worry about the small traffic when responding to a call—they always just seem to get out of the way! That also explains size-based see and avoid regulations.”

“How about farming?” Soren offered. “Large herbivores tend to farm the big crops; wheat, corn, orchards. And you smaller guys,” she pointed at Jack with a broad smile, “are perfect for growing veggies.”

“I’ll grant you there’s sometimes a justification for stereotypes,” Jack mused. “You can also call it institutionalized job discrimination. A lot of mammals find themselves restricted to or from certain occupations for reasons valid or not, and that causes a lot of resentment.”

“You just put one of society’s biggest problems under your paw, Mr. Savage,” Barret said. “Do you have your own example in mind?”

“Yeah, a personal interest. How many of you follow the space program?”

There were three affirmative nods; Skye’s among them due to Jack’s fascination with it. Hopps and Wilde looked mildly embarrassed. From the look on her mate’s face, the professors were about to get a taste of their own medicine.

“They’re making preparations for our sixth orbital spaceflight, the first long-duration one, Spacelab Alpha. Crew of twenty, including a couple of lemmings, on a planned month long mission. It’s taken a long time to get this far, funding’s always tight, since there’s never much public support.”

“No wonder,” said Wilde, “all they do is send up rodents.”
“Yes, I remember some mammals called them Astrodents,” Dr. Alder said. “And I read an editorial once that called the first launch...Mousetrap One.”

“There’s good reason for that,” Jack said. “It’s very expensive to put anything in space and those early rockets had small payloads. That first crewed flight put four mammals in orbit—all different species—in a spacecraft barely larger than you are officer Hopps.”

“Why’d they risk sending four up on the first mission?” Wilde said.

“The reason given at the time was that if one or more species had a problem with extended zero gravity, another might withstand it and maintain control.” Jack cracked a small smile. “I think the real reason was to involve several species early to garner support for the program. The problem was that like today, they’re all small.”

“An excellent and visible example,” Dr. Alder said. “Space program funding impacted by size-based envies among the public.”

“Don’t we have more powerful rockets now? They’d get more public support if they launched some larger mammals,” Wilde noted.

“Cost effectiveness is still a bigger driver than public relations unfortunately,” Jack said. “I wish I had a picture of the new spacetool officer Wilde, it’s quite impressive looking—at least in the artist’s conception of it orbiting the earth.

“The reality is, the lab would easily fit in this room, solar panels and all. Disappointing isn’t it? The main hull is a meter in diameter and about three or so long. Its Aurora 2B booster can just get it into a high enough orbit for the duration of the mission. Let’s say we replaced its twenty strong crew with you for example. Our brave starfox might last a few days, crammed into a space barely large enough for him to scratch his tail, before he ran out of an important consumable like water or air.”

“It’s like the economy, resources go a lot further for smaller mammals,” Hopps chimed in.

“There’s hope for the rest of us,” Jack enthused as his ears perked up. “Once they mammal-rate the new Ursus launcher they’ll be able to lift a spacecraft that can hold someone my size!”

“But not anyone larger for awhile, right?” Hopps said. Her own ears were up and she’d regained interest in the conversation. Skye respected the rabbit’s quick resilience.

“It’s not feasible. This is just a more extreme example of the reason why air travel remains a limited service for the elite,” Jack said as Skye suppressed a smile.

“Another triumph of the Square-Cube Law!” Barret clapped his paws. “Do go on.”

“There’s a reason most long-distance travel is by ship or rail. They carry a wide range of loads cheaply and efficiently. Airplanes are very weight restricted and can’t economically carry large, heavy passengers. Their one real advantage is speed, and that costs.”

“Our economic levels don’t adequately compensate for weight differences or allow anything close to equitable ticket prices for all species,” Barret added. “Thousands of small rodents can fly for the cost of transporting one elephant. The public wouldn’t accept actual cost pricing. An airline has to either discriminate for practical reasons, charge universal high fares as they do now, or receive
subsidies to be viable as a business.”

“Also, large passengers have little or no choice of seating, and are prohibited from moving around the cabin for weight and balance reasons. Bias mandated by the laws of physics,” Jack concluded.

“I hadn’t thought about it very much, but large mammals have that problem almost everywhere,” Hopps said. “A lot of Zootopia is inaccessible to them but not so much for us. I mean, my apartment has too much headroom and not enough floorspace, but it’s usable. We smaller mammals might not always have the best choices, but we make do since we have a lot more of them.”

“Choices...there are still places that find ways to avoid renting to skunks, and I’m a degreed professional!” Dr. Soren gave an irritated little side-flick of her tail.

“Just another one of the many forms of discrimination and divisions between us, many unbridgeable due to our physical natures,” Dr. Barret said. “I have one last example to show how wide those can be. Aquatic mammals like dolphins.

“We all know that they are at least as intelligent as any of us—even though they have no technology beyond what they trade fishery work for. However, the physical and perceptual differences are so great between the aquatic species and us, that we have only developed rudimentary communications with them.

“The reason? Just like we have a temporal disparity with small rodents, we have a sensory one with dolphins. Compared to all of us, dolphins have weak eyesight; they cannot see any colors. For our foxes, a dolphin possesses no sense of smell at all. For our lagomorphs, the range and sensitivity of their hearing well exceeds yours, and is their primary sense. Their worldview is incompatible with ours, what’s crucial to one, is unusable or imperceptible to the other.

“No mammal is unaffected by the sometimes profound differences between us. This is what I wanted to illustrate for you today, the true fragility of our society in the face of a threatened resurgence of past animosities and prejudices.”

“It’s been a long process,” Hopps glanced up at Wilde, then back to Barret, “but you’ve all finally managed to dispose of any remaining illusions I had. I’ll let you know if I find one you missed.” She managed another sardonic smile before saying...

“So what can we actually do to prevent this?”

“Gather as much information as we can,” Dr. Alder said. “Unfortunately, yesterday I received a preprint paper that seems to confirm an abject anxiety that I’ve had.

“A new site has been found in the city of Fairfield back east. They had removed an old building and had started to dig a deeper foundation for a new one—right downtown! The excavation uncovered remnant walls around several enclosures and a small pit nearby. They called in a Dr. Ulric—I haven’t even looked him up yet—who mapped the site and removed the remains to allow construction to proceed.

“The pit contained fairly intact remains of a few of our primitive Coypu. A piece of wood and a bone were tested with a preliminary date of from four to five hundred years. That was all he was able to do before the city authorities claimed ownership and demanded the return of all the specimens.”
Something was wrong here, Skye realized, first Alder’s budget, and now a quick confiscation?

“We have a problem,” the raccoon stated. “As I feared, dissemination of what we know may be out of our control. Worse, a significant and well-studied multi-species prey community has continually occupied this location for at least six hundred years. If verified, this is inescapable proof...

“Multiple prey species were also raising meat animals.”

Chapter End Notes

Dark adaptation: Full adaptation occurs after twenty to thirty minutes in the dark. Ten to fifteen gets you most of the way there. Astronomers will hold one eye closed if they have to use a light or avoid one (Car headlights) to preserve the adaptation in it.

The Hopps family: Bonnie stated at the fair that the nine-year-old Judy had 275 siblings. Assuming Judy was among the older ones, that means her mom needed to maintain an average pace of three litters of nine kits each per year for ten years. At Judy’s graduation, and at the train platform, there is a full range of young rabbits seen. If her parents had stopped reproducing when Judy was nine, there would be a gap in ages. Grandkits would likely be five or younger and the last of Bonnie and Stu’s would be around fifteen. Being merciful, I assumed she’d slow down a lot over the last several years and end up with 328. Bonnie still gets the mother of the millennium award!

The space program: With no cold war to drive a space race with a rival power, I assumed that the Zootopian program would be similar to China’s in our world. It would start later (Early 90s) and progress slowly and cautiously, with a flight every few years. Orbital infrastructure would also develop more slowly, but from a higher technological base. Things like moon shots, interplanetary probes and a GPS constellation are still a few years in their future. (Navigation is regional, and ground transmitter based) Care to design a space helmet for an elk?
A hastily assembled group becomes a team, and realizes they face a greater threat that targets themselves as well as greater society.

Jack Savage’s right ear twitched, then his left. It was a minor instinctive response to an uncertain peril, one not yet identifiable as a distinct threat—some called it preyanoia. He exchanged another glance with Skye; she’d noticed too. So had Wilde. It wasn’t some sound at the threshold of detection, as Dr. Alder had spoken quite clearly.

The raccoon’s revelation that prey mammals had almost certainly been involved with rearing farmed animals for meat was bad enough. The seizure of the recently discovered evidence for it was worse. Jack might accept a single coincidence, but not any more.

“Doctor Alder, it sounds to me like you don’t know this person...the one that sent you the paper—I assume for review? Why would he do that?”

“It’s rather irregular,” Dr. Alder said as he lifted his briefcase from the floor, and opened it in his lap. “See for yourselves.” He waited until Skye cleared a space on the table, then shook the contents of a large opened mailer onto it. There were several printed pages and a couple of dozen photographs.

“To save you all the time to read these; there’s an incomplete abstract, a fairly comprehensive description and photos of the site and its excavation, and an introduction to, but no detailed description of the remains. There are enough good photos that we can easily identify two of our primitive Coypu. This one,” the raccoon reached and flicked a sheet, “has the initial dating results. As to why me, I’m prominent in the field.

“So, meat animals dug up in a very inconvenient place, and now we’ve got a hasty cover-up of a potentially explosive interspecies scandal,” Jack stated.

“Seems like it, since this report was sent unfinished, because someone was afraid of losing credit for work on a major find,” Dr. Soren said. The skunk rose and stepped over to scrutinize the title sheet. “I wonder if they made him give up his field notes.”

Skye read from her tablet. “He’s a doctor Jarvis Ulric...wolf...biology professor at Piedmont University in Anniston. Appears to be a mid-sized institution.”

“Why would they call in a wolf from out of town? If the—I guess they’d have to be prey—authorities were worried about this sort of thing getting out, you’d think they’d have their own mammals to oversee it,” Hopps said.

According to the e-mail from doctor Ulric alerting me about his package,” Dr. Alder said, “the first investigator called in for the Fairfield site was from the local agricultural college. He likely found remains and called for available professional help on his own.”
“Everyone! Wait a sec!” Jack’s senses were on alert and his instincts said bolt, don’t freeze. “Sorry Docs, we’ve gotten complacent with the seminars the last couple of days, but we need to move now! Alder!” —The raccoon started at the lack of honorific—“did anyone else get that e-mail?”

“Just doctors Hornby and Ellison at the national museum. I assume they also received a pac...”

“When was it sent?” Jack jumped to his feet. *Shit! Another connection! That probably explains Alder’s budget!* It’s beyond the ZBI now he knew, as his nose started to twitch uncontrollably.

“I received it four days ago.”

When Bogo passed along Soren’s original report, Jack realized. One of those two at the national museum must have been on watch for finds like this and had immediately passed it on to an established contact at the ZBI. That individual had been hit with two nasty shocks at once, which had at least allowed his and Skye’s hasty assignment opportunity.

“I’m going to assume that one of those colleagues of yours informed others with an agenda to protect, and that they will act to keep what you’ve shown us *buried.*” Jack waved at the papers and photos. “Now, I need you to make a couple of sets of copies of all this, give them to Hopps and Wilde here, and put the originals where you’d normally keep them. Make sure that only you keep and handle the originals.”

“Shouldn’t we hide the originals and let them have copies if they try to confiscate anything? I assume that’s what you’re worried about,” Dr. Soren said.

“That’s exactly it. But copies are easily identifiable. I want them to trace these back to Ulric—through his printer, by skin cells or fur in the envelope—and think that you hadn’t bothered to make copies yet. Might slow them down a bit.”

“You sound as suspicious and paranoid as that TV detective—what’s his name...Cosgrove? You really think they’ll go to the trouble?”

“I do doctor Soren,” Jack told her, “There are forces in authority that want to...reinforce the present political narrative about predator-prey relations—that are well above those who tried to suppress this find back east.” Also above me, as they often reminded him.

“The Mara remains,” Wilde said. “That wasn’t supposed to be found where it was either.”

“Wait, that shouldn’t matter; doctor, didn’t your report mention it without saying anything about its age and location?” Hopps pointed out.

“Yes, but unfortunately, we did discuss its morphology thoroughly enough for someone knowledgeable to make the connection,” Alder said. “Remember these are rare finds.”

“Yesss... Doctors, we’ll have to assume that someone already has. They’ll certainly want that Mara back since it’ll reinforce this latest discovery. Have you released any report about it to anyone other than ourselves?” Jack demanded.

No, our description is fairly complete, but we held back and contacted the ZPD when we realized what the impact of our conclusions could be,” Alder responded.
“Great!” Jack was happy for even a minor break at this point. “Continue doing whatever examination and documentation you want to for now, but keep giving all of it to these two—along with any problematic paper records you already have. I want it to look like you’ve started work on these remains, have some records of that work, but are a long way from any conclusions or publishable results.”

“I can disperse the remains of our freshly deceased Coypu in the stacks,” Dr. Soren added. “I’ll hide and label them so that even an expert couldn’t find them unless they already knew what to look for!” The skunk was fully engaged in their planning, with eyes alight and tail up. “Might do that for a couple of Mara bones too, and emphasize my paw research.”

“Thank you, that’ll be perfect,” said Jack. “Now, if you and your colleague would accompany agent Winter back to your museum, she could start to purge your computers of the full ZPD report and anything else provocative.

“Doctor Barret, if you could help officers Hopps and Wilde copy these here, then they can deliver the originals back to doctor Alder. Then, if one of you will set up an appointment with your chief later this afternoon, we’ll meet then.

“For my part I’ll go to the federal building, contact my superiors, provide them with a...selective report of our findings, and await their further direction. That should tell us where we stand and what actions to take, as there is a real possibility that I might be the one assigned to take what you’re hiding!” Jack paused to examine their faces for a few seconds before he turned to Skye.

“Agent Winter, a brief word before we all go?” Jack and Skye left two surprised and three pensive expressions in the room behind them as they went down the hall for privacy.

“Things are spinning out of control rapidly,” Jack told his mate quietly. “I don’t think we can wait on trusting them; we need to talk to them tonight if possible, or tomorrow.”

“I see that too dear. I think it would be best to meet with them separately, one-on-one,” said Skye. “Particularly for Hopps’ sake.”

“By sex or species?”

“Definitely sex,” said Skye.

It felt sooo good to be moving again, in spite of the remaining tightness in his leg. Nick was almost back to his normal walking pace, although running would be unwise for a few more days. He hoped to make it back to the station before anything called for that.

It was a risk. He was in uniform, the only one visible in Savannah Central Square after he’d entered it near city hall. There was always at least one ZPD officer on foot patrol in the general area around the square, but they seemed to be elsewhere. At the moment he was the steady paw of authority to the citizens going about their business—mammals unaware that he couldn’t protect them from their hibernating id monsters.

The last few days hadn’t been good for either his leg or mind. Enforced idleness while some dry professorial types patiently justified his initial overwrought fears had left him doubly frustrated.
How does anyone deal with a dormant threat this vast? For once, Slick Nick couldn’t come up with any sort of a solution. That totally sucked.

At least he wasn’t alone. He’d worried that the capable-looking federal hare wouldn’t take the report as a serious warning, but agent Savage had embraced it and had even revealed a distrust of his own superiors to them all. Nick wasn’t sure that having him as an ally had been worth the revelation of high-level political involvement in this disaster in the making.

His vixen cohort has quite the haughty persona, but he’d seen the like before and had used one himself on occasion; only she used hers to hide something away. At least she seemed in accord with the rest of them.

Then there was Carrots. It was exquisite agony to have to watch her exuberant spirit slowly bleed out—and not intervene. Even though she’d wanted to, he realized that leaving her alone to brood for the last two nights had been a mistake. His self-imposed barrier against the overwhelming desire to physically protect and comfort her again made the climate wall an ephemeral thing by comparison.

Why’d it have to hurt so much? Because he feared that Jack would make an obvious and impressive partner for her? Only their lack of any apparent mutual interest so far had kept him together. That wasn’t fair to Judy—they’d discussed possible issues with their friendship openly and had even—insincerely for him—encouraged healthy in-species dating for each other. He knew it would tear him up inside if she actually ever did that.

Barely two weeks ago, before reality went sideways, they’d been together on his sofa for movie night and she’d made this adorable little *chirr* of contentment. Nick hadn’t known rabbits did that, and right now his most fervent wish was to hear it from her again. In the hall of his mind, he’d abdicated the lifelong throne of his own ego, and now served its new ruler. You will serve her happiness whatever she does, even if you can only share it vicariously...

The steps before the precinct entrance dredged his thoughts back up with a few sharper twinges from his leg. Focus fox, he told himself, you weren’t even aware of the ramp right there to use.

Inside, Clawhauser was busy on his microphone; maybe he could get past...

“Hiya Nick! Where’s Hopps? Your opposite twins from the ZBI are already in Bogo’s office; so go right on up.”

“She’ll be along in a couple Ben. We’ve got a ongoing investigation now and just found some really unsettling evidence, so go easy on her—please?”

“Sure thing Nick, I know she’s still trying to work through her OIS. Whatever you’ve got now must be bad, both those agents looked really upset.” Clawhauser sadly propped his chin in his paws and watched the fox head for the elevator.

Nick kept walking, but not fast enough to get out of range of the dispatcher’s final soft-spoken comment.

“Total shame; I’ve never seen a more perfect set-up for a double date...”

One did not enter chief Bogo’s office without direct permission, or some kind of acknowledgement. Nick had brushed against the limits of that rule a few times, but felt that today would count as an exception. He pushed down the door handle, shoved it open, and entered to find both agents with
the chief in the sacrosanct territory behind his desk, all intent on his monitor. Nick assumed the
peace of the water hole was in effect, and walked around to join them, noticed only by a
momentary eye and ear flick from Savage.

“Got it.” Winter said. The vixen’s forearms were propped against the edge of the massive desk to
steady her camera’s aim.

“Ok, back to the index and the latest update,” Savage said in an undertone, his paw moving Bogo’s
bulky mouse. “Coming up on it—here!”

“Got it,” the arctic fox took two quick photos, and stowed her camera. “City’s monthly budget
update, Wilde,” she told him. “Previous one was just over two weeks ago.”

Agent Savage clicked through a couple more pages and turned the mouse back over to the chief.
“Look at whatever you normally do for another minute or so.” Bogo made a low snuffle and
complied.

“I like to call it ‘practicing my clandestine skills’ rather than paranoia,” Savage said. “I don’t know
what software the city servers have installed, but the later versions log each page request so you can
tell what someone was interested in. Just muddying the waters a bit.”

“We will have to examine the photos to confirm it,” Winter said, “but it looks like Dr. Alder’s
research budget was the only item zeroed out or even changed from last month’s.”

“The planning commission broke their regular schedule and didn’t adjust anything else to obscure
their intent. Obviously a very quick and sloppy imposition from above,” Savage said scornfully.
“Now, Chief Bogo, can I see the redacted report that you sent to the ZBI?”

Buffalo Butt looked mildly surprised but brought up the document for the hare to read. Savage
perused it for a minute or two before he explained himself.

“Everyone’s been bovidlerizing this report of unfortunate facts and suppositions since Doctor
Soren first generated it. I wanted to know exactly what my bosses saw and what they decided not to
tell me!”

“Agent Savage, you seem to have a strong tendency towards insubordination. Is this a recent
proclivity or a normal thing for you?” Bogo said rather sweetly, which was his most dangerous
tone of voice in Nick’s experience. An interruption came from a polite knock low on the door.
“Enter!” Bogo said more harshly than he likely intended.

Judy came in wide-eyed and ears splayed. Her mouth opened slightly as the three of them emerged
from behind Bogo’s desk. The chief considered, then waved Nick into the oversize chair behind
them. He sat on a corner to make room for Judy, then agent Winter to join him.

“Officer Hopps, I’ve been briefed on your findings. We have also just determined that the
cancellation of the museum’s research budget was deliberate.” The chief directed her attention to
the scowling hare left standing. “Agent Savage here was about to explain his position and duties
within our...investigation.”

“My duties remain the same as yours, to protect society from those elements that seek to disrupt the
social order for gain or ideology. That’s probably written in a handbook or mission statement
somewhere, but I do try to follow that example. Those who do not can be found anywhere, and I
am now certain that some of those disruptive elements are in my chain of command. My position, Chief Bogo, has become a precarious one.

“There’s been a recent push within the agency to redefine predatory crime and allowed behaviors so that we can efficiently monitor and control any perceived atavistic individuals among them. Embracing and justifying this public safety agenda is now...beneficial to one’s career. I took far too much time to realize that a long game was being played; it was very subtle at first, but has now reached a threshold where it has become more overt.”

“There has always been anti-predatory prejudice, it’s inevitable given our joint histories and the majority prey population,” Bogo said. “It recurs, and we’ve just come off a peak of that. Why do you feel this is different from past enabling of speciest behavior?”

“Because this time it’s more highly organized!” Savage emphasized. “Patterns of public behavior are like the weather; it’s a chaotic system, unpredictable in the long term. Now, more controlled...purposeful...plans have been set in motion. Agent Winter can explain it better; she’s the one that found a lot of this!”

“I originally joined the ZBI as a computer programmer and data analyst,” Winter began in a precise voice. “Once my other talents were recognized, I was recruited and trained for investigative fieldwork. Even with that, my IT work remains a significant responsibility.

“First doubts arose during the time I was tasked to help develop software that would track and correlate any individuals personal associations, habits, and interests. I was assured that this was for court ordered investigations only, and that our prior less intrusive monitoring tools would remain in general use.” The mottled brown and white vixen’s voice slowly dropped in tandem with her tail.

“I needed to test and optimize those programs, and was allowed to use our in-house database to run my trials against—as long as I openly reported the results to my supervisor. When I found that those reports were being passed straight up to the deputy director, I grew very nervous and made up excuses to stop doing them.”

“Your managers were spying on their own employees with it, weren’t they?” Nick asked her. “How’d you find out?”

“I told her,” Savage said. “I overheard a comment about how they’d found some internal corruption and assumed that her work was involved in that. She then told them her part of the task was complete, and to revoke her access to the program, witnessed by management. They had already started using the program on their own, and likely wanted her tests and reports to continue; to set her up for a fall in case they needed to obscure their own activities.

“We have no evidence at all for this, but we believe that one recent resignation and a couple of unexpected retirements resulted from manufactured evidence based on data from this program. All were fairly high profile predators in the agency in positions to be impediments to others.”

“There are still plenty of predators working at the ZBI and other agencies, although our numbers have started to decline at about the expected attrition rate instead of being kept at parity through hiring,” Winter noted. “It’s right there in the database, but it’s not wise for anyone to draw attention to it.”

“I would like to know,” Bogo said after a long exhale, “why two ZBI agents would discuss an unproven conspiracy theory against predators within their own agency, with outsiders they first met
two days ago.”

“Because I’m taking a big chance with the first people I’ve felt I could talk to about this!” Savage said. “Your actions during the wild predator events last year showed that you three do live by those words on your badges. I’m not here by accident! That report you sent us chief, was a badly needed gift for me, to induce them to willingly give me this assignment.

“Back when I had my initial suspicions, all it took was for me to make a deliberate and mild speciest comment about a co-worker before the right ears. That started cautious efforts to recruit me and determine the depth of my...passions. I encouraged this, and was first asked to merely watch certain pred employees for any suspicious activities to exploit. Of course, my reliability was being tested to see if I might tip off a colleague that they were a target.”

Agent Winter raised a paw and waved it gently from her spot on the other side of Judy.

Nick’s affinity for Savage jumped; the hare had to implicitly trust his fox partner—just like Judy did with him. Even the acceptance by proxy felt good, and filled in a little more of his lingering self-doubt. Was it strictly professional, or could there be more between them? Nick knew those thoughts would only lead to despair, but he couldn’t banish them...

“It is almost impossible to know who to trust now,” Winter said. “There is enough badge tracking and other internal surveillance that we must assume it’s pervasive at the agency. Even simple hallway encounters by a couple of preds would be noticed and flagged, so those such as myself can do little to meet with the like minded. We are also easily identifiable and badly outnumbered, making surveillance of our outside activities likely. Agent Savage is a hare and would be suspect for preds even if he wasn’t maintaining cover!”

“It’s just as dangerous for aware and sympathetic prey mammals,” Jack said. “They can’t try to identify and contact each other without risk of exposure to conspirators above. I fear enough are in place that the agency is already lost as an effective counter to this trend. Our staff isn’t very publicly visible, and malcontents are easily marginalized and legally silenced.”

“The verisimilitude of apprehension,” Bogo said quietly. “Your latest evidence shows this may go beyond prior attempts to discredit and restrict predators, as certain prey species may now need to hide their own ugly past. Individual zealots and psychopaths like former mayor Bellwether can be excused by society as aberrations. An organized group that patiently seizes the levers of political power could eventually decide on anything from subtle segregation to repression of whole species as justified policy.”

“Any attempt to expose this now would be dismissed as a fringe conspiracy theory, right?” Nick said.

“Particularly since we don’t know how widespread this really is, or their final intent,” Winter said. “We may have to wait until they make an overt move.”

“That could be imminent,” Jack said. “My report should get some reaction out of them; learning about the Fairfield meat farm certainly has. We need more allies and information before we can consider any action, so I suggest we concentrate on that for now.”

“We can’t rely on official support from the ZBI anymore.” Winter said. “If we are to have any success, mutual trust and security among us will be crucial. To develop that, I strongly suggest some one-on-one, get acquainted sit downs somewhere private. I need to start with you, Officer
Hopps, as soon as possible.” The two females shared an appraising look.

“You need to start with me? And why individually if we’re all going to work together?” Judy said. “I think we’ve already adjusted well to each other.”

Nick admired how she’d grown into her ideals—well past her prior distrust; his bunny partner now sat quite comfortably sandwiched between two foxes.

“Because Miss Winter understands the situation Hopps,” Bogo said firmly. “From now on, any interactions among you four will occur discreetly outside this precinct. I will not permit any hint of a conspiracy within my police department! I will restrict myself to coordinating our exchange of information and providing covert logistical support if needed, until we learn more. Otherwise, you and Wilde will visibly continue your duties at the ZPD, as agents Winter and Savage must do for the ZBI. Any overt joint operations between us must be sanctioned by both agencies.”

Bogo slid open a drawer and rifled through its contents before extracting a page. “I would have considered your evidence and suppositions barely adequate to agree to our present cooperation, if I hadn’t also recently received this from the Department of Justice.” He slid it across his desk for Savage to read.

The paper passed silently between paws until it reached Nick’s. It was a hiring guideline that noted a disparity between the makeup of several law enforcement agencies and the general population. It touted the social benefits of bringing their predator heavy natures more in balance with the communities they served. Although implied rather than directed, the intent was clear. A little more weight tugged at his spirit as he gave it back to Savage.

“This is somewhat relevant to my own secondary assignment,” Savage waved it at Judy, “which is you. I’m here to discreetly assess your suitability as a target for recruitment. Those species elements in the hierarchy can use the legitimacy that a popular personality like you can provide. Of course, I will report that you seem to be a true idealist that likely wouldn’t tolerate institutionalized discrimination.”

“Actively seeking support is another indication that zealotry rather than ordinary prejudice is behind this,” Bogo said. “Keep me informed, and if you two need more time for your own investigations...I believe you have a shortfall in stakeout, community outreach, and perhaps parking duty to make up.”
Chapter Summary

Our team members meet privately for some trust building and soul baring.

“Okay, four more reps, keep them slow,” said the therapist. The wallaby repositioned her paws under Nick’s thigh after each one, pressing gently. “Feels good, I think you’re ready for normal activities. Just no abrupt or intense exertion for another day or two.”

“It’s still tight when I extend it, I get some twinges,” Nick complained as he slid off the seat of the leg curl station. Embarrassingly, the weight setting was only two notches more than the lightest one.

“That’s normal when you sit on your ass and don’t do the stretches you’re supposed to,” she admonished. “Remember, sit with your leg out straight and supported, then rock your torso forward until you feel it, not till it hurts. Gently back and forth until you’re vertical or a bit past several times a day.”

He carried his uniform folded in a bag and walked out to the tram stop in his running shorts and — I’m Foxy, deal with it — T-shirt. His well-tailored ZPD blues often felt confining by the end of a long day, and right now he wanted the anonymity and freedom from responsibility allowed by his pedestrian attire. He couldn’t call this present interlude carefree, but it was probably as close as he was going to get to that ideal for awhile.

At least Carrots wouldn’t be alone for the whole evening. Agent Winter had been fairly insistent, and the two of them were probably already out to dinner somewhere. It wasn’t the kind of date he always feared she’d indulge in, but it unexpectedly was with another fox. It would be interesting to find out from her what the vixen had wanted.

Savage had been off like a shot after they’d all left the chief’s office, to check he said, on any directives from his agency. That left Nick to kill some time at the outpatient clinic to keep Carrots and the chief happy, then head for home on the adjacent inner blue line. On the tram, he had to put up with suspicious looks from a smallish pig trying to contain four of her kids, and a belligerent one from a rather large fluffy goat with oddly curved horns that was possibly a hybrid. It was three long stops to the covered platform of Pack Street station, where he was glad to get off.

On a bench by the station exit, a rabbit sat reading a somewhat oversize newspaper that hid everything but legs and ears—black tipped ones, each with a distinctive black horizontal stripe just below. Nick walked past Agent Savage, who briefly rustled the paper as he did so. A block later, other foot traffic had dispersed, so Nick stopped at the corner and pretended to fiddle with his cellphone.

“Good way to blend, Wilde,” Savage said as he walked up and nodded to Nick’s shirt. “Just enough to irritate and make ’em shun you without provoking them.” The hare grinned momentarily. “Thanks for not making me wait too long, I’d just be at your door later.”
“I had a feeling I might not have tonight to myself. You are in a hurry, can’t recall being stalked by a bunny before. So—why these separate interrogations?”

“Hardly that—call it a badly needed mutual trust building exercise.” Savage said evenly.

“You’ve shown a lot of that already with what you’ve told us,” Nick said, keeping his voice low. “At first, I just thought you wanted to see our reactions to your corrupt authorities story—you know, check out our loyalty—then I realized you both were really serious and isolated enough to risk confiding in us. That’s really disconcerting.”

“Imagine how we felt when we became involuntary renegades. Any more of this discussion needs to be in private; do you consider your place secure?”

“Yeah, reasonably. If you want some dinner first, there’s a mid-sized sandwich shop a block west,” Nick said and pointed, “usually with a couple of cart vendors further down. I’m three more blocks up this street, then bear right, my building’s just past two large beech trees. Second floor, all the way back.” Savage had the traffic light, and took off without another word.

Nick had enough time after he made it home to change, and tidy up a few incriminating Judy related items around the place. He’d just gotten his Hungry Maw out of the microwave when he heard a click from the door. Savage slipped through, then closed and locked it quietly.

They silently evaluated each other; Savage had assumed the door was unlocked, as Nick had expected him to. He motioned to his sofa and they sat.

“Wasn’t trying to be inhospitable; I didn’t have any veggie meals,” Nick pointed to the empty box next to the microwave—its illustration tried to look appetizing without being too carnivorously obvious.

“No problem Wilde, go ahead, I’m used to predators. I take it your partner isn’t as comfortable with them yet? I’m not sure how to start with you tonight, so this will serve for now.” He pulled his more bunny-friendly fare out of a bag, and they refrained from further conversation until they’d finished.

“I’ll start and save you the effort,” Nick said as he disposed of their dinner trash. “Right now, my curiosity is overriding my...natural concern about being interviewed by the Feds in my own place.”

“Well, it’s just one paranoid Fed, so you needn’t worry too much.” Savage got up and paced around the room; and ended up looking out the kitchen window. “Nice bit of nature you got here Wilde; flowing stream, secluded, good cover.” The hare opened the window to admit the sound of water, then stretched to lean out. “No screen, convenient drainpipe, end unit; kinda place someone like me might feel comfortable in. Well chosen fox.”

“Figured you’d know about my background. Yeah, I moved a few times to avoid...entanglements, but I’ve kept my record clean!” Nick joined Savage to gaze out the window—it beat the alley and fire escape view from his previous affordable housing. “This is the best place I’ve found so far, and my ZPD job should allow me to keep this one for awhile. The neighbors here don’t mind having a cop on the premises—they would have in my last couple of places.”

“I checked you out, it’s part of the job. You’ve transcended your past and earned your place—you may not know this, but Chief Bogo’s wasn’t the only favorable recommendation that got you into the police academy.”
That was a surprise, and Nick didn’t care if Savage saw his reaction. His face must have asked the question; the agent’s head gently shook no. He closed his window and led the way back to his sofa; time to get to the point of this visit. The hare took the hint.

“I was reluctant to tell any of you about the conspiracy hidden within the ZBI, until this sequence of recent events forced it. Agent Winter and I...debated this point thoroughly before we agreed. I didn’t think that your chief would accept our story as easily as he did.”

“Bogo is an authoritarian pain in the ass, but he listens, and he’s fair. You have no idea of the respect he has within this department. I give him grief with my attitude, but he accepted my report on the feral animals without question. Deep inside, I think he’s got some of the idealism that Officer Hopps has.”

“Hearing this from you, Wilde, puts to rest any concerns I had about your chief. Yes, I just put some trust in you, but there are several levels of it, and I’m going to need a lot more from you. You got beers in the fridge? Cause I hope we get to the point where we can use a couple.”

“I do,” Nick said warily. “You’ve already trusted us with your government conspiracy, I don’t think I can top that!”

“We’ll see. For now, I’d like to use this place as a temporary safe house until we find something better. It’s not ideal, apartments usually come with nosy neighbors and all.”

“Her name is Carla; one door down, other side of the hall.”

“Okay, I’ll check her out when I can.” The hare produced a pad and made a note.

“That would be inadvisable, agent Savage,” Nick used his cop voice. “Unless you want an older woodchuck girlfriend.”

“Oh, a mixer?” Savage put on a mildly surprised face.

“She hits on me. And that was before the uniform.”

“I think we can deflect Miss Desperate, fortune has given us a perfect cover for our joint activities,” Savage said. “We’ve got two foxes, plus a hare and rabbit—the same thing to everybody else. We can split into a normal fox couple and bunny couple as needed. However much interest there might be in us, it would be what’s expected. Regular undercover work.”

“I’m not sure, agent high society really isn’t my type, and I don’t know what kind of date you’d find officer Hopps to be, she’s pretty work-focused around me.” Nick obliquely scrutinized Savage’s face as he spoke—no discernable reaction from the agent.

“It’s just for appearances; so we don’t attract unwanted attention. If I can put up with Winter’s demeanor, so can you.”

“Well ok,” Nick allowed. “As long as she doesn’t make everyone think we’re having a bad date, or worse, that she’s trying to blow off a pesky loser—which, of course, I am not.” The hare reciprocated Nick’s smirk, and they both relaxed a bit.

“I’m sure you officers have already experienced this for yourselves—even within a professional
capacity, certain mixed partnerships like ours will aid and abet public intolerance. So we’ll avoid them. Once you work with agent Winter, and get to know her...more...well...like I do, you’ll get along fine,” Savage’s face briefly froze—enough for Nick to notice. “Mutual trust is crucial if we’ve any chance to fight this, and there are obvious barriers to overcome between us first.”

Nick’s suspicions erupted. Did the hare just reveal himself, and attempt to deflect? Why would he invoke the pred-prey divide between them when he’d revealed the anti-pred plotting in the ZBI? Was it just with me, he wondered—or was Savage worried about where Judy’s allegiance would lie? His paranoia excluded his fox partner—their trust seemed total and mutual—there really had to be something more there.

Just ask him idiot, Nick told himself. He’s already spilled enough for you to destroy his career if you want. That hare trying to sit there on your couch and hold a neutral face is desperate! You might need him too, slick—be careful.

“About those barriers, Savage. You’ve already trusted me with a lot and have asked for mine in you even though we just met. Doesn’t seem to be much of a problem there, so leave that for the moment. Now, you’ve apparently worked with agent Winter for a long time, so let’s first nail down the level of trust you have in that pred-prey relationship.”

“It is absolute, Wilde. Now it’s my turn. I need to know the nature of your personal relationship with officer Hopps.” Savage tried and failed to give him a demanding look—another need struggled beneath it. Nick suddenly recognized he shared it, and his inhibitions about opening up to the hare evaporated.

“I owe my present life to her; she’s my best friend.” Nick clamped his jaw to stop an incipient quaver in his voice. “I’ve told her I will protect her; but she only thinks that’s because I’m more familiar with the threats in the city. I will always be there for her, but I can’t get any closer than I am without interfering with her life. Swear to me Savage! She can never know how much I...really care about her. I will not allow myself, or anyone else to hurt her! I would kill to prevent that.”

“I understand that fox and I will. I too would kill to protect my mate. It is fortunate for you that Skye—isn’t your type.” Savage seemed to sag a bit in relief upon his confession.

All of the circumstantial evidence he’d noticed over the last two days didn’t soften the blow of confirmation for Nick. It wasn’t just a solid partnership like he shared with Judy— Savage had used the unequivocal words my mate. His vixen mate. Centuries of civilization had loosened some of the instincts and behaviors that governed many species, but foxes had mostly kept their mate for life reputation—one of their few positive attributes in the eyes of others. Did that hold cross-species? Did it already apply to him with Judy?

“Has she bonded with you!” Nick blurted, too desperate to know to be embarrassed.

“Yes, and I with her, some of us are known to do that too,” Savage said with a smile that Nick knew he’d pay any price to emulate. “I’m surprised I’m not completely white with all of the scrubbing I do to keep our secret. She likes to...anoint me. Congratulations Wilde, you are the very first one to know.”

“I had no idea Savage. This had to have just happened, right? How could you possibly have expected to hide this when you both work for the ZBI!”
“We’ve been mates for almost three years now. Over that time we have carefully cultivated the appearance of mild to moderate dislike of each other. It is a game for us! An occasional minor spat, snide comments mostly from me, and most importantly, very subtle body language cues when we’re among others to keep us secure. This has been effective enough that we’ve noticed we often get joint assignments when our case officers become annoyed at one of us! This keeps everybody happy since we do work well together.”

“Yet you let me know,” Nick said softly. It couldn’t have been deliberate if they’d taken such precautions; had the hare just been so eager to meet someone else in a similar situation that he’d assumed more than what actually existed between Carrots and himself? “Why?”

“When we met you, Skye and I saw that you and Hopps had to have more than a casual friendship, and were curious about how you might have approached some of the problems we faced. We were at first...guarded about approaching you two.” Savage looked resigned. “But our...excitement over meeting a possible couple similar to ourselves finally overrode our caution and will require a joint apology from us at some point. As to why I revealed our relationship, I simply slipped up. Away from home, among comparative strangers, distracted by the evolving situation, I let the game lapse enough for you to notice.”

“Winter is having a similar talk with Judy right now, isn’t she? Doesn’t she realize the harm she could do!” Nick couldn’t keep the fear out of his voice.

“Now is when I need your trust in us, Wilde. Skye is very tactful, she won’t need to ask Hopps about you directly, she’ll know. And you won’t. If you truly want to keep Hopps ignorant of your feelings and make *The Noble Sacrifice*, we’ll respect that and keep you ignorant of hers. And mourn what you both could have had.”

That last was like a slap on the muzzle. “It’s not about what I want you hacked up furball!” Nick snarled. “It’s about what she needs! I have to give her the freed...”

“...Freedom to live a normal life, to not be...contaminated by your past unworthy lifestyle and reprehensible species, fox—*Isn’t that right!*” Savage was on his feet; rigid arm and finger in Nick’s face. Before he could recover from his shock and bite off the hare’s offensive appendage, Savage brought his other arm up and grabbed him by the shoulders—quite firmly despite his size.

“Yeah, you want to indulge in the *Sacrifice* Wilde, give her the greatest gift you can imagine. Did you ever think it might not be the one she wants? If you truly want her to be happy, to live her life, and pick who she wants in it, you have to *allow her to choose it!*”

Savage abruptly released him and walked into the kitchen. “Idiot fox, haven’t you ever read any literature? This is the oldest, most common theme there is! The protagonist—that’s you—selfishly decides what’s best for another—that’s Hopps—and sacrifices himself and their happiness to his chosen end!” He yanked open the fridge. “I need that damn beer.”

Nick sat stunned, and watched the hare rummage in the fridge. He pulled out a box and lifted the lid briefly before putting it back. “I see you like carrot cake Wilde; expecting a special guest?” he said before Nick could summon the words to object. Savage took his beer.

“It’s nothing like that you...we’re friends! We have a movie night once in awhile,” Nick forced his next words through gritted teeth. “How dare you assume what she wants Savage, you can’t possibly know what she feels about me!” He wanted to heave the prying agent out the window—it
was higher up—but a weakness inside kept him rooted to the sofa.

“Those that are closest together are often the last ones to see it or admit it,” the hare said precisely as he tossed another bottle over—Nick’s brainstem caught it for him. “If I can see it, it’s definitely there; Skye’s convinced it’s already foregone.” Savage adroitly pried off the cap with his teeth and sat back down—deliberately beside him as he unconcernedly took a swig from his beer.

You wanted this fox; you both sought kindred spirits to unburden yourselves on. “Guess I needed to be pushed into some self-analysis, Savage. Still sucks.” Nick’s defensive anger melted away as quickly as it had come—chased by...hope. Somehow, faced by intractable circumstances, these two had not only made their relationship work, but also wanted to help with his...ours. He hoped that Judy’s visit with Win...Skye, would go smoothly.

“What we’ve each got is a tough thing to maintain in this society, Wilde. But it’s oh so worth it. If you ever decide we can be friends, call me Jack—you need that opened?”

Nick quickly popped his own cap to prove he wasn’t completely ineffectual. “To friends, I’m just Nick; Nicholas is reserved for Mom.”

“Yes, I recall hearing that from your Judy. I’m curious as to how you two met?”

“This little bunny cop profiled me on the street and I hustled her out of twenty bucks. Then later, she hustled a lead out of me on the case that made her famous. Then the usual—adventures, mob entanglements, chases, prison cell, exploding subway car, and getting shot. Then she waved a paw, and presto, I’m a cop too. Your turn Jack.”

“Sounds like a real rescue romance—that’s another literary trope—which one of you did the rescuing?”

“We both did. We’re still arguing about whose meant more—hers did, whatever she says. Still your turn.”

“Nothing quite so dramatic; I was just finishing up what was about to be one of the best days of my life. Skye walked over to my desk and asked me out on a date.”

“That doesn’t happen; my type or not, she’s hot by fox standards! Seriously, Jack, I mean fox Goddess hot! You didn’t do anything to...ah try to encourage that?”

“Nothing at all, I knew little more than her name at the time. Many others were aware of her of course. You should see her in full winter coat. Skye had a few advertising contracts back in the day. Mostly smaller print and packaging ones, she didn’t have much temperament for live modeling. Something about biting the heads off of the other talent as I recall,” Jack said and grinned. “She went to college off the residuals from her beer contract before she was accepted at the ZBI.”

Nick was incredulous. “Your Skye was the Borealis Beer Fox! Except for her, you’re going to be hated by every fox on the planet until the end of time if this gets out!”

“Except one other. That’s what convinced Skye, you didn’t notice her as a vixen. Since you weren’t dead, obviously you’d already found your soulmate.”

Nick knew he was a lost cause romantically, he was Judy’s. But hearing it confirmed so easily by
another...? He thought he’d carefully hidden his deepest self away, but now realized he’d botched it. The Snarlbuck’s barista had been an unheeded warning about his changed behavior—which had been so obvious to everyone except him. Jack and Skye had seen it immediately; Clawhauser patiently awaited its confirmation; had Judy noticed?” As far as he could tell she thankfully hadn’t, but he couldn’t trust his judgement anymore. He felt a horrible burning eat its way outward from his chest until his fur stood up.

“I don’t know what to do! I can’t allow myself to hurt her!” Nick couldn’t help letting a small whine escape at the end. “Spirits I’m pathetic; can you just go?”

“Not ‘til you get over yourself, Nick. Of course you think you’re the only guy that’s had it this bad.” Jack got up to face him, and Nick let his gaze droop towards the floor—a soft paw under his chin brought it up again to face the hare’s...sympathetic eyes? “She’s a pure innocent; a Goddess that walks the earth. You can only corrupt her. I know, imagine what I had to go through!”

“I am not a headcase Savage! I’m just being realistic about this,” Nick snapped.

“Not really Wilde, you’re head over tail loopy for that bunny and can’t escape it. It’s easier to retreat back into your sacrifice. Wilde, do you think I felt worthy of Skye?”

“You made it work between you somehow.” He’d been pulled back again; that damn hare should have been a therapist, Nick realized.

“Not what I asked for but I’ll answer myself. No I didn’t. I was in utter shock when Skye asked me out—not just for the cross-species aspect of it. This tall ultrafox stood there looking down at me. Foxy is an adjective Wilde; many other mammals consider them quite attractive. That’s why PR and advertising are common and accepted professions for them.

“I think it was sometime after our fourth date, when this suave ZBI agent outside, had just begun to relax inside.” Savage thumped himself. “Skye had mentioned a bit of her background—if you can imagine it, I was too honorable to have looked it up myself—I was in the store and had grabbed a different six-pack of beer because it reminded me of her.”

“And you realized it was her,” Nick said.

“Almost dropped the bottles. Do you remember their slogan back then? ‘Wrap a paw around me!’ I had to wrap my head around the fact that was my girlfriend! Marvelous story and you’re the first soul I’ve been able to tell it to.” Savage took a long swig of beer.

“You seem to be pretty comfortable with her now.”

“Only after Skye ‘corrected’ my perception of our relationship,” Savage grinned wickedly and sat back down, crossed his legs and reclined. “Grabbed my cheeks hard enough to draw blood and said, “Don’t you ever question my judgement in choosing a mate again!” All I had was a scratch—a moment later she was ministering to it—oh, that turned out alright!”

“Too much Savage, I don’t need to hear about any more romantic details right now. Look at yourself, you’re a hare, you’re taller than Judy. Winter’s an Arctic fox, smaller than me. You two might be well over the line, but you’re a reasonable physical match.” Nick’s voice cracked again as he wrapped his muzzle with his paws. “We’re not, I can’t risk hurting her!”

“Physical issues? Shouldn’t be a problem unless you’re worried about your own self-control when
you get to that point.”

“I’m not! It’s that she’s half my size!”

“If you’re afraid of accidentally abusing her, just let her lead... Wilde? Why the fear...? I’m sure Judy would help...It’s like you nev... Oh crap...Sorry.”

“Go ahead! Just strip my soul bare, Savage,” Nick growled. “Can’t you leave Judy out of this; why would you assume she’d ever...”

Be realistic! Your Judy is a rabbit. We lagomorphs have a reputation for a reason. A majority of us have probably had a half-dozen lovers by the time we got out of high school!”

“She didn’t!” Nick snarled deep in his throat as he rose, chest heaving, ears flat, and bared his claws at Savage. “How dare you insinuate that...” Savage was also up in a wary stance. Be. In. Control. Fox. Nick willed. He managed to lower his arms, but the claws stayed out.

“So then you’re both a couple of fumbling fifteen year olds,” the hare finally said in calm amazement. “Perhaps I exaggerated, but it’s obvious that at least your parents didn’t do their jobs.”

Nick stared, until the hare added, “Give you The Talk, Wilde. Sit down, you need this.” Nick deflated until he feared he’d shrink away to nothing. A minute crawled agonizingly by.

“Right now Savage, I’d jump out my window if it was a few floors higher.” A little admiration for the agent’s manner made itself known. No one had gotten to him like this for...since Carrots did.

“No. No they didn’t. My dad...left when I was about six; mom never knew why or wouldn’t tell me. I eventually fell in with types she disapproved of and left myself before I finished school.”

“Sav...Jack, I’ve always tried to be independent. It’s who I’d made myself be. A lifelong lie I’ve told myself—alone isn’t a life. I always had mom, then Finnick and Vance allowed me a place if I’d finish school, then when I thought I finally had independence and control over my life, Carrots came along and shattered it, and now I’ve got a ZBI agent dragging this confession out of me.” He drained the rest of his beer.

“Well, at least you’re cooperating Mr. Wilde. Carrots? You ever call her that to her face?”

“It was an insult the first few times; now she expects it from me. If I call her Judy it makes her worry.”

“So neither your mom or any siblings gave you guidance either?”

“No, not about that, and I’m an only with no other relatives that I know of. Have a vague memory of my parents talking about another kit, then nothing. I think I was four. Otherwise just talk and a few experiences I’d rather not relate—none got serious.”

“Whatever you’ve picked up on the street or elsewhere doesn’t matter anyway Nick, your problem isn’t with other foxes. You’re desperate to know if your chosen can be a mate. She can, assuming she doesn’t find you hopeless. Curl your fingers up in the palm of your paw. Baby bunnies and hares are bigger than that lump—and the mothers have no problem having lots of them! So unless you are built like a wolf, you two won’t have any physical issues. So my son; be considerate,
tender, and patient with your love—now your talk is over because it reminds daddy of his own past performance anxiety!” Jack finished off his bottle.

The revelation that Jack’s fears might have been worse smothered any residual animosity he had for the emotional vivisection performed on him by the hare. He feared any harm he might cause to Judy, of course, but it was horrible to imagine the ego-rending trauma to be dispensed by a...disappointed Skye. The two agents had risked nearly everything for each other, had recognized his and Judy’s situation, and wanted to help. There was a debt.

“Jack, thanks for...the trust and advice, I...maybe...needed to hear that, but you have no idea how thoroughly embarrassed I am right now.” His ears insisted on remaining flat.

“It’s worth it Nick—if it prevents you from doing something stupid with your futures.”

“I have to know, how did you stay calm when I so wanted to attack you!”

If you had, it would have disillusioned your Judy when she heard of it, and I was sure you couldn’t bear that. Glad I was right, I’d hate to beat up a friend.”

“I didn’t remember the martial arts thing. About that, are those fur markings real?”

“As real as the rest of me, similar patterns are common in my family. Although...I do have to touch this one up with some dye to maintain the symmetry!” Jack reached and brushed the upper dark wedge on his right cheek. We alpha males have to maintain the image!”

“Jack, you did better than I did tonight. You gave me the reality check. But understand this! Judy’s not ready for that, she’s still establishing herself here, you both need to go slow with her. She’s not...emotionally obsessed like I am. I’ll wait as long as I have to for her.”

“Of course we will, besides, Skye thinks you two are kinda adorable when you try to stay aloof. Assume a meeting here tomorrow as soon as we learn anything. I’ll text the time. Let’s keep the electronic communications to a minimum, it’s a good habit. Well friend, it’s late.”

Nick turned off his lights after the agent’s departure; modern life usually interfered with his nocturnal proclivities, and he needed the comforting cloak of at least some darkness right now. The city glow from the kitchen window was augmented by a rhombus of white skewed across part of the countertop and against the wall.

He walked over and leaned into the cold light. A waning gibbous moon had just cleared the adjacent building, and sat in the gap between two trees. Its full pattern of dark markings wasn’t visible due to the phase, but he remembered it—The Rabbit in the Moon.

Bunnies everywhere were inordinately proud of their celestial affirmation. It might still hold a more spiritual connotation for some of them. As a nocturnal, Nick had often just watched the moonlight—there was a beauty to it—particularly when the moon floated behind edge-lit clouds. The moon bunny had always been just a mild curiosity; he didn’t recall that Judy had ever mentioned it to him. From now on, he knew it would be more meaningful. He wondered if that was something he shared with Skye.

Other mammals often swore by, or with, a Great Spirit or Spirits of life that watched over all. Some still held to their ancient species-specific deities. There was even an annoying in-your-muzzle-proselytizing group that followed an idealized pan-mammalian entity that everyone normal detested.
as a grotesque contrivance.

Nick decided it wouldn’t hurt to entreat the Rabbit Goddess the next time he saw her.
That stuck-up eland has a split seam on his ass, should we tell him? Judy smiled as she read Skye’s refined cursive script. She had no sympathy for the large antelope; he’d seated them with discernable condescension in his voice. She carefully wrote her reply in the vixen’s notepad and slid it back.

No one else has, be fun to see him find out himself. Think he’ll notice b4 we go?

“You’re such an outstanding public servant Judy,” said Skye before she delicately mopped up some remaining sauce with her last piece of bread.

Judy had to admit the agent’s idea had been a good one. Every time she and Nick were in a public place, but out of uniform, they always collected a few offended or rude looks from others. But two females with a notebook and pen to provide a business-like air were accepted—even if they were a fox and rabbit.

It was an unfortunate fact-of-life that their two species had to resort to misdirection and camouflage to justify their public association with each other. Such was the power of the divide between ex predators and their ancient prey even today.

That prejudice had been a subtle undercurrent of Judy’s life back in Bunnyburrow; certain species always found it was made uncomfortable for them if they lived too close to town. However, even they didn’t have it as bad as that one most distrusted species in rural areas—strangers.

Later, her humiliation at Nick’s paws on her first day of work in Zootopia had been merely a foretaste of the disillusionment to come. More species in the big city just meant more opportunities for intolerance, although the greater chance of embarrassing public exposure tended to make it less overt.

The check arrived on its little tray; placed exactly between them. Skye waved Judy’s paw away with an almost Nickish smirk.

“Government expense account Hopps, so you’ve already paid for it!” The debit card Skye produced was plain enough to confirm that.

So had some other mammals, Judy knew; this was the first menu she’d seen that just rounded the price to the nearest even dollar. Her admittedly excellent artisan salad had been a 26. Embarrassingly, this restaurant had also pointed out how she still relied on others to find good places. Skye had suggested a nice dinner, then had to look this place up on her tablet when confronted by Judy’s equal unfamiliarity with available Zootopian cuisine.

As they went out past the greeter’s podium by the doors, Skye commented clearly on the refreshing breeze they would have on the way back. The concierge remained clueless and the only things that actually stirred were a few quizzical heads turned in their direction. Judy spotted one that wore a slight smile out of the corner of her eye—they’d passed the baton.
The restaurant was near one end of a two-block long, upscale pedestrian shopping and entertainment arcade. Judy may have seen it during her city orientation, but not remembered that it was barely three miles further along the boulevard that passed a block from her apartment. There were large areas of Zootopia outside of her normal patrol area still mostly unexplored after over a year on the job. Would she ever throw off her country bunny outlook and fully adapt to the intensity of life here? After this last week, she seriously wondered if she ever could.

Skye, at least, was going out of her way to not add to the pressure. Two hours ago, she’d still been Agent Winter. Now she was openly friendly and relaxed, and although Judy knew that the ZBI fox would eventually return to her agenda, she would enjoy every minute of the peace before they did.

The crowds thinned quickly after they’d walked past the parking structure and subway station entrance at the corner. They’d taken it here, two stops from Savanna Central, but the now pleasantly cool evening invited a leisurely stroll back. For several minutes they did just that, until the sun had settled and distorted into a molten blob just above the horizon behind them to their right. Long diagonal shadows Zebra striped the avenue in front of them.

“Hopps? I think we’re being tracked.”

“That weird looking deer a block back on the other side of the street? I wondered about him too. Trying too hard not to be noticed.”

“He’s hung back, but definitely following us.” Skye pulled out her iPhone and angled it without turning her head. “Sun’s not helping.” She checked again when a building shaded it. “There he goes. Crossing over to our side. Why don’t you take that next street and we’ll see which one of us he’s interested in. Probably me; no offence Judy but I look a bit more prosperous.”

She gave Skye a little smile of acquiescence. She didn’t have anything very formal outside of her dress uniform—her present skirt and top evoked wholesome rather than sophisticated. She casually waved to the fox and walked up the residential side street—using the agent’s cellphone trick to watch behind her.

Judy lagged to not put too much distance between them, but picked up the pace a bit when the deer appeared. He did look up the street at her, then continued after Skye. As soon as he was out of sight, she spun about and dashed back down towards the main street. She slowed near the corner, and gave Clawhauser a call, but another voice answered.

Right, it’s after seven. “Maitland? Officer Judy Hopps. I’m on foot, thirty-two hundred-block West Walnut, need back-up for a possible two-eleven. Suspect is a medium-sized deer in a charcoal blazer with lighter pockets. Following a female fox, dark dress, she’s also L.E.”

“Got it, wait a sec... Unit in area, ETA two minutes.”

Judy peeked around the corner of the building to find the deer closing on Skye halfway down the block. Something glinted in his hoof. Further along, a shorter, thickset mammal in a hoodie sat on a bench looking across the street. Traffic was moderate and no one else was close. The deer wasn’t looking around, so Judy leaped onto the sidewalk and ran in pursuit while pulling out the only piece of police gear she’d carried that evening—her badge.

The mammal on the bench got up as Skye approached and stepped towards her. Judy swerved to keep the deer and fox between her and the likely accomplice. They were all going to converge on Skye at nearly the same time—the vixen held her arm out slightly and let her handbag sway.
enticingly.

Judy got the couple of seconds of cover she needed. The deer slowed, unnerved by Skye’s negligent behavior, and the accomplice shouted a muffled warning.

“ZPD! Freeze!” Judy made ready to jump as the deer turned towards her—he wore a bandanna over his muzzle and stepped towards her to throw off her timing. He ripped the cloth off his face to expose a scarily impressive pair of curved fangs and made a high pitched strangled bray. His hoof with the object came up...

“ZBI! Drop it!” His head turned again to the perfectly timed distraction—Judy aborted her leap and slid along the ground—she rolled her hip into one of his high ankle joints and folded it back. He started to collapse, then was propelled over her; borne to the ground by a tightly cinched vixen backpack.

Siren and engine noise—gasp of expelled air from the deer as he hit, then hunched to try to throw Skye off—Judy pushed herself to her feet as heavier footfalls thudded over.

“That’s quite enough!” A huge white paw pinned the deer down while another offered Skye an assist up. “Ma’am. Oh, would you mind Hopps? This one looks kinda fragile,” said the glacial mass of Officer Snarlov. Judy retrieved the polar bear’s smaller set of pawcuffs from his belt and restrained the quivering deer’s narrow arms.

Skye pointed out the accomplice, who was edging away in a shocked bystander act—a look and beckoning finger from Officer Jackson commanded the beaver’s compliance and he soon had his own set of cuffs. The tiger officer picked up the far smaller mammal and set him on the sidewalk next to the deer. “You have the right to remain...”

“I think this is just a multi-tool,” Snarlov said, holding the deer’s slip-on prosthetic device over one finger. “Could be used as a strap cutter. There was an assault and snatch around noon not too far from here. Only a vague description from the victim, but he fits it.”

“I didn’t do anything! These two jumped me as soon as I tried to walk past them!”

“Remember what the big kitty said. So far, I think we’ve got stalking, brandishing, we might get assault with a deadly weapon to stick, since your nose daggers don’t appear to have been blunted—plus this thing.” Snarlov twirled his finger. “That’s just this incident.”

“You can’t prove intent and that’s not a weapon! Piece of crap doesn’t even work right. We didn’t assault anybody, they overreacted,” the deer said more confidently.

“Thank you for confirming that you work together,” Judy said. The beaver sighed, while the deer flinched at his slip-up.

“I wouldn’t worry about what the ZPD wants to do,” Skye told the glowering deer. “You resisted my lawful arrest based upon suspicious behavior”—she flipped open her badge holder—“which makes this an assault on a Federal Agent.”

“You jumped me! I didn’t even... Oh crap.” The realization that his statements were meaningless and they could charge him as they wished hit the deer and transformed him into the frightened youth he was. He was hoisted to his feet and urged towards the car.
Judy followed them with a paw on the beaver’s arm—his eyes widened when he saw her badge held in the other. “She said ZPD! Max, you got taken out by the bunny cop!” The beaver quailed at the glare he got, as anger and humiliation sublimated off the deer.

“Hey Russ,” Snarlov said while his tiger partner placed the suspects in the back of their cruiser, “that dude’s fangs are longer than yours!”

“Skinny, brittle things,” Jackson replied, and briefly exposed his more substantial pairs. He got in the back as well to allow Judy and Skye his seat for the ride to the precinct.

“I’ll admit I got a scare when I saw those, what is he?” Judy asked Snarlov as they pulled away.

“Musk deer, Hopps,” he said. “They’re startling the first time you see one, they’re rare in Zootopia, come from Asia. Most folks know about them from a slasher movie that featured one a few years ago. And if you’re wondering, I think it’s just the males.”

Less than half an hour sufficed for booking, helping to write the report, and retrieving a clean shirt from her locker. She couldn’t do anything about the smear on her skirt; the sidewalk had been rough enough to likely damage the fabric. Skye, somehow, had managed to tackle the suspect without mussing anything. They exchanged waves with Maitland before the two victorious females exited into the night.

“I hope for the sake of your skills Judy, that there are some competent criminals in this city,” Skye said in an amused tone. They’d thankfully retained their post dinner good mood.

“I’m learning to appreciate the easy ones. Likely a couple of dropout amateurs,” Judy confirmed. “Right out in the open being obvious instead of in a crowd getting lost in the confusion. Probably not good enough for a regular gang so they formed their own. They don’t pick this life because they’re smart, but they can still hurt people. Thanks for the great distraction Skye!”

“You too, he was done before we touched him. That idiot beaver just stood and watched.”

“Yep, great choice of henchmammal, short and slow. Just wish I could do more than arrest them,” she sighed. The thrill of the chase had slowly waned for Judy on the realization that it merely held a few of society’s problems at bay, it didn’t fix them. Even so, she could live with that due to the one spectacular success she’d salvaged from the despondent wreck of her first day on the job. Repairs to her fox had rebuilt a perfect partner—of whatever definition of the word she wanted. Except that if she chose poorly, it could be devastating for both of them.

Skye illustrated that as she walked faster to join the crowd of commuters boarding the tram. For the one stop trip to the station across from Skye’s hotel, they would be lone travelers. Judy was last on, and first off, having sheltered from the crush under the large mammal pawrail near the doors. She loitered a bit to let Skye get to her room first.

Tonight had been tantalizingly close to her frustrated desire for an uncomplicated, elegant evening out with Nick. It’s ok mom—Judy imagined how that unwelcome explanation might go—we’re not going steady yet; I go out with other foxes too! The Hopps matriarch would collapse on the spot; dad’s reaction would leave a crater. For once, she was glad for the two hundred miles of social insulation between Zootopia and her overprotective parents.

She padded silently across the wide lobby; her identity had been hung away with her uniform; here she was just a frumpy gray rabbit to be ignored by the dapper twin antelopes that presided over
reception. The anonymous lapine still took an avoidance path to the elevators that wouldn’t reveal her smudged skirt to them.

Room 420’s door was ajar with a Do-Not-Disturb tag on the handle. Judy entered and closed it behind her to find Skye at the far window of a space almost three times the size of her apartment. Most of the sumptuous furniture indicated that it was for mid-size mammals, but the bed was large enough to make even Bogo comfortable.

Skye’s wave said ‘look around’—probably triggered by the expression on her face. She just managed to stop herself from reaching to pull her ears down. Good job rabbit, you certainly rose to that country bumpkin stereotype. Judy sighed and looked around anyway, she was curious.

The bathroom was a revelation. The facilities came in two sizes, the smaller nearly perfect for her. The shower was cavernous, both the showerhead and paw spray wand had several massage settings. The communal one at the end of the hall in her building went from ten percent to seventy percent clogged, depending on when somebody had last tried to clean it. Close by, a step-in fur dryer had its own plethora of adjustments. A case on the countertop held a comprehensive grooming kit that even included small sets of fur tints for each of several base colors.

“Go ahead and clean up first Judy,” Skye’s voice came. “I can wait a few.” The bemused bunny winced and closed the door; she must have just stood there for a couple of minutes.

They finally relaxed in overstuffed chairs that Judy had to admit grew on you as you sank deeper into them. They each held a drink from the healthier end of the spectrum provided in the mini-fridge. She’d also managed to transfer most of the dirt ground into her skirt onto one of the bathroom’s pristine towels. She felt some guilt for that, but the various tissues provided had been too flimsy for the job.

“I wonder how much of my paycheck I’d have left after a weekend here,” Judy mused.

“Maybe enough for tips, I expect. First time in a high class hotel?”

“Maybe my sixth time in any place that wasn’t home, a friend’s house, the academy, or the Grand Pangolin Crackerboxes down the street. The rest were where we stayed on family outings and they had names like ‘BunnyBunks.’ Or maybe it was ‘Budget Bunny Bunks.’ That was awhile ago.”

“Sounds utterly charming...oh...” Skye’s sarcasm was quickly followed by a pained look. “I must apologize Judy, sometimes I need to remind myself that mine wasn’t a normal life.” The vixen sighed deeply. “Damn, I had this all planned out.”

They regarded each other for a minute. If the agent had wanted her to relax and open up, why’d she admit her intent? Or was that too a ploy? Don’t overthink this Judy, she told herself. Skye’s either a Nick class manipulator... Or...

“Agent Winter,” she said abruptly, “you were very insistent that we talk alone, today; just tell me why.” The vixen twitched at the use of her name, and Judy decided it wasn’t faked.

“To further develop our working relationship as I said. But I will consider this evening a failure if it ends before I find what I desperately need... A friend.”

“There was a cartoon when I was a kit,” Judy said slowly. “This pig farmer planted a row of seeds, then watered them. As soon as he did, fully ripened vegetables popped right up.”
Skye nodded, then smiled. “If I thought that would work, your face would be in the bathroom sink under the faucet right now.”

Judy had to smile back at the vixen’s absurdity; she was sharp. “So, if you want me as that friend, you’d better explain yourself fully—get to it and I promise I’ll listen.”

“Fair enough Hopps. Now, honest opinion time, what was your first impression of me?”

“In order? Condescending, status conscious, competent, and aloof—I could add arroga...”

“Enough, I know that I just asked for that first one...I’m definitely the “B” word. At least you put competent in there, thanks for that. That’s what the rest of the world always needs to see me as. The reason that I’m here is because I was late to learn that lesson.”

“I assume you don’t mean here, as in your assignment, or Zootopia, do you?” Judy prompted; there had been a hint of resignation in the vixen’s voice.

“You are quite correct, I can also include your continent of Laurentia. I immigrated here from the fair Celtic isles some eight years ago. The far northern part is bleak, but beautiful in its own way; I was raised there in what was known locally as the four families. An estate and landholding continually occupied for three hundred years by four cooperating lineages of foxes. We never rose to great prominence or influence, the area is too sparsely populated for that, but we lived comfortably for most of that time. Well enough that the families took great care to maintain what they had.

“Sarden, Sherwynd, Whinton, Flint; it’s apparent where I belonged, I only had to change a couple of letters. Foxes everywhere put great store in family and fidelity—our own Hebridean culture further reinforced that. Those responsibilities are not lightly slighted. We were the smallest family, the only arctic foxes of the four. There were always...concerns about our line’s long-term viability.”

“Did you avoid an unwanted...arrangement?” Judy came alert at the hint of shame. There was a certain familiarity between most does and romance novels and she had read her share.

“Nothing quite that immediate,” Skye said, paw briefly raised, “our traditions aren’t that hidebound, I had choices although there were expectations. I naively...enabled things until impatient concern within the families became severe embarrassment. Judy, I bear more scandals than a daytime drama script; none instigated by me; but I was still the cause.”

“But what happened still forced you from your family?” Judy saw the conflict in the fox.

“Yes, but that was by my choice, not theirs, I ran. Just ran. To this day I’m likely still an unresolved tragic loss for them.” The vixen’s agitation grew, and finally forced her up from the chair to pace around randomly behind it, her tail limp. She stopped and turned back, paws and arms fidgeting. Skye’s feeble efforts towards self-control were painful to watch.

“Officer Hopps, I have to apologize again for my attempt to place my unrealistic expectations onto you. It’s not right for my personal concerns to interfere with yours....”

Judy was up, and came around quickly to gaze closely into Skye’s blue eyes, drawn by the sudden need and sadness there. She took the vixen’s paws into her smaller ones as best she could; held
them for a few seconds, then led Skye back to her chair and sat her down.

“Skye,” Judy said carefully, with the hoped-for reaction, “I said I’d listen, and I’d like you to explain those unrealistic expectations of yours.” She sat, relieved at having squelched the vixen’s likely emotional flash flood. “Your family issue is a bit like my partner...Wilde’s. I was able to...help him resolve it.” Skye perked up at her mention of Nick, and sighed.

“Before I spill everything, and I promise I will, Judy—I’m sorry—this is inexcusable of me but I have to know, and if you choose to answer, so will you. I’ve watched and listened to both of you carefully. Do you have any...int...personal involvement with your fox partner?”

No! No! No! Why that! Oh moldy fungus, who else has seen it? First we have to beat off Clawhauser and now this ZBI fox... A fox, her fox... They’d been cuddled together the whole night just before the weekend—she must have smelled that on one of them!

She’d showered, wasn’t the soap good enough to rid herself of his musk...had Nick? Clothes, she hadn’t done a wash since! Could that have transferred enou....

Skye sat patiently with a steady gaze, waiting for a righteous hammer to fall. She knows. Judy Hopps closed her eyes and confirmed her deepest dirtiest secret with a slow double nod.

“I can keep your confidence, Judy. Has it become a serious relationship?” Skye had tried for a kind voice, but the curiosity was still apparent.

“No! It can’t. I can never let him know how I feel, it would ruin everything...please, you can’t tell him anything!” She was breathing quickly and shallowly. Fear tightened around her, she’d put herself at the mercy of a predatory near stranger. There was no going back.

“I understand, I truly do. Do you know how he feels about you?”

“How can you possibly understand!” Judy’s shout shattered her fear; the pieces spun and immediately fell into a new configuration. Skye did know, her prying interest in them wasn’t prurient, it was personal! And she needed to talk to...me. The symmetry demanded it be real.

“You...and Savage,” her words were very soft, but adequate; Skye smiled and returned her nod. “Really...you barely seemed to tolerate each other,” she said more clearly. “How long have you been...partners?” A stronger word still seemed wrong.

“We exchanged our vows almost three years ago. We are mates, Judy.” Skye paused and watched her with those pure blue eyes. “Spirits, how I love these cute bunny expressions!”

That certainly rendered all of their emotional give-and-take moot—nothing else would have been as effective. Their secrets were shared—fates in each other’s paws...

“You found your friend—I hope we grow to like each other,” Judy acknowledged. “Just don’t let my parents know, they’d explode if they found out I socialized with one fox.”

“You’ve kept your ardor for that one well hidden. Does he hold any for you in return?”

“He’s told me the most important thing in his life is...protecting me.” Embarrassment flushed her ears—Skye was aware of it. “I know he’s in love with me, if I did anything at all to encourage him it would finish both of us!” Judy pulled her flaming ears down—she must look pathetic—she released them and they soon drooped back on their own.
“Judy, this is important, when he told you that, did it sound like a formal declaration—the words are very specific when a fox makes a life avowal to another—they are beautiful and to be cherished when spoken or heard—it can only be done once, and never broken.”

“No, he said that he cared for me and would always be there to protect me, but it didn’t sound ceremonial.” If he had done that, she’d certainly have jumped out of her fur—for several reasons.

“That is good, he cares enough to wait for you. This declaration is exclusive to foxes and can be made by either sex at any time; once exchanged by a pair, done together or even years apart, witnesses or not, they are permanently mated. Given the circumstances, and since I’ve made mine, I will tell you enough later for you to recognize and respond to the vows if they happen.”

“Most people know that foxes mate for life, but I had no idea the commitment was so...absolute. I don’t know if I’d be happy or terrified.”

“Both will happen, Judy, and the order matters!” Skye said. “Through this life and the next...”she intoned. “That’s a fragment, but should be enough to convey how serious this is. Not all foxes adhere to this in their lives, and those that don’t will never use the vows. And that leads into the sordid details of my life, if you’re still curious rabbit!”

“Skye, three days ago you were a complete stranger living a thousand miles away—now I’m sitting here telling you my most personal secrets—that I knew I must never reveal to anyone. I’m in shock, not that I did that, but that I’m accepting that I did! And yes, I’m waiting for more! How...” Judy lifted her arms in wonder, as the vixen started to smile.

“Reality is often stranger than fiction, Judy, because fiction has been plausible to be believed. I’m waiting too, little scandal bunny; there’s plenty of time tonight for both of us to spill the good stuff. Our strange reality right here and now just means we are living at a level few experience!” Skye rose and replenished their drinks; her excitement palpable as she returned with ears erect and tail sinuous.

“If you take notes and sell this to a tabloid, I want a percentage!” Skye said with a smirk and pointed quivering finger. “Now, back to me; other foxes consider me to be attractive, the todds find me quite desirable.”

“We’re friends, just say it,” Judy shot back. “A lot of different mammals would kill to look as good as you!” Something flicked across the vixen’s features—enough to cause an immediate pang of regret. She mouthed ‘sorry’ and Skye pushed the moment behind them.

“As a kit living in an isolated area, there weren’t frequent opportunities to socialize with other than family; and my twin sisters were the only ones close to my age. We all, to different degrees, developed somewhat solitary interests. When I came close of age, I attracted great interest from acquaintances outside the family before I was mature enough to navigate those emotional waters. I did not fully learn to properly meet, socialize, or unambiguously signal potential partners—because I didn’t need to! I was always popular, encouraged, and courted at house and regional occasions.”

“Skye, you’re a living romance novel character; your origin, your story, even your name.”

“I know, you haven’t heard half of it yet. Jack’s mentioned that several times; we’re both avid readers, that’s one of the things that brought us together. And to answer those wide purple eyes of yours, none of our old landed families bear ancient titles, so I escaped being a princess. Now—
Skye is a large island near my ancestral home and a traditional name there. I didn’t change it because I liked it; my sisters are Farrah and Feye.”

“What happened to them? Are they still with the family?” Judy thankfully set aside her own rash admission—she wanted to savor every morsel the vixen was willing to vouchsafe. Skye, she was now sure, also needed her bunny confidante.

“They are. Both accepted mates before I left and by now must have given the family what I would not. I was the problematic, reluctant daughter; which somehow only enhanced my desirability to my suitors. Before I fully understood the seriousness of their actions, two had impetuously declared their vows to me. The situation was difficult for weeks and when forced into the open, again due to my naïveté, it resulted in both of them being permanently crippled.”

“That’s horrible! Seriously Skye, how could you live with that!” Judy said in disbelief, then briefly rubbed the base of her ears as if to check their function. “You actually had two suitors duel over you? That still happens over there?”

“No, there was nothing civilized about this. It was raw primitive ferocity when they met. I wasn’t present for it, but was severely...chastised for my role anyway, and kept close to my den for the family’s benefit. When I was reintroduced socially to a carefully vetted prospect, the idiot started to declare his vows publicly. I’m certain he’d decided a quick strike would win him the vulnerable prize. I broke and ran before he finished.

“My family was horrified by his premature attempt, and by my disruption of it—the first was reprehensible, the second almost unforgivable. I was fully aware of that, but couldn’t allow yet another to throw his life at my feet. Our shame was absolute. I packed a case, took my papers and some cash on paw, and left that night.”

“For here? I can’t imagine what it would be like to just move to another land...did you have a place to go...other family?” Judy knew she was the adventurous one in her family, but that abject a leap into the unknown might be the terror that stilled her heart.

“Yes, for here. I couldn’t go back home, and I hadn’t run my emotions out, so I booked foreign passage as soon as I could under a false name—a simple bribe sufficed. Scotia was one place here with a familiar name, but few ships went there. I ended up in Port Catskill, in Nieoward, with nothing but what I carried, and no contacts or prospects. Three days after I arrived and one after attaining my majority, the Spirits bestowed a new life upon me.”

“Your majority?” Judy said curiously.

“Adulthood, I was eighteen, with a temporary visa, dwindling funds, and was desperate to find somewhere better to stay than the port authority terminal. I was reading used newspapers there when a wolf saw me and brought me a single page from his business magazine. He told me I’d want it. There was an agency looking for mammals to do commercial advertisement work. One listing was for an Arctic vixen—but they all had very specific requirements for appearance, experience, and a portfolio.”

“Obviously you got the job Skye; how’d you manage it?” Judy knew, but didn’t want to deny the vixen the pleasure of telling her. Or hers in listening to this movie-worthy drama.

“I have a great power, and that’s when I took control of it. I had enough funds for a simple gray dress and a good professional grooming. I went to the agency without an appointment and told the
impala receptionist that I’d decided to take the job. Ten seconds of staredown, and I’d won. I was sent up and was under contract within the hour. It wasn’t for much, but it was fair. They set me up in the city, took care of my immigration, and found me steady enough work to pay my way through college.”

“How did you know you’d won?” Judy said, still playing her role.

“When she reached for the phone to call her superior—then the way she emphasized the word Fox.” Skye’s grin punctuated it. “I was fortunate, it was a mostly prey run company so my relations with the staff were distant but cordial. Clients were a different matter altogether. I found photo layouts and commercial shoots tolerable, but was repelled by the crude behavior at some corporate events or while modeling. Fortunately, I made enough from my largest customer, a brewery, that I could avoid most of that and concentrate on my studies.”

“You learned to program—I remember you said that got you into the ZBI.” Eagerly, she leaned towards Skye. “Did Savage recruit you? How did you two meet?”

“I had become fascinated with computers when younger, although my exposure to them was very limited. I’d tired quickly of constant public exposure and wanted something challenging and solitary! Computer science was perfect and I had a real talent for it. There was no ZBI recruitment Judy, I was past most of the drama in my life by then. They were just one of many listed positions I applied for after graduation. I believe I was hired because...

“Get to Savage!” She couldn’t help bouncing noticeably in her seat. “You had them fighting over you—you could have chosen anyone you wanted, why him?”

“Hold yourself together, Judy. I don’t need a bunny bomb in here. They’ll make me pay a surcharge to clean the rabbit splatter off the walls.” Frustratingly, Skye folded her paws, settled herself a bit, and made her wait a few seconds.

“Data analysis and programming are not highly visible jobs. Hours hunched over a keyboard and staring at a screen tends not to promote social interaction, which is what I expected. Of course, after my first week at the ZBI, every canid in the agency, plus a few others, was aware of me. It was less overt than it was in my media career, but no less irritating! That unwanted attention is what honed my sterling public personality to the fine edge you described earlier.”

“So I assume agent Savage was professional, inoffensive and above all, patient?” Judy guessed. “How long did he wait? Did you become acquainted on assignments, or...wait, was he the one that trained you for fieldwork?” What she really wanted to find out from Skye, is what drove him to even try! This could be two damaged mammals finding some form of acceptance with each other. That meant they both had issues. Well, she thought, we do too...

“As much fun as it is seeing you stumble around in the dark with your paws out Judy; I don’t want to be cruel!” Skye said with obvious amusement. “Your assumptions might feel plausibly familiar, but are wrong. Jack seemed decent and safe the few times we’d met, since our jobs had no real overlap, and he’d shown no discernable interest in me. One evening I felt a little lonely and didn’t want to just go home. Yes Judy, even me. The wrong kind of popularity can be very isolating! I took a longer route out of the office and although it had mostly thinned out, Jack was at his desk. I walked over and asked him out on a date.”

“Oh sweet peaches! You just did that!” Judy gaped. The full weight of Clawhauser’s joyous obsession with the affairs of others sat on her. “What did he do!”
“My first experience with a complete bunny freeze. I was afraid I’d shorted him out internally! When he recovered I explained that I was tired of the constant social pressure and wanted a simple, safe, no obligations or expectations evening out. I suggested that if he would indulge me, one of us could choose dinner, the other the entertainment.” He thought about it long enough that I worried the Personnel Department would be having a talk with me. He finally said, “you pick dinner fox, as long as it isn’t BloodyBurger!”

“Judy, that was the best date I ever had, except for the later ones! He chose an inexpensive classical music concert at the university, and forestalled any civic disapproval of our pairing with a simple suggestion. He took his seat first, and reacted uncomfortably when I came and sat next to him a couple of minutes later. We were then ignored for the rest of the evening! ”

She couldn’t imagine Nick or herself overcoming their fears enough to have an actual date out like that, subject to public scrutiny. As mixed species patrol officers on the beat, or at lunch together, they were acceptable. As two mammals at an outdoor concert, blended in a crowd, they were fairly invisible. But a fox and rabbit, actively socializing, would draw public ire and exclusion from most decent places.

“So he went along with what you wanted and didn’t try to impress you with anything extravagant,” Judy said, knowing she’d be uncomfortable if someone did that with her.

“He did; I even asked him about that and he said the silliest romantic thing. ‘Didn’t have much choice did I? Classical music—for a classical beauty.’ He also said that he didn’t want where we were, or what we saw to unduly dominate the memory he wanted to keep. I told him to call if he ever needed to reinforce it, and he almost froze up again. I don’t think either of us dated anyone else after that point.”

“Skye, that is the most implausible, over-the-top, sappy romance story I’ve ever heard.” Judy flicked her ears at the vixen. “And I grew up in a community of gossipy rabbits who lived for that stuff! The only reason I’m not ridiculing this tale of yours, is that somehow, I too seem to have a fox in love with me!”

“Oh! Do tell Judy—so you understand now why I wanted us to talk?” Skye’s grin was predatory—in a good way. “Now I know you two are just starting out, and I read about how you worked together on the savage predator case, but I want to know how you met and became friends and where you are now!”

“We certainly weren’t friends when we met! He preyed on my sympathies and inexperience my first day on the force. I’d wanted to be a police officer for years and thought I’d finally made it through hard work, top of my class! At my graduation I find my police academy acceptance was due to a self-serving political agenda as much as my efforts. I was assigned to a precinct that didn’t want me, and shunted into safe, routine, busywork.” She was not going to tell this worldly femme-fatale vixen about her humiliating assignment.

“Top of your academy class is a worthy achievement however you first got there, Judy.”

“Chief Bogo and most of his officers didn’t seem very impressed by it. I knew I was the token bunny. But oh! Judy Hopps was going to prove herself to them! I just needed an offender to arrest. Nick Wilde was the first likely prospect that I spotted—a shifty, conniving fox just like my parents kept warning me about—I followed him and promptly got hustled.”
“So you started from rock-bottom as far as any relationship was concerned,” Skye said evenly, “with a traditional rabbit worldview that maligned foxes. Had you met one before?”

“When I was nine. Kicked one in the face after he pushed me, then got clawed...right here. Freaked out my parents even more than me. We had a bias against foxes, but that’s kinda normal in Bunnyburrow. I just hid mine better than my parents did. They were worried enough, that when I first left home to come to Zootopia, they tried to give me a bunch of anti-fox safety products.”

“Anti-fox Products?” Skye leaned back in genuine shock, eyes wide. “You have those things here? You should have mentioned them when that Badger asked us about the things that divided species!”

“Sorry! I just didn’t think about it,” Judy’s previously alert scandal antennas collapsed behind her head at her own revelation and Skye’s reaction. “Actually, I don’t recall seeing them here at all...they may have only been marketed locally to us scaredy-bunnies.”

“I’d like to get my paws on some of those! That’s the sort of thing we work to shut down; they crop up all too often! The agency actually has a display gallery of those sorts of speciest items.”

“I can do that,” Judy said timidly. “I’ve still got mine—it’s called Fox-Away.” She cringed a bit even though Skye’s expression hadn’t worsened further. “It’s probably a variant of pepper spray, we all carry that and they probably thought mine was just a bunny-sized one without looking at it closely. I kept it as a reminder—it almost permanently destroyed our friendship.”

“Before you get to that, what happened to that poor fox you got in the fight with? I assume he or she was young too?”

“Yes, a local named Gideon. Met him the last time I was home and not only got an apology, but a crucial insight into the savage predator case from him. He’s a baker now and buys stuff from my parent’s farm; so they cooperate. I’m proud that mom and dad listened when I told them how I’d learned to trust my partner Nick, and that like anyone else foxes were fine if you got to know them.”

“I assume that’s as much as they know about your...present situation?” Skye was back to her calmer self. “Don’t collect too many fox friends Judy, they might suffer a relapse!”

“They’re ok with Nick, they met him briefly at his graduation, and they know about the locals like Gid... You won’t be a problem, they’ll never hear about this conversation! Nick’s mom was there, but I don’t recall if they saw her...and Finnick only comes by occa...Oh my.”

“A fennec fox—friend of Nick’s? Uh huh, that makes five of us so far!” The vixen was back to being highly amused. “What do your rabbit friends think about this?”

“Haven’t been home since then,” Judy said, “wouldn’t tell them that anyway.”

“Judy, I mean here.”

“Don’t really have any,” her tiny voice came. “Wait, Trisha works at the 10-7; that’s a cop bar I went to once...officers at the precinct introduced us...but we’re not really friends yet.”

“So your Nick has already introduced you to his mother? And I thought you two said you’d avoided anything serious,” Skye said thoughtfully. “Did she approve of you?”
“It’s not like that! Not at all! It’s diff...Th...that’s a story for Nick to...” *Oh pickles!* She’d made herself appear a complete deviant—well; at least it was to a vixen guilty of that herself.

“It’s starting to sound like your standard bunny upbringing didn’t stick, Judy. You come from that huge family, but seem to be different from most rabbits socially, along with your...needs in life. Perhaps that’s what drew my curiosity; I saw some of myself in you.”

“I’m the unusual one in the warren. I’m taller and leaner than both of my parents, nearly all of the does, and even some bucks. A few of us have wondered if there might be some hare in our background. I was always quite athletic; I’m fast even by rabbit standards. My own dad likes to call me ‘Jude the Dude.’” She got a gekkering laugh out of Skye with that one.

“So Jude the Dude joins the strong arm of the law! There must be something exceptional in your family make-up, the sheer amount of your mother’s...bunny production is daunting to imagine!” Skye looked flustered. “Maybe that’s where most of my maternal urges went.”

“Oh! I’ve so got to explain that! We rabbits are not above some exaggeration and...benign misdirection for the benefit of outsiders.” She watched Skye mouth an ‘oh’ that morphed into an anticipatory smile. “If you ever go to Bunnyburrow, there’s a welcome sign as you come into the train station. It has an outrageous population number on it, and the last few digits keep counting up over and over—it’s a tourist spot that reinforces the ‘multiplying bunnies’ stereotype.” Judy felt sure that Skye would manage to avoid ever seeing that sign.

“There are a lot of very large rabbit families, but they’re usually not organized the way that most assume. Our parental structure isn’t as distinct as that of many other species. Many sets of siblings will remain together and raise their families in a single warren. Obviously, that can get unwieldy after a couple of generations, and younger individuals or groups usually split off to form new ones.

“We Hopps actually are the largest stable family in the region, and prosperous enough to maintain it! My own parents are in the founding line and head the warren, but many of their generation stayed with them along with their mates and offspring. I have sixteen aunts and uncles that divide up the parental duties. We’re close, and like most rabbit warrens, we consider ourselves one communal family. I have to admit, Skye, that I was upset at doctor Barret and decided to mess with him! Didn’t mean to confuse the rest of you.”

“Don’t worry, he just let his curiosity overcome his tact. At least you can call or visit family when you want to. Even so, it must have been hard for a rabbit like you to adjust to living in a new city without any friends. I sympathize because of my own experience, but we foxes can more easily withstand solitude.” Skye somehow rose gracefully from the unstable softness of her chair, and returned to the window to stare at the nighttime cityscape.

“Now, I recall that you told me you’d met Nick Wilde on your first day with the ZPD. I’m curious, how long was it before you overcame your mutual...enmity and were able to work together on the savage predator affair?” Subject changed; Skye came over to face her again.

“It was just a case of several missing mammals at the time. I was assigned to it the day after I’d first...encountered Nick, and by that afternoon I’d found and convinced him to help me follow up a lead he’d furnished. By the next morning, we’d reached an accommodation, and followed another lead that allowed us to find all of the missing mammals by that night. The next day, I ruined everything we’d done together at a televised press conference and *lost him*. I was despondent and resigned from the force a few days later.”
“You sure played into the paws of the anti-pred agenda with that one, rabbit! Makes sense that our little cabal at the ZBI asked Jack to recruit you. Resigned from the ZPD? Never heard you did that. I assume you were reinstated when you two finally broke the…” Skye stopped and neglected to close her mouth.

“You lost him? Judy—did you just tell me that you went from adversarial with, to heartbroken over that fox in three days!” You really are fast for a rabbit! So, you’re still afraid to admit your feelings for each other, but reached an ‘accommodation?’ Jack and I at least had the forbearance to date for several weeks before any...uh...amorous overtures.”

“Noooo!” A rushing filled her ears, she pulled them down over her eyes; a flush crawled through her skin making her fur prick up. Judy forced herself to recall her exact words... Oh Fungus! She must think we’re still coping with the emotional aftermath of a one-night stand! Embarrassment surged; she leaned forward and put her muzzle in her paws. “I didn’t! We didn’t! I’ve never...” She tried to still a tremble.

“Judy? I am so sorry, that was so very presumptuous of me,” Skye said gently. “I believe you—I didn’t realize that you were quite this...vulnerable. Please, come and give me a look.”

She was being...held. Then expert paws moved to gently knead the base of her ears. Judy’s head lifted at the touch; her eyes opened to find Skye’s blue ones filled with concern.

“Thoroughly screwed that one up, didn’t I? Skye said. “Although you must admit rabbit, your friendship did grow rather precipitously for someone who thought that I had the unbelievable romance!” The vixen released Judy’s ears and slid her paws slowly down over shoulders, then arms, palpitating both, before pulling them carefully away. “You’re still so tense; what else do you have bottled up in there? We all have our anxieties, but they’ll just keep compounding unless you can find a way to release them.”

“I’ll handle my share.” Judy forced herself to stand up straight and speak steadily. “You’ve already helped more than you realize—just knowing there’s finally someone I can talk to about my...our social issues. I’d always wondered when I got to this point in life, which of my sisters I’d first confide in. I never expected she’d be a fox.”

“We both badly needed to talk, this fox needs to apologize, and you really need to relax, rabbit. Here’s an idea!” the vixen said with an air of decisiveness. “It was necessary to be self-reliant back on our Hebridean estate, therefore we had our own smith’s shop. I remember being fascinated watching them heat and shape metal. They would bring it to an exact shade of red or orange heat and either quench it for strength, or slowly let it cool to remove the stress. That is called annealing. There is a similar process for overstressed mammals called grooming. When was the last time you had a thorough, relaxing, grooming, Judy?”

“I usually give myself a good going over twice a week or...”

“That doesn’t count and you know it! When was the last time one of your family, or a salon, thoroughly pampered Judy Hopps!” Skye demanded with a dangerous smirk.

“Nine months... Wait! You’re not going...” It was too late, the vixen’s waving tail trailed her to the bathroom. “I can get one later...this isn’t necessary...I can’t expect you to do this for me! Skye!”

“Over there on the corner of the bed rabbit!” Skye had the grooming kit and shooed her out of her
chair. “And I want to see a lot more gray fur before I start! This is what families do for each other, and remember Judy, I’m your fox sister now.” Skye interlaced her fingers, turned her pawpads outward and stretched sumptuously. “On your belly and let your feet hang over the corner.” Skye shifted limbs to her satisfaction. “Don’t you worry, hunny bunny, I already know all of the spots on rabbits!” Paws started to knead her shoulders.

“A massage? Isn’t this a little...much?” Judy said to the bed comforter. *And a fox is doing it,* complained her internal voice, *the wrong fox!*

“You really need this,” Skye’s voice came from close above her. “I can feel it in you. Also, fur can’t be properly groomed unless the substrate is completely relaxed first. I’m going to dissolve every bone you’ve got!”

As the vixen slowly, rapturously, worked her way from one muscle group to the next, Judy had to admit; this was the right way to experience it. As you self-groomed, you knew exactly where, when, how much pressure, direction and speed you’d use for each stroke. With someone else in control, it was all such a delightful mystery!

She had a few moments of anticipatory apprehension—wondering if the fox would really go there. She did, and Judy was gently turned to access her front and face, then scalp—a gentle quiver as ears were first held, then gently rubbed in just the right places. Skye elicited several shudders from her when she delicately dragged the back of a claw along the inside edges of each one. Judy realized that Skye was tailoring her ministrations to the reactions she evoked. As long as she lets me bliss out here...no, I hope as long as I want her doing it!

Judy had an unexpected thrill course through her when Skye tugged on the last bit of modesty she wore—but only by a little to allow a final combing around the base of her tail. Skye left Judy limp and unmoving until she dimmed the lights and returned in her nightwear.

“You stay right there Judy, there’s plenty of space for me. If you need anything, they have twenty-four hour room service! There’s no reason you can’t enjoy a fancy hotel for once!”

“Skye?” Judy roused herself after the vixen had put out the last light. “I’ve never had anyone touch me like that! I was so nervous at first—but you were awesome. Could you help me again in the morning—I need to learn how to do that to a fox!”

Chapter End Notes

As Zootopian history is necessarily totally different than our own, things like place names will be different as well. For landforms I will use modified geological or paleontological nomenclature. Laurentia for North America, Amazonia for South America, as examples.

Fox Vows: Those here are patterned after the more elaborate ones developed by sarsis for his superb “Guardian Blue” series. A must read!

Trisha and the 10-7 bar are an OC and place from BlueLightHouse’s stories. Also highly recommended.

Bunny families: The Hopps are a huge warren. My ‘analysis’ in the Chapter five notes
is valid—you just need to plug several more moms into the equation.
Crossing Paths

Chapter Summary

Some public outreach duty eventually leads Nick to a personal insight about his partner.

Chapter Notes

Well, my very first fanfic has reached a minor milestone: 50,000 words! Nobody told me to start with something simpler and shorter.

Thanks to Disney for letting me play in their copyrighted, all rights reserved sandbox.

Officer Wilde whipped their ZPD cruiser across the asphalt of Oakglen Elementary’s empty playground with lights flashing, gave a blip of the siren, and braked to a stop. Directly in front of them, the school’s central courtyard actually did have several scrub oak trees, with the shaded grass beneath them mostly covered by a gaggle of students. Nick estimated almost one hundred and fifty—fourth through sixth grade, and from less than one foot high to taller than him. They were held well back from the edge of the pavement by a line of teachers.

“It’s ShowTime Carrots!” Nick said brightly to his curiously rejuvenated partner. A nod and they simultaneously opened their doors wide to display the ZPD logos on them—she needed a foot to push hers all the way out. They stepped out smartly and stood at parade rest just beyond them. The staff barricade opened and they were engulfed by the kit amoeba.

His first interlocutor was a young girl porcupine—who could not be crowded out by the others due to the personal zone of avoidance that attended all of her species.

“Have anyone ever killed you!” Miss Prickle asked breathlessly.

Ok, that was a new variation. She’d managed to get the first word in the right place. “Just twice, honey,” Nick said as he crouched down and kept a careful eye on the soccerball of quivering weaponry. “But I got better.”

Nick fielded a few more questions while Miss Prickle stood in confusion from her blown opportunity. Once the instructors had restored a semblance of order and set up a table, he stepped to the rear and opened the hatch to unload their posterboards, law enforcement paraphernalia, and safety brochures. On her side, Carrots was already reading a cuffed miscreant his rights as a smiling teacher waited to give a witness statement.

There was always one. This time it was a bear cub that had tried to clamber into the patrol cruiser—attracted by the lights on the radio scanner and the tape of dramatic police calls that issued from the modified device. He would be placed in the caged back seat until the teachers had the impromptu courtroom set up in the auditorium. These mock arrests and introductions to the justice
system were a popular part of their community outreach visits. When requested, they would send the school advance materials to prepare the students and give the teachers roles to play.

“Mister Gregory Orson, you stand accused of one count each of trespassing on city property, breaking and entering, and interfering with the duties of a police officer,” said the collard peccary prosecutor. “How do you plead?”

“What’s that mean Mrs. Trotstan?”

“You have to tell the court if you’re guilty or innocent of these charges, Gregory,” the compact bovid told the likely fourth grade cub. “Did you do them or not?”

“I hafta be innocent cause I only did one!” Gregory looked indignant as intended—the over-the-top charges just reinforced the sham nature of the trial. This time there was a sheep on the faculty to play the judge—they always looked the part—and he empanelled a snickering jury of the defendant’s peers; several said “guilty” as soon as they were selected. After some histrionics from the prosecution, defense, and witnesses—all identified by placards—the jury returned a verdict of guilty on two counts and not guilty of the B&E.

“Mister Orson. You are sentenced by this court to thirty minutes community service—that service to be concluded once you have helped the officers set up the demonstration on the playground.” The judge enthusiastically slapped a ruler on his podium in lieu of a gavel.

Nick escorted the now grinning cub out of the auditorium, and handed his ‘Bailiff’ sign to ‘Arresting Officer’ Hopps on the way. She did look quite arresting, he thought. He was elated to have his apparently normal bunny back, but perplexed by her casual deflections as to how that had occurred. Something had happened either during her talk with agent Winter, or the one the next day with the contract psychologist that had cleared her return to duty. She had bounced into the bullpen this morning as if the last week hadn’t happened.

“Officer Wilde will now step on the brakes—you’ll see the strobe light on top and the taillights both flash when he does that.” Carrots stood on a chair with the loudhailer, while he sat in the softly idling cruiser with the winner of the safety question contest as a ride-along. He started tapping the brake pedal.

“That’s enough Nick,” crackled the walky-talky. “Get in position.” She hadn’t just preempted his keycode message at “I LO...” earlier she’d casually mentioned the possibility of an ‘exhibition of speed’ citation if he showed too much enthusiasm behind the wheel. He drove carefully around the periphery of the playground and aligned the SUV with the two sets of traffic cones and the inflatable generic pedestrians.

He admired the fetching little flag on her rump from his staging point as she explained the demo. She raised a paw, then dropped it—he gunned the engine briefly, stabilized at twenty miles per hour, and hit the brakes as he passed the first set of cones. He stopped a few feet short of the pneumatic pedestrians with only a mild chirp from the tires.

The student’s thought processes were as predictable as the sunrise. *If he’s gonna go twice as fast this time, it’ll take him twice as far to stop!* They placed a third set of cones at one hundred feet; twice the distance of the second set, and moved the pedestrian figures there. Nick slowly backed into position, and at Carrot’s signal punched it to forty with a squeal from the passenger seat, and a longer louder one from the tires as he slid into the figures and sent them flying.
“Dispatch, kit-one is ten-twenty-four; heading back to the barn.” She’d just asked for it, he knew, as Carrots hung up the microphone and gave the school a farewell wave.

“Ten-four farmbunny and foxtrot,” Clawhauser never disappointed when given an opportunity. “Report to the principle’s office on arrival.” That was expected; Bogo wanted them to maintain the appearance of normalcy, and likely had another routine assignment—or possibly some privileged information.

“Whatja do Wilde, stick her ears together with gum?” said Wolfard’s voice on the radio.

“Just be sure you ditch the booster seats and pedal extenders before you give the kiddycar back to precinct three.” That was his partner Fangmeyer. “And do push the seats back.”

“Don’t want them to have a...diminished view of the stature of our officers,” said a gruff voice, probably McHorn’s. The rhino sat next to them at briefings the same way a mountain sat next to a vacation lodge. He’d been one of the slowest to warm up to the precinct’s smallest officers, and this inclusive condescension showed that they’d finally earned some of his respect. Whether you thought of the ZPD as a pack, herd, skulk, or warren, they’d become a part of it and were being welcomed back. Nick matched his partner’s smile; acceptance by a whole organization was still an unaccustomed state of mind for him.

Then there was Judy. However unnatural, he knew there was no other for him. She had accepted him as partner and her best friend—but based on what Jack had said, plus the night together at his place—she might really want some more. “Let her choose!” the hare had said; but would he have the strength to let her pull him down that path if she did? She’d seemed so comfortable nestled against him, warm, her small paws tightening in her sleep to pull his tail closer...to claim it...him as...

“Earth to Nick! Our corner—left!”

He focused on the road, slowed, and swung into the far-left lane behind a car that immediately put on its turn indicator. “Whoopsie, wandered off into fantasy land there.”

“Sometimes I’d like to be a kit again too,” Judy mused, “takes being an adult to realize how good you had it then. Even in school!” She choked off a laugh; her ears splayed and paws flew to her muzzle. “Sorry Nick! I didn’t think...I just assumed everyb...”

“Steady, Carrots; it’s all right. Mine was mostly good too, until I left and screwed it up. Years later I got lucky and some bunny rescued me.” He let his voice become more serious. “Recently, I thought I’d lost that wonderful bunny; I was so happy to get her back this morning. Who do I thank for finding you—or maybe for writing you the prescription?”

“I’m not on anything, nosy fox. I just finally had a chance to unwind—to get a break.”

“There has to be more to it, and you know I won’t let up until you confess rabbit! A session with the shrink to get reinstated doesn’t sound relaxing, so either the elixir of happiness just hit the market, or maybe you made some kind of...connection with Winter?” Bingo—her eyes widened at the mention of the agent’s name.

“Ok, we had a nice dinner and a good long talk afterwards. She’s actually pretty cool if you take the time to get to know her,” his bunny companion said a little too casually.
“With an arrest in the middle for dessert.” Nick pulled into the precinct lot and parked over by the small maintenance bay. He shut off the engine, and gave her his full attention. She signaled her acquiescence with a half-smile and winsome little sigh.

“We didn’t expect that, but it was a great ice breaker! Messed up my best skirt. All right Nick—one we’d talked, Skye suggested we relax at the groomer’s. We actually found one that wasn’t just open late, but had a rabbit specialist! Nick, it was so wonderful! I’d never been groomed quite like that before—it’s been months since my last by someone else; and that was with my sister Emily. Skye was so considerate! She was stuck with a trainee, but said she didn’t mind since she was still shedding,” Judy’s eyes were shining, and she looked a bit...hopeful. Hmmm.

“Was this an establishment we’re both already familiar with, dear Carrots?” Nick tilted his muzzle down a trifle and pricked his ears at her.

“No! It wasn’t that place...that...Mystic Spring one. This one was reputable, first class!”

“Sounds good; and they don’t seem to mind fox walk-ins. Maybe I can try it out one of these days.” Nick was rewarded by a distinct nose twitch and cant of ear from a caught-out bunny. *Hafta file that one for future use,* he noted. Ok, she’s softened up, but not really upset, that’s good.

“Anything interesting come up in your discussion with...did I hear she’s Skye now?” Another nose twitch, a pause, then sudden animation.

“She’s quite interesting and actually comes from overseas! With her background, you’d never expect her to end up with the ZBI. And yes, I seem to have found another fox friend; she’s Skye and I’m Judy now!”

“I thought she had an accent—though she covers it well. Seems like you two females got beyond just business and maybe touched on friends and family?” Her eyes widened even further as he aligned his muzzle with hers and leaned to slowly close the distance. “Did foxy mention anything...scandalous!” He watched the certainty slowly spread across her face.

“You know,” Judy said firmly. “You’ve already talked with...”

“Savage. Yeah, he told me they’re mates. I sensed something between them before, but didn’t believe it at first. Didn’t even have to say much before he opened up.”

“At least you had some idea, I was hit all at once when Skye got curious about us, and I realized that’s why she wanted to talk to me so badly. They’re not just alone within the ZBI Nick, I think they’ve totally isolated themselves socially!”

“Probably had to; who would approve of them? So they met us and saw themselves—a sudden opportunity to relate and be accepted. I’m certain we’re the only ones that know—Savage seemed so relieved once he admitted it. Carrots, I’m still amazed they just assumed we shared a bond like theirs! What did they see?” Her suddenly crestfallen face stopped him.

*Thin ice fox! No time to analyze, Back—Away—Slowly!

“Sooo, anyway,” Nick said more tersely than he’d intended, “they’ve revealed everything about themselves to us, but we shouldn’t until we first decide how we’ll...present ourselves.” The dejection on her face contracted further into raw pain in her eyes; *better drop this!* “Let’s see the chief now before he gets suspicious and makes his own assumptions!” She was out of her door before he unlatched his.
Judy bolted for the back entrance as he strolled behind to give her time. He’d just wait near the ladies room until she composed herself. She so worried about how they appeared together in public...but that couldn’t be enough to make her look so...hurt. Somehow, the two agents admitted relationship had really affected...

The rear door’s inset window reflected a thoughtful red fox officer’s face as he reached for its handle—and stopped. “Those that are closest together are the last to see.” Nick had the singular experience of watching himself at the exact moment that he realized her pain had mirrored his perfectly. She’d hidden it like him; she’d hurt like him; she was...maybe she couldn’t admit it yet, but as he’d chosen her—she’d also chosen him!

The reflective fox jumped aside as Nick opened the door and willed himself to walk down the hall without leaping and yipping in joy. He caught up with his true partner as she left the room of requirement—she turned to give him a brief glance, which became a look of surprise as he maintained it with a gentle finger under her modest chin.

“You’re right, we gotta...keep this mum!” she gasped before her voice steadied. “He’ll bust every window in the station if he hears us!” she fervently whispered. They both quickly scanned the thankfully empty and silent hallway.

“I am pleased that the two of you are apparently fit for duty again,” chief Bogo said with an appraising look. “Who should I thank for this state of affairs? The ZBI, or the West Savanna Unified School District?”

“Sir, If anyone’s going to eventually save Zootopia from itself, it’s the kits,” Judy said through her still broad smile. “We both just needed the reminder.”

“I didn’t realize that elementary school duty could be this therapeutic for my officers. Were you able to accommodate yourselves with Winter and Savage?” That came with more penetrating scrutiny from the cape buffalo.

“Yes sir; we’ll make a good team,” Nick said carefully. “We’re very comfortable together now.” Carrots gave an affirmative nod from beside him in Bogo’s office hot seat.

“That phrase still concerns me, Wilde. Your own partnership already attracts notice; I did not expect to deal with a second so analogous. I expect you all will avoid any possible personal issues that will affect your performances?”
“I guarantee sir, there will be nothing of the sort between the ZPD and the ZBI,” Judy clarified briskly. Nick kept silent and avoided the perils of further explanation.

“Humph! Just try to restrain Wilde’s behavior. I would prefer that the ZBI retain a professional impression of this department.” Chief Bogo picked up a thin report from his desk and waved it slightly at him. “An internal matter has come to my attention that concerns Officer Wilde; give us a few minutes first, Hopps.”

“She can stay sir,” Nick said evenly, “I have nothing to hide from my partner.” Bogo’s eyes widened slightly, as the smaller of the two officers hadn’t even moved to leave.

“Very well; this concerns your application to the Zootopia Police Academy eight months ago. That, as we all remember, was a rather rushed affair to get you accepted in time for the fall class of cadets. One requirement was to attach three official recommendations; due to your past, we only had Hopps’s and mine. I was prepared to write a temporary waiver for the last, as I doubted the new interim mayor or council would respond in time. I now regret that due to the chaos back then, I hastily accepted the fortuitous arrival of a reference…”

“From the ZBI,” Nick stated. The look on Judy and Bogo’s faces was curiously similar in spite of species and size differences. “Agent Savage mentioned it to me the other night, but didn’t reveal whose it was.”

A wisp of bovine breath washed over them as the chief stood and held out the report for him. “The ZBI has just withdrawn their prior endorsement based on the discovery of an apparent bribe made on your behalf. I am certain Wilde, that its source will be traced back either to you, or a past unsavory associate of yours. Now, before you look at the name on this report, understand that you still have my full confidence!”

His recommendation was a succinct two-paragraph endorsement signed by—S. Winter, ZBI Information Directorate, plus an official seal. A needlessly large outlined ‘RESCINDED’ was stamped across it. He felt Carrots reaction through the seat as she saw Skye’s name, although she stayed silent and kept reading. The rest of the confidential report noted the agent’s likely connection to financial irregularities still under investigation. There was a distinct scent of fishmarket to this.

“Chief Bogo, they’re setting both of them up now!” Judy said. “Because they’re foxes?”

“Winter also agrees, and yes,” the buffalo said quietly, “This does match the one in Wilde’s file, and I gave her a copy of this report not two hours ago. I expect you will have a rather interesting discussion with her tonight. It appears that at least this one of our adversary’s schemes started before our two agents suspected anything amiss at the ZBI, and may overlap with your solving of the savage predator crisis.”

“Chief? Did Skye say why she issued this?” Nick dismissively flipped it back onto Bogo’s desk. “Was she instructed to?” He suddenly felt hollow inside—Skye had sensed a set-up before and avoided it; Jack mentioned that others had been set up too. But why would they plant something through her, to be useful against him before he was even in law enforcement? Then they decided to keep it in reserve until now….

“She was Wilde, which implies that someone close to us, likely in city hall, shares the ZBI conspirator’s agenda and watched for opportunities. Only a few of us back then knew of your
intentions to join this department. There are far too many possibilities suggested by the prior and present timings of this, and of why an apparently still ongoing ZBI investigation was even revealed to me.” Chief Bogo looked pensive, then pinched a paper scrap off his desk.

“This all needs to be kept well away from Savanna Central; we have to assume the city’s agencies are as compromised as the ZBI. The appearance of routine activities is our best protection—I don’t want to see you here beyond them! If I need to be informed Wilde, be a wiseass. You five have a substantial set of circumstances to unravel together, meet at this location, six tonight, and dinner will be served.” Bogo extended his burly arm.

Nick got out of the chair and took the folded sticky note from the chief’s hoof, peeled it open and examined the cryptic address. He nodded to the chief. “Got it. Who’s our fifth subversive?” Bogo had to have a good reason to want to expand their clandestine group.

“The instigator of our involvement in this whole mess. Doctor Soren has convinced me of her utility and right to be included. Until then, set aside any individual speculations as I have a new assignment for you both.” The chief proffered another folder.

“This should be a simple follow-up to our recent recovery of stolen property from the AblePaws corporation,” Bogo continued. “Their management now thinks that may have involved industrial espionage by a competitor. This is a prominent predator owned manufacturer, and I am concerned that there might be more than coincidence involved. Find out if this is just a business issue, or if there are any broader connections. They’re in the South Savanna industrial zone, across from the Riverside ZTA station. Use the cover that you’re there to do some product evaluation for us. Dismissed,” Bogo said wearily.

AblePaws Inc. turned out to be a modest four-story office block adjoining two large tilt-up concrete commercial buildings—all in a fairly clean, decently landscaped area. Carrots’ face had betrayed her expectation of finding something more akin to a steel mill.

Bogo’s justification quickly got them sent up the elevator, where an elegantly dressed young lynx was waiting for them. She led them into an executive office where a remarkably similar older version rose to greet them. Both females were taller than he was.

“Thank you Cassie. See if you can find Ross, then tell marketing they have another hour to brainstorm before I’m done here. Thank you for coming officers, I’m Sandra Pouncet, owner and CEO of AblePaws.” She came around a desk cluttered enough to show her active involvement in operations, and nodded in recognition at Carrots. “I did not expect that our complaint would rate a visit from our illustrious Officer Hopps!” Carrots responded with a demure smile, so Nick introduced himself before the door reopened to admit an otter lugging a briefcase. “And this is Ross Stillwater, our head production engineer. Please, be seated.”

“I am afraid,” the lynx began, “that our problems did not end with your recovery of our property last month. That was just the beginning of them. I’m certain that someone unknown, for reasons I cannot fathom, is trying to ruin our reputation and drive down our market share!” Ms. Pouncet fiddled briefly with one of her ear tassels, then caught herself.

“Our report implies that you thought one of your competitors would be responsible for this,”
Carrots said, opening the folder. “But you seem unwilling to go with that now.”

“I do officer Hopps, for good reason. This will require some background if you’ll bear with me. There are only three major firms that make augmentation prosthetics. We are the technological leaders by far, and make high-end custom products for a broad range of mid-sized and a few smaller mammals. We sell mostly to government agencies, businesses, research and medical professionals, and affluent individuals. We hold one quarter of the total market.” The lynx rose, and stepped back to her desk with a rapid grace that belied her age. She scooped up and passed them a few brochures. “That one is ours,” she said proudly.

“These cost as much as some cars!” Judy gasped as her face went protean. Nick managed to stifle any reaction to her precious expressions lest he pay for it later.

“And they’re worth every dollar because we measure and custom build for the individual. Now, that gaudier catalog is from Empower Incorporated, which holds seventy percent of the market. Theirs are generic mass-produced products widely advertised and sold in retail shops and on-line. They do not have the versatility we offer, or the technical and manufacturing ability to compete with any part of our market.”

Nick leafed through the list of products for the everymammal—with wince-worthy monikers like —Capabilizer, Accessible Ewe, Sowlutions, Seize your Deftiny, and from that horrible ad, The Clasper!

“The third is Dextron Manufacturing. They specialize in very large mammals only— above equine. They hold five percent of the market, and we barely compete at all with them.

“You don’t try to cover your prosthetics at all, I see,” Judy commented, as she continued to look at the brochure wide eyed. “These look so mechanical compared to theirs.”

“Would you put fur on a hammer or pliers? These are tools, and we don’t compromise their functionality!” Pouncet smiled at the otter. “Mr. Stillwater?”

They were given examples from his case. Nick was surprised at how small and light his was, and the delicate articulated parts evoked watchmaker rather than car mechanic. He stuck a finger into the contoured sleeve, and was able to move a few parts.

“These are from our Microfast line; note the quick change effector heads. They are popular with artisans, surgeons, and hi-tech industries. This one is a Holdfast example for professional chefs. It helps prevent scalds, and has an infra-red sensor here; you only have to point at the inside of an oven, or the contents of a pot to determine its exact temperature!”

Mr. Stillwater placed another unit on his paw and deftly twirled a pen about with the softly clicking mechanical digits—which had Nick wondering if there was a cardsharp model. From Carrots rapt gaze, this one was apparently designed to hypnotize rabbits.

“These are demonstration models similar to the ones stolen from our Palm Galleria display store.” Pouncet raise her voice slightly to get them back on track. “The thieves likely found them unfenceable as they are both serialized, and were mounted on display sleeves. Remember, our actuators and control sleeves are customized for the individual—the stolen items were not fully functional.” She waved a paw at the otter.

“That was what we assumed until recently,” said Stillwater. He pulled more devices out of the
briefcase. “These are two of the actual stolen items. We now know they were partially disassembled, deliberately degraded, then reassembled before their recovery. Skilled people did this. They annealed heat-treated parts—likely in a small induction furnace—so they would wear and fail prematurely! We only found out when an inspection tech spotted this subtle color banding on the annealed parts.” Stillwater held the AblePaw up in the wedge of sunlight that slanted through the window, and pointed out the tinted flaws with his pen.

“We have also just received our first customer complaints about quality and durability issues. Somehow, more of these altered parts have gotten into our manufacturing stream in spite of our quality controls. This is sophisticated sabotage!” Stillwater said angrily.

“We are not a publicly held company, and our main competitor cannot easily exploit our difficulties, so I don’t see this being done for financial reasons,” Pouncet resumed. “We are taking measures to increase security and inspections, but I don’t know if those will be enough to stop this attack on my company and its reputation! Officers, you need to help us find out who’s doing this to us and why!”

“Ms. Pouncet,” Judy said slowly, “how well-regarded do you consider yourself and your company to be in the community? I mean, do most see you as only a big company, or maybe an exclusive one, or as one run by predators?”

“I see Officer Hopps,” Pouncet looked ill at ease. “We’re socially and commercially quite visible. Due to the high cost of most of our products, and that a large majority of our individual customers are prey species, it’s to our benefit to be seen as supporting various civic causes. We have always been aware that offering a helping paw to our less dexterous customer base engenders some resentment. That’s why we market ourselves as a maker of precision tools, rather than as helping to correct someone’s perceived disability. Do you think that this might somehow still be related to the unpleasantness last summer?”

Clever kitty, Nick thought, as Carrots told her it was possible. These devices were an embarrassing but necessary reality in many mammals’ lives. Some might need one or two on the job, and more had some form of them at home for convenience; but it was still considered shameful by most to be seen using them in public. Particularly for some, if the best ones were from a visibly pred run company. If this was a part of the larger organized anti-pred con—he felt it was more likely since he’d just been set-up too...

“They’re expending way too much effort here just to discredit you or your products Ms. Pouncet, a con like this needs to have a bigger payoff—like your whole company,” Nick concluded. “It’s always the money, probably a product liability insurance scam.”

“We shouldn’t speculate without more evidence Nick, we’re not detectives!” Carrots objected. “We don’t have any idea whose behind this yet.”

“I know...officer Hopps,” he reminded her to watch the familiarity. “But while we’re gathering that evidence, these mammals need to take preventative measures against what I’m afraid is going to happen to them!”

“What would that be and what are your recommendations officer Wilde,” Pouncet said with keen interest. Stillwater stopped putting away his demo items and listened as well.

“Our...adversaries—and I’m afraid this does go far beyond you—are trying to slowly change the general public’s view of your products. Can I assume that you don’t carry a large amount of
“We have product limitation warnings, and customer training is included in the price,” Stillwater said. “We also register our purchasers to control secondary sales,” added Pouncet.

“Here’s how I think it’ll go down,” Nick said as he stood, then dramatically pointed a digit at the floor. “You said your first few customers have started to complain; I’m sure you’ll get more; then maybe in a few weeks you’ll see a story planted in the news to reinforce the word of mouth spread about overpriced junk. That forces you on the defensive to publicly offer repairs or compensation and there goes your rep for quality. The more you try to publicly fight it, the more attention you’ll draw to the issue, and the weaker your position becomes. That’s what they want. This is a long con; they can drag it out as far as they need to.”

“You spin an elaborate conspiracy, Officer Wilde, and imply a ‘they’ more powerful than business competitors or even organized crime,” Pouncet said. “Do you seriously think it’s forces working within the...authorities again?” It was awful what his small nod did to her patterned feline face.

“I agree with the fox,” said Stillwater. “Whoever’s after us seems to have planned this to make it difficult for us to defend ourselves. Any explanations of ours will sound like we’re using a wild conspiracy to cover up our failures.”

“They’ll make sure it does. That will set you up for the finish. That’s when they’ll hit you with some kind of accident and a big lawsuit to bankrupt you! I’m sure they’ll have an altered product in-paw, and an incident planned for the right time. So we have to catch them at it and expose them first!” Nick watched the silent faces on the other three as several seconds ticked by; good logic had a power of its own.

“It’s not accidental that I’m talking with you two officers, is it?” Pouncet said quietly.

“No it’s not,” he told the lynx who was now gripping her paws tightly. “We have suspicions—and some recent leads like your present problem—that we only stopped part of a larger anti predator agenda last year. I need to caution you not to discuss this with anyone or take any obvious steps that might tip off our...opposition. We’re in the early stages of understanding all the connections and gathering evidence, so more than anything else we need time to work. I think we have a few weeks before they’re ready to do anything more evident against your company.”

“Ross, we need to find out where this part tampering is being done,” Pouncet said. “And we also need a way to check for weakened pieces at assembly if receiving isn’t catching them. Is it just a few, or are we losing whole lots?”

“We do final finish work here after the initial heat treat, so it has to be done either here, or the completed parts are taken off-site and then brought back.” The otter pondered for several seconds. “The first alterations were to the stolen units...so I’m assuming for now this is being done off-site. I don’t think it involves a large percentage of the parts at this time.”

“I’d like you to write up a report about what you’ve found being done to your products,” Carrots said, jumping back in the conversation. “If we could have that, along with a few of the altered parts, we could put them into evidence. That would show your awareness and openness about the problem, and might reduce your liability later.”

“If my initial summary is ok, you can have them today,” Stillwater said.
“And don’t tell anyone you don’t trust that you’ve caught on to the sabotage, or that you’ve reported it to us. We need to keep the opposition, as Officer Wilde politely called them, ignorant of our knowledge of the scheme. If we have to contact you directly again here, it’ll be by someone else in plainclothes, we’re too visible now. If anyone asks about us being here today, tell em you’re trying to get a law enforcement contract!” Carrots said as she shot him a brief smile; he so enjoyed seeing his bunny developing her street smarts.

“What kind of security controls do you have for parts brought in or taken off site? Do you keep an inventory?” Nick asked.

“We really don’t,” admitted the otter engineer. “Nearly all of the parts in question are small, say one to four centimeters long. We track batches mostly. Many are standard parts across several of our models and we use thousands of them. Someone could swipe a pawful from a tray and no one would be the wiser. We’ve never really had a pilfering problem since they’re small enough that, say a recycler would pay almost nothing for them.”

“Is it possible that the initial robbery was to get examples for study...to figure out the best ways to alter them? Maybe they didn’t want to use ones already out in the field since you said they are registered to users.” Carrots’ ears leaned forward a bit above a frown of continued concentration. “Mr. Stillwater, you implied that there has to be someone on the inside here to take and return the parts,” She looked to the lynx CEO. “Can we have a list of employees hired recently? So we can check backgrounds?”

“I assume you want to go back to before the robbery?” Pouncet asked. “Just the usual few production workers since then—we have over eighteen hundred mostly small mammals here—five or so is normal turnover per month. I’ll have Mr. Dustin get you that; he’s been setting up our new tracking and security measures.”

“Him too, if you please,” Nick requested. “I assume he’s one of the recent measures you’ve taken? If so, I need to keep him out of this until we check!”

“He’s a highly experienced and recommended professional, Officer Wilde,” Pouncet said, her short tail slowly waving, “we were fortunate to find him, and I expected that you two would work well together. We need all the resources we can get to uncover this.”

“Now I really want to check him out first!” His own tail was perfectly still.

Carrots bounded out into the rush-hour chaos of the Little Rodentia ZTA station—armed with his scribbled instructions as to where to rendezvous. The next stop was his, with a good mile and a half walk from there to home. It was warm enough that he’d probably need a quick cool down shower when he arrived. At the one-mile point he walked right past the much more convenient for him Pack Street station. Unfortunately, to get from one to the other by rail almost required a grand tour of Zootopia.

He’d be back here soon enough as a much less official fox. The local liquor store was close by to entice thirsty commuters; so he walked in and caught the attention of the Wombat on duty—who started a bit because of cop.
“Dinner invite at somebody new’s home, mixed group with herbivores, half dozen, need something decent but not snobbish. I’ll pick it up on my way back.” He nodded his approval at the recommendation, paid and left.

It had cooled somewhat by the time Nick recrossed Pack Street with the bottle of Jerboa 02 wrapped in the deep green jacket he’d once used for classier hustles. The joint road and rail bridge on his right crossed the divide cut between Savanna Central and the Rainforest District beyond. The narrow but energetic river beneath it had collected, among others, his backyard creek somewhere upstream. He followed the winding road parallel to it downslope another mile or so to the Divide Terraces station—if anything, an even more inconveniently circuitous route away from where he lived.

He found the stairs the specified two blocks beyond the station, and stopped at the top of a long straight descent to a now wider and slower river. Some lights were already visible below; the depth of the river cut, and the canopy of trees effectively blocked what sunlight remained up here at street level.

Nick Wilde stood above the dusky vista as a tranquillizing weakness completed its spread through his body—during his walk illusory spiders had crawled up his spine, deadening successive pairs of nerves with their venom. They’d allowed him to internalize his earlier revelation by numbing any distractions. Now one had reached his brain to pry out a deeply hidden anxiety that he hadn’t realized was shared. He placed a paw on the top railing and leaned against it, staring down the steps. Judy had been making the same noble sacrifice Jack has accused him of selfishly doing. Protecting him...from her. How long would they have frustrated themselves in matched but separate anguish had Jack and Skye not seen and forced the issue? He didn’t know if they could have resolved their dilemma; they might have just continued to endure until one of them...broke.

Thankfully that was over, they were mates but for the ceremony—this was one of those irrevocable transitions in life. They’d had their doubts about the feasibility and permanence of a relationship, now they didn’t. But issues about the propriety of their choice remained, and would be a permanent stigma on their lives. Except for their new friends and partners in deviancy, they would need to be deceitful with all those who were close to them.

Like Judy’s family. The Hopps were close-knit enough that her trying to keep this secret from them would only layer a loss of trust onto the inevitable shame and estrangement she’d have to bear. She’d known that, and had still chosen to be with him. His warmth for her didn’t stop a pang of sorrow at her willing sacrifice of an oft-described loving family.

It would be easier for him; mom was grateful for Judy’s efforts to reconcile them, and had asked about her on his last visit. With time, he knew his bunny would grow on her enough to reduce the shock of his unconventional choice of mate. Of course, mom was an observant vixen and might figure it out herself.

Nick set the bottle aside briefly to put on his jacket and make sure he was a presentable guest, as he was already a few minutes late. He started down the steps without any protest from his leg, and surveyed doctor skunk’s neighborhood. The slopes on either bank showed a myriad of inset doors and windows separated into levels by the meandering paths that gave the area its name. He spotted a number of otters, beaver, and muskrats along the riverbanks and lower walkways, along with a few Coypu to remind him of their distant, problematic cousins. He turned right on the first cross path—Soren’s was the third door along.

His nose was guided there by enticing scents that wafted from the open window by the round-
topped wooden door. There was enough room between the front of the residence and the path to allow for a planter with several small bushes and a ceramic dinosaur. A mute windchime hung from a shingled awning over the door—which on closer inspection had somewhat wavy edges carefully fitted into its frame, and several apparently in-progress carvings. It all fit right in with the rest of her neighborhood’s decor.

His knock summoned Jack, who took the winebottle and closed the door behind him. “The fox has brought an acceptable offering,” the hare stated as he took it to a dining table further back and placed it next to a six-pack of foxy girlfriend. Carrots was rapidly laying out the place settings, while Skye and Dr. Soren were in the kitchen at the front, the skunk occasionally stirring the contents of one of the two pots on the stove.

The sable scientist turned and smiled. “Welcome to my dig Nicholas! Make yourself at home; everything’s well in paw.” Her apron was decorated with several prehistoric animals and enough faint stains and wrinkles to show regular use.

“Sure I can’t help doctor Soren?” Nick said, as Judith’s smirk acknowledged her culpability.

“Kristen. Just go sit. We’re almost ready to serve!” Their host covered the pots and reached above them to close thick wood shutters over the window.

Someone with cursive skill had made paper name tags; Soren’s place was at one end, with foxes to her left, rabbits to her right. They’d put him between Skye and Soren’s fluffy tails...deliberately. Jack sat too; Nick cocked an eyebrow and pointed at the beer. He got a shake, no, and the agent’s finger implicated Skye.

A gray whirlwind served chilled salads, as Soren placed the pots in the middle of the table. As the skunk turned to her seat, she managed to drag the tip of her tail under Nick’s and set it happily wagging. He regarded her with lidded eyes, and a big smile. If the expected etiquette here included suggestive play, he’d accept the challenge! Then his tail thumped something. He knew it was Skye before he turned to see the cheeky vixen slip innocently into her seat right next to him. Carrots placed her salad, then sat behind it and watched him benignly.

Nick understood—they all badly needed some domestic calm before the coming storm. He reminded himself again to watch the familiarity, as their newest member was...unaware of the social dynamic of all of her guests. Although, Dr Sor...Kristen hadn’t seemed to mind some occasional cross-species flirting with him.

“Must be losing my touch. Had all three of you revved up last time! Can I assume Officer Hopps, that tonight won’t show up in my next performance evaluation?”

“You’re off Judy tonight...Nick,” his Carrots said smoothly to a snicker from Jack. Certainly a prepared line; from her tone she’d been waiting to use it. She turned and drew their gazes to the head of the table where Kristen remained seemingly oblivious.

“Fullest table I’ve had in awhile,” the skunk said, patting her paws. “Our custom has been to have the last arrival give the invocation for our food!” Nick set his fork back down.

It didn’t take a clever fox to realize she was still playing with him, so he dipped his muzzle and tried to look solemn.

“Looks good! Smells great! Let’s eat!” he said swiftly as he snatched the fork and stabbed his
blueberry and greens salad to general laughter. Skye’s was similar, and the lagomorphs opposite
dug into their more varied and elaborate concoctions. Their hostess’s was unique, with everything
from string beans to a few banana slices visible.

She had gone to a lot of work to accommodate them. Her old but serviceable dining set had been
pre-adjusted to their heights, decorations placed about, and the stews in the pots had likely
simmered on the stove for awhile. One was veggie heavy; the other had satisfyingly large Proteo
chunks disguised among the potatoes. They’d done it right and hadn’t overcooked and softened the
meat substitute—Skye had obviously come here early to help.

The events at the school and some safely distant childhood experiences sufficed as conversation
for their thoroughly satisfying meal. Once they’d cleaned up for her, Kristen lead them on a tour.
Her burrow extended deeper into the bank than he’d expected, with room for all of them to stay if
they doubled up. The last chamber had unfinished shale walls and provided considerable storage
space. Again, his nose failed to detect any trace of skunky essence. Once back at the table, Jack
eased them into their deferred underground conclave.

“Couldn’t have asked for a better safe house if I’d written the specs myself! Out of the way but not
suspiciously isolated, has heavy door and shutters, nice thick stone walls, and nothing bigger than a
small wolf can easily move around in here. And it comes with a great cook! I wouldn’t have
thought of that detail.” Jack Savage traded smiles with the skunk, while Skye seemingly ignored
him, then around at the rest of them as his face slowly hardened. “Well, let’s get to it. As I feared
earlier, our speciest conspirators have accelerated their activities, the Fairfield discovery and yours
truly definitely got their attention!”

“As did we,” Skye said. “Early this morning I received instructions to confiscate the Mara fossil
and return with it to Concordia and the national museum.” Kristen nodded to confirm.

“Shit! So their gonna split us up,” Jack snapped, followed by an audible growl.

Nick flashed back to the first time he’d heard Carrots do that after one of his more egregious stunts,
it had been...unexpected to be growled at by a rabbit. “We’ve got some news too, a new case that’s
got to be related to all this.”

“I assume Bogo told you about the bribe?” Skye added. Jack looked quickly back and forth at
them, surprised by the non-exclusivity of his having breaking news for them.

“Yeah, of course. They’ll spring that trap when you return, you know that,” Nick said. “Then I’m
next—Bogo will push back until they come up with hard enough evidence to convince him. I really
don’t have the financial records for them to fiddle with convincingly, so I might have a couple
more weeks than you do Skye.” The vixen’s face appreciated his initial use of her first name.

“That should help me as well,” she said. “I might be censured or suspended, but they won’t risk the
bad optics of incarcerating me too soon without a solid case. If I’m wrong, and have to disappear,
I’m prepared, and we’ll exchange means of contact before I go.”

“What’s the timeline for this?” Jack asked tersely.

“Three days; Friday noon I’ll fly back.” Skye turned to look at Soren with concern etched on her
muzzle. “Are you all right dear?”

Their skunk paleontologist sat very still with eyes wide enough to rival Carrot’s. Their irises were
brown, he noted. Her tail was on the floor and mouth open.

“I don’t think our hostess was fully briefed before she volunteered to join our subversive and dangerous lives as agents,” Jack observed without reaction from the skunk.

“Well,” Nick drawled, “she already knows enough that we would have t...OW!” He grabbed his stinging shin; the force of Carrot’s kick had slid her chair back audibly. “Sorry!” He rubbed the reminder that Kristen hadn’t been privy to their joint discussions with chief Bogo.

That broke Kristen out of her trance, and now all three ladies angrily glared at him. Skye briefly held her claws-out-paw near his muzzle and got a firm look of sanction from Judy, who favored him with another lapine growl. Yep, he’d overdone it and was in debt again. No response was his best option.

“We can no longer indulge in those kinds of Wilde witticisms,” Skye stated, “there’s enough serious issues for all of us to deal with. Kristen, last year’s crisis was only part of a much larger anti-predator conspiracy, we’re still discovering new facets of it. Perhaps our Mr. Wilde could start with the one they found. Her clear blue eyes compelled his best behavior from now on.

“AblePaws is a pred-run prosthetics company almost certainly being set-up for takeover through a product liability scheme.” That perked up the skunk—she obviously knew about them. “We were assigned to follow-up an earlier robbery and found that sophisticated product sabotage is being done by as yet unidentified persons.” Nick was grateful he had their serious attention back. “This is a long-term effort, and Judy and I think we have several weeks before they make their move. We’ll be trying to trace the source of the sabotage—we all agree it has to be from the inside. For now, we’re checking the backgrounds of recent hires and company security before we undertake any joint investigations with them.”

“Sounds good. We can probably run backgrounds faster than the ZPD can if you want Wilde,” Jack offered, “can you get me...oh?”

Carrots already had their list out of her pawbag and passed it over. “The photo is their new security hire; Nick seemed wary of him,” she told the hare.

Jack glanced at it and passed it to Skye—who exploded before it reached her paw.

“That son of a...” The vixen caught herself and pointed at the photo of the slender, dapper coyote on the table. “That’s your inside saboteur! He’s ex ZBI!”

“Thought it was your ex boyfriend,” Jack snarked gently. “We all thought he’d been canned for workplace harassment of agent Winter here. Seems he’s still working for someone there under this name. His last name isn’t Dustin; it’s Clifton. Good catch Wilde.”

“Why would he be working with the anti-pred forces to bring down this company?”

“I don’t know Judy,” Jack said. “He had supremacist tendencies from what I heard; maybe someone found some twisted way to take advantage of that. Still, this fits disturbingly well alongside my new assignment! I’m to investigate Proteo Foods for any possible evidence that they’ve sourced actual mammalian meat for their synthetic products.”

“I’ve never been so happy to be an herbivore,” Judy said flatly. “Dad was right; should’ve stayed on the farm.”
“Now the biggest pred owned company out there is in their sights.” Skye said. “As Jack anticipated, events have forced the paws of the conspirators to prematurely advance their full agenda. Would you like proof?” No one filled her dramatic pause.

“It’s not just Wesley that’s being brought in, I’m also overseeing a guard detail transferring a prisoner to federal custody.” Skye waited for them—Carrots beat him to it.

“Dawn Bellwether.”

Skye nodded.
Chapter Summary

What do you do when your unrequited love--isn't anymore?

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the conclusion of my four-chapter take on WildeHopps. I’ve always felt that Judy and Nick’s relationship was a done deal after the scene under the bridge. They were miserable apart, and ecstatic once together again. All they had left to do was realize that, get pushed to admit their feelings to each other, and deal with the consequences of being a mixed species couple amid the disapproval of an intolerant society. (Somewhat more so than most in my view of their world) My version of W.H. might seem a little rushed amid all of the beautifully written slow-burn romances woven around these two here—let me know how I did whether you agree with it or not!

How will Nick handle the release of his suppressed feelings? What will Judy do now that she’s openly taken possession of her fox? Will Disney object to where I take their characters once I figure this all out? Find out below in my first double digit chapter! More plot and action next time!

Zootopia was a different city this late at night. There was almost no larger traffic; the smaller was thin and unobtrusive. The street lighting seemed dimmer—probably for the comfort of the now active nocturnals. Even the towers of downtown, their tops visible beyond the rise of the street in front of them, had forsaken their earlier evening brilliance.

There was a cold glow to the left of the skyline, which backlit part of the slope of Tundratown’s main peak. Misty silver fingers slowly shifted above it as she watched. If ice could burn, that’s what it would look like, Judy thought. A blunted claw of brilliance slowly started to extend upwards—once fully risen, the moon would provide some semblance of comfort and direction if streets like this one started to appear more menacing.

Left alone, she might still twitch and shiver in trepidation as she sought her miles distant shelter—but a nocturnal predator had already seized her. Only her paw was wrapped in his, but it spread warmth throughout her petite form. They had both silently reached out as they’d approached the ZTA station a block or so upriver from the stairs to Soren’s burrow. She hadn’t wanted to take the train back to Savanna Central, wait to make a transfer, and end up isolated in her apartment. He...Nick’s grip had silently and publicly proclaimed ‘mine!’

Along with incarceration, horror movies, and weddings, this was a form of possession that Judy Hopps had heretofore avoided—until she realized she was desperately in love with this fox. She’d been forced to not just hide, but then deny her feelings to preserve their lives from ruin. Doing so had proven to be the one thing that this overachieving superbunny, the pride of the tri-burrows,
was a complete failure at.

She’d blamed the occasional unwelcome notice of others on her incautious, besotted, heart in his
paw partner. He’d tried to hide it, but hadn’t been able to fully control his behavior around his
chosen life mate. Not all foxes did that Skye had said—but this one had fallen for her quickly and
completely. It took two, she was equally culpable, and her regular casual association with him had
also been a curiosity magnet. Now that they each knew how the other felt, further concealment
from society would be at best difficult and probably futile—they’d slide into perdition together.

“Not gonna be easy,” Nick said softly; which still jarringly broke their long silence.

Did he mean just us? Judy wondered. Or was it the multitudinous plots of the speciest conspiracy
they all faced, and their earlier discussion of counter plans? Her perceptive fox must have sensed
her unease as they walked. This was their first time alone together as mutually recognized mates,
both able to really think about what that meant. You wanted him, needed him, now you’ve got him,
the conflicted thoughts came, so what’s wrong?

Anticipation! shouted her contrary internal voice. You killed it—you flipped to the last page of the
book you silly rabbit! Yeah, she thought ruefully, we skipped right over the slowly discovering
more about each other thing, the excitement of exotic dates, and all those dreamy evenings
wondering how much he loves me. At least that’s what the romance novels described—about
acceptable normal relations. She must not have read enough of them to ingrain those plot lines into
her life. Or listened to her sisters...or even her mom’s advice.

You certainly didn’t ignore his revelation this afternoon at the station—you embraced it! You both
went straight to the love epiphany without the preliminaries. “Heartbroken over that fox in three
days! You really are fast for a rabbit!” Skye had said to stoke her shame. No patient exploration of
your feelings, no gradually growing comfortable together and becoming more...intimate! Oh
Spirits! He’s taking me home tonight as his willing mate!

She’d already been cozily familiar with him on his sofa, and had spent that night cuddling with his
tail. He’d told her afterwards that like most foxes he was sensitive about others touching it—except
for her apparently. But now he knew she’d also accepted him as her mate—and that implied
consent meant that he might want to...well...mate. A cold claw of fear struck between her shoulder
blades to stop her mid-step, and threaten to complete the icing from a year ago—even though Big’s
mansion and Tundratown were miles away. A pace ahead, Nick turned to her in concern. She
couldn’t meet his eyes and looked down.

Just concrete—no pit down to a dark and icy death yawned at her feet. She slowly lowered her
raised foot, and numbly noticed that the white fur rimming its toes brightened as she did so. A
small car, mid thigh high to her, slowed as it approached from ahead and began to pass to their
right, blunt muzzles behind the windows swiveling to watch them. She just knew the looks were
accusatory in spite of the reduced illumination from the streetlight.

How dare you, I’m not! Judy’s foot came up and drew back, her toes panned to track the gawking
hamsters—ready to boot that biasmobile over onto its side. It accelerated to safety with an
otherwise comically high-pitched—blit...blit...blitblitblitblit.

“Can you believe it! They assumed we were...maybe you were a...” Oh sweet peaches! I might’ve
thought the same thing if I saw this out on a late patrol, she realized. Sharp dressed shifty fox under
a streetlight in the middle of the night leading a downcast bunny doe off to... Well wasn’t he? She
released Nick’s paw and buried her face in hers. Embarrassment at their public exposure crumpled
her up inside until it recoiled from the spikes of fear that pierced her heart. Her breath started to catch. *It can’t be happening like this!*

She’d never thought about the physical aspect of their relationship as anything more than a distant possible...fulfillment, hidden safely behind their armor of self-denial. Deliberately vague imagined pleasures had become a horrifying immediate possibility. *I’m not ready for this! If he is, could I reject him? How much will it hurt me to not hurt him!* Any words were smothered by the sudden constriction in her throat and she felt warm tears start. Judy slumped back; felt blindly for the cold support of the sidewalk; the world abruptly rotated and fell away. She let the sobs come; trying to stop them would prolong her anguish. Her whole body flexed rhythmically in his arms with her gasps.

The bouncing continued even as she got her breathing under control. She was being carried—not just held—she wiped her eyes and risked a look up at Nick. His look back was steady, he must have watched her as he walked—she had a brief flash of shame at her present state but there was no judgement in his eyes, only concern. *What’s wrong with you girl!* If there’s one thing that you absolutely know, it’s that he’ll never hurt you. She couldn’t stifle a last sniffle, but managed a weak laugh afterwards to show she was all right.

“You bunnies...”

“Yeah, so emotional, I know.” Judy gave him a bigger smile and her flaccid ears firm ed up a bit. “It’s all happening so fast Nick, I overreacted to them, but I think I’m ok for now.” She was gently set back on her feet.

“Heavier than you look, Carrots,” Nick snarked, rubbing his upper arm and elbow. “Thought bunnies were supposed to be light and fluffy, not so built and toned.”

Given his vulpine viewpoint, Judy took it as a compliment. “Most rabbits are shorthairs, won’t find much fluff on me,” she said, wondering just how far he’d carried her. The moon was well above the horizon now.

“Cept for this!” Nick leaned slightly and reached down behind her—instead of the anticipated flick, he gave her short tail a slower, sensuous stroke along its upturned curve. She felt it lift involuntarily against his paw and send a thrill up her back. “I think it’s time to break in a new Nickname, Carrots; that ok with you...Fluff?”

“I suppose I could use another one; you only use my name when it’s something serious.” Although she was used to Nick calling her ‘Carrots’, others that overheard would consider it rather derogatory, so an alternative was wise. At least fluff had less allusion to the other ‘C’ word and was a good counterpoint to her use of ‘slick.’ She turned and signaled her readiness to continue with a slight hip check to the fox.

“Ha! Here they come!” Nick stayed put and pointed to the not quite third-quarter moon. She rubbed her eyes again to clear them and finally made out a few sparse groups of tiny black dots slowly moving downwards in front of it. As she watched, they became more frequent, with a few larger and faster spots jerkily transiting its face in various directions. It was mildly confusing until her brain abruptly recognized the pattern.

“Bats Nick? It seems like you expected them. There must be hundreds.”

“Tens of thousands fluff, it’s a big sky—all trying to make it home by one o clock. I assume you’re
never up this late? Well I am, I might have to work days but I still do night runs in the park a couple times a week. We foxes like to sharpen our senses, and exercise in the cool of night. Really looking forward to getting back to it—always sleep better afterwards. I’ve seen these flights many times.”

“Why do they come back so early?” Judy asked. “There’s still several hours of darkness left this time of year.” She got a genuine laugh from him at that—they’d been rare lately.

“Late night drama time fluff! They can’t miss ‘I hear your Dance’ or ‘Echoes of the Heart,’ it’s all right there in the TV listings if you cared to look. Soon as it’s dusk, they take off for the Meadowlands,” Nick jerked a thumb back over his shoulder, “lots more bugs out there. Then they all dash back here to hang in front of the TV for a couple of hours. Never figured out if they hang the sets upside down, or just broadcast the programs that way. Stuff’s unwatchable for us anyway, seems to need a custom surround sound system for it all to make sense to them. Anyway, I heard these mass flights are an expected cultural thing for bats.”

“Maybe that’s who they should have talk to the dolphins,” she told him. This was yet another large group of rarely met mammals that had little in common with the rest of society. The badger prof was right; we are a group of separate cultures sharing little more than co-location. At least Nick had again worked his powers of distraction for her benefit. Her angst had passed, and they resumed their walk towards his familiar, and no longer seemingly perilous apartment.

They were spared further scrutiny by the unobtrusive, mostly residential route her streetwise fox took to his neighborhood convenience store. “I’m low on everything fluff, so let me go first, then you pick up what you need in a few minutes.” Nick gave her a brief sad smile and ruffled the fur between her ears. “I’m not much further on, and it’s probably best they don’t get used to seeing us together here.”

He was right; she waited out of sight across the intersection until he’d left the FareMart and walked away on a perpendicular street. Judy affected a weary guise before she entered the store and trudged over to the prepared meal case. She grumbled about having to work until closing because her relief didn’t show, as she dumped an armful of burritos, lettuce wraps, and a bottle of VegAll on the counter. That precluded any conversation from the surly looking wolverine behind it, until he’d bagged her purchases and she turned to leave.

“Careful out there bun, there was a fox in here a few minutes ago. Think he went up Cortland Street.” The mustelid actually sounded more civil than she’d expected, so she turned and nodded her thanks. It was likely his looking out for a vulnerable customer more than just a biased view of foxes, so she let it slide. Judy resumed her direct route to Nick’s place, already close enough that she had her bearings in spite of the night. He reappeared out of the first threatening shadow she passed, and they were soon padding down his second floor hallway. She pointed silently at his opposite neighbor Carla’s door as they passed it.

“Not at all nocturnal,” he said in an almost normal voice to her surprise. “She might as well be hibernating. Him too,” as he indicated the adjoining apartment, then unlocked his. They unloaded their bags and restocked the fridge for future need; Kristen’s ample home cooking would likely carry both of them past breakfast tomorrow. She caught his eye, then reached and thumped the box in the back of the fridge.

“Carrot cake Nick? Any particular occasion?” she chided with a lilt. His paw tugged her back before he pushed the door closed, and he held up the other with two fingers together.
“Always be prepared,” he intoned. “Never know who might hop over for a visit.”

“Oddly specific for random guests,” she teased, “Unless you just happen to like...Carrots!” Judy took two quick bounds over to her end of his sofa and settled herself against the armrest. He followed and gently trapped her as he sat—no space between them this time—and possessively bound her with tail and arm as she leaned forward to invite that.

“Kinda neutral on them as a kit, but they’ve grown on me,” Nick said evenly before giving her the same look of recovered equanimity he often needed after annoying the chief. She tilted her head to let an ear drape in front of his shoulder—she could faintly hear and even feel his elevated heart rate against her cheek.

“Here we are,” he continued with a slight strain in his voice. “You hid it better than I did—at least from me, don’t know about everybody else. Back when I left home it was an—escape for me—of course I didn’t manage it too well. Was angry...scared, no plan no place, they’d put the elevated highway through so Happytown was already kinda rough. About dark I met this raccoon—Vance—he sorta knew who I was, took me to Finnick, they let me stay, taught me to survive. I couldn’t ever imagine a bigger change happening in my life.”

“I didn’t eith...” Judy tried to interject, but his tightened arm stopped her.

“Then I met you, lost you, you found me, I ended up in the academy instead of a jail, wasn’t a change so much as a whole new life, it took me awhile to realize that! I found my purpose Judy. I never expected to have one.” She felt his paw cup the back of her head, his fingers around the base of her ears. It was gentle, but insistent as he shifted her slightly to lock their gazes. His was steady—with pupils wide. “And today I realized that a dream I dared not ever consider had been made real. I wanted what I could never ask of you, and you still chose to give it. How can I be so happy and terrified at the same time!”

“I don’t think that life cares if we’re ready Nick. I’m not...not all the way...that’s why I freaked out back there! Maybe some of us need our dreams and idealism to ease us into a commitment before the reality scares us away. That might be why I was never really interested in the bucks mom kept trying to fix me up with. It was always about the practical benefits and expectations—I never felt anything else; never wanted to...settle for that.”

I’m so sorry Judy, I was really afraid to think that you might have felt like I did. I never thought you could want me the way I did you. I couldn’t possibly be worth that, but you decided I was. How long has it been since you...started to become interested?” Now there was a hesitancy and cautious tone in her fox’s voice. She realized he needed to know this—every detail would make it more real to him. Just like telling him would do for her.

“We can calculate that if you’ve got a calendar. It was thirty-nine and a half hours after we first met!” She felt him shift against her left side, and his eyebrows and ears twitched up as well at the precision of her answer. It didn’t take much imagination to see him replaying that night in his eyes. “That’s when I finally had enough time to recognize that you were more than a condescending, annoying, full of himself con-fox!”

“So, when I stopped buffalo butt from bullying you? For this?” Nick said, as he reached with his other paw and brushed the spot on her top where the badge on her uniform would have been.

She stiffened to suppress the delighted shiver and ‘eep’ that would otherwise have escaped her and he quickly withdrew. “No, no, it’s ok,” she soothed, and reached to grasp the paw he momentarily
didn’t know what to do with. She brought it closer again and held it between both of hers. “That’s only when I was able to accept what you’d done for me; it started...maybe a half-hour earlier when you didn’t leave me on the platform with Manchas. Things were happening too fast then for me to think about what it meant! You could have just stepped to safety, I told you to! You could have been free and clear, rid of the annoying bunny cop, but you stayed! You chose near certain death just to give me a chance!” her voice had risen to a near squeal—smothered as her protector pulled her tightly against his shirt.

“That’s when I found my purpose fluff, although I didn’t realize then all of what you’d mean to me now. I’ll always stay for you!” His voice was husky and almost broke into a whine, and he curled over to further wrap her up in foxy armor. Just get his shirt wet, said her inside voice; you can’t do anything else right now.

After an interminable time in a clinch with her fox, Judy realized she now held his soft warm fur, her paw having found its way inside his shirt. Her own top had ridden up under her arms with his pressed up along her back. She had turned to put her leg over his and bury her face in the thicker ruff of creamy fur under his muzzle and neck. His long lean chin brushed between her ears—as much from her own movements as his. He’s a canid came her disjointed thoughts, is he...chinning me? Marking me? Wouldn’t it be more vigorous if he was? Judy slowly dragged herself out of the abiss—and realized it didn’t matter—his musky odor was throughout her nose and lungs, it wasn’t unpleasant...a bit like freshly turned earth.

Thank the spirits we don’t have to go to the precinct tomorrow she realized, we can hold that revelation off for another day. He’ll be with Skye—I’m with Jack and they both know. Judy’s ears flushed; Skye would be delighted to smell me all over him—could she convince Nick to scrub enough to maintain some semblance of their privacy? Can I get his foxiness off of me? There was an unexpected chuff of breath from her mate as his discernibly shaking paws did the opposite and lifted her off his thigh and back down onto the sofa. Her troubled fox worked his mouth—obviously searching for words. The only right thing to do was to wait for him to find them.

“It’s too late now for both of us,” he finally said, “I forced myself to deny what had already happened because I was afraid I’d only hurt you Judy. I’m living in your world now but that’s not the one I came from. Circumstances pushed us together, and neither of us really understood what that might eventually do to us. I know your thinking about Winter and Savage, but we’re different! I spent twenty years hiding the real me behind walls and nobody saw anything other than what I wanted them to! Then you come along like a superhero to blast them away and rescue me without taking a good look at what’s in there first. That’s what I’m afraid of—you’ve forced me out where I can’t hide what I am...to you.”

“Nick, I know who you are! I’ve known how you felt about me for a long time. And me, I think I might have chosen you first without even knowing it. Once I figured that out, I tried...I really tried to hide that for our own good.” Just like you did you noble lovable fox.

“How long does it really take to get to know someone bunny bumpkin?” A trace of sadness crept into Nick’s voice. “You’re an idealist, you see what you want to see in me. You know very little about how I was raised, what events shaped my life, what I’ve done! Yeah, I promised to always protect you from a dangerous and uncaring world—the same one that spent twenty years shaping me into a perfect representation of it! I’ve been so busy shielding you from it, that I didn’t see its most immediate threat...me!”

“You’re no threat! You said you chose to protect!” Judy leaped to her feet, wavered unsteadily on the sofa cushion, and grabbed the closest support—Nick’s muzzle. She stretched her paws to hang
on and clamp it shut—no more of his selfish misgivings. “You’re my mate! I’m yours and that won’t change. It can’t! If there are any issues between us we will deal with them together. No more doubts, Nick, I won’t have it!”

His green eyes were wide, but not in fear as he carefully pried her paws off and took a breath. “I really don’t deserve you Carrots, no matter how much…”

She slapped him—hard. The recoil tipped her back irrecoverably and she bounced off the end of the armrest on the way to the floor, arms flailing. Training took over to tuck and roll her to a safe landing. Back on her feet in the middle of the room, she watched a shocked red fox rub the base of his muzzle below one eye. She closed her own as her shame returned.

“You know fluff,” he said carefully, “maybe I do. Savage said that Skye did almost the same thing to him—except her claws were longer. She drew blood; then they made up.”

That totally quenched her chagrin—not the blood part—the make up part. The fear she’d laid to rest reopened its eyes. “Ok Nick, I’ll give you conditional forgiveness. We don’t second-guess each other’s choice of mate ever again. It’s done! Now, what did Jack do?”

“I believe the same thing I just did, he questioned the integrity of their relationship in front of his vixen. Skye’s got nothing on you in that department.” Nick kept rubbing, just for show.

He considers me his vixen? Judy smiled broadly at the compliment since he’d directly compared her to Skye. “I’m hardly a vixen slick, your fault you didn’t look around more.”

“I just never found any that really interested me. On closer examination you are a bit peculiar for one, what with the two tails on the wrong end and the butt ear.” He invited her back with spread paws and lifted her into his lap. This was much better. They’d both been on-edge and overreacting to their open new status as an affirmed couple. His arms remained around her middle, likely to forestall further lapine assault, and his muzzle found its place between her ears. “Mmmm, so soothing.” He abruptly twitched and loosened his hold on her. “Is this too much right now? I’m honestly not good with the…physical signals here.”

“Of course not, we need this…Nick, am I your first…serious relationship?” She had a flash of guilt about prying at him so soon after her outburst, but decided she needed to know. Large parts of his past were blank to her—he’d never mentioned any others before and he was thirty-three now! She settled back to confirm their present arrangement was fine with her. He didn’t speak right away, although she felt his muzzle nod slightly atop her head.

“Yeah fluff, you’re the first one that really got to me,” he emphasized before she felt his expression change. “It’s not like I wasn’t interested in vixens…sometimes the guys worried…but I’m ok…I just never met…out there…ones that I’d want to…” Nick stammered anxiously before he stopped for several seconds.

“Choose, Nick?”

“No fluff. It’s kinda embarrassing, but I couldn’t disappoint—get involved with—someone mom wouldn’t approve of,” he finished in a quick whine of distress. Nick let out a long deep breath, then tapped the side of his head. “Part of my mom’s always been in here. I failed her, hurt her with my first big choice in life; couldn’t do it again. Without you Judy, I don’t think I would have ever had the courage to go back and face her, being what I was on the streets. I know she looked for me, I was too ashamed to let her find me.”
So she really set the core values of my fox. Judy was proud that he’d maintained his mom’s example decades on. From what she knew of his hustles, even they had ethical bounds. It wasn’t going to be easy to find a way to thank Vivian Wilde for Nick’s upbringing without revealing the depth of their relationship. “Didn’t mean to do this Nick, I brought you two back together; now it looks like I’m going to take you away from her again.” The last thing she expected back from him was a yipped laugh.

“If I can’t have any doubts about us anymore, you can’t either!” Her wrap-around-back support snugged a bit tighter. “Yeah, it’ll be a shock when I bring you home as my mate, she’ll have to adjust—but will accept you. I’m certain of that Judy, she already likes you.”

A warm flush spread through her. He felt she was not only worthy of Vivian’s approval, but that she’d receive it. She would be family to those two foxes—and share society’s scorn with them. Just like that, the ice was back.

“We’re not much compensation for yours, are we?” Nick had sensed the change in her as soon as it had happened. “I know what you’re giving up for me, but I’ll do whatever you need to reduce the shock to your family when they find out.”

“It’ll be bad no matter how it happens,” she told him, “I’ve already had to deflect questions about my life here—even a few about you directly. My family’s size and nature doesn’t allow for real privacy for any of us; with everybody checking on everybody else’s well being including those like me who’ve left the warren. It’s even worse for me since I’ve always been seen as different and in need of...well meaning guidance! Hence all of the—‘You aren’t going to the dance?’ or, ‘Here’s a nice buck you could settle down with’—that gets dumped on me.” That came out more bitterly than she expected; and Nick noticed.

“Woah! I’m supposed to be the one who ran away from home because I felt smothered! So you had it what...three hundred times worse? Do you realize what you’ve done fluff? You’ve taken away any excuse I had for feeling sorry for myself!” He ruffled the fur atop her head and slid her drooped ears up between his fingers. To her surprise, it was enough physical attention to make them stay there.

“There’s more slick. You’re not the only one here lacking experience in the relationship department.” She made sure his paw rejoined its mate around her middle—to forestall any physical withdrawal on his part. “You like nicknames for me? Here’s one my dad coined—if it ever escapes your lips, it will be the last thing you ever do! Understand fox?”

She felt him nod again before he said, “Must be pretty adorable to rile you up.”

“Way worse Nick...it’s...Jude the Dude.” She felt his flinch; then his whole body writhed as he brutally strangled his imminent ridicule. “You may live for now,” she said looking up.

“Your own dad came up with that?” Nick managed to squeeze incredulity and sympathy into his response.

“Yes, and its already spread to several of my siblings. Bad enough you fell for a rabbit, let alone an abnormal one. That’s what they’re worried about. I always focused on my own interests and goals in life, not what was expected. Teenage rabbit does spend a lot of time socializing about family matters; general gossip, eligible bucks, dating, planning to settle down, how many kits they want! I had to participate in enough of that to fit in, but it never rang true for them, I was always...apart.
I’m taller than most rabbit does, and leaner. I helped with more physical chores than some of the bucks in the family did, and the ones outside of it were far more interested in my softer curvier more *demure sisters*!”

“I’m glad they were, I got the foxy one!” Nick enthused. “Unfortunately, I have to play this by ear since you didn’t come with instructions.” He tentatively gave a light stroke up along her left ear—she hummed to let him know that was quite enjoyable. Perhaps she did appear to him as more...vixen like than other rabbits would. A hint of unaccustomed excitement about being wanted by a male companion kept her earlier fear in check.

“Nick, I’ll admit to being a little nervous, I really don’t know what to expect from foxes, or the...right way to react to them. I’m not a vixen; I don’t know how they...or I should respond to your...expectations? Honestly, I didn’t really get that far with any bucks either—a couple of second dates was about it.”

A heartfelt foxy sigh had her sink a little deeper into his front. “Thank your moon goddess! I’m not quite the suave, sophisticated, vixen-collecting rake everybody assumes me to be—what with my mom issues and all. I was concerned that I might be less worldly than such a desirable member of your notorious species!”

“Hardly slick, if I was typical there would be a lot less of us around. You actually have the honor of being the first one to really get me...*seriously interested!*” Now she could admit that without fear, they’d voiced their anxieties and signaled their desire to proceed slowly. Her mate was apparently as relieved as she was from his lightened mood.

“All those bunnies to choose from, and you take their worst nightmare, a fox as a mate. They already see you as assertive and ambitious, now they can add aggressive! Have you even researched the implications of becoming seriously interested in one like me?”

“I know we have a lot to learn about each other, but I don’t want to rush that! We’ve missed so much already Nick by choosing so quickly! I wish we could go back—you know, more dates, more time to get to know each other, more...romance before we decided.”

“We can still do all of that fluff, just with the security of knowing that we won’t break up!” Should also give you time to do your adult homework on vulpine culture and biology so I don’t...startle you.”

“I’m not completely naive Nick! Several of my sisters already have kits of their own! You learn more about life in my family than you ever could in high school sex-ed.” Oh right, she realized, home or not, it’s all bunny-centric sex-ed. Wait! Skye had...no, he’s dressed, and the only good places reachable from her present position on his lap were his ears. *Save it! Otherwise you’ll have to explain how you know about those!*

“Bunnyburrow sex-ed? Think they’d allow a fox in the class? Might be useful.” Nick snarked as he started slowly stroking both of her ears. He was more tentative and awkward than Skye has been, although she still enjoyed it. “We foxes are quite tactile fluff. Even a single gentle touch can be considered flirting. And when mates engage in closer activities like what we’re doing, it will invariably lead to the...*biting!*”

His muzzle darted to her neck just as the word registered, his jaws wrapped over it at the base. She couldn’t resist an instinctive strong flinch—he held her firmly in his paws, teeth barely pricking her skin through the fur. It was a moment frozen in time, the primal end of so many of her remote
ancestors—then he slowly dragged his fangs through her fur and away.

“Normally,” he drawled, “this happens when it’s already serious enough that you have your clothes off! Then you can get it all over.” He was back to benignly stroking her ears—which served to slacken her suddenly elevated heart rate. Although gentle and brief, it had been an unexpected and far more intense experience than even their desperate acting in the museum pit. “But since I’m a gentlefox, I will go no further unless specifically invited to.” As soon as he felt the tension flow out of her, he stopped the ear rub and lifted her slightly to turn her around. She drew back a leg and pushed with the other to help until they were face to face. He drew and squeezed her legs around him with his forearms until she tightened her grip. Nick raised his arms; his paws went behind her head to support—this time massaging slowly around the base of her ears.

They were muzzle to muzzle, almost touching, eyes locked together as if by glass rods between them. Although he was slightly out of focus at this range, his gaze was intense. Her nose twitched in response to his soft breath periodically wafting across it—his earthy scent was strong. She knew what he wanted, but couldn’t think of anything to say to encourage him that didn’t sound like bad movie dialog. Judy settled for bumping noses gently and turning one cheek very slightly towards him.

He reacted immediately with two long strokes of his muzzle against her, his eye momentarily close enough to hers each time to fill half her field of vision. Twice more he went grossly out of focus as he marked her other cheek. Again, her fox repeated the four almost desperate strokes, pushing against her, as a long, needful whine escaped from him.

He clung to her with his muzzle resting atop her shoulder, while she frantically tried to recall anything useful from her mammalian behavior classes in school. This wasn’t a rabbit thing; male predators usually did marking as she recalled. Felids and canids mostly. Nick was right, she should have done her homework on foxes—she wasn’t sure what response was expected from her. I need to acknowledge this, she decided. His muzzle was right there beside her, she turned and tipped her head slightly to give him a brief rub back.

It was enough; she got a shorter, softer whine from him, then he pushed them gently apart with his paws on her upper arms and broke into a broad smile. “Now it’s official fluff,” he said enthusiastically, “I can drag my mate off to bed!” He managed to wag his tail somewhat even though it was scrunched against the back of the sofa.

“Not so fast cave fox, we have an agreement!” she said with an unfortunate hint of panic. Why would he make light of their first seriously intimate moment—one that she wanted to remember and cherish? Because, said her inside voice, it’s how he copes with emotional moments—things that get to him.

“Yes I remember dearest bonded lifemate who just invited me to claim her. We still have a few hours before dawn to take things nice and slooow!” He had his smarmiest hustle face on.

Ok, she decided, already feeling somewhat overtired and giddy, he’s completely incorrigible. Well, said her voice, you’ll just have to play foxtface’s game. “And that’s what we’ll do slick—slowly and in the proper order! That means being properly introduced by our guardians, then at least ten supervised social events with trusted chaperones, then...”

“I’m willing to compromise fluff!”

“Good. We really need our sleep Nick; after tomorrow, we’ll need a lot more. And we absolutely
have to learn more about each others...cultures to avoid any...hasty misunderstandings.”

“Interesting descriptive—cultures,” her fox pondered, “If you’re curious about the basics and don’t want to wade through all the academic stuff, you can just go to CaniPorn dot com.

“Nick! Don’t ruin this! It won’t help me knowing what other canids do.”

“Yeah right, you’ll need to look up fox and bunn...”

“NICK!”

“Surely you must know about rule...”

“I know about the Internet Nick, I don’t want to spoil what we’ve got ahead of us! And don’t forget that I now have the status here to make you sleep on our sofa!” She poked the cushion for emphasis.

“Not tonight rabbit mine!” Nick rose, boosting her up with him and smoothly transferring her to under his arm. “I am dragging my mate to our bed—even if she stays in her carrot print underwear!”
Do the Hustle

Chapter Summary

Our team recruits some needed help from the opposite ends of society.

Chapter Notes

Here we go! Add plot thickener—stir slowly as you bring to a simmer and sprinkle in another character or three. Will the unfolding of this larger active conspiracy force me to write a lot more chapters than I initially expected to? Has this happened to anyone else?
Yes, I read a Zootopia story and liked it. Then another one; liked it too. Now, after some seventy + more stories enjoyed, I’ve been sucked down a rabbit (and fox) hole, and find myself well into writing my own! That rather cuts into my reading time I’ve discovered.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cerulean metalflake finished roadster drove up the semicircular drive in front of the Park Savanna Hotel, and eased to a growling stop opposite the entrance foyer. The partially visible dark furred driver, attired in a violently purple sleeveless dress and tinted goggles, turned to wave away the approaching goat valet.

Nick Wilde was in the passenger’s seat in his green jacket and mirrored aviators—so this had to be her promised ride. Skye rose from her lobby seat and went out to meet them.

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The now soft brown vixen was caught a little off-guard; this rumbling bit of ostentation was apparently Dr. Kristen Soren’s old car—as per Nick’s text. Of course she’d picked him up first; they lived out the same way. Foxdom’s latest bad example was now out holding the door for her—he’d gussied himself up with a gold chain, rings and spats around his ankles. Well, she’d agreed to this earlier, and his instructions had been quite simple—show off.

Never a problem Skye thought as she stepped into the immaculate gold accented convertible, her dear Jack had once said she could make a grain sack look erotic, so her cream and copper fitted strapless dress and modest necklace were more than sufficient. Still, Kristen had provided worthy competition—the skunk’s dress plunged deeply in front, and her abundant sable fur had spilled over the edges to make it look even more daring.

“Good day Miss Neal,” Nick greeted her alias as he slid back alongside. He shut the door, and leaned to casually drape an arm over its top to give her space to avoid the roadster’s gearshift. The seatbelt was long enough to accommodate both slender vulpines and Skye took the opportunity to lean in herself and take a surreptitious sniff as he passed it over. She noted lots of soap, some Odor-Away, and a detectable hint of Judy. Uh huh. Foxcon here might have gotten away with it if she hadn’t been quite so familiar with the rabbit’s scent herself!
“Showing up in this,” Nick enthused, “will work way better than walking over from public transit! I seriously couldn’t believe this was our dusty old fossil monger’s ride—a ninety Pierce Prowler!”

Kristen wore a smile of infinite satisfaction, as she didn’t quite burn rubber peeling away from the hotel. Skye rapidly matched her expression—this was welcome fun and they were already attracting stares! The grinning skunk swiftly and expertly navigated the streets to avoid the midday congestion near the square, which seemed to indicate that this car had often graced the museum’s staff parking lot. At one point, she unconcernedly passed a ZPD cruiser; Nick’s idle paw wave showed he’d tipped the precinct as to their intent. Another minute or two and they were eastbound on Acacia at a more sedate traffic mandated pace. The pimped-out undercover lowlife next to her pulled his tongue back in and turned to speak.

“Team’s all together now Doc, so explain this before I haul you in for stealing it!” Nick’s grin matched theirs. Skye hadn’t seen him this happy before. They’d definitely been together; determining how far the newly joined couple had gone would have to wait for another time.

“Glovebox suspicious todd, and watch the pawprints!” Kristen gave him a quick glance and returned her attention to the road.

Nick delicately popped it open with a claw as Skye watched. Inside, a pair of white gloves rested atop a neat package of vehicular paperwork. Obviously, this beast was no stranger to car shows. There was an engraved plaque inside the compartment door, and Nick’s muzzle swiveled from it to their driver and back before he clicked it shut.

“So you’re associated with Stinky’s. If you hadn’t shown up before coffee, I mighta figured that out,” Nick said in a tone of voice that suggested he’d already suspected.

“Yep!” the skunk said happily. “We can make anything run way faster! Oh sorry Skye, we’re one of the top garages and mod shops in Zootopia—our own track racing team and everything. Dad picked this up at an estate sale for a hoarder who didn’t take very good care of what he had. It was only in fair shape, and I got it on condition that I do at least half of the restoration work. I knew I’d still get it since it’s the year I was born, but I did the work anyway!”

“From restoring cars to restoring fossils, interesting career progression,” commented Skye.

“I reconstruct fossils. I’ve always liked working with my paws. Parents insisted on college and it was a course description on how we all came to be that steered me into biology. Lots of unanswered questions—decided to try and answer a few about these.” Kristen lifted both paws off the wheel and wiggled them for a scary moment.

Nick’s directions led them across the river into Sahara Square and up towards the Canyonlands area, alongside a small arroyo whose watercourse was mostly hidden by tamarisk and cottonwoods. They approached a wider spot between road and greenery that held a convenience store with an overlarge parking area that extended well behind it. It was mostly empty except for a motley cluster of vehicles way in the back.

“This is it, turn in here,” Nick said. “Cruise past that airbrushed red van, it’s his—Skye, look at it carefully! Then for that bench with the awning—I see him there. Make an entrance and stop about fifty feet away.”

Kristen drove slowly as if she were looking for a close in spot in the last row. The well-worn van had fantasy artwork on it in the style of a Furzetta. Either a large buff fox or a lean wolf was clad as
a barbarian warrior. Everything was there: sneer of triumph, straps, rings, inadequate but revealing protective plates, broadsword, and a storming background. A snow-white vixen had swooned in his arms—so foxes. Her form hugging attire was somewhat akin to Skye’s own except it was green. So that’s the role Nick had in mind for her. Piece of cake.

Kristen accelerated noisily in first gear directly towards the small figure on the bench, then let the engine slow them again before she swung the wheel left, tapped the brakes and slid them ninety degrees to a stop at the specified distance. They rocked back level before Nick quickly grabbed a can in a foam insulator from behind the seat, exited, and stood with his elbows slightly spread. Skye linked arms on his right as Kristen took his other, and they walked over to the bench taking care to synchronize the sway of their tails.

A small fennec fox in khaki pants and a dark T-shirt stood there with a dubious expression that slowly morphed to a scowl. Skye looked up at Nick and petted his forearm to forestall her laughter a little longer, as Kristen leaned her head against his shoulder. They managed to hold it together until the fennec couldn’t.

“No Freakin’ way,” he said in an unexpectedly deep near growl, looking at them in turn. “I know you too well Nick; you’re expecting to hustle me into sumpthin! Why’dja even try?”

“Just wanted to show you the benefits of clean living Fin!” Nick said brightly, which deepened the fennec’s scowl. The little fox’s muzzle was now aimed squarely at Nick, but the eyes under his now pushed up shades were roving over her.

“Clean livin? So you show up like a B movie conmammal after not calling for a month to what...impress me? For what? And these two are way above your level! Besides, the way she was drivin it, it’s her car!” He pointed at Kristen then sat down and folded his arms.

Kristen gave the glaring fennec a friendly smile for his likely unintentional complement and sat next to him on the bench. She patted her lap as he turned to look. “He’s kind of snuggly—can I keep him Nicholas?”

Skye deflated the petite fox’s swelling outrage as she slid close on his other side and let her tail stray behind him. “Aren’t you going to introduce us Nicky?”

“Yes, of course...forgive my manners! Finnick, this is Cassie, and this is Kristie,” Nick said slowly as if he were acquainting first graders. “Ladies, this is my long time partner in...”

“Can it Nick, ya pulled a nice stunt, but this ain’t you since bunny cop started keeping you on the straight n narrow. So what’s the game here?”

Exactly as planned. Skye had to give Nick credit, he knew his small friend well, and had kept him on the edge of fulmination—until his curiosity won out. Nick passed over the amply sized drink he held to Finnick, and gently admonished “both paws!” He then sat on her other side still working on his friend, who’d have to look around her to see him.

“I’ll tell you once your Getting is complete Finnick. Enjoy your beer.” Nick’s grin prompted the small fox to push the can part way out of the foam sleeve and look at it in brief puzzlement. Finnick’s eyes went from the can of Borealis past her to Nick. He had straightened up with his arms out, so Skye pushed up from the bench and settled into them. She then draped her left arm over Nick’s shoulder, closed her eyes and let her head and ears fall back as they shifted into an approximation of the van’s artwork pose.
“Yeah...right—pretty close though. What’s the point?” Finnick’s grumble had softened, as his eyes flicked between Nick, herself, and the van a couple of times, then watched as she raised her head and slowly smiled.

“This works better when I’m in my winter coat,” she cooed provocatively. “When you’ve wrapped your paw around me.”

“No,” Finnick said in a small voice, “you totally gotta be shittin me!” He looked carefully between her and the can before it slipped out of his paws onto the bench between his legs.

Skye sat up quickly with an assist from Nick and opened her white pawbag. “I’m sure I’ve got a card from my ad agency in here somewhere cutie. Look, he really is one Kristie; we have an ear apiece, maybe we should help him relax.” She slid the rest of the way off Nick’s arm, and they both slowly reached for the wide-eyed little fox sitting rigidly between them.

“Alright then,” Nick clapped his paws and got a visible jerk out of Finnick. “Down to business, we don’t want to put him in the cardiac ward ladies. Item one; Finnick, I’m claiming you as the victim of a one hundred percent, totally awesome and with witne...”

“Ok! Ok! Never thought you could pull somethin like this off—but ya did,” Finnick hastily interrupted Nick’s victory address. “But whatever you’re after with me I hafta know, how did you have the connections?” The flustered little fox waved vaguely at her.

“That’s just a regular crack of yours Nick! Seriously, how do you know her!” His apparently normal irascibility was returning; anger seemed to be the fennec’s go-to refuge.

“For you, I’ll come clean,” Nick soothed, “Cassie here is one of Judy’s friends, they go out shopping and dining from time to time. Kristie and me like cars. I was on desk duty a while back and called her as part of a case follow-up. She sounded nice and invited me over; we talked for hours. Later, she met Cassie and invited all of us over to her place for dinner!”

“Your bunnycop is friends with the fox? And she fixed you up with her?” Finnick’s voice was heading for cardiovascular event territory again. “And you’re going out with...they’re ok with each other? No, no, no way, you couldn’t possibly be pulling this off, not you.”

“Every word I’ve told you is technically true.” Nick’s ears twitched. “Uh, any other clarification needs to be in private—so van everyone?”

Skye had heard it too, a group of several mammals behind them. There was a path to one side of the bench that, according to the adjacent sign, was a trailhead that doubled as entrance to a campground down in the arroyo. She headed for the van at a brisk walk, which forced Finnick to run ahead. It required a firmly held jaw to avoid laughing at his haste as his head swiveled between her, the oversize can now back in his paws, and the side of the van before he jumped up onto the bumper to open the rear door for her. Nick had eased back a few paces to watch the show, and a rumble from behind revealed Kristen was reparking the beast.

It was possible that she might have inspired whoever had done the mural, so she gave Finnick his moment to invite an artistic fantasy come to life into his—once she looked inside—cluttered mobile
It may have been a make-out den for some free-spirited type—a couple of decades ago. Now it had been modified for its present shorter resident. The forward third of the van’s interior had a second floor installed at about shoulder level to her. A small folded sofa bed was against one side up there with a hinged table opposite. Below and behind the narrow access ladder was a cabinet with a washbasin across from a cooler. Edged and stretch netted shelving and racks back along both sides held necessities from tools to toiletries. The floor was buried under a worn earthenone carpet that had obviously been much lighter years ago. Skye gingerly seated herself on a small footstool, after Nick set its improvised plywood tabletop behind a couple of large jars, as it was likely the cleanest surface in there.

Finnick climbed, can under arm, to perch on the edge of his upper floor where he likely felt more secure, while Nick sat on something rolled in the corner near the door. Light flooded in as Kristen rejoined them to sit on a box opposite Nick, while he closed the door and returned them to the dusky illumination from the smoke-shaded side windows. As crepuscular and nocturnal mammals, the dim light was fine for them all, but as an arctic fox the temperature wasn’t fine for her. It was already hot enough inside to prove the pop-up ceiling vent inadequate, and Kristen had started to look for something to fan herself with.

“You really are...?” Finnick silently tapped his beer can as if he was afraid he’d wake up.

“In the fur honey.” Skye focused her most enticing smile on him. “If we all get through this, we’ll get our picture taken next winter and I’ll autograph it for you. Maybe your van too. Now, Officer Wilde here will explain the mission we’re recruiting you for today.” The surly little fox seemed ready for their pitch; as he cycled between numb acceptance and irritable disbelief, his resistance curtailed. Nick had insisted this was the quickest way to breach his friend’s cynical and distrustful barriers to gain his cooperation, and her connection to the beer and van art had been too irresistibly perfect for either of them to feel guilty about its use.

“Nick, she makes this sound like some kind of spy movie. Recruit me? Mission?

“Exactly what it is Fin. Short version, Bellwether’s arrest didn’t end the anti-predator conspiracy last year; we’ve recently discovered that she was only the local part of a larger, more organized one embedded in the federal government. You remember what it was like before we exposed her, civil unrest, calls to restrict predators, lots of us paranoid and hiding out.” Nick’s words put a discernable mien of fear onto Finnick. “Those speciest forces have waited, learned from their mistakes, and are now active again! This time they could win.

“We don’t know yet how widespread this recent anti-pred movement is, we’re not sure who in federal authority we can trust right now. You I know. We think we’ve found a way to stop part of their plans and that’s where you come in—as in we need an inside mammal to gather evidence to bring down a rogue ZBI agent trying to sabotage a major pred run company. This is the opportunity you and I always wanted.” Nick held up his paws in a there-it-is gesture.

“You’re goin against the government, and the ZBI? That’s your big opportunity? And who exactly is we? Just us takin the risk? You lost enough friends and contacts when you became a cop! I don’t even see bunncop here. And I thought we’d still keep what we had.” Finnick had recovered his attitude again; the glare and crossed arms were back. It shouldn’t matter now, Skye knew, they’d banked on some part of Finnick’s ego wanting to emulate Nick’s big break in life, and he was still talking—bitter content notwithstanding.
“We’re not idiots, neither is the ZPD, we’re trying to protect society—the same one you live in—from another major interspecies threat.” Nick held up a finger and made sure Finnick noticed. “Judy is working another part of this investigation.” He flipped up another finger. “These two will set you up for your new job, one you’d better not tell anybody about even when you’ve collected the evidence and alerted the ZPD through their secure contact.” Another rose. “Stealth is mandatory, we can’t alert the conspirators until we know the full extent of their plans, so all of us operate on a need to know basis. Just like the spy movies.”

“Cops—and you seem to be the only one of those here Nick—do undercover all the time, so why’d you ask me, unless you’re the unofficial ones workin the wrong side! So what would I get out of all this if you convince me to stick my neck out n be dumb enough to try and hustle a ZBI agent?”

The little fennec was trying to anger his way out of their clutches.

Nick managed to suppress his smirk as she stood and took a single step towards Finnick—who’d set himself up perfectly—so she was eye to eye with him. Skye did the flip, and the little fox’s face fell as he stared at her badge and agency warrant.

“Because you have an opportunity to assist the ZBI agents like me that value their integrity, so we can bring down those who have abandoned theirs for darker motives!” Skye watched his cute little fangs for a few seconds, as his mouth remained open. “Did you think that with talent like mine,” she sinuously waved her tail, “that I’d just be content with a career in advertising?”

“What about her? She an agent too?” Finnick pointed limply at Kristen.

“We’re all part of the standard team Fin,” Nick jumped back in, “I’m the suave playfox, Cassie’s the femme fatale...”

“And I handle the cool cars and gadgets in the lab,” Kristen said briskly. “But I’m not an agent. I kinda got recruited like you,” the skunk added helpfully.

“So what do I hafta do? Not that I’m agreein to anything yet! I still better get something outta this!” Finnick seemed to think that at least one of them would benefit from his rubbing money fingers at them—which dropped him an ill affordable notch in Skye’s estimation.

Nick was ready for this. “As cover for the job, you get hired for an actual job with AblePaws; they’re a company that makes prost...”

“Yeah, I know who they are. They make fancy hooks n grabbers for mammals with hoofs and shit. It’d take years to hustle enough to buy n appropriate finger from them to flip you off with!” Finnick made the gesture and seemed miffed that it only earned smiles from them.

“While you’re there, you’ll earn a decent paycheck and your first honest, resume worthy profile in city records. Expose the sabotage and I’m sure the company will be grateful, and like me you should get a few unfortunate items removed from your record—in your case, the ZPD one. Get the evidence and help bring this dude down, he’s their head of company security.” Nick passed the photo of Alex Dustin to her, and although the coyote’s picture wasn’t slimy, she still made a show to hold it by a corner and hurry it on to Finnick.

“He looks hardassed and is bigger than you Nick; what if he makes me? Hustlin’s been hard since you left, and this ain’t exactly the opportunity I was hoping for!”

“Done right, you should never meet on the job,” the larger con-fox continued, “he might catch you
occasionally on a surveillance camera, but you are both supposed to be on-site during the early
morning shutdown. That’s when maintenance and stores deliveries take place. It’s a high-tech,
mostly rodent workforce; they’ll be pretty much gone by then and you’re small enough to move
through those areas of the plant and keep out of sight as you watch him. Listen, take notes, and get
video of him in the act; the ladies here will give you the rest of the details.” Nick reached for the
door handle. “There’s more to this investigation that I need to go take care of now, Finnick. They’ll
drive you down there and get you set up—remember, your part in this case is just as important as
ours.”

“You need to keep a low profile, so take public transit to work; there’s a station across the street
from the plant,” Skye said, trying not to break into a pant and hoping Nick would actually open the
oven door. “We can’t have anyone connect you to Nick through something as obvious as your van.
Kristie and I can take you down there this afternoon to meet with our management contacts; my
alias will identify us. They’ll start the hiring process so you appear legitimate, and get you fitted
for a uniform.”

“A uniform! What kind of a job is this?” Finnick snapped. He ignored her and glared at Nick—who
finally had the door cracked open and looked ready to leap as he said...

“Janitor.”

“WHAT!”

Hare or rabbit didn’t matter; the ears revealed the mood. It was a tell they all had to live with; no
lagomorph was immune. Jack’s had semaphored anger and then resignation as he read down the
page displayed on his tablet. Judy decided to not read over his shoulder in the swaying railcar and
to wait for the bad news, although she’d recognized the ZNN website.

The inner loop line had gone underground one stop ago, so they were nearly there. It was the most
aggravating commuter annoyance in Zootopia; that although Savanna Central Square and the
middle of downtown were less than four miles apart, it was an eleven stop roundabout ride through
the middle of Sahara Square to go from one to the other on the ZTA.

As periodically pointed out to a skeptical populace by transit engineers, pre-existing buildings, a
four hundred foot upslope, and hard rock drilling all the way save for one unfortunately placed
seam with high water pressure, made the direct line difficult to implement. However, that didn’t
stop the calls to do something about it.

At the Herd street station, Jack was easily able to maintain personal space for them amid the crowd
headed for the exit. It seemed the tall hare with the rather predatory markings had a superpower—
or more likely that his attempt at anonymous professional attire still had FED written all over it.
The upper half of the iconic Impala tower hove into view as the escalator delivered them to street
level. Proteo Foods, as befitted one of Zootopia’s largest corporations, was a home office tenant
there. The base of the tapered and twisted edifice was still a few minutes walk away—time enough
to find out what had grated Jack’s parsnips.

“I didn’t catch the news this morning, what happened?” Judy asked, choosing to conceal her big
news for a little longer.
“Not the news, an *editorial,*” Jack made the word ugly, then waited until no others were close by before he continued. “Its byline is a pseudonym the agency uses to disseminate needed information to the public. Seems we’ve just changed format to outright *propaganda.* It points out a...public concern about the rising number of reports of predatory antisocial or aggressive behavior, and what should be done to help more *civilized* mammals recognize the signs and protect themselves. No real statistics, so I’d better have Skye check if there’s really been any increase in the average number of reports being filed.”

“Sounds related to that letter Bogo got,” Judy said, “do you think they want to exploit the leftover prejudice and fear from the savage predator crisis?” It was certain that some of the conspirator’s schemes had dated from that time, and that Bellwether had prematurely implemented her part of it. Perhaps they were trying to salvage some benefit from her lapse.

“That works to their advantage only in Zootopia, Hopps, but it goes beyond here; I think this is the start of a more general campaign to stoke the public’s instinctive fears and get them to accept later repression. Remember that speciest elements in the ZBI and Department of Justice have already started to redefine predatory crime and conduct. I expect more of these editorials and claimed reports to show up in cities all over the country from now on.

“Our opponents are still trying to get ahead of recent events. They’ve been patiently waiting to prepare their plans and get people in place, until they were caught unawares by our recent archaeological finds and forced to accelerate things. We just have to confirm how all that relates to their agenda and try to predict where it’s going.”

“I’ll make sure the chief is aware of it Savage; he watches governmental and behavioral trends and I’m sure he could even *request* that information in a way our conspirators would find...satisfying.” That earned her a faint smile and nod of approval from Jack. Some of the hare’s professional paranoia had rubbed off on her, as she also watched to ensure that nobody else could overhear them.

“My thoughts exactly Hopps; like myself, Bogo’s in the perfect position to slowly become more receptive to our opponents agenda and possibly encourage them to divulge some of it. And just like you, he would be a valuable ally for the conspiracy if they could turn him—they’ll try simply because that would be easier than marginalizing or replacing him. This will be a severe test of the trust between your chief and his predator officers if he has to demonstrate his compliance with higher authority to maintain his position. Unfortunately, this might eventually require both of us to sacrifice our foxes willingly to their intrigues to maintain our own separation. Our mates understand this already.”

Judy couldn’t avoid flushed ears and a slight shiver due to his choice of words. She wondered how long it would take her to make the perceptual transition from me to we, and what she’d do if society forced them apart again. Beside her, Jack’s slight hesitation before he continued showed he’d noticed. “Our problem now is convincing certain other predators to remain passive while under threat!” Jack said, while he waved at the tower that loomed before them.

“We’d still be ignorant of most of this without you and Skye—have you decided yet how you’re going to break your assigned role to set up Proteo to the Growley’s?”

“I still haven’t been able to think of anything better than just coming clean with Derreck, and praying to the moon that he can convince Fabienne to sit on the likely biggest story of her career!” Jack shook his head enough to flex his ears. “At least your celebrity status was able to get you into
a one-on-one meeting with him! It’s up to you; go charm the billionaire!”

She went into the expansive blue glass and stainless bas-relief paneled lobby while Jack remained outside—he wasn’t supposed to make direct contact with the company, only gather intelligence to subvert it. He was to involve her in his investigations if possible, so if he was seen to bring her here that would be in keeping with his mission. As a new recruit to the conspiracy, the hare was convinced he’d be under some surveillance and had told her he wanted an opportunity to spot his tail.

Proteo Foods occupied the sixteenth through eighteenth floors—barely a quarter of the way up—they seemed to value floorspace over a more impressive view. Her badge, ID card, and a brief but humiliating pat down from an impassive ring tailed cat got her admitted to the inner sanctum—once her scheduled appointment time arrived. She doubted it would have been any different had she’d been in uniform.

Her polar bear escort actually monitored his watch for half a minute before he opened the elephant sized portal at the correct instant. Judy walked into a somewhat shadowy cave lit indirectly through its wide irregular mouth to her left. Walls, ceiling, and slightly undulating floor seemed to all be native rock—irregular enough to appear as if a natural formation had been reassembled here. She walked in slowly, eyes down; there seemed to be enough small bumps and shadowed areas scattered about to catch an unwary foot otherwise. Warm light brightened from recesses above, all focused around a larger mass ahead and a bit to her right.

Derreck Growley, the principal shareholder and CEO of Proteo was revealed seated behind it, the large snow leopard’s dark eyes examining her. Set before the polished slab of a desk that extended from an off-center rocky mound, was an appropriately sized seat for her—placed low enough that she’d have to look well up at the powerful mammal.

Judy carefully suppressed her indignation—not a foot thump or even a nose twitch rabbit! This whole set-up reeked of dominance, manipulation, and privilege. It seemed well designed to keep supplicants disconcerted during their audience. She chose to stand silently behind the provided simple seat with her arms crossed. She smiled slightly—for her self-control, not the leopard’s benefit—as she waited.

“Very well officer Hopps. Explain to me the return on investment I will receive for granting our city’s uncharacteristically silent celebrity fifteen minutes of my valuable time.”

Jack was right about the notoriously arrogant businessmammal, this was a test of her resolve—but her mere presence here showed Mr. Growley was curious as well. Now how would Nick respond to this? His previous lifestyle had emphasized economics and profit...

“Mister Growley sir, you may need to push back your next appointment as it might take somewhat longer to discuss your chances of keeping what you already have.” Judy knew she could have phrased that better given more time—but that’s what came out.

“I haven’t heard that overt a threat in a very long time! I would be hopeful that an out of uniform rookie officer might still be smart enough to choose her next words carefully.” He started to rhythmically drum his claws on the desk; tic, tic, tic, tick...tic, tic, tic, tick...

“We are here to warn you about a severe threat to you and your company, not to make one! We can’t give you all of the details because we don’t know them yet, but we hope we have enough for you to take it seriously and protect yourself.” Thankfully, that stopped his incessant tattoo and
locked stare; it had started to excite an involuntary panic she didn’t want to reveal to the assertive predator.

“Ms. Hopps, is this ‘we’ you speak of referring to the ZPD? If not, I can easily call your chief and report your apparent insubordination.” A panel to one side of the desk tilted up, and he lifted a phone receiver and tapped at a hidden screen. He listened briefly before his face clouded over.

“We expected you would, mister Growley, but you must do it securely.” Judy pulled out the cheap cellphone and stepped up to the desk to place it within reach of the leopard. He’d brought up Bogo before she had to; that might make this a bit easier. “He will confirm my purpose here. Use the number in this burner phone, he has another since right now we’re more worried about his end being monitored.”

That put a brief surprised expression on the leopard’s face as he reached for the undersized flip phone, opened it and delicately selected the number with a claw tip. He gave her an annoyed look as he did so, which she answered with a ‘what do you expect’ shrug. She would have had to carry one his size under her shirt like a breastplate.

“Adrian, Derreck! Before we continue, give me the approximate date that we last met!”

Judy didn’t have to exercise much of her auditory ability to hear the desperate howl from the tortured device in Growley’s paw. “August second! Important...listen to Hopps...curity is paramou...make...o further tracea...le contac...ZPD...r to me...e will initiate any!” The call terminated with a crack that likely meant the chief was sweeping electronic detritus into his wastebasket.

Growley stared at the phone in his paw for a moment before he passed it back over and shared a look with her. That was angry and abrupt even by Bogo standards and her sense of unease returned. The chief knew how to put on a deferential facade for politicians and business moguls but didn’t seem to care about using that self-control right now. Before she could arrange her thoughts to fill the silence, a soft tone sounded and Growley listened to his own phone.

“Would the hare with the strange markings in reception be the rest of your we?” he said.

Her nod and his curt “yes” had Jack join them within the minute. Judy turned as the door opened and drooped her right ear just enough for him to see as he entered. Her other would have meant—careful, be diplomatic. Jack marched past her with a severe face and swept back ears to place his credentials on Growley’s desk. He waited until they had registered on the leopard’s face.

“Special agent Savage, Mr. Growley; we have a lot to talk about and less time than I expected to do it. Do you trust the staff that knows of Hopps and my identities, or that is aware of our presence here?”

“Yes, since last years...difficulties, I’ve found it prudent to keep my schedule private. Now,” Growley’s voice became severe, “what concern of mine warrants this...joint display of reckless assertiveness?”

“Your most basic,” Savage gazed evenly at the now on his feet predator, who’d decided to be dominant and lean towards them with his paws on the desk, long tail slowly waving behind him. “Now before I continue, can you assure us that this conversation will remain dark?” The snow leopard sat back down thwarted, as neither of them had shied back in the slightest. He tapped at his screen again and gave Jack a nod.
“And most importantly sir,” Jack continued, “that the only things that your mate will know about this conversation will be what we authorize, since your very lives may be at stake here.”

“I can assume that you would consider our freedom of speech and that of the press she represents, and my own considerable resources to be inadequate responses?” Growley’s voice was curious now and Judy tried to unobtrusively release her tension at the clearing of their first obstacle—getting one so powerful to give credence to those seen as below him.

“Unless you’re willing to publish an expose of your personal finances and the sources and production methods for your Proteo meat substitute, then yes. Or unless you purchase the federal government outright, then also yes.”

“So the threat that you both have alluded to comes from within the government?”

“You remarked about last year’s difficulties,” Judy told him, appreciative that Jack’s subtle ear twitch had deferred to her for at least the synopsis. “Their cause remains active today. Bellwether’s savage predator plot was only one local part of a much larger anti-predator conspiracy that was temporarily derailed by her premature implementation of it.”

“Back on track, full head of steam, and they’re about to tie you to the rails—being melodramatic, mister Growley,” Jack stated. “This is a major effort to not just make other mammals fear predators again, but to totally discredit, vilify, and remove them from society for good—with you and your company as the prime target.”

“As a public figure of considerable notoriety, I am used to being the target of envy and projected revenge. My order remains feared due to a primitive past we cannot escape due to our very biology—the very word pronunciation predjudice illustrates that!” He cast a critical glance towards her that she ignored. Automatic intimidation of his perceived lessers seemed an ingrained part of this leopard’s personality. “I have staff in place to deal with the malign efforts of other’s. I pay them well, and they also ensure that the government won’t have cause to bring action against my interests.” Growley considered. “You say that these conspirators will have no difficulty with legal protections—so you must be assuming they will use physical means? Do you think this will actually be condoned and backed by the rest of the government?”

“Mister Growley sir,” Jack began, “we’ve reached the point where we need to provide some background for you. Before I begin, I’ll answer your question with a yes. None of the normal protections of society will apply if our enemies are able to pull off their most likely plot. They intend to set up, then expose a crime of yours—and predators in general—so vile that the howling mob will solve their issues with predators permanently!”

“And you think I’m not aware of my own business!” Growley was back on his feet, tail thrashing, and shouting. “I spend a fortune on testing, tamper proof packaging, and end to end traceable secure production! We have a dozen lawsuits a year about actual meat being found in our products—extortion attempts! Usually turns out to be some prey mammal behind them. Three months ago one of those chittering government inspectors tried to take advantage of that! Now I’ve got two rabbits insinuating the same thing’s about to happen on a larger scale!” Growley made a visible effort to regain control. “Why exactly are you two here and not someone more...suitable for convincing me of another anti-pred conspiracy.”

“Because,” Judy started at Jack’s nod, “I helped take down the last one—and agent Savage was recruited as part of this one! Also it’s important that the conspirators remain ignorant of what we
know already and not push forward their plans. We need time more than anything else to discover what those plans are. You really are their prime target—they don’t know we know that—so don’t risk any overt contact between Proteo and the ZPD or ZBI. Uniformed ZPD officers would have been seen here and reported by a probable embedded operative like your inspector. Remember what the chief said!” That sat Growley down again.

“The government as a whole is unaware of this conspiracy to date, however, it has been ongoing for well over a year,” Jack said. “Some of us discovered it within the ZBI by accident when we noticed a pattern of predators in senior positions being replaced at well above the normal attrition rate. Several have been forced out by manufactured scandals. Replacement hiring of predators has virtually ceased. This is also happening in at least one other government department.”

Jack seemed to decide that he’d stood before Growley’s dark slab long enough. He walked slowly towards the mouth of the faux cave, and Judy followed as soon as she noticed Growley also rise to his feet. They ended just outside, where a gallery followed the curve of the building’s windows. The short side to their right went to a stairwell; the other curved around with a view inside over an office bay as well as out over the city. They were high enough for the view to be impressive; facing a foreshortened climate wall with Sahara Square to the right and Tundratown to the left behind other downtown buildings. Growley seemed content to watch a passing news helicopter while waiting for Jack to resume.

“There’s been a recent push within the agency to develop tools to efficiently monitor and control any perceived atavistic predators,” the hare said quietly. “Their legally acceptable behavior is also under review by the Department of Justice. This is a stealthy multi-pronged assault on your rights—all promoted by prey individuals over the brief objections of predators. That stopped once it was perceived to be a career killer for those many positions not subject to public scrutiny. I myself recently overheard an update on the push to weaken the mobbing statutes to provide greater recourse to those who feel vulnerable.”

“That’s outrageous! Those are some of the pieces of legislation that were necessary for the integration of predators into society. That puts a cornered predator back into a no-win situation—try to escape, and it’s a threatening move in front of dozens of prey witnesses!” Growley looked at her as if she hadn’t studied civil law in the academy.

“Sir, check today’s ZNN web editorial to reinforce to you that steps such as this are being implemented. There will certainly be more to come; our conspirators are far more disciplined and patient than before. Those like me that don’t adhere to their goals, already find it dangerous to seek the like minded. I deliberately made an intemperate remark about a co-worker where it could be overheard and allowed myself to be gradually recruited into the conspiracy. As a field agent, I can be groomed into a valuable asset for them, although I’m still low level in their hierarchy, not privy to planning or knowing more than a few contacts. I was sent here to research your company indirectly—certainly as a test of my usefulness and reliability—hence my caution.”

“Agent Savage; Officer Hopps; you have painted me as the prime target for this conspiracy; obviously the broad market reach of our products can be used to stain a majority of predators with their falsified carnivorism. Do you know what they will try to arrange and how they intend to plausibly prove it? Deliberate product alteration is a problem we have great experience with.” Growley clasped his paws behind his back and continued to stare out the window at Zootopia below.

“We’re now in the realm of speculation,” Jack said. “There are many possibilities and almost no evidence yet of which they may pursue. I’m fairly certain that more attempts will be made to
tamper with your products merely to prepare the public for the reveal of the greater set-up crime. Of course there’s the obvious accusation of meat in your meat substitute. It might be contamination by some chemical they’ve developed that makes preds more irritable and prone to outbursts. It’s even possible that a few of your earlier product lawsuits may have been...probing attempts of your defenses. A list of basic information about those would be helpful for us to research the possible associations.”

“In any case,” Judy led them back into Growley’s cave, “we are fairly certain of their endgame. Their purpose is to have an upset, instinctively sensitized prey population ready for the revelation”—she jumped onto Growley’s desk and turned to the surprised CEO, on her toes, ears erect, as close to eye level with him as she could get. “That you have been farming; raising prey mammals in secrecy to kill and render them for their meat!”

Judy felt a wave of relief at seeing Growley’s wide eyed, open mouthed, frozen face. Her spur of the moment leap to his desk seemed to have paid off. It was his fault anyway for not offering them decent seats. Jack sprang to join her and seized the brief opportunity to reinforce the point.

“We are certain that this was not their original plan. A very recent archaeological discovery that we cannot reveal any details about was made, then immediately and brutally suppressed. This is a gift for the anti-pred conspirators, and they are rapidly trying to take advantage of it.” Jack stepped closer to her and put a paw on her shoulder. “We two are among the perhaps dozen mammals on both sides that have seen this absolutely unequivocal evidence for the existence of recent historical meat farms.”

They let Growley have time to process this—a good two minutes passed before he softly spoke.

“This is completely insane, how could they get anyone to believe we’d do this; we couldn’t possibly hide an operation large enough to supply more than a fraction of our customers. It makes no sense to take the risk; Proteo is nutritionally complete and has high customer satisfaction—the modern dietary advancement! We only imply that you don’t need natural meat anymore. That’s how we have to advertise it to avoid too much criticism from disgusted prey mammals. Now you say I’m facing something more like that carnivore cult mini-series that was cancelled a few years ago.”

She felt Jack twitch beside her at that comment.

“Oh shit,” he said, “I’d completely forgotten about that one! Timing’s right...and there was a controversy about the cancellation. Something about graphic subject matter. It’s meaningless what you have now mister Growley, they’ll just claim you did it earlier before you’d developed your meat substitute. Just as guilty! Or that maybe elite predators demand natural meat even now—you’re the arrogant rich asshole after all, the mob will want to believe. Logic or proof is not required to trigger ancient prejudice and instincts.”

“And I will tie by association nearly all predators directly to our unforgivable bloody past. How far will they take this? We felines are the obvious targets for prey mammals, being obligate carnivores, but how will they define predation among omnivores, by type of prey, by percentage of diet? How many will be made vulnerable before they are satisfied?” Growley physically sagged as he spoke, having finally acquiesced to the irritating prey before him.

“We have no idea, these mammals are hidden zealots, we can only guess at their ultimate desires—just recognize that they’re contrary to civilization,” Jack said. “That is why we two are here, some of us still believe in what we’ve built!” He waved towards the window.
“Do you have evidence for any others targeted by these conspirators, and their objectives for doing so?” Growley said, apparently feeling uncomfortably isolated.

“Yes,” Judy said. “There is also a sophisticated sabotage underway to discredit the AblePaws Corporation; its owner...” Growley raised a paw.

“I am aware, Sandra attends my yearly business roundtable.”

“Contact her privately, and securely, ask about her daughter Cassie. That will let her know you’re aware mister Growley. We have already begun to assist her.”

“As for Proteo Foods, how do you recommend we respond to this threat at this time?”

“With no more than what you’re already doing,” Jack said. “The only way to stop this plot is to let it develop as we covertly gather intelligence, then expose their operation before they are ready to do so themselves. Risky, but we have to find and catch them in possession of their illegitimate evidence to prove their guilt. Otherwise, it’s all on you. Secrecy is crucial; the conspirator’s ignorance of any organized opposition is our only advantage right now. That means no hint of any of this to your newsy mate! I am aware of your counter arguments—remember, they will be of no avail when you are being dragged away as one of history’s great villains.”

“That might be impossible,” Growley looked pained, “Fabienne has a sixth sense for a story—or secrets, particularly mine.”

“Then, sir, may I offer a distraction? I felt this might be needed and the publicity might even mildly aid our efforts. Rumor has it that if one were to inquire discreetly of sources associated with the prison out in the meadowlands, you might become aware of a notorious and relevant inmate being transferred by air to the Federal District early Friday morning.”

“I’ll have someone call her anonymous tip line. Oh, and agent Savage; thank you for suggesting that I not record any of this. Losing a pissing contest with a Hare would not be good for my image if it got out.”

Jack passed a card over to Growley. “This is a pair of contact numbers if you need to inform us of any developments. There’s a list of numerical abbreviations as well to keep text messages ambiguous and short. I will send you a more secure receiver soon.” They both hopped off his desk.

Judy watched Jack leave and listened to Growley describe his desk for a few minutes for them to unwind. It was actually rather interesting—she had trod upon a three billion year old polished piece of a banded iron formation. Life was merely bacterial back then he explained, with no oxygen in the air at all. She wondered if the slab provided incentive for the wealthy feline to match his fortune to its age. Growley remained quite courteous while ushering her out of his office.

“Suzette! Here I am!” Jack’s voice called from across the street. He made it to the zebra at the corner and beat the light across. Judy tilted her face up to allow him a chaste peck on her cheek. Skye was right; he did love to exercise his simpler bits of spycraft. The two everybunnies continued walking away from the Impala tower.

“Lives up to his reputation,” she said. “I think we succeeded, he did listen without a lot of objection—although without his calling chief Bogo to verify me and getting chewed, we would’ve been out on our tails.
“Growley let your chief gnaw on him?”

“He sure did, I’m worried that something’s gone wrong from what I heard out of him.”

“Well let’s hope the rest of us are as successful as we were,” Jack said, “I don’t expect we’ll hear from them for a few more hours—I’m still reluctant to use that untrained ‘friend’ as our mole in AblePaws.”

“You wouldn’t like him if you met him—I have and I’m still not sure—but Nick trusts him completely.”

“Well it’s not like we have a deep team right now. Oh...duty calls, at least they waited ‘til we’re out of the lair back there.” Jack slipped out his slightly bulky; rubber armored phone and carefully tapped in a twelve digit code.

“Oh shit!” Jack’s ears splayed out.

“Oh shit, dammit, they’re moving too fast! Shit!”

“Jack, what! Tell me, who?” He didn’t react to her paw on his shoulder.

‘They’re already after Wilde—federal arrest warrant! Count of tax fraud...and one of trafficking in a controlled substance. They want him brought in immediately. Skye’s busy she can wait. You—were you at Nick’s place recently?’”

She could only mutely nod.

“Is there any evidence of your presence there?” Jack stared accusingly at her, his nose twitching continually.

“Everywhere...I stayed the night.” Her own nose started to emulate his.

“I remember his place is three stops away on this line—and we’re the only available maid service. We’d better run for it!”

Chapter End Notes

I borrowed a fox ‘Getting’ from sarsi’s superb Guardian Blue stories.

Kits, find the 48-word sentence in this chapter, a real run-on by my standards.

Our next exciting installment will be—Chapter Twelve: Fox on the Run!
Chapter Summary

Reality intrudes into Nick Wilde's newly perfect personal life.

Chapter Notes

Zootopia, its characters and settings, are the property of the Walt Disney Co. I'm appreciative that they have not complained about what I'm doing with them. If you have any, that's what comments are for!

It had been enjoyable while it lasted. That was a bucket list memory if there ever was one. He, Nick Wilde, former common street fox, had rubbed shoulders with a widely recognized ultravixen while cruising through town in a hot sportscar—and was likely the only todd on the planet that couldn’t fully immerse himself in that fantasy.

They had relied on that to break down Finnick’s defenses. Skye’s presence for the rest of the afternoon would ensure his cooperation even if he did eventually realize that his van mural had probably been painted while she was still a kit. Upon further reflection, Nick realized he’d been able relax far more than if it had been a serious date with either of the ladies. Kristen and Skye would both be guaranteed finalists if someone ever decided to run a sexiest tail competition, yet the only one he was interested in was the pert little gray and white comma appended to his bunny mate.

Who had provided him with a better fantasy—Judy Hopps had transformed him, given him a purpose, professional respect, and then herself. Willingly, to me, he marveled. It was far beyond the acceptance so often denied by others to his species; it was...

“Love,” Nick voiced aloud to himself, relying on the rumble and squeal of the railcar for privacy. It was no longer his bantering use of the word from two months ago that had revealed how far down this path he’d already gone, it now meant that he’d earnestly spend the rest of his life proving he was worthy of it to her. A genuine smile on his muzzle and a joyfully waving tail drew curious looks from passengers taken by the sight of an openly happy fox, rather than the usual publicly furtive one.

The truss structure of the bridge over the river flickered past to either side before they swung into the left turn that brought them to the station opposite the AblePaws plant. It was possible the others had already arrived, but he couldn’t see the parking lot behind the now remembered buildings as they slowed to a stop. It did remind him that they all had jobs to do, so he pulled out his previously silenced phone to check for messages. There were two, the first was from ZPD dispatch; he opened it, but something about the formatting seemed off. His tail’s lateral swish slowed.

Nick selected the ZPD’s alert number and rapidly typed out his access code, then tapped ‘send’.
Invalid authentication was the immediate return message. He was about to try again—then hesitated. It was second nature to check for alerts too sensitive for general broadcast—he knew his code had been correct. This dispatch notification had been different, was he being spoofed? He checked the number, and got one he didn’t recognize.

So, a bogus notification, but what was the point since his blocked access wasn’t directly linked to it. Invalid authentication? He thought the system was supposed to ignore those and not respond. Unless it had been altered for his benefit. His tail stopped, then drooped.

Someone with system admin access within the ZPD had wanted him to know he’d been blocked. That he was now likely a mammal of interest—no, you have to assume you’re a fugitive, Nick realized. It’s not paranoia, you and Skye have been set-up—you wrongly thought you had more time. They’re moving way too fast, so you need to move faster. What would your new agent friends want you to do?

Not be found, arrested, and turned over to the ZBI personnel behind this. Found—Nick stared at the traitor in his paw as they pulled out of the station. He’d sent his code to the ZPD network. Assume your opponents are competent and have forced cooperation from the department, they now have a rough location ping on you—at least that you are on this ZTA line. Maybe several, phones can be tracked by number.

He momentarily entertained the idea of leaving the phone on the train for misdirection—but that might buy him an hour at most before they figured he’d done that. There was also a considerable amount of Carrots implicating data in it that he didn’t have time to delete—which might not be effective anyway. Baobab Boulevard was the next station; in a minute the track would descend below grade and remain there for the next few stops. He turned his phone off when they entered the tunnel, then removed its battery. That was something he hadn’t known until the academy, that a powered down smartphone still sent location data.

As they began to slow again, he had a bout of apprehension that this station was close enough to Savanna Central Plaza that there might be agents, or even some fellow officers, on the way to stake it out and intercept him. If you thought of it fox, they did too—act on it. You’re prey now, don’t be seen. Can’t stay on the train, might be stopped and searched down the line. Need a bolthole—the tunnel behind—there has to be a security cam...where?

Most of the stations Nick was familiar with had one near the departure end of the platform that looked back along it towards arriving trains. Assume that here. He sauntered back to the rear car and made sure his sunglasses were secure in a pocket. Then he took the jacket from over his arm, knotted its sleeves around his waist, and pushed up the ones on his shirt.

The doors hissed open onto a relatively uncrowded platform. Nick stayed close behind the largest of the few mammals exiting—a white-tailed deer—stepped to the side and dropped to all-fours as soon as he felt most eyes were off of him. A quick dash to the back of the train—he snagged a lap joint at the corner with his claws and swung off the platform down behind the car to the track.

An abrupt jolt of panic twisted him hard enough to almost resprain his leg as he avoided contact with the closer rail. He held a tail up arched pose until a look reassured him that this train drew its power from lines above. He straightened, then took a couple of steps away to glance about for other cameras or any curious faces on the platform. Instinct sniffed to assess his surroundings; ozone and grease from the train dominated the pervasive olfactory background of mixed mammals. Nothing else significant—he seemed safe for now and would likely have time to lose himself.
Soft thumps from the doors preceded a strained hum from beneath the train, the tang of ozone increased, and it started to move away. Nick dropped back down and galloped into the welcome dimness of the tunnel, timing his stride to hit the concrete crossties instead of the rougher, less stable ballast between them. He momentarily lost traction a few times, but didn’t stop until the tunnel curved enough to conceal him from view.

Back on his feet, he was able to jog the rest of the way to the tunnel mouth before the next train came. As soon as he heard it, his inner voice cautioned him to retreat back into the shadows and stand in a shallow alcove by a signal box until it thundered past. He was invisible here as it rifled his jacket and exposed fur; outside in the day, the oddly dressed fox standing next to the track might be noticed. Even if someone decided to report that, he’d be long gone before any response; but survival required that you not ignore the small stuff.

The reversion had come so easily, his new life suddenly gone and right back out on the streets. Nick didn’t feel a sense of loss, but one of resolve, he still had what was important—his mate and friends—they would fight with him to regain the rest. However, clarity of purpose wasn’t enough to soothe the inevitable reduced or complete loss of contact with Carrots that he’d likely have to endure.

His immediate goal was obvious, get to ground in Soren’s burrow. If he took the direct route, it was at least six miles away through the middle of the most densely populated district of Zootopia. There had to be an APB out on him—what had he been charged with? Had to be more than the supposed bribe to Skye or his previous back tax peccadilloes.

Nick walked out of the tunnel, reached to retrieve his shades and stopped as he saw his thoroughly filthy, greasy paws. “Oh sweet cheese an...” Well she is your mate now he thought with a brief smile. What was mine is now ours goes both ways. He squinted in the mid-day sun and tried in vain to find something to wipe off the train drippings with. He did scrape as much grime off his feet as he could on the edge of one of the crossties—no sense in leaving any more tracks for them than he had to.

To either side of the right of way concrete slopes led up to a chain link fence. He trotted along the now double track as their height diminished and they finally ended, leaving him on an empty cross street of light industrial shops and warehouses. Scuffing his paws in the dirt at the edge of the pavement rid himself of some of the lighter fractions of the greasiness but only served to grind the rest in. Dismayed at his state, he walked along with slitted eyes looking in vain for anything to clean himself with. It hadn’t rained in a while so no water was in the gutters, and no trees, grass, or even litter seemed to be available along this street.

Figures that he’d be stuck like this in the nearest things he had to formal wear. He could be a snappy dresser when the occasion demanded—like earlier today—although he was more comfortable with his usual casual lack of fashion sense. That was likely one of the first things that his new mate would attempt to correct, as she’d already pointed it out more than once.

The real issue was that he couldn’t stand to be grubby for any length of time. It went beyond his past need to appear clean for his several food related hustles—or the more recent standards to be met as a uniformed officer—he really was a fastidious fox. It had been one of his mom’s standard admonishments—other mammals are going to call you many unfortunate things my young todd she’d said, but dirty shouldn’t be one of them.

A good memory for the layout of the myriad twisting streets of Zootopia was important for any mammal, and Nick took pride in possessing far more extensive knowledge of them than most.
Except for here. This area was outside of his normal haunts, too close to the waterfront and too industrial to have adequate and sufficient customers for most of his hustles. Familiar territory wasn’t too far away—several blocks towards the towers of downtown was a more trafficked, exposed, patrolled area that would make it easier for law enforcement to scoop him up. He broke back into a jog down this street, and hoped that something would turn up before too many nosy drivers or pedestrians did.

The haven of the distant paleontologist’s dig was far more desirous now that he had no easy means of getting there. His own place was equally distant and far riskier; a stakeout there was a certainty. They might already be inside gathering infor… His legs picked up the pace without regard to the warmth of the day. Their being partners in the ZPD was hopefully all that was known about the two of them—but there was enough rabbit related evidence in his apartment to totally compromise his Carrots. His only hope was that the chief would insist on the prior issuance of a search warrant; a delay that would allow him to get there first.

He shook his paws futilely as he ran, merely because he needed to feel like he was doing something. From any distance, no one would care about his dirty paws—but an anxious, hurried, panting fox in a white ruffled dress shirt with a jacket flapping around his waist and tail in the middle of the day would certainly attract unwanted attention.

The industrial area ended as the street reversed its gradual curve and came to an intersection with a traffic light—with a third tier service station and convenience store on the other side. Nick gritted his teeth in frustration—they were too small to be of much help. Busy Baobab and the transit stop entrance he’d skirted was now only two short blocks off to his right. He poked the signal button on the corner with a claw, and waited before he crossed at a casual walk—tail partially between his legs and jacket nearly dragging—to hopefully avoid attracting notice from that quarter.

Halfway across, the high remote whine of an air tool betrayed the existence of a garage behind the compact store. Nick’s hope blossomed, as mechanics should have that paw cleaner goop! He carefully stepped around the store and pumps to crouch down outside a well-kept shop. Inside, a larger than average squirrel worked to remove a tire from a van almost too mini even for him. He spoke softly once the small mammal finished his task.

“Uh, excuse me?” He waited until the squirrel stepped to the front of the bay and looked up at him before slowly extending his paws with the pads up. “I really need some cleaner if you’ve got some. I’ll pay for it.” The mechanic flicked his voluminous tail while scrutinizing him slowly from head down to paws before continuing past to linger on his ankle spats. He then pointed at them and broke into a bout of laughter.

“Fop of a fox in a filthy fix,” he got out once the chittering and chortling subsided. “This should be worth a good story—wait a sec.” He walked to the back of the garage and poked at a small box.

“Hey, Deena, see if we have another can of orange Pawsall and bring it out!”

Two more squirrels joined them, obviously he’d been observed from inside the store. The two female’s common patterning and the younger ones, “what’s he want dad?” comment, showed this was a family operation. The daughter stayed several steps back with her cellphone at the ready, although not quite pointed at him yet. Her dad stepped forward and quickly squirted several pumps worth of cleaner onto each of Nick’s paws.

“Ok, rub and work it in, when it gets thinner I’ll hose you off over there. I hope you can do that and talk at the same time, cause I want to know how and why you’re here. Some mammals call us fox squirrels,” he said as he twitched his tail, colored much like Nick’s own. “And that’s as close to a
real fox as folks around here want to see.”

Nick nodded and noted that the squirrel’s paws were close shaved, as was the part of his forearms beyond his overalls—a serious mechanic who wanted to avoid snagging his fur or get it badly slimed like his was. This whole set up suggested a plausible cover story.

“One of those mornings,” Nick sighed himself into character. “I was at an all night rave, overdid it and had to sleep it off; my ride decided not to wake me and went home. No biggie, I’ll just walk to a bus stop and find some decrepit old lady armadillo and car stranded on the way. Did this gettin her restarted—she said it kept stalling—so I removed and banged out her air filter, put a paw over the carb, told her to crank it, and got it running. Dirtwise, way more than I expected. Course she took off as soon as I closed the hood.”

“You’re kidding fox. I haven’t seen a carburetor in years. What was the car and why didn’t she call roadside assistance?”

“It was either a Vincent Vagabond or Valiant, whichever’s the uglier one. I asked her what happened and she let me help cuz I said I probably could. Friend of mine’s a restorer, used to work for Stinky’s, and I’ve helped out enough to pick up stuff. Although you might not expect it, some of us foxes will take any opportunity to overcome our stereotypes!”

“Well, you seem to know your old cars. Now you need to goop up again.” Nick was re-squirted and tried not to smile at his success. He was now a fellow mechanic—who gave silent thanks to a new acquaintance and to Carrot’s old landlady for their supporting roles.

“Where was the party and who came?” The daughter’s eager voice drew a disapproving look from her mother.

“Back there,” Nick used his muzzle to point. “It was for canids mostly, we rented an empty warehouse cuz it’s cheaper than a regular party venue. Be a different spot next time.”

“I meant who played! And how do I find out whe…” She ran down to an outright glare and flicking tail tip from her mom.

Nick raised a leg to show the spat. “It was a period party, mostly jazz.” He earned a frown.

Forty dollars poorer, his aviators back over his eyes and the spats hidden in a jacket pocket; Nick asked his now cordial helpers where he could catch the 281 bus and continue on his way. The squirrels had only asked for twenty, but Nick pointed out that he had two paws to clean, and insisted. He felt it was worth it to further reduce the distrust of foxes they or their local neighbors had. It didn’t escape him for long that as a new fugitive instead of a cop he’d still promoted good community relations.

Beyond, his street started a gradual upslope through an extensive, but somewhat rundown small mammal neighborhood that justified the squirrel’s business location. The side streets there were all narrow enough to show he wouldn’t be welcome to enter, and he kept his eyes forward as he walked by to allay the fears of any out-of-doors residents. It was likely one of the earlier attempts to blend neighborhoods of different sizes into one big happy community. The newer mixed size neighborhoods seemed to work a little better.

He’d mentioned a useless to him bus line as misdirection—but then realized that might still be the best way to make up precious time. He could take another that went in the general direction he
needed and knock off a few miles from his trip. He knew ZTA notifications could be sent to the busses, but his adversaries might not have thought of that yet. He’d just watch his driver to see if he attracted any undue interest and would need to bail. That risk would only increase as they widened their search, so he’d better take the chance now.

It was only a ten-minute wait for the bus once Nick had found the right stop, but the brief enforced idleness was agonizing. There was more traffic here as he stood by the shelter, and he got the expected percentage of judgmental looks from others at seeing a fox abroad during daylight hours. That was lessened—somewhat—when he was by himself in uniform. But then the department would start to receive calls about a fox impersonating an officer—one of the things that made parking duty such an ordeal. It was only the combination of being in uniform and with a partner that provided some legitimacy for him to the rest of society.

The driver, a large red kangaroo, gave Nick just enough of a bored glance to acknowledge his presence as he stepped up and tapped his transit card on the fare box reader. He then took the first seat in back of the door—the smaller prey passengers behind him expected that, as they always preferred to keep an eye on preds, particularly a fox. Opposite him, there were marks on the floor that showed where the other first seat had been removed to provide extra room for the marsupial’s massive tail and custom seat. Further back, several pairs of beady eyes peeked at him from the gallery under the larger seats as they finally got moving.

A couple of miles passed uneventfully before opportunity made Nick press the stop strip on the window post. He had to walk back a block to the second paw clothing store he’d spotted. The unconcerned young sheep at the register silently pointed him to the sidewall where his sizes were. Not surprising he thought, the near side of Happytown along with his mother’s house were both less than a mile from here, so foxes should be regular customers.

Selections that both fit his frame and were aesthetically tolerable were in short supply—he had to settle on some medium blue shorts that were comfortable but clashed with his fur, and two somewhat loose shirts. He changed into the one that advertised some beach resort and put the other, adorned with a rock band he didn’t like, into a shoulder bag with his fancier clothes. He managed it all in fifteen minutes, and for less than he’d given the squirrels. He’d taken extra cash this morning in case he’d needed to slush Finnick a bit, and it was certainly paying off. Already cooler, and decidedly less conspicuous, he returned to the bus stop.

The next bus was nearly full, and stares from several passengers made Nick stand next to one of the few empty seats rather than threaten someone’s personal space by using it. There were a couple of other preds on board, but they’d already doubled up ahead of him. Well, he thought, you wanted to blend in as a scruffy everyfox so no surprise they’re treating you like one. At least the hunch-shouldered mountain goat up front seemed unconcerned, so that was another break.

They made it up past Walnut Street and the Sousten St. station before Nick spotted any law enforcement—two likely precinct three cruisers that passed them and continued on ahead. No lights and siren, but in a hurry nonetheless. That was enough, he needed to disappear for the last two miles home.

Someone else pressed for the next stop, so he didn’t have to call out for it. Unfortunately, it was far enough ahead to be within sight of the Grass Street station and the two cruisers now in front of it. That was the station he used most frequently to and from home, so they had to be at the apartment too. For Carrots sake, he still needed to get there on the off chance that they hadn’t gained entry yet.
Nick followed a smaller stout mammal out the back door of the bus and realized it was a Coypu when he saw the white muzzle patch and small tail. Her presence pointed out that Soren’s burrow, along with the home of so many of her own kind, was only half as far away as his apartment was—once you chose your direction up ahead. Annoyingly, she didn’t go towards the station—but turned and walked back the way he was forced to go.

“Stop following me fox, I’m warnin ya!” the large rodent said, with a click of her yellowed teeth for emphasis. She pawed in her bag briefly and pulled out a canister with a flared horn. “I’ll use this!”

“No Ma’am! I’m just going the same way you are, so let me go ahead.” Nick stepped off the curb into the street to give her space and slowly raised his paws in a hopefully placating manner. She watched warily, air horn ready—the last thing he needed was for her to use it, they were close enough to the ZTA station for it to be heard clearly by those officers. The bus was already pulling away and would provide only another few seconds of visual cover—he took another step back as he circled faster around…

“AAAH!” Nick nearly jumped out of his fur as a loud horn blared behind him and he felt the pulse of air as a good-sized vehicle passed. He made an adrenaline fueled run for the alley a half-block ahead and took the turn into it at full speed—thankfully without any twinge from his leg. If he’d been directly noticed—have to assume that—he had maybe a minute to lose himself. If the officers paused to get a description from the nervous Coypu, add ten or twenty seconds. This alley backed mid sized apartments so was relatively open, and he knew it was offset at the end of the block after this one. If he could make that before being seen, it would conceal him long enough to get to the flood control channel just past Live Oak Trail.

Luckily, there was no traffic to impede him as he dashed across the intervening street and pounded down the next section of alley. He was spotted or heard as he ran; a wolf stepped out of a building shadow near the far end and turned to face him with a belligerent snarl.

The unexpected threat accelerated Nick’s mind further into that enhanced state of simultaneous thoughts and near instant reflexes foxes were known for. One part calmly noted the wolf’s gang colors and garb—he was Cliptail Brotherhood street pack—and outside their regular territory. Another part watched the heavier lupine gradually—to his sped-up perception—spread his arms and prepare to block the smaller fox from bypassing him. A blade extruded from his right paw. Screw that, Nick thought, there’s no time for this crap.

Just strides away now, he didn’t slow or veer aside as his adversary likely expected—but instead stretched his jaws wide to fully expose the fangs, with eyes locked on the wolf’s throat. To his heightened senses, that dum-dum reacted like a sloth—pulled his arms slowly back in to intercept him, and let his muzzle open and drift down to shield the obviously crazy vulpine’s target. At the last moment, Nick broke his gait to set his legs—his body leaned forward and dropped slightly before he kicked off hard and leapt directly over the wolf.

That loser Cliptail’s muzzle came back up in time to watch him fly flattened out overhead with his tail stiffened and angled for balance. The paw and knife jabbed—a half-second too late—behind the fur of its tip. Nick worked his limbs and tail to set up for a full speed all fours landing and felt a sharp pain in both shoulders as he hit the pavement. He was still running, so nothing broken—he glanced back at the wolf as soon as he’d swept the street ahead for traffic. His adversary seemed momentarily torn between finding out what Nick had run from, or starting a long tail chase—which he’d lose due to his hesitation.
With the wolf finally out of sight behind him, Nick slowed, panting hard, and resumed his normal stance—shoulders still painful as he pushed himself up. Only then did he realize the clothing bag strap was hooked in his mouth. That was probably what the wolf had wanted—it must have come off his shoulder when he’d landed, and he’d reflexively caught it. If he could surprise himself, that wolf certainly had no chance to react in time to a flying fox.

He felt the academy’s Major Friedkin would have been pleased with his performance; she’d taught cadets to practice and utilize their own individual natural abilities. Civilized mammals, she’d said, were slowly going soft and forgetting what other species were truly capable of. That’s an advantage to a trained and aware officer. Nick proudly knew that a certain underestimated fuzzy bunny had reminded the polar bear of that the previous year.

Pity Carrots hadn’t seen his feint and leap—she probably would have made him an honorary Hopps on the spot.

That brought a wry smile as he jogged. He glanced back every few seconds to check for pursuit and started to slowly rotate his arms to assess any joint damage. Neither was of immediate concern, although he was certain he had icepacks and an uncomfortable night or two in his future. He stopped briefly in the alley to swap shirts before he stiffened up enough to make that difficult. The darker one with the mediocre rock band would make him less conspicuous for the rest of his journey home.

The chain link fence that bordered the flood control channel suddenly appeared as a more formidable barrier until he found that pulling with his arms wasn’t nearly as bad as running on them. Once he’d dropped below street level, he relaxed and spent a minute standing in the shallow flow of cold water down its middle to scrub a bit more grime off of his feet and paws. It was pleasant to watch the last thin traces of oily contamination swirl away.

Refreshed, breath caught, and scent trail broken, Nick loped upslope—slowing to let his eyes adapt when the channel turned into a tunnel under a commercial area. It opened again after half a mile or so, just within Oak Creek Park, which thankfully wasn’t crowded on this workday afternoon. He used a maintenance ramp to regain the surface, then took his familiar route home, although he usually did that at night after his runs here.

Once close to the creek in back of his building, he dropped to the ground and crept through a dense part of the bushes lining the bank until he had a clear view of the property. No one was there, although there was a black trashbag on the ground right under his open kitchen window. Nick remained cautiously hopeful—it wasn’t standard procedure for investigators to throw collected evidence out of second floor windows.

Movement inside—a second trashbag was tossed out to land lightly by the first, then to his relief his go-pack emerged and was lowered on its cord by Jack Savage. Obviously he’d been informed about Nick’s fugitive status, and had also realized the implications. He wondered if Skye had been given that notification. A stone prized out from under a root and tossed into the creek got Savage’s attention; the hare recognized and waved him over.

Nick picked his way across the stream as Jack climbed out of his apartment and awkwardly hung onto the drainpipe with his feet and the sill with one paw. He fussed with and held something inside with the other as he slowly slid the window down, then withdrew and banged it closed the last bit. He smiled in satisfaction and shinnied down the pipe.

“Glad you’re here, she’s around the side on lookout,” Jack softly answered the question in his eyes as the hare hopped to the ground and stripped his latex gloves off. Nick turned in time to see the
out of uniform pink and gray blur, but not quite prepare for the impact and gut compression. Carrots released him with a relieved smile, then looked at Jack.

“They all went back inside; I think they got tired of waiting for the landlord. You really think they’ll force entry?” Her normal voice told them they were secure for the moment.

“They already would’ve if the ZPD hadn’t been here with them. I think we owe your chief one,” Jack told her, then turned to Nick. “How’d you find out about the warrant they issued? I got notified a little before noon. Don’t know when the ZPD did. We assumed they’d already picked you up when you didn’t respond to Judy’s text. We really took a chance with that!”

“Someone at the ZPD,” Nick said, “sent me a faked dispatch call-in notification, I called and found out I was blocked! What’d they pin me with?”

“Trafficking a controlled substance, with fourteen more counts as an accessory to bodily harm—and your back taxes. They always wanted you for messing up their old savage pred scheme—looks like they decided to tie you to it to get their revenge. No mention at all of Skye’s bribe. We had to get here to clean up so they wouldn’t implicate your partner too.”

Nick reached out and put a paw on the hare’s shoulder. “Thanks for having our backs, I thought I’d be too late getting here! Any good news from your meeting?”

“Yeah, you almost were—we got Growley to cooperate without too much trouble, how’d it go with your little street friend?”

“He’s on board and on site with the ladies. He knew we were hustling him, but couldn’t resist Skye’s superpower.” Nick immediately wanted to smack away the dreamy smile that grew on Jack’s face after he heard the word ‘superpower’. Carrots was perceptive enough to bump gently against him as a reminder he was equally fortunate.

Jack abruptly became all business again. He stuffed the cord in Nick’s go-pack, then helped slip it onto his back. Then he picked up the two trash bags and headed for the creek. “Let’s get to cover,” he muttered.

When Jack paused in a secluded spot beyond the creek, Nick shook his head and took the lead. “Lots of folks will be home from work soon; we’d best be away from here before it gets busy.” He led them along an unobtrusive route to his running park and chose an overgrown corner to conceal them. Jack set the bags down, opened one and pulled out the carrot cake box from his fridge.

“Thanks for lunch Wilde, we saved you a piece. This one’s Hopps’ stuff and some extras we grabbed for you. That’s all trash. If you’ll dump it, we’ll go and de-fox her apartment and bring the rest by Soren’s later.”

“Why? I’ve never set foot in her apartment,” Nick said, “Just met her there a few times on the way to work.” He looked at his quiet mate—Carrots avoided his eye contact and her expression remained carefully neutral—enough to make him wonder what vulpine contraband she kept in her crackerbox.

Nick stuffed his clothing bag into the one with Carrots stuff, provided directions, and watched them walk away while he finished off the cake. He disposed of the trash in a dumpster by the groundskeeper’s shed; then set off towards the nearby Rainforest district. It would take longer, but
provide more separation from the surveillance around his place. Once he was past Pack Street Station, it would be closer to dusk, and somewhat safer for him to decide where to cross the divide cut and get to Soren’s burrow.

Skye asked Kristen to make a brief stop at the hotel so she could change into more professional attire; then called the regional ZBI office for a pick-up as they pulled into the museum’s parking lot. It was just four-thirty, and that’s when she’d promised delivery.

They hurried inside to get Kristen a lab coat and carry Wesley’s flat metal casket to the back door. When the pair of agency zebras showed up shortly after in their unmarked van, the paleontologist started a bitter complaint barrage directed mostly her way. After one zebra checked the seal on the fossil’s case and the packet of photos taped to the lid, Skye lifted it carefully onto the back seat, got in beside it and slid the door closed with a bang, cutting the skunk scientist off in mid rant. She allowed herself a smile of relief once she made sure the zebras weren’t looking.

Once they arrived at the federal building, Skye insisted on carrying the case and was escorted up to the fifth floor. They entered it into secure storage; then she nodded her thanks to the dour equines and went to see her ZBI operations manager.

The ram administrative assistant waved her in, and station chief Tarija subjected her again to a few seconds of scrutiny from on high. The llama was a striking mammal, well over twice Skye’s standing height even when seated. A styled white patch on the top and back of her head transitioned to an equally coifed thick brown mane down the long neck. The rest of her visible fur was all black. Appropriate Skye had thought at their first meeting; our temporary placement under the llama’s supervision couldn’t have made it more obvious what side she was on—she may as well have had the word ‘Villain’ shaved into her fur someplace.

Skye worked to maintain her professionalism to conceal her part of the mutual animosity held with the station chief. She could excuse that as it was shared not only by her Jack, but apparently by several other less involved mammals within this station, pred and prey alike.

“On time, but later than I expected, agent Winter,” the llama said in an artificially pleasant voice. “I assume they did everything possible to make things difficult for us?”

“Yes, chief Tarija. I had to give Doctor Alder the court order before he would relinquish the fossil. He and his staff still argued with me after I reminded them their national museum charter legally superceded their transfer agreement. Then he insisted on photographs as they packed and I sealed the case. They all said that they wouldn’t be held responsible for damage to the specimen. They printed copies to accompany the fossils, and gave me the files for our records.” Skye showed her a memory stick and the llama smiled.

“Excellent! I assume you placed a backdoor? That should make your new assignment much easier. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours overnight, so won’t impact your flight out Friday. And don’t you worry about them having photos of one of our agents, since you’re already plastered on a hundred million cans of cheap beer.”

Envious, aren’t we? Skye thought. Quite the character flaw in someone whose position requires a certain level of anonymity. She knows I haven’t done clandestine work; so that shouldn’t be a concern for either of us—she must be frustrated by her own obscurity.
“We have the fossil and we’re not concerned about their having records of it, so what more do you want me to look for there?” Skye tried to look innocently curious. “I’m not the breaking and entering kind of investigative agent!”

“You are now, agent Winter. This just came up, is time critical, and may be very serious! You’re familiar with the museum now, you’re the right size, and you have the data retrieval skills we need. You’re also the only one available at the moment that meets those criteria, so consider this a career opportunity.” Tarija passed over a small envelope that contained a key and a note with a passcode for the museum’s alarm. “At least you won’t have to lockpick the building. This should be good for most of the ground floor.”

Jack has the skills but Tarija didn’t want to involve him, Skye noted. That meant she was expendable as soon as she returned to Concordia. At least she was about to find out how much the conspiracy would risk revealing about Fairfield.

“Recently,” Tarija said more firmly, “several rather inflammatory packages of pictures and analysis have been sent to a number of prominent researchers and institutions. They appear to show the discovery and excavation of an uncomfortably recent mass-murder site. The numerous victims span the range from mid-sized mammals to large rodents. The perpetrators and reasons for this are unknown, as are the motivations of the anonymous discoverers beyond inciting interspecies strife, and even the location of this find.

“At first, we considered this might be an elaborate hoax, but the experts now agree this seems to be quite real. In the aftermath of last year’s predator crisis, we can’t take any chances of this being exposed to the public by these persons unknown without an ironclad explanation for it.” Chief Tarija paused to apparently arrange her thoughts.

More to make sure she gets the false narrative right, Skye knew.

“The packages are not identical, but share commonalties,” Tarija continued. “Here are a few photos and a brief introduction shared by all. These are what you’re looking for.”

Skye looked at the three photos—she’d seen them before from Dr. Alder’s package. They were overviews of the site that showed some remains—but not closely enough to reach any real conclusions. They also appeared to have been cropped to disguise their location.

“If you find these, delete them and all related files. Then check e-mails and other postings to see if these academics shared this with anyone! Ideally, find and retrieve the original package—it may be the last one unsecured. Get it all, so any complaints of theirs become baseless fabrications. We have to keep the public ignorant until we understand this!”

“I appreciate your faith in me, chief Tarija,” Skye said deferentially, as she looked up at the llama and tried to keep her teeth hidden. “I may be out of season for it now, but I think I can still be an excellent ghost for you. Will I have back-up?”

“If you decide you want it, otherwise I’m happy with my ghost.”

Skye took the dismissal and left the office, certain they’d try to monitor her regardless. It had been rather painful to remain obsequious in front of that disingenuous cud-spitter. Unfortunately, a deep sense of foreboding enveloped her as she walked to the elevator—she worried that her corrupted superiors might decide to change her retirement plan to the one used for redundant agents in lurid
spy novels.

She would be vulnerable as soon as she stepped off the plane. Her Jack would be upset by this development and try to be protective, but shouldn’t otherwise mind having a clingier than normal fox on his paws while they were still together.

Skye concentrated on that last thought and about how she’d like to be comforted, as she returned to the hotel to dress back down. An overpriced snack in the lobby restaurant partially made up for her missed lunch, and gave her a chance to see if she was under surveillance even now. She failed to detect anyone there, and they would need to be a lot better than she was to maintain contact with her on the way to Kristen’s neighborhood.

It was nearly dark when she arrived at the stairs into the cut. Skye curled her tail, flattened her ears, and duck walked down to their safe house. Faint cracks of light showed around the window shutters and she could barely hear a voice within. The door’s handle yielded to her touch, so she slipped through and quietly closed it behind her.

“Okay, we’ve finally got our fox,” Jack said with some urgency. “You need to do a quick extraction Winter, they pulled the trigger on Wilde, they’re combing the city for him.”

Eyes wide, Skye mutely pointed at a damp-furred Nick Wilde sitting next to him.

“No, it’s my mom,” Nick said on the edge of panic. “They might take and use her to force me out, and I can’t allow that. Please, I won’t leave her behind again! You’ll need this to identify yourself, just give it to her and she’ll go with you. Her name’s Vivian!” She was given a folded red cloth with hemmed edges, which she tucked in her pawbag.

“We’re agreed on this, time is everything!” Jack urged. “Get going, we gave Soren directions, she’ll wait with the car while you make contact—we need a fox and using Wilde is too risky. We’re hoping you’ll beat it, but watch for any stakeout.”

Kristen was at the door in a worn dark overall, her tail twitching fitfully. They were shooed out right after Judy quickly said, “We did okay today too! Good luck Skye!”

She was led a couple of doors further down the path to a bare concrete tunnel that led deep into the bank. The infrequently lit passage deposited them in an underground parking structure on the other side of the street above—an ideal hidden access. Kristen snapped back that she didn’t think like a secret agent when asked why she hadn’t mentioned this to them. She went silent again until she’d driven the beast up the ramp and onto the street.

“We’re trading this for a loaner at the garage,” the skunk eventually growled with clenched teeth. “Savage says this is too conspicuous. Where we’re going isn’t too far from there. Then it’s all up to you agent fox!”

She was terrified. Of course, right now all of us are, Skye knew. “I realize you’re nervous about this Kristen, but Jack’s confident we can do it. And remember, I work in the IT department and do field interviews. You’re not alone, this is my first covert mission too!”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” Kristen groused at her. “You’re all trained cops—you knew what you were getting yourselves into. It won’t exactly help my career if I’m the first paleontologist sent to prison!”
“You’re just a first time accessory, you’ll get probation. Maybe a fine.” Her deadpan delivery teased a sigh out of Kristen as the skunk pulled around the back of a large and still busy auto shop and parts store. She left the keys in the beast and within a minute they were on their way again, stuffed in a faded beige sedan that was considerably less fun.

“Crappiest car we have, it’ll fit right in where we’re going. Happytown isn’t the Heights.”

Their surroundings deteriorated until they skirted an outright slum for a few blocks. The itinerant mammals she saw there were all predators, including to her chagrin, several shabby foxes. Fortunately, Kristen soon turned away from the worst of it, and the neighborhoods improved again with run down apartment blocks slowly yielding to streets of single homes.

“ Took the back way in,” Kristen said. “Should be next block on the right, the tan and brown one near the end. Savage said to drive past first, then park out of sight.”

“Good, don’t slow down near the house, just at the corner. Let’s see what we find.”

Vivian Wilde’s modest home was neatly kept and not crowded by its neighbors or by much low vegetation—so not a lot of cover, Skye saw. As they came to the intersection, she caught slight motion ahead and gave Kristen a curt, “Left.” She then held up a paw to gain time to think. This street was straighter, with more lights further ahead, a good exit.

“Okay, this is far enough, find a spot off this street and we’ll come to you. Just watch for us without showing yourself—there was somebody behind the hedge on the far corner back there. Didn’t see what they were, but I saw movement in there. I think there’s just one so I have an idea! I’ll need to get around and approach from the way we drove in, so it might take me a while.” To Skye’s surprise, Kristen leaned over and gave her a quick silent hug before she could open the car door.

The location of the presumed rogue ZBI agent gave them a good view down all the streets and of the front of the target house. That required Skye to sneak past the back of several others and jump a couple of fences before she arrived at the hidden side of Ms. Wilde’s. She laid low to watch and listen until she was sure she’d been unobserved—the conspirators must be stretched thin, with only the one available to see if Nick came here. She doubted the ZPD would have provided officers for a low probability stakeout like this on short notice.

There was one small window on this wall; Skye found enough of a gap in its curtains for her flashlight to reveal it as a bathroom with a closed door. The back of the house was more exposed—she had no choice but to crawl along the base of the wall, then stand close to what was the kitchen window. Closed and mostly curtained of course.

Her initial idea of tapping out a cadence on the side window to attract attention was out; it might be heard from here since she was nearly in line of sight to the agent across the street. The kitchen was dark, but there was warm light further inside from the room in front, so Skye guessed Ms. Wilde was at home—everybody had just assumed that! She pointed her flashlight inside and oscillated it hoping the flicker would be seen.

It became intensely frustrating after just minutes. How do you get someone’s notice when they’re out of sight and you have to be quiet! And how long would it be before the other agent moved and spotted her? Skye kept wiggling the flashlight in vain and turned her muzzle to press an ear against the window in the hope of hearing…anything!
Skrrrick! “Who are you?” The words hammered into Skye’s ear and her whole body recoiled. She almost dropped the flashlight and would have fallen if the house weren’t in the way. Stifling a gasp, she turned to find the other vixen’s face inches from her own, the curtain pulled aside.

Desperation made Skye turn the light to her own face and shakily put a finger to her muzzle. She got her breath under control and made motions inviting Ms. Wilde to open the window—she didn’t, but continued to watch her. Skye then reached into her pawbag to get the cloth and made sure she could be seen doing that. She carefully shook it open and held it up—then illuminated it from behind.

That got Ms. Wilde to slide open the window—her paw demanded the cloth and raised it to her muzzle, where she sniffed deeply.

“Who are you and why do you have this?” The older vixen thankfully kept her voice down. Her momentarily half closed eyes reopened and bored into Skye’s. They appeared the same shade of vivid green as Nick’s. Skye put her badgeholder on the windowsill along with the light and waited long enough for the other to get a good look at it.

“Nick is fine, missus Wilde.” Skye saw her face immediately soften. “A lot has happened today and he, you, and myself are in considerable danger. You’re under surveillance right now and I need to take you to him.”

“Nicholas gave you this? And why am I being watched?” A suspicious look returned to Ms. Wilde’s face and her paw tightened to retain Skye’s identification.

“Yes, he’s in a safe location with officer Hopps and a couple of others. He’s under a false arrest warrant issued by rogue elements within the ZBI and federal government. Last year’s predator crisis isn’t over, its been reactivated by those elements. We’re afraid they might use you to flush him out of hiding.” Skye had hashed over what to tell Nick’s mother on the way over, and now could only await her decision.

“What does Nicholas call his partner?”

“I call her Judy; he calls her Carrots—but don’t spread that around,” Skye said quickly. There was a slight pause; then she got her ID back with a nod of acquiescence.

“What do I need to do?”

“Act normally. Right now I’m sure they’re watching for Nick to show up here, and won’t follow us. I need to go away unseen; I’ll come back to your front door in ten minutes or so; greet me as a friend! While I’m gone, pack something with necessities.”

“I have that, my Nicholas insisted,” Ms. Wilde said steadily. “I’m Vivian, officer Winter.”

“Skye. Secure your house and grab whatever else you might need, loose cash, another change, you might be away for awhile.” The window closed and she retraced her route away, then circled around to come back up the street that passed in front of the lurking agent. Skye walked slowly with a bit of a slouch along the other side and avoided looking at the hedge as she went by. She rounded the corner and went up to Vivian’s door.

“Vanya! So nice.” The taller vixen stepped through the door to lean in and give her a hug. “I’m ready.”
Skye took advantage of a passing car to whisper, “look at me, not the hedge,” before they linked arms, walked to the corner and crossed. Once a couple of houses down the other side, they heard a faint rustling behind them—Vivian stopped, turned to stare, and held up Skye’s flashlight with her thumb on top like it was a can of pepper spray.

The shape back on the corner in the nocturnal friendly street lighting was nearly Skye’s height and build, a smaller mammal than she’d expected to be there. Round headed and earless, it looked at them before turning to walk nonchalantly up the side street. Long ears were draped behind a short muzzled head. It had to be a hare; a darker furred version of her Jack! It was disappointing to see one working for the other side, but probably inevitable at some point. There weren’t too many in the agency, Skye knew they should be able to ID this one. He’d be back at his post as soon as they were gone.

“You said to act naturally,” Vivian commented with some amusement in her voice as they resumed walking.

“That I did. Our transportation’s a couple of blocks further.” Skye was proven wrong when Kristen made her presence known at the next corner.

“Oh good! I parked a couple of streets closer, couldn’t see very well from back there. Hello Ms. Wilde, I’m Kristen—secret paleontologist!”

Unfortunately Skye didn’t get a good look at the expression that crossed Vivian’s face. The good doctor ushered them into the car and asked Vivian to remove her phone battery as she explained Nick had wanted. Her course back to the parking garage gave Skye plenty of time to provide Vivian with some background information on the conspiracy.

“I hope you don’t mind leftovers for dinner,” Kristen told Vivian as they walked through the tunnel. None of us have eaten yet and I’ll just have to warm up from last night.

“Actually I’ve already…” Skye stopped Vivian with a paw.

“You might want to reconsider, she’s really good,” Skye told her. Their exchange visibly relaxed their newest member before Kristen checked outside the mouth of the tunnel, then led them to her home. A faint murmur of voices stopped when she unlocked the door.

As soon as they were inside, Nick managed to silently scoop all three of them into a brief group hug, then had a much longer one with his mom. Skye knew that Jack had likely admonished him repeatedly to be quiet when they arrived. The six of them found places at the dining table and on Kristen’s sofa, then exchanged smiles of relief.

Jack introduced himself and gave Ms. Wilde some background on his involvement with the conspiracy, while Kristen busied herself in the kitchen bulking up the leftovers.

Four firm knocks sounded from the front door. Silence fell and Kristen turned towards the door with a look of surprise. Vivian and Nick exchanged nervous glances—Judy, Jack, and Skye froze. Four more raps came…

“Doctor Soren, please excuse the late hour. I’m agent Hartley from the Zootopia Bureau of Investigation. May we talk?”
I know. I should have titled the chapter Foxes on the Run, since at least three of our vulpines had a good day turn sour to varying degrees.

APB: All Points Bulletin

Nick being accused of impersonating an officer—an idea from Old Goat.

Back in the Jurassic period of automotive technology, an old quick fix for a car stalling from fuel starvation was to remove the air filter and put a hand or rag over the carburetor inlet to block it. Crank the engine, and the greater suction would pull some fuel through a clogged line filter or ports and clear them enough to get you home. I did that twice for people back in the 1970s; one of them was a non-armadillo old lady in a Chrysler.

We are now caught up with this story as published on FF. I will try to post further chapter updates at least monthly. This of course depends upon how fast I'm able to surgically extract words from my brain.

Our next fur raising installment—Chapter Thirteen: Breaking up is hard to do
“Doctor Soren? I just have a few questions, this shouldn’t take long.”

That voice outside the door belongs to a larger mammal than I am, Jack Savage thought through his shock. He sat rigidly for a few seconds until a paw pushed his arm.

“You’re ZBI, you have to take this!” Judy hissed at him. “You’re in your suit, go!”

He got to his feet, which prompted the others to do the same. Nick silently urged his mother towards the back of Soren’s den, Judy reached a paw out to Skye and they followed. “Stay hidden; keep a door closed!” Jack quickly hissed back at them.

He then stepped over to a wide-eyed Dr. Soren in the kitchen, thinking furiously. He unceremoniously reached around the skunk to pull her closer. “Stall! Say something…I’m coming…anything!” he whispered right in her face.

“Again? Coming, give me a sec!” Kristen said loudly in a brittle voice—which immediately suggested a stratagem to Jack.

“Good! Be Angry! We took your fossil. I’m annoying you here.” He let go of her arms and took a step back. “This whole place smells like wet fox; have anything to cover it?”

Kristen’s eyes narrowed a bit in thought for a lethargic second or two. She then moved quickly for a skunk and pulled a square plastic jar out of a cupboard. A flip of a cap, and she squeezed a sizeable brown puff into the air. It was cinnamon—Jack resisted a sneeze as she fanned it about with a pot lid. She handed it to him and went to the door. Jack set it down and followed. She opened it to a crisp pair of dark blue pants with small split hooves below.

“Why are you here! I’ve had enough of you people today. I’ve already got this ZBI jackass to deal with!” She pointed back at him with a dramatic quivering finger.

The tall antelope outside leaned down to peer through the door at him. Jack didn’t recognize his agency colleague beyond his stated name, but the other seemed to know him.

“You’re the one from the federal office—agent Savage?” Hartley seemed disconcerted to find him here. “Excuse the intrusion Doctor Soren,” he showed his badge, “I need to ask a few questions about someone you have recently met; a ZPD Officer named Nicholas…”

“Why do you think I’m here?” Jack kept his voice moderately exasperated to not upstage the
fuming skunk now staring at them in turn—who he felt had dealt with this crisis admirably so far. “I get the same notifications you do,” he told Hartley, who’d propped himself on the top of the doorframe with his arms and pushed his head inside to look.

“Perhaps you’d like to barge right in and recheck the premises while I finish interviewing the doctor!” Jack continued with obvious sarcasm. Kristen reacted as he’d hoped and shoved him into the antelope.

“Out! Get out both of you! This is my home you ruin my research and come and poke around in my home because of some fugitive I might have met without a warrant but I’ve got a lawyer!” Kristen finished in a crescendo.

The pressure on his back vanished and he slipped down to his feet, back against the open door. He saw Hartley’s eyes widen abruptly and turned in time to watch Kristen, back turned, hike her tail and grab the hem of her dress. She started to pull it up—Hartley clenched his eyes and jerked back, catching his horns again with a clack!

“Ma’am! I’m not in your home. That’ll count as aggravated assault!” Hartley cried out with panic in his voice.

“Your head’s in here—that’s all I need!”

Hartley fatalistically moved a few inches forward, mouth tight, tipped his horns clear and withdrew back outside. Jack backed out with him and flashed Kristen a brief thumbs up before she slammed the heavy door.

“Walk with me,” Jack told Hartley sternly. The Antelope looked shocked for an instant before his face clouded over.

“Nothing. As for Wilde, he and Hopps met with her four days ago at the museum, Winter and I were there too! We all discussed her initial report filed with the police. The last time I saw the fox
was two days later at the ZPD.” Jack watched the antelope up the stairs and then made a show of persuading Kristen to readmit him in case Hartley doubled back.

Jack was pleased to hear Kristen unlock the door, then resecure it behind him. Their civilian member had a steep learning curve ahead of her, but seemed well on the way with how she’d reacted to this unexpected and stressful episode. He, on the other paw, had remained frozen in surprise like the rest until Judy pushed him into action. Skye’s similar response didn’t excuse his—it was an embarrassing lapse for both of them.

Skye and Nick returned to the sofa with Mrs. Wilde and sat her between them. It was hard to tell which of the mutually clingy and nuzzling foxes needed the most reassurance. Judy spared Jack a brief glance from the dining table, and drew his gaze to follow Dr. Soren’s hesitant return to the kitchen—where she halted to hug herself as the shakes started.

Judy got to her at the same time he did, and they led her over to the therapy sofa where there was still a little room at one end. Skye noticed and rose for them.

“We’ve got an empty kitchen to tend Vivian. Perhaps you could direct your handsome son to set the table?” His perceptive mate turned her muzzle to Nick and earned small smiles from both Wildes. Nick assisted his mom to her feet after her nod and the foxes set to their tasks. Skye’s timely distraction had apparently eased most of their tension.

That left a very distraught skunk in Judy’s and his paws. At first they just sat with her as she quietly shuddered. Judy held her paw and spoke soft platitudes, then moved to gently massage around her small ears, then further down to relax her. Jack felt reluctant to join in. Dr. Soren accepted Judy’s ministrations, but he felt that his own might add too much. Even with Skye as his candid teacher, he doubted he’d ever be as spontaneous and comfortable with unexpected emotional situations. Somehow most females were, even between species.

“I’m sure we’re safe now,” he said mildly. “We embarrassed that agent and I made sure that he’s gone and will report what we want him to.” That seemed to work—Kristen turned slightly in his direction, she’d heard. Jack finally felt secure in placing his arm around her.

“We’ve all had a rough day and you rose to the challenge as well as any of us,” he told her. “You couldn’t have done any better, you set him up perfectly and made it easy for me!”

“I’m still not trained like all of you; I thought I’d offer advice, not get directly involved!”

“You still reacted like a pro doctor—you dealt with the crisis, and waited until it was all over to come ungled. Many people think we ZBI agents don’t have emotions, but like you, we do. Training doesn’t eliminate them, but it helps us to control them—most of the time.”

“It wasn’t very reassuring that you looked as scared as I was,” Kristen’s voice and bearing had firmed some, and she looked at him to make her point.

“Yeah, we all were,” Nick added. “Totally caught out and the first one of us to recover was Officer Hopps here,” he said as he stepped over from the table and briefly tousled Judy’s ears. Her eyes snapped wide open and she tried to unobtrusively bat his paw away.

Jack also gave the incautious fox a severe look, but fortunately Kristen’s attention had shifted to the vixens as they brought dinner from the kitchen. Nick’s grimace acknowledged his negligence as he quickly turned and took his seat. His casual familiarity with Judy hinted that something good...
had happened in their relationship last night, perhaps aided by his and Skye’s earlier counsel. He hoped that had been the case. Unfortunately, two of their present number weren’t privy to any of that.

Or maybe he had just one to worry about now—Vivian Wilde must have seen Nick’s indiscretion, but hadn’t visibly reacted. Maybe she already suspected or knew something about the pair—she’d seated herself at the opposite end of the table from Kristen and watched them benignly. Jack sat too, and as technically the last in to Soren’s den this time, thanked the spirits that some among their number weren’t being served prison food tonight. The foxes across from him took his comment to heart and dug in, while Judy and Kristen’s expressions put him on notice before they began to pick at their meals.

Jack thought last night’s dinner had been fraught with tension, but tonight’s was worse. They all ate with a distinct lack of small talk, or even much eye contact. At least Kristen’s food was still good enough to provide an excuse for that. No salads this time, but the reheated stew smelled and tasted as good as before. Too bad that several of its vegetables hadn’t fully retained their earlier firmness—right now he wanted to sink his incisors into something. That was one of the more predatory urges he seemed to have acquired from his mate. Maybe if he had Skye recount her mini adventure with Mrs. Wilde, that would ease them into the difficult decisions to come. When most seemed finished with their dinner, he put his fork down with a distinct click and had their attention.

“Agent Winter, any difficulties to report about bringing in Mrs. Wilde? You took long enough that I got worried.” Jack caught a ‘reminder received’ ear twitch from Nick in his peripheral vision.

“She was under observation when we got there sir; one agent, a hare your size with brown fur. Unfortunately posted in a good spot, I had to be silent. It took me some time to attract Mrs. Wilde’s attention.” Skye favored the other vixen with an uncharacteristic self-effacing look, while Vivian seemed near to laughter. That story would have to wait for another time.

“Were you seen?” Jack prompted.

“Yes, we walked right past him acting as old friends; I felt that if we left openly, the lookout would have to assume that we didn’t expect Officer Wilde to show up.”

“That’s excellent Winter, lets hope he has a long cold night! Now Wilde has already informed us of your success in placing his friend with AblePaws, and the doctor about your confiscation of her fossil. Anything else before I continue?” Jack was pleased to see that both Wildes had noted Skye’s and his careful professionalism. He felt that Vivian would test that long before Nick would again.

“I got a new assignment from Tarija and some information from her that I’m afraid is going to cost me dearly.” Skye’s tone and expression tore Jack up inside as he struggled to remain passive outside. Judy turned to meet his look—hers echoed the thoughts in his head. Neither of them had expected that the potential joint sacrifices they’d discussed this morning would come due the same day. Skye had also gone silent as they confronted their fears.

“Who is this Tarija person that so troubles my family and friends?” Vivian Wilde said evenly but firmly.

“She is the chief of the regional ZBI office here in Zootopia,” Skye told her without hesitation. “A llama definitely working for the other side to whom agent Savage and I were recently assigned. Your son and I, as predators, have been carefully set up to take the fall for impeding their agenda. He for trafficking nighthowlers, myself for bribery and corruption.”
Jack wasn’t too surprised to see how quickly Skye had included the other vixen. The foundation of their own relationship was mutual trust, and she’d just decided that applied to Vivian as well—who’d referred to them as friends just minutes after they’d met. It was a clear signal from Skye that she considered her an asset rather than a liability. He agreed; Nick’s mom had also impressed him with her forthright acceptance of her new situation.

“I’m assigned to find and expropriate Doctor Alder’s received package about the Fairfield primitive mammal meat farm discovery, and wipe any related files that I discover on his computer—which I’d purged earlier,” Skye summed up for Vivian’s now wide eyed benefit. “I’ll retrieve it later tonight from his museum office after I make a showing at my hotel so Tarija’s tail can follow and monitor me.” Skye gave Vivian an opportunity for questions; a slight paw wave bade her continue.

“Chief Tarija described the recently found Fairfield archaeological site as an apparently real mass murder carried out at an unknown location. She told me that several packages of provocative information had been widely distributed in an attempt to inflame interspecies animosities by persons unknown. All but my objective tonight have been intercepted. In reality Vivian, there were only two; the other went to the National Museum in Concordia. The conspirators are desperate to keep this discovery hidden until they are able to exploit it by first fabricating, then exposing an explosive secret of the Proteo Company.”

“Do you think Tarija is aware of anything about us?” Jack asked.

“No she’s not. I’m certain. After I retrieve this, I’ll be the only potential leak. So once I’ve delivered Bellwether to federal custody,” Skye put a paw on Vivian’s arm, “I’m expendable.”

That finally broke Vivian Wilde’s composed demeanor. She put her other paw over Skye’s. “You have to go through with this don’t you; to hide what you know.” Skye nodded. “Bellwether again dear? Are they doing this to get her out of prison?”

“No, they need to keep a closer eye on her and limit her contacts, she screwed up their earlier plans as much as your son and his…Officer Hopps did.” Skye’s hesitation made Mrs. Wilde’s ears perk up. Jack noticed and leapt in to preempt anything unfortunate.

“Officer Wilde is our immediate problem!” he said, fully aware that he dare not underestimate this vixen either. Maybe he should ask Nick if that was a general rule with them. “Today’s call for his arrest shows that our adversaries fear he suspects too much already, after all, he did help prepare the report they saw. I feel it’s an unacceptable risk for him to stay here more than a few days, he’d be a lot safer if he left Zootopia altogether.”

“What about me or Doctor Alder?” Kristen said uneasily. “We know everything too and they’ve already come looking for me.”

“That’s an issue,” Jack admitted, “but they really don’t know the extent of your involvement and Winter’s got that covered. She’ll retrieve Alder’s package and your networks are clean; I’d expect electronic surveillance of you for now.”

“Tarija’s got access to your computers, and someone’s probably already trying to get in there to allow verification of my upcoming report,” Skye said. “I needed to give them that to allay their suspicions about you two.”
“Kristen, you’ve got the ZPD too,” Judy said. “Chief Bogo and the precinct will keep eyes on you for protection. That ZBI chief won’t be able to harass you without any…”

“Wait! Wait!” Jack raised his arms to protect his germinating thought. “Oh yes, this might work! Thanks Officer Hopps. Dr. Soren, do you have any uh…obligations, family issues—anything that would prevent you from traveling?”

“Not really, a good part of my research just got stolen by that evil fox,” she pointed out Skye, “and the rest’s kinda on hold, so I could.” Her expression added, so OK, where?

“How about if our angry skunk goes ahead and makes a complaint to the ZBI about their unwarranted intrusions? Maybe threatens to go to the media if she doesn’t get satisfaction?” Jack couldn’t stop a smile from spreading. “Chief Tarija would certainly want that problem to go away—maybe by giving the obsessive scientist access to her precious fossil. You get a trip to the Federal District, research time as cover, and Skye would have a trusted local contact if she needs you. That lets Tarija isolate you from problematic colleagues and contacts here, so her headquarters superiors can more easily monitor you in their territory. I’m sure that you could be boring enough for them to get sloppy about it too!”

“I don’t really feel like I want to call or visit the ZBI and that Tarija person,” Kristen said.

“No need! I’m ZBI, so you already have Dr. Soren. I’ll pass on your complaint and take care of the negotiations as I speak fluent Fedlish!” Jack got the hoped for modest smile from the skunk. “I feel you’re reasonably safe now whether you stay here or go, as long as you don’t obviously try to hide your actions.” Jack shifted his attention to her left.

“Wilde however will be a fugitive wherever he is. He stays hidden and we’ll certainly get more widespread wanted notices, rewards offered, and surveillance of his known contacts—like us. Today’s rapid response indicates they really want him—for revenge as well as being a threat. Wilde, I recall you saying that you know everybody in Zootopia—so a large number of them know you as well.”

“You’re right, he can’t stay here,” Judy said slowly. “Or at Mrs. Wilde’s, tonight showed that.” She got a few nods of agreement—including Nick’s.

“Pity, I could’ve made use of him around here,” Kristen said innocently. Jack saw a brief perturbed look cross Judy’s face and knew that those two were each other’s worst enemies for keeping secrets. Best to separate them—however cruel it might be right now.

“Kristen, I know Officer Wilde well enough that you wouldn’t want him on your paws after he gets bored,” Judy said before she scraped her fork around the bowl. “And as good as this was, we at the ZPD don’t want to get a fat fox back.”

“Might I comment?” Nick got several calm noes in response. He sighed. “Thanks for reinforcing my trust issues after I just lost my job and effectively got evicted today. You’re right, Nick Wilde needs to temporarily disappear. I can’t easily do that here, and places like Fox Hills and New Reynard are too obvious and small—it would take only one unscrupulous fox to sell out the stranger to the authorities—of which I am no longer a part of.”

Jack felt sudden regret, the two officer’s banter wasn’t a response to past stress; it was to cover the reality that the newly acknowledged mates also knew they faced imminent separation. He looked to his own; Skye saw it in them too. They understood the risks of their relationship, and had kept
them at bay for years; Judy and Nick wouldn’t have that chance. It could have just as easily been us he realized—he’d fight to get that chance back for them as hard as he would for ours. They’re friends now—which makes it our business.

“We need a well distant population center for you to get lost in…with a new identity! Nick Wilde leaves here; another fox arrives there.” Jack hesitated in thought. “Problem is getting the right kind of false identity on short notice—the resources of the ZBI and ZPD are unavailable to us for this. A fake driver’s license or I.D. to get into a club or buy something is enough for a teen—you’ll need a better one for longer-term use.

“How about borrowing a real one?” Vivian said. “There’s a lot of pride about Officer Wilde in the local vulpine community—although his infrequent visits with us have likely kept him unaware of most of that.” They watched Nick’s shoulders slump as he decided he’d better leave that arrow where it had struck for now.

“I’d need one that’s a reasonable match for my age and description,” Nick said, “and I’m not your average red fox. Most are a bit blonder than I am and have white tipped tails. Mine’s a little bushier and darker on the end; maybe one out of every dozen of us.” He lifted and slowly waved it—which elicited a small and quickly suppressed smile from Judy. Vivian briefly raised hers as well—as if any of them needed that familial confirmation.

“Vanya’s a real friend Skye, and I think there’s someone in her family that might do for this. If not, I can pass the word—don’t worry, we know who to trust and will cover for each other. Needing this to help Nicholas clear his name will be all the explanation required.”

“There’s another issue everyone,” Nick sounded hesitant. “Wherever I, or whoever I become ends up, I’ll still need something to live on—even if I keep a low profile. Looking for a job or living rough in a strange place is too risky and I certainly can’t use my account—I have less than five hundred in it anyway.”

“Could you reach my bag behind you dear?” Vivian took it from Skye, extracted a finger thick wrapped stack of bills and tossed it to a startled Nick. “There’s a thousand Nicholas—you told me to keep some ready cash for the go bag.” The sweetly smiling vixen paused to let everyone appreciate the expression on her son’s face. “I only used some of what you sent me over the years; I wanted to save as much of it as I could in case of need—for either of us. That is now.” Vivian’s tone brooked no argument. “There is another eight thousand of it in my account if we can find a way to get it to you unnoticed.”

“Agent Wilde,” Jack asked slowly, watching Vivian in admiration. “Would you also happen to have an organization chart for the opposition and some surveillance equipment in that spy kit of yours?” He had to wave his arms to stifle the general laughter. He got up to retrieve his briefcase and they all waited for him to resume.

“Circumstances are splitting us up before we have enough information for a coherent response to this conspiracy. Maintaining secure communications and acquiring additional operating funds are crucial if we are to have any success. We,” Jack glanced at Skye, “dare not make any unexpected charges to our own expense accounts.” He snapped his case open and pulled out two simple flip phones, thought for a moment, then passed them to Kristen and Nick. “Agent Winter leaves Friday and we already have a pair of these set up. You two are most likely to leave next—these have mutual contacts with ours. I was going to give them to chief Bogo, but we might not have the time.” He pulled out his own and gave it to Vivian.
“Could you buy, or have someone else buy...say four more of these tomorrow? Get them prepaid for a month, a basic MigrateMobile voice and text plan.”

“Do you think it’s safe for me to be about so soon?” Vivian passed back his phone after a brief examination. “Won’t the ZBI want to question me about Nicholas’s whereabouts?”

“Now that I’ve had time to think, I believe it’s imperative you go back home. Your best protection now is a normal routine. React to the news when you hear about it; call the ZPD to find out what happened. Do that and let everybody assume Officer Wilde is long gone! If you stay hidden for much longer, they’ll have to assume you're in contact with your son. We also need that new ID fast!”

Jack pulled out several file cards and passed them around. “We’ll need pens, some of you’ll be writing.” Vivian started to clear the table, which induced Nick and Skye to help her make short work of it.

“I only started to fill out two of those, so let Dr. Soren and Officer Wilde have…”

“Agent Savage,” Vivian interrupted. “Given the circumstances with all of the agents and officers about today, and the possibility of some confusion.” She waved to Judy and Nick, then Skye and himself. “Could we finally be somewhat less formal?”

“Makes sense Mrs…Vivian. I’m Jack.” It was going to drive him nuts speculating about what that vixen actually knew about them—or would rapidly find out. Seems everyone he’d met recently had stripped away more of his anonymity. He also suspected that Skye was secretly pleased that she’d found another vixen to watch over him once she left. If that was a typical fox thing, then Nick was fortunate indeed to have found his pretty bunny mate.

“OK, now agen...Skye will have to leave soon to retrieve Dr. Alder’s package, so we need to agree on our phone protocols. Use voice as little as possible and watch how you speak. We have ZBI tools to look for keywords in calls and text messages—which may bring closer scrutiny if you use them! Be assured that each of our names and those of individuals and locations associated with us will be among those keywords!” Jack pulled out his own card and showed them one side before giving it to Vivian to copy. “Use text as much as possible, these four digit codes are abbreviations for useful phrases to keep messages short. Our security relies on only using these phones to call each other, no one else!

“You mentioned Bogo, so he is included in the group?” Judy said.

“Yes, although you can contact him through normal work channels. For the rest of us, leave contact with him to me—I’m the least likely to be suspected among us at the moment.”

“Who are these names on the back?” Kristen asked.

“We each get a code name! Go ahead, figure them out.” Jack’s attention put her on the spot and she started looking around the table.

“Well, this one’s obvious; you must be Estelle.” She pointed at Skye and Jack nodded. “And I’m Rocky no doubt, real subtle Savage! Now Tilly…”

“That’d be me,” Judy raised a paw. “Farm, field, crops,” she said in a resigned tone. She glared at Nick’s exaggerated ‘Aha!’ look. “Aren’t these rather childish Jack?”
“Not really, they’re not meant as an effective alias, just as a simple memory aid for us.”

“So I’m Cutter and you’re Martin? Oh, got it.” Nick said as Jack grimaced and raised his arms in a fighting pose. “So we load these names in our phones for easy caller ID.”

“Exactly. Now I want all of you to write down three or four simple words related to your name. Skye already picked some star names, pass your cards and she’ll put them in. When you text, include one of your words somewhere in the message as authentication in case someone else gets hold of your phone.

“Do you really expect us to memorize all of this? You’ve got over twenty phrases and even more codes,” Judy said.

“No, just refer to your card. If it falls into the wrong paws it’s meaningless without phone numbers to tie it to messages. Just don’t keep it with your phone and delete messages after sending or reading one. Our real security comes from short ambiguous texts that will be hidden among tens of millions of others. If someone does suspect, it will take time to uncover them and they’ll be useless by then.”

“I suppose I’ll use ‘Marian’, it’s been a family name, but does not show on my records. Mom will be my confirmation word since some of you might have suggested that anyway.” To Jack’s consternation, Vivian was looking at him instead of Nick.

“Ah, OK that’ll do. Though its close enough to what I’m using that some might think we’re ah…” Jack blurted out. He tried to cover his near revelatory slip with an uncomfortable grin. Both vixens watched him back calmly while Nick was fascinated by something on the wall behind Judy—who’d tried to distract Kristen by reaching for her card. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so wrong-footed by a female—and another vixen at that—sitting right next to his Skye. He struggled to keep his damn ears up.

Vivian had to have discerned something about their personal relationships—she appeared so self-assured and had too comfortably taken her place among them not to have done so. She couldn’t have conspired with Skye just to provoke a response from him, his mate knew better! Although Skye had told him that foxes loved their practical jokes and gotcha moments, this wasn’t the time! But Vivian had looked at him so…perceptively—no, maybe past him, at Judy! Get a grip Jack, your secrets safe, she’s just focused on her incautious son’s ambiguous partner like any other worried mom would be.

“Jack? I’ve got a suggestion for one of these unused codes,” Nick said to his thankful relief. “We should have one for when we have to text from a different phone than ours.”

“Good! Let’s make that code four zeros preceded or followed by your authentication word so it’s easy to remember in a hurry.” He wrote it down immediately to encourage the others to do so.

“That’s why I left extras, I can’t think of everything! If anyone can come up with more, let’s do it now, we really can’t let this party go late!”

“Hey Martin,” Nick said to him amid their brainstorming. “Does my name mean that I’m cut out of doing anything useful? Last time, we were involved!” He waved to Judy. “I can’t just run and stay away from my responsibilities this time!” Now he looked at Vivian.

“Do you think I know what any of us are going to be doing Nick?” Jack said in sudden bitter
frustration. “We’re covert, information deprived and resource poor. Skye’s about to walk into a certain trap and I’m trying to keep you out of one! I need to organize and plan so I don’t have to face what we’re really up against and how badly outnumbered we are! So far, what’s kept me from losing it are the close friends in my life worth fighting for.”

Chest pounding, breath audibly whistling, he stared around the table at his companions worried faces—Nick’s had an overlay of embarrassment while Skye had started up, then hesitated and settled back into her seat. He felt soothing strokes start around and along his ears and felt less shame than he expected over the collapse of his façade of resolute leadership—he knew he had to let it out to avoid physical consequences, as did the smaller distant kin behind him. Jack closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing while Judy did what she could to calm him. It wasn’t until he opened them again that he realized Vivian had shifted closer to put one arm around him and her other over his own. Skye was up, leaned over with both paws on the table and closely watched him in concern.

“Thanks, I’m back,” Jack finally got the words out. He straightened up and brought his ears to attention as Judy retook her seat. “Time is not our friend tonight and I didn’t help there, so we need to conclude this. Yes?” Kristen wanted his attention—if she hadn’t had second thoughts about him earlier, she must be having them now.

“If I’m to travel to Concordia, perhaps Officer Nick could do the same. I don’t mean together, but we might meet as casual travel acquaintances. I’d feel better having someone trained in law enforcement close by, particularly if I really need to help Skye somehow.” Kristen looked at her. “Would you feel more secure with a trusted fox available if you need?”

“I certainly would,” Jack put in. Skye confirmed with a nod. “That’s actually a clever idea Kristen; it’s a big enough city for him to melt into, and the last place he’d be expected to go with the government on his tail. We’ve got most of a day to think about it before Skye leaves.

“We’d have one team here to coordinate with Bogo and the companies, and one at the center of the conspiracy,” Nick said. “If needed, Skye and I could pose as that couple you initially suggested Jack.” Vivian watched her son while Skye couldn’t resist a saucy tail flip.

“All right, enough for now. If you’re willing to do some more driving Kristen, we could save time by having you drop Skye in the vicinity of her hotel as well as Vivian near home.”

Nick suggested it would be prudent to have Kristen scout the tunnel and parking structure, then send an all clear before Jack escorted the vixens to her car—then he’d backtrack and walk up to the ZTA station to return to the hotel in case of any lingering surveillance. Jack understood what Nick wanted and remained impassive—when they were all gone, it would give the two new mates as much as an hour of privacy before their own inevitable parting.

“I’d like to find a clean sink when I get back,” Kristen told Nick and earned two other feminine smiles. “See, I knew you’d be useful.” She teased Nick with a subtle flip of her own tail as she walked to the door. Jack followed to close it behind the skunk, and caught Vivian’s eye as he returned. Now was his chance to pry out what she might know.

“Mrs. Wilde, we dragged you rather abruptly into the dynamics of our subversive little group and are sending you away again after having asked much of you. We have a few minutes, can we ease any of your natural concerns about us?” Jack said, realizing he could have phrased that better due to the nervous expression it brought to Judy’s face. Nick looked like he faced a sentencing. He waved toward Skye to hopefully clarify his intent.
“For such a newly formed and as you said, unapproved group, I see a lot of cooperation and reliance among you already,” Vivian said carefully. “Now during my life, I’ve witnessed the development of some very close friendships. I see two such here, one quite unexpected, the other less so—but of a kind. Please forgive my curiosity about the obvious trust and concern you have each shown for your partners.” She waited, with an uncomfortable slight knowing smile, likely having judged her prompt sufficient.

Jack stepped around behind her and stood close to the sofa with Skye to ease the pressure on Nick—who now appeared to have seen the executioner’s blade. Everyone was on their feet—Judy however, seemed unsure of where to stand. Nick closed, then reopened his eyes as he steeled himself.

“Mom, I didn’t want it to happen like this…I don’t know what kind of future we’re going to have…and I have to tell you now myself, just in case. I don’t want you to guess or find out some other way.” Nick motioned Judy closer and placed a paw on her shoulder to ensure their close contact—he evidently badly needed her support.

“I wasn’t able to admit that I’d chosen her for a long time…until I realized she’d chosen as well. I present to you Judy Hopps—my now and forever mate.”

Vivian approached the stiffly anxious pair. She crouched before Judy in silence and gave her two token cheek to cheek rubs. “I accept and welcome you into my family Judy,” she said as clearly as Nick had spoken. He visibly relaxed as he heard her words. She straightened and exchanged a firmer nuzzle with her son before glancing down and asking, “claimed?” Judy nodded. “With her assent?” Vivian turned back to her immediate family. She placed her paws on both of them. “Nicholas, I anticipated this between you two ever since your new mate brought us back together. Not only had she given you a better life, the effort she went to for us was beyond what a regular friend or colleague would have done. Were you afraid because you didn’t expect me to see that?”

The text notification blip from Jack’s phone might as well have come from a truck backing up. He flinched and checked the all clear message as he heard Vivian ask Skye, “Did you two have anything to do with this dear?”

“Forced us to admit the obvious,” Judy said. “We just couldn’t before.”

Vivian’s arm reached to demand their presence. Of all the outcomes he’d worried about today, Jack hadn’t anticipated the one where he’d be nearly smothered by three foxes.
“This is now a minor concern agent Savage, regardless of your clever solution to it. Fortunately this Dr. Soren is a typical skunk who can’t see much beyond the end of her snout—or microscope.” Chief Asa Tarija still loomed over him, but had welcomed him to sit this time in a chair actually high enough to let him see over her expansive desk. Jack took that as a positive sign. He carefully breathed through his mouth to try to keep the musky scent the llama had decided to wear today out of his nose. Somewhere in Zootopia, he realized, there must be a mammal willing to date this one.

“Her ZPD report about the discovery of the primitive animal, the likelihood of others, and its impact on society was thankfully cautious. That has so far allowed us to staunch any premature public dissemination of this. Chief Bogo has also readily agreed to suppress his part of it. However, some other very recently acquired information, such as that retrieved by your associate Winter last night, has revealed a far uglier picture that we must investigate.”

“And Wilde’s the only other one involved in creating it; any word on him?” Jack said.

“None yet. All we know is that he was in his apartment before we were since he seemed to have taken essential items. Bogo really fell down on that one with his insistence on judicial procedure! I thought he’d realize the importance of this over turf battles.”

“He’s in a very public position, he needs to be seen as impar…”

“I’m aware of that Savage! My concern is results. Our only lead is that two patrol officers apparently saw Wilde driving towards Sahara Square in an older sportscar. We are interviewing them today. I am also very interested in how he was tipped to the warrant we issued. He was apparently already out of contact with the ZPD at the time which implies advance notice and a leak!” However, you need not concern yourself further with Wilde or with Proteo for the time being. I have a pressing task for you that may eventually circle back to them.” Tarija fussed with the files on her desk—seemingly her way to change to a more important subject.

“We have an unexpected and quite fortuitous opportunity to advance our long-term agenda significantly! This demands maximum effort from all of us and you may consider your now more crucial role as acknowledgement of the initiative you’ve shown. As an immediate down payment Savage, you will no longer have to work with little miss arrogant. She has concluded her work here successfully, and I…appreciate her naïve efforts on our behalf. After she leaves tomorrow, your nemesis will return to other duties at the federal office where she won’t be a further annoyance to you.” Tarija looked at him expectantly.

Jack showed her a rictus and risked a scalp cramp to keep his ears rigid. He added a small fist pump to sell it as subtleties of expression were often lost on other species. Thankfully, that appeared to work to his benefit this time as Tarija tapped hooves and continued.

“New evidence has surfaced that proves primitive animals live today, and suggests that they, along with certain modern mammals, are serving as a carefully concealed and actively managed food source by numerous types of predators! You will be one of several teams that must locate and confirm the physical proof of this. We must not reveal any hint of this until we have absolute proof of these crimes. Preds have walked among us with blood on their fangs throughout history, and this may finally be our chance to end their depredations upon mammalkind and secure the future for true civilization!”

Ok, the zealot speech is out of the way, get to my assignment thought Jack as he tried to look
suitably horrified. Chief Tarija obliged him by passing over a file.

“This is an…issue of the Podunk Press Telegram from just two months ago. The locals refer to it as the Deerbrooke Denouncer—which is an appropriate comment on their journalistic standards as completeness and accuracy seem to be nebulous concepts for them. Nevertheless, this article had enough information to reveal the find of one of our primitive mammals—recently dead. There is no indication that it was examined beyond a local attempt at identification, which proved fruitless. Your task Savage is to not only find and bring this specimen in, but to gather enough information for us to seek out and obtain living members of this less evolved species. This is crucial baseline evidence that we must have in case our investigations are uncovered prematurely and the guilty destroy their own evidence.”

Jack tried to disguise his relief that the conspiracy hadn’t found any living animals yet, as his resignation at the prospect of lengthy fieldwork. “This likely will take time and will require good coordination with the other teams. When will we meet?”

“You are going first, they will contact you once they are formed and ready to deploy. I have requested that Chief Bogo detach Officer Hopps to join you. She is from Bunnyburrow, and that, along with your species, should ensure easy local cooperation. Use that as your base of operations and keep a low profile until you have enough information to assign the other teams effectively. I’m sure that you will find a way to enjoy convincing little miss high profile to temper her idealism and embrace her true nature!”

Chapter End Notes

This should have been posted two weeks ago–blame Jack Savage. He didn't like the way his chapter was progressing and demanded a re-write after I was halfway finished with it.

As always, any comments pro or con are welcome!

The setting and most of the characters of this story belong to the Disney Corporation. The plot and a few O.C.s are mine. I'll continue writing until they complain about it. (Although I'm desperately hoping for praise instead)
Departures

Chapter Summary

Although unexpectedly split up, our resistance heroes find some direction and begin to implement their own plans against the renewed anti predator conspiracy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rhythmic waves of consciousness successively built until they resolved into an incessant beeping. Then motor function kicked in, and Judy’s left paw blindly but accurately swung back to silence the clock on the windowsill. She reflexively drew the other to her side under the sheet—unimpeded by anything foxy, warm or stuffed.

She and Jack had made sure of that early last evening. Her problematic plush was gone, as was the framed picture from Nick’s graduation—the only previously displayable one of the few photos they had together. Now the one of her receiving a commendation from the city kept the family group shot company. She slid her legs off the side of the bed, sat up and spent a few seconds rubbing away the vestiges of her delayed and badly needed respite.

Except for the used dresser and mini fridge, her apartment looked much the same as it had when she’d first rented it. My familiar lonely waystation on the way to a better life, she thought ruefully. One not only imagined, but also achieved—for a single night. She’d been in a better place than this, snuggled warm in bed with her fox. But fate and society were sadistic partners—and had immediately snatched that forbidden life away from them. It was little consolation that Jack and Skye had been able to manage a few furtive years together.

She’d maintained her composure for awhile last night while they’d sat and held each other. Her eyes had been closed as Nick caressed her ears—when he’d softly said, ‘Judy, please be careful, I can’t keep you safe anymore.’ That opened the floodgates, the only good had been that his shirt was already damp from his trek through the rainforest district.

Nick had tried to recover from that and get her busy with the clean up from dinner. She’d still cried, first into the sink, and finally against him again; she’d only come out of it when she felt a warm drop hit the back of her ear—then another. They’d gotten to each other again, as mates should. It had been hard to regain their composure before Kristen returned.

All right Judy, you’re better now; all cried out and reasonably rested. She retrieved one of her rescued veggie wraps and warmed it slightly since she didn’t want it to get too soft and soggy. It went down better than she’d expected, so she followed the rest of her normal routine; with the assumption that it’s like one of those mornings where you’ll meet Nick at the precinct instead of here. Finished and ready to go, she looked at dad’s old Fox Away spray on the stand by the door—where it had been on her first working day at the ZPD. She’d left it out meaning to give it to Skye, but that wasn’t practical anymore. She hesitated, then swapped it out for the generic pepper spray on her belt. It was just about the worst reminder of times spent with Nick she could have—but about the safest one to carry.
Carry on as expected; that’s your best strategy now. Be assigned to a new partner and settle in. Unfortunately, if the ZBI did that with Jack, she’d be left alone to coordinate with the companies, Finnick, and the chief. She’d also need to watch over Vivian for Nick.

Judy left the apartment and scanned what she could of the street from inside the Grand Pangolin’s lobby before stepping outside. No one obvious, but if not now, she’d soon be under some kind of surveillance due to her past close association with Nick. That would make any further contact with Kristen and Vivian problematic too.

Also, they only had a few days to implement their alternate means of communication, or agree on safer places to meet, before they all dispersed. Their task ahead was thoroughly daunting, and had undoubtedly contributed to their separate emotional episodes last night—with only their vixens seemingly unaffected. Did they just hide it better?

Maybe she’d never fully understand the life that Nick had lived, or those of other foxes. Yet among one of the most widely distrusted and maligned species in society, she had found friends, her mate and acceptance as family. Judy knew she wouldn’t have it any other way. What had Jack said? He had friends worth fighting for. Now, so did she.

Well, you did want to make the world a better place, she reminded herself. Judy didn’t remember the phrase’s origin, although she’d repeated it ever since a stubborn young bunny decided to become more than what she was expected to be. But she’d assumed that making the world a better place meant doing it incrementally, not all at once! So if she wanted to live in that better, more tolerant world, it would require rapid and fundamental change to society. That might be their higher purpose, beyond just preserving what they already had. After all, hadn’t Nick accused her of picking idealistic hero as a profession?

Head and ears up, she jogged to the next stop to catch the tram. She could save a few minutes and get right to work. She hoped the chief was available, or had left some message.

A middle-aged raccoon exited the ZPD as she walked up, held the door open for her, and nodded her through with a “Mornin’ Officer.” Judy smiled her thanks; she appreciated even a minor positive start to this day. That mood died abruptly when she spotted a tall dark-furred llama in business attire talking with Clawhauser inside. She walked up to the reception desk, careful to give only passing notice to Jack and Skye’s favorite mammal.

“If you find out anything more from them, let me know.” Chief Tarija’s voice betrayed repressed frustration as she looked down at an uncharacteristically stiff dispatcher. Finished, she shifted her gaze to Judy.

“Excuse me ma’am,” Judy said in passing. She refused to meet the llama’s nearly vertical scrutiny. “Officer Clawhauser, I’m early for my appointment with the chief, is he available yet?” Judy knew she should acquaint herself with their adversary given the opportunity, but right now didn’t seem propitious. She hoped Ben would rescue her.

“A few minutes ago he had a pressing matter to attend to,” Tarija said frostily. “Your appointment might be delayed. Since you have a few minutes anyway, that’s all I will need from you.” She reached to hold her ID down at Judy’s level and looked pointedly at the lobby clock—it showed 10:48, well shy of any expected normal meeting time.

“Do you want me to try and contact Chief Bogo now?” Clawhauser said professionally without a hint of his normal personality.
“No, only if Officer Hopps runs up against her…appointment time with him.”

She was stuck and followed Chief Tarija to the interview room Clawhauser reluctantly assigned to them.

These rooms had several wide steps along one wall, with appropriate chairs for each level. That brought smaller members of the often-uneasy public closer to eye level with the uniformed officer taking their report. It also kept the smallest comfortably away from officer hulking rhino or officer bigfangs if a smaller employee wasn’t available to help them. Judy had to admit that she also preferred to keep her distance from chief evil llama.

“First, Officer Hopps, I must apologize,” Tarija said in a warmer voice after they’d seated themselves. “I have had a rather frustrating morning. But that must sound inconsequential in the face of the betrayal you suffered yesterday.”

Judy could only mutely nod and try to listen for any useful information amid the coming lies about Nick.

“Better that you learned the truth now about your officer partner, rather than further misplace your trust until it was too late. All mammals have good and bad qualities, it’s the ratio of those that determines their place in society—some never meet the minimum for inclusion. Many predators can’t escape what they are however hard they struggle against it throughout their lives; we see reversions all the time. Some will embrace their primitive natures, and those we must segregate or remove for the safety of the rest of civilization.”

“Officer Wilde hasn’t ever shown violent tendencies, he’s one of our best public outreach officers. I’ve never felt uncomfortable around him.” However futile, she was not going to let Nick go down undefended!

“Your sense of fairness is commendable Officer Hopps. Unfortunately, your ex-partner proved to be the manipulative type that lulls us with their exemplary behavior, while they secretly undermine everything we work to protect. This Wilde maintained his longtime contacts with criminal elements and carefully positioned himself to exploit the void left after the arrests of Bellwether and her cronies. We have solid evidence that he intended to resume the production and distribution of controlled substances, under the cover of new pred allies recruited from within law enforcement.”

Judy found the fabrications preposterous—between his academy training, and working closely with her as a rookie officer, Nick never had any time for that. At least that was mitigated by the realization that Tarija had no idea of how closely she’d worked or otherwise associated with him. That reinforced what Skye had reported to them about her.

“We already know of two of his associates,” Tarija continued, “and once this is all brought to trial, you should find the evidence compelling. For now, I would like to offer you the opportunity to assist an important investigation that is not involved with your ex-partner. Agent Savage has requested your help, since his new assignment will be based out of Bunnyburrow for at least a few weeks. Your value there to provide local cover for him is obvious and you should also be able to enjoy a needed break from the disruption of your duties here. Bogo approves of this, and Savage will be in contact soon to brief you.”

Sorry Nick! Judy reproached herself. She’d briefly felt selfishly relieved that she could spend time with family without having to bring and explain her mate. A shiver rippled her fur and dropped her
ears. Of course her parents would assume that’s why she’d brought Jack home! She would have to
gently dissuade their revived hopes without concerning them into finding a therapist for her. Then
there’d be quelling gossip among the rest of the family!

“Officer Hopps? Is something amiss?” Tarija managed to sound solicitous.

“No, no! Everything’s happening at once, I think it just caught up to me. I guess I could really use
that break, I do appreciate your consideration Chief.” Judy tilted her head to smile up at the llama,
which also helped restore her ears to their expected place. She walked the ZBI chief to the doors,
and paused inside to see that she’d really left. As soon as Judy turned back, Clawhauser silently
motioned her over. He pulled a donut box out from under his desk, then a small fiberglass one with
snap latches holding its halves together.

“Raccoon was just in here Hopps, gave me this to give to the Chief. Said his name was Alder like
that meant something, that mean anything to you? You OK Hopps?”

“Did that llama Chief Tarija see this!” she bounced up in his face, barely keeping her voice down.
“Oh, sorry Ben, it really matters.” She glanced around hastily to see if anyone was near, which
served to further infect a concerned Clawhauser with her nervousness. The cheetah slid the small
case behind his donuts and out of sight.

“Uh, no, he was leaving when she came up from interrogation. She and another ZBI agent were
here to question Packard and Krumpanski—does…does this have anything to do with what…
happened to Wilde yesterday?” Clawhauser said in concern.

Judy held up and briefly waved her paws to hush him, then quickly jumped onto the reception
desk, then down behind it. Fortunately the lobby was fairly empty at the moment.

“What is this?” Ben reached the box down to her and leaned over as if to shield her. “What’s going
on?” he said quietly, “I m…Hopps, it’s hard to believe what they’re saying about Wilde.”

“Me too, I’m sorry Ben, I can’t tell you what’s going on with our investigation without
endangering you as a predator.” She hated having to say that as the realization slowly spread on
the kindly cheetah’s face.

“It’s still not over, is it? I mean from last year.” Clawhauser’s voice was low and serious. “Is that
why they’re after Wilde, because he was involved before? Who are they this time?”

“No it’s not, and these new conspirators seriously want Wilde, but I can’t say more now. Our only
advantage is they’re unaware of us knowing about them. Say nothing to anyone at all, Bogo will
tell you what you need to know.” Judy reached as high as she could to put a paw on Ben’s arm.
“Promise me, not a word. About this too.” She hefted the box and got a solemn nod before
Clawhauser pointed her up to Bogo’s office.

Judy worried that she’d already revealed too much, but at least claws would be wary of Tarija and
would realize that Nick was still free. And that she might have been in contact with him.
Clawhauser’s gossip aside, she took comfort in the chief’s implicit trust in him.

Bogo’s office door was slightly ajar and the chief himself opened it for her as she walked up, then
locked it behind them. Inside, a radio was tuned to some daytime talk station, and Jack Savage was
seated on a pile of folders placed in the middle of the chief’s desk texting on his phone. A second
stack was placed for her, so she hopped up feeling that she was desecrating sacred ground on
Jack finished with his phone, gave it to her and spoke softly. “It’s Skye’s, we decided it’s too
dangerous for her to keep it once she leaves; it’s yours now.” Judy looked in the ‘sent’ folder and
read his text while he and the chief waited. She had to dig out her card as Jack had used some of
his codes. It was to Kristen, telling her to get the beast thoroughly cleaned and not to drive it for
awhile. It also asked her to confirm when she’d set up the meeting and drop point at her family’s
garage to allow safe contact with Vivian. Judy looked at the hare and rubbed her free paw on her
thigh; Jack nodded, so she erased the message.

“Mrs. Wilde’s got both our numbers and will text when she has the procurements for us,” Jack
said. He looked curiously at the box. “Looks like one of Dr. Soren’s sample cases.”

“From Doctor Alder,” Judy confirmed in a low voice, and set the box in front of Bogo—who’d
leaned close enough to be really intimidating no matter how quietly he sat. “A raccoon who wasn’t
him dropped it with Clawhauser fifteen or twenty minutes ago. Chief Tarija came up there and
missed seeing that by less than a minute!” Judy let her voice rise up enough to make Jack hold a
finger to his muzzle. Everything tumbled into place when she saw that the radio’s speakers faced
the window behind the chief. The agent was seriously concerned about outside surveillance!

“Well. Let’s see what ZBI management missed. If one of you…” Bogo looked momentarily
abashed, his thick fingers together were the same size as the box.

Judy opened it and Jack removed a folded paper set on top. Under it in bubble wrap were two small
liquid filled vials. She lifted one out to show Bogo and saw a small bone inside, possibly from a
paw, with lengths of split tendon strung from one end. The other held a dark matted strip of fur and
hide. Their labels were ambiguous, certainly of Kristen’s devising. The gristly remnants made her
uneasy, so she wrapped the vials back up.

“Oh shit,” Jack breathed. He looked up from reading the paper, then down at the vials in the box.
“So she almost had this in her grasp. Chief Bogo, Tarija recently learned of the existence of these
remains from a rural newspaper and just gave me a priority assignment to find and secure them. I
will also soon coordinate with several teams tasked with recovering live feral animals.” Jack looked
to her again. “I seem to have moved up in their world.”

“I saw Tarija talking with Clawhauser,” Judy said. “He had to have just put it under the counter—
maybe a foot away? She talked with me too, told me you had that assignment up in Bunnyburrow
and wanted me to assist, but didn’t say any more about it.”

“I don’t know about you Hopps, but my heart won’t tolerate many more of these coincidences!”
Jack gave her an awkward smile. “Tarija also insinuated that I might use our coming close
partnership as an opportunity to…seduce you to the dark side.”

“That doesn’t surprise me as much as it should, Hopps,” Bogo mused. “Although it fits in with my
earlier discussion with Savage. We think at present, the conspiracy is widespread but shallow, as
illustrated by his own hasty promotion; they desperately need committed recruits to take advantage
of these recent opportunities. Now about this,” the chief indicated the box, “a testing sample?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “This is part of our best evidence that primitive mammals are alive today. Our
doctor friends want to get this genetically sequenced to absolutely prove it.” Jack gently waved the
paper. “Alder and Soren don’t want this done by any of their colleagues at the university, they say
it would be impossible for them to keep a discovery of this magnitude secret. They suggested that
we make a discreet approach to an independent genetics lab near Zootopia General Hospital.”

“Using proxy deliveries. Well-done Savage, you’ve already got your scientists thinking about operational security.” Bogo’s brief expression of approval then fled from the unfamiliar terrain of his face. “Now to Officer Wilde; you seem confident that Mrs. Wilde can make adequate arrangements for his security—and that once you two leave, that she will serve as my only informed local contact?”

“We don’t really have a choice anymore,” Jack admitted, “however, as we did, you may find her more useful than you might expect. She will insist upon meeting with you as soon as Officer Wilde’s fall from grace hits the media, as would be expected of any concerned parent. She should prove a competent actress. That’s your opportunity to arrange ways to safely utilize—and protect—her, since by then her son will be…elsewhere.”

“Do you concur Hopps? I seem to have lost one Wilde for another.” Bogo glanced at his clock, “in less than a day.” He leaned closer to listen to her, as his expression implied that a far longer respite from vulpine responsibility would have been most welcome.

“Yes chief, I do.” Judy decided he could use some more reassurance. “You should be relieved to know that I think Mrs. Wilde got most of the maturity in her family.”

“I certainly hope so—assuming there was enough to start with considering how little was imparted to her child. Let us hope he is able to acquire some more by the time we get our officer back.”

Judy felt the chief’s attempt at optimism fell flat given their circumstances, but she still had to appreciate the implied respect for Nick he’d shown. Jack passed her an expanded code card—his comment about Bogo’s suggestions interrupted by a text notification. He opened it and gave the kind of sigh that Nick would have found cute if she’d done it.

“Oh well. No peace for the pursued. It’s a ticket confirmation from Tarija’s office; we’re on the 6:15 tonight to Bunnyburrow. My, they are in a hurry aren’t they?” Jack picked up the sample box and hopped off the desk. “Duty calls chief Bogo, and we’ve got six hours to deliver and explain this, pack, and make arrangements for our late arrival.”

Judy waved her smartphone at him, then finished her message. “That’s done. All I have to do is tell the folks I’m coming home and they’ll have someone at the station to pick us up. They know when it arrives! You’ll stay at our place, we have plenty of guest rooms.”

“Only a guest room Miss Hopps?” Jack gallantly offered his paw and a broad smile, then needlessly over assisted her down from the desk. “I’ve been directed to commence my assignment as soon as possible! At least my case officer will be pleased there’s progress.”

“Just keep me informed about your investigations!” Bogo then snorted and waved them out petulantly. Judy was certain he’d be cradling his head as soon as the door closed.

Judy stepped off the tram and crossed the street towards the architectural hodgepodge of periodic expansions that was Zootopia General Hospital. Several other structures surrounded the main sprawl—fortunately there was a well placed map display to alleviate the confusion. It directed her
to the most modern of the ancillary buildings, a modest sized glass and steel edifice identified by polished letters above the entrance as the Honeywell Genetic Counselling Centre.

Counselling? Somehow that didn’t seem sufficiently analytical. She’d headed over as soon as she spotted the name Honeywell on the directory. Jack had said he’d meet her here by three if possible, otherwise she was to go ahead without him. He still had ten minutes, so she decided to wait for him out here.

They’d gone to her apartment and cleaned out the mini fridge for a quick lunch; then Jack left for his hotel to pack and ‘run some errands’. Judy knew one of them was named Skye. That gave her time to inform the landlady of her planned absence, change back into her everybunny clothes, and pack what little she needed to go home. Actually, the bulk of that was her uniform—their investigation should be mostly undercover, but a majority of the family had yet to personally see her in it.

Five after and no Jack, she couldn’t put this off any longer. The door admitted her to a waiting area finished in soft pastel colors—like those of her flying bunny gift bag with the samples inside. To one side a jackal sat with a coyote, their paws crossed; they watched her walk over to the reception window to step up on the mid-sized mammal riser. That got Judy high enough to see the gnu receptionist, who noticed and turned away from her paperwork.

“Good afternoon Miss, and welcome to the Honeywell Centre…can I get you to sign in here?” The receptionist handed over an appropriately sized tablet, and directed Judy’s gaze to the sign-in. As she reached out to take the tablet, she noticed the gnu’s nameplate, identifying the receptionist as Natalie Clove. The bulky bovid turned away and consulted her computer. “I don’t see anyone of your species on today’s schedule.”

“Uh, I don’t have an appointment ma’am, but it’s important that I talk to someone who can do some genetic testing for me.” Judy started to feel some doubts about this place.

“So you have a referral from your physician, Mrs…?” The gnu was scrutinizing her carefully.

“I’m sorry, I need to keep this as private as possible. It’s really important that I talk with someone in authority.” Judy had tried to keep her voice down, but not by enough, she heard padding behind her. She turned to see the young jackal—who’d begun to show—her presumed boyfriend or mate had apparently been told to stay put.

“It’s alright Hun, they’re discreet,” the jackal said soothingly from a polite pace back. “This is our fourth time here and they’re careful with personal privacy.” Natalie smiled at Judy in confirmation as the jackal returned to her seat.

“Thank you Lilla, Dr. Hawthorne should be ready for you soon,” the receptionist said as she glanced over at her monitor again before fixing her gaze on Judy.

“Now miss, normally walk ins aren’t an issue, however, we’re quite short staffed today, and only two physicians are on call. If I could have your name, I could put you down for our next open consultation on May eleventh.”

A rush filled Judy’s ears as she took in the soothing décor, the young inter couple, their concerns with…this was a fertility clinic! Her eyes frantically latched onto the brochure rack next to the window—the first one to seize her attention was…The Adoption Option!
Judy was given a new patient form; she walked over to the entrance in frustration to see if Jack had come yet. Nothing—she had to have made a mistake.

Judy turned back to admit that and ask where she needed to go, only to see a gazelle come through the door from deeper inside the facility and veer towards her after a brief exchange with Natalie in reception.

"Good morning," she said, and offered Judy her hoof in greeting. "I'm Ellen Antlerson, one of the Centre’s counselors. I understand that you have some personal questions, and if you'll come with me I'll do my best to give you some answers."

Judy followed her silently; at least she gotten past the receptionist and might get more useful answers from this one. They passed several large mammal exam rooms and she was ushered into an office down a cross hallway.

“I’m not a patient!” Judy raised her paws and preempted Ellen before either of them took a seat. “I just need to get some genetic testing done on this.” She pulled the sample box out of her bag. “With as few people knowing about it as possible!”

“Now miss…oh very well. We here at Honeywell specialize in prenatal genetics and care; we don’t have the staff to devote to more routine screening that can…a moment.” Ellen listened to her desk phone and finished with an, "I understand."

"Your confidentiality is very important to us Amy, and your mate just arrived. I’ll be right back with him.” The gazelle gracefully swept out of the room and left Judy to glower at Jack’s presumptive cover story—although it was a reminder that she’d been wise to conceal her identity so far. Unfortunately, when Ellen returned with Jack, she gently insisted upon some form of identification from them.

“You never saw this and we were never here,” Jack said darkly as he pulled back his agency warrant. After Ellen had hurried out and closed her door, he gave Judy a wry smile and said, “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to say that!”

“We want these people to help us dear!” Judy admonished. “That requires an apology.” Jack nodded and they waited to see if this new Dr. Wilson could provide what they needed.

The door opened almost a half-hour later and an older brown-furred rabbit in the expected surgical scrubs and white coat paused, paw on handle, to take stock of them. “If you’ll both follow me, we can give Ms. Antlerson her office back and you can tell me what is so important that it has you seeking aid from a maternity clinic?” The buck led them up to the second floor, and into a rather spacious office. As they entered, Judy glanced at the plaque beside the door that encouragingly said ‘Director and Chief Physician’.

Doctor Wilson motioned towards a pair of vacant chairs and bade them to sit. Jack took a moment to look around the room before nodding to Judy; she placed the opened box and her ID alongside his on the doctor’s desk.

“I’m Dr. Doug Wilson, agent Savage…and Officer Hopps,” he said with evident surprise directed her way. “Who referred you to us?” he said as he pulled a vial out and examined it. “This is clearly a forensics issue, and is quite outside the work that we perform here.”

“I’d rather not say for everybody’s safety doctor,” Jack said. “You were recommended for the
security that you can hopefully provide for us. To start, were you at all involved with the savage predator crisis last year?” Dr. Wilson’s expression clearly answered that.

“Those events I’d prefer not to be reminded of agent Savage. At first we assumed the rest of the medical profession had things under control, later we did considerable work to determine if there was any genetic component to the behavioral regressions—and after the toxin was characterized, we did help to verify its biochemical effects.” Dr. Wilson paused and gave Jack a penetrating gaze before coming to a decision. “We soon realized that our efforts were being hindered by elements within city government—requested samples gone missing, restrictions on needed medical information, even our reports edited without our knowledge!”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way doctor, but I’m glad to hear that,” Jack said firmly before glancing at Judy. They gave the doctor time for his thoughts and watched his ears gradually droop behind his head.

“So here you are agent,” Dr. Wilson said slowly and clearly, “unwilling to use the certainly adequate resources of both the ZBI and the ZPD, and in the company of the officer responsible for exposing the assistant mayor’s conspiracy. It went beyond her and you didn’t get all of it then, did you?”

“No we didn’t. Bellwether was part of something greater, but set them back when she acted prematurely. It remains rooted within several federal agencies, has regrown, and what this sample represents could advance their agenda considerably.” Jack reached to lift the box. “In the wrong paws this could result in the violent removal of many predatory species from society. In the right ones, it will still shock and spread suspicion among a lot of us.”

“If this is just a sample, there should be many researchers who could identify it from the morphology of the rest,” said Dr. Wilson, apparently choosing for the moment to consider the immediate problem rather than its broader ramifications.

“That’s not the issue Dr. Wilson,” Judy said. “We already know it’s a Coypu. The individual this came from died about six months ago, we need you to compare it to a modern Coypu and determine its genetic age.”

“Our scientific source for this sample, mentioned something called a molecular clock,” Jack added. “They’re afraid the university lab, and others, could not contain a discovery this significant, and are themselves likely already suspect and under surveillance due to their awareness of another suppressed discovery.”

“Oh Spirits, you’re serious.” The Senior Physician sat up straighter and reached for the box. “Have they made an estimate of how primitive this Coypu ancestor—no, I suppose it must be a cousin—might be?”

“All here doctor,” Jack held up the paper from the box. “One of us, or one of them,” Jack waved the paper, “will contact you when we need this information. If things go badly wrong like last time, contact Chief Bogo of the ZPD.

“You are asking quite a lot of us Agent Savage, and implying personal risk. I’m not going to risk harm befalling any of the staff or patients here simply on your word alone. Aside from the presence of Officer Hopps, do you have any other corroboration of this?”

“None I feel comfortable sharing. However, I gave you the power of life and death over both
myself and my investigation as soon as I showed you my badge,” Jack said flatly.

“I see…I understand what you want, but you need to know that practically, it might be quite
difficult,” said Dr. Wilson. “DNA degrades rapidly after death Mr. Savage, so I’d like to know the
interval between that and this.” He gently tapped a vial.

“Best guess four or five months, the remains were found washed down a streambed and did not
reach expert paws until recently.” Jack’s expression echoed Judy’s thought of—well; it was worth
a shot.

“Warm and wet is the worst case; ideally you want frozen or rapidly desiccated,” said a
disappointed Dr. Wilson. “We’d be lucky to recover even one percent of this genome. That said, if
we can find any recognizable regions, we still may be able to pin down when the two populations
diverged, but given the age of the sample, and the conditions it was exposed to, the odds are we
won’t be able give you many answers. Even so Officer Hopps, that will not be the ‘genetic age’
you mentioned, evolution is not a steady linear progression, each branch proceeds differently, in
accordance with its environment.”

“We just need some form of additional proof that this is a primitive animal that was alive very
recently,” Jack said and passed over the paper. “Similar evidence exists, but most has already been
seized by government authorities involved with the conspiracy. Hence our need for secrecy.”

“I realize that,” said Dr. Wilson. “Your need and my own curiosity leads me to accept this task—
with conditions! Our patients come first; I will not allow this to interfere in any way with the care
we provide. It could take considerable time, and I will require the assistance of at least two others
on our staff. Don’t be concerned, we are a tightly knit team; several of us have been together since
we opened our doors almost nine years ago, and I know whom to trust with this.”

“I assumed that might be the case,” Jack admitted. “Hopefully you will have all the time you
require doctor, I don’t expect to need these results for at least a month, or more.”

“What about paying for this doctor?” Judy asked. “We can’t access any funds for you without
revealing to the conspiracy what we’re doing. We’re afraid some of them may be in his chain of
command!”

“We can cover immediate costs; just keep society together officers, so there’s someone to send
the bill to!” Dr. Wilson stood, took the sample box, walked them down the hall to an elevator and
stopped them back on the first floor. “This will be secure down in the lab, your exit is through
those doors ahead.”

More mammals were starting to board the train, so Judy lifted her bag and joined them, not wanting
to be excluded from the best seats. There were already several other rabbits seated around the
forward rim of the third car’s tall mammal cupola as she climbed up, but the back was empty. She
sat, saved another space for Jack with her bag and hoped the hare made it here before departure.

This was her preferred place due to the expansive view, which now allowed her to scan the station
for any approaching exotically striped ears. He had seven more minutes—If he didn’t make it,
she’d have until ten tomorrow to lower the family’s expectations before he finally arrived.
Jack did, wearily mounting the narrow steps to plop into his seat. “We’ve got problems, but they can wait a bit,” he said quietly. “Figured you’d be up here.”

“Didja see those ears! Gotta be a hare, he’s so tall. What’re their problems!” The soft youthful voices seemed to come from immediately in front of them. She shared a look with Jack; the shape of the cupola made for a good whisper gallery. He looked around carefully for a few seconds, then leaned forward and to one side.

“I wonder if the parents approve of their talking that way about us commissioner!” The startle reaction from adults and kits alike at the other end was satisfying, and everybody remained silent as the express accelerated out of the station. Once they passed the Palm Hotel and moved out onto the causeway over the bay; the view behind became spectacular. The sun was low enough to scatter brilliant reflections across much of downtown, and Jack acknowledged her choice of seats with an appreciative nod. Judy watched the scene behind recede, and wondered how many more sunsets would see Zootopia’s ideals remain intact.

Dusk was well advanced when they relocated to some reasonably secluded seats in the last car. Jack pulled out two Grab-N-Go meals and rapidly finished off both of them after she politely declined his offer of one.

“Good news first,” Jack said after his last swallow. “Agents Kristen and Vivian have been very busy today and have completed most of their assignments, as well as another under their own initiative. I’m actually proud of both of them!”

“Admit it Savage. You have a thing for slinky vixens. Or is it just long fluffy tails?” Being a hare, his also rather outclassed hers in that department. “Won’t that make it quite bothersome for you to seduce little old me!” she wheedled at him.

“Maybe so miss Hopps.” He smirked back and opened his briefcase to show her some new phones. “We now have enough burners—they gave me these at the rendezvous point they set up at the Soren’s auto business. It’s more than adequate. Vivian’s confident that she’ll have Nick’s new ID in a day or two, as well as one of her own at his suggestion. The Soren’s also sold her a used car at an inflated price to launder a few thousand extra for him.”

“That sounds really dangerous Jack! That makes an obvious connection between all of them right when Nick’s declared a fugitive. Kristen and Vivian are already being watched!”

Kristen’s got that covered! Tomorrow’s Friday, and that’s when their business deposits checks and does other banking. Vivian lives in the area; she predated her check to last week and the paperwork for the car reflects that. Nick’s new status hasn’t been publicly revealed yet, and there’s no way she could have known about that anyway. Further, she’ll have the car, so no apparent benefit there to Nick, but she will have greater mobility if needed.

“I also briefed her more fully and suggested that in our absence she might be needed as a go-between for the ZPD, the Growley’s, and Pouncet’s. Should have seen her face, Judy!”

“She’s probably already started to look through her outfits to see if she can fix up something acceptable to high society!” A brief sympathetic laugh escaped Judy’s lips; she’d had some recent reminders of her own lack of stylish wear.

“Vivian wasn’t our only busy vixen,” Jack said, “we arranged for Skye to have covert access to the
ZPD network this morning—she dug around for a couple of hours and found a lot. Ever since her assignment to remand Bellwether to federal custody, we’d wondered about the current disposition of others involved with the crisis. Turns out Lionheart’s also in federal custody, ‘held for pending charges,’ with no other information available about his present status or even location! The same for that sheep chemist Ramses, and at least one of the sheep ex ZPD officers. The only ones that appear to be still incarcerated locally are low-level hired muscle and the like.”

“I thought mayor Lionheart had already been released…or was about to be,” Judy tried to keep her voice below the notice of other ears in the car.

“Apparently, so does the news media for the moment,” Jack pointed out. “That gives us one usable countermeasure, we might cause some disruption of plans if we feed that tidbit to the Growley’s. However, Bogo suggested we hold onto that one for at least a few days, and I agree.” Jack pulled out a folded newspaper sheet and gave it to her.

“They’ve ramped up their media campaign against predators somewhat faster than I expected, seems the conspiracy is feeling the time pressure. Skye found this published in at least four major cities today after only a cursory look on-line.”

This is bad, Judy thought as she read. The article claimed that at least three nighthowler affected predators had suffered what was being called an ‘atavistic flashback’, an abrupt and unpredictably delayed return to savage violence. No names or incident information was given for claimed privacy reasons—which she knew would only serve to throw suspicion onto any predator even marginally linked to the prior crisis.

“It’s another agency pseudonym and front, so any inquiries from legitimate news organizations will allow them to be fed corroborating information! And they’ll run with it!” groused Jack, “controversy and ratings are their mother’s milk.”

“Don’t we have some kind of in with the media due to the Growley’s?” she asked him.

“Not really, Fabienne’s just a presenter, they don’t own ZNN. She can plant a story; I don’t think she could kill one like this.” Jack filed the paper away and gave her another that looked like a screen shot.

“Dr. Jarvis Ulric’s office vandalized, and home robbed two days ago,” Jack summarized. “They’re blaming the former on a disgruntled student, but this has government stink all over it. They didn’t say anything about Ulric himself.” Jack busied himself with his smartphone. “Let me see if there’s any update on that before we run into signal issues out here.”

Judy left him to it and looked outside. Full night had fallen and there was no moon to illuminate the landscape, so she could only see occasional lights pass in the distance. Except for one more intermediate stop, it would be like this for almost the next two hours. She was idly wondering which—and how many—family members would meet them at the station when Jack finally drew her attention.

“Our Fairfield investigator has now apparently vanished. If his paranoia was in good order, he’s on the run like Nick. If not, the conspiracy may have taken care of a loose end.”

“You’re not suggesting that they killed him are you?” Judy was horrified that the conspirators would resort to that so readily—and that their own lives might now be at risk if they were exposed.
“I’ll assume Judy that your uncomfortable with the realization they’d have to go to these lengths to cover up prey culpability with that meat farm—rather than just being charmingly naive. This also tells us that doctors Alder and Soren are at more immediate risk since they’re known to be aware of the Fairfield evidence, and Skye even more so! Now I’ve got some messaging to do!” Jack swapped his smartphone for one of the burners.

Judy shifted closer to the window to acknowledge that and looked out at nothing as they kept rolling further into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to eng050599 for arranging our visit to the Honeywell Centre. His admittedly rather dark fic Lost Causes & Broken Dreams and its copious scientific notes, are an excellent introduction to reproductive genetics.

Our next exciting installment will be—Chapter Fifteen: Out of the Frying Pan.
Out of the Frying Pan

Chapter Summary

Falsely accused officer Nick Wilde leaves Zootopia for his own safety, and takes a train to the Federal District, unsure of how to effectively resist the conspirators embedded in the government.

Chapter Notes

Nick Wilde likes to grab this story and run with it whenever his turn as viewpoint character comes up. This time he ran for 11,000 words, so I decided to split the chapter at a natural break point. The last part just needs a final edit, and will be posted soon! I know this one took awhile dear readers, and I appreciate your patience!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the better things about Kristen’s dig was the stand-in fur dryer. It was a quality unit, just big enough to fit a fox, even though the skunk was a full head shorter than he was. She took her grooming seriously, and had spent the better part of an hour on it this morning before she departed—with a last alluring wave of her tail. No doubt about it, Nick Wilde had a flirt on his paws.

He’d been friendly and appreciative while they shared the breakfast she’d whipped up—then had gone right back to bed as soon as she’d left for the day. He’d been too emotionally overwrought and physically sore last night to get a decent sleep and needed to make up the deficit. Nick turned off the dryer, left the bathroom, and walked over to slouch on her sofa wearing only his newly fluffed fur. It was good to feel relaxed and unconfined, and he had a couple more hours of solitude as the kitchen clock showed just two-thirty.

Time to see if he’d been kept in the loop. Carrots had sent him a simple text last night when she’d arrived in Bunnyburrow; now another had come this morning after he’d gone back to sleep. This one was full of codes, so ‘Tilly’ had decided to practice her communication skills with him. His magic card revealed that Jack had already gotten a tour of the Hopps farmstead, which likely meant she’d gotten some temporary relief from parental expectations. Her partnering with Jack had just delayed the inevitable, eventually they would have to find out that she’d actually chosen their worst fear as a mate.

The rest of the text further explained all the codes. Ex-mayor Lionheart had also been taken away into federal custody, and the wolf professor from that unfortunate find back East was now missing. The last line was plain—check the paper. That would have to wait, Kristen didn’t subscribe, and he wasn’t about to go out after one. That’s what TV news was for. Nick got up to raid the fridge and make sitting through all the irrelevant stories bearable.

A key rasped and clicked, then the front door swung in. He barely had time to flip his tail up in front of himself and hug the tip with a paw. “Uh, I…” He looked closer, “Mom?”
“I see you’ve made yourself quite at home Nicholas!” his mother said after she’d quickly shut and locked the door behind her. She set a walking stick he’d remembered seeing as a kit against the side of the kitchen counter, then found a spot for her sun hat and a large drawstring bag. Her infirm grandmother camouflage had actually worked on him momentarily. She continued to inspect him for a few awkward seconds, then walked over unconcernedly and gave him a brief welcome nuzzle—to his rigid discomfort since she’d come right up and slightly leaned in against his tail.

“Mom, please!” Nick wriggled out of her grasp and hurried away to get dressed, followed to his temporary room by her admonition, “Just your shorts Nicholas, I need to groom you!”

That sounded ominous, since he’d already managed to comb himself out reasonably—given the residual soreness in his shoulders. ‘Nicholas’ also demanded more compliance than anything else would have.

When he returned, his mom had ditched her shawl and set several items out on Kristen’s dining table. There was an ID, a credit card, two paperback books, and several grooming products… He was about to get a makeover, and she was smiling.

Nick picked up the ID card—it wasn’t even a driver’s license—to look in dismay at a noticeably older fox. One with some decidedly uncool reading glasses on his muzzle.

“What kind of a name is Rafe?”

“It’s yours Mr. Holcroft. Best cooperative match we could find in the community and agent Jack approves! Now sit here.” Mom positioned a chair and he automatically sat. She pulled another over and sat facing him close enough that their legs overlapped. A pair of polished surgical scissors appeared in one paw, and she picked up a book in her other to study its back cover. He could see his new name on the front, underneath the title ‘Forgotten Summers’. The background art was the silhouette of a pair of foxes against a rural sunset.

He took and opened the other copy. It was signed, and his incipient dread was confirmed as he scanned a few pages. It was a sepia tinted homage to a past bucolic life that had likely never existed, with various anecdotes and some moderately decent sketches. Something that would try to obscure the realities of life for foxes with comfortable fantasies.

“Hold still!” Mom set the book down and gripped his muzzle, and used her thumb across the top to pull the skin taut. The scissors came up and deftly snipped off a whisker.

“Hey!” He raised a paw to the insult to his person—and mom lowered it with a look. Her grip tightened in that unbreakable way only a parent could achieve and a second was clipped flush. Released, Nick stared at the back of his book in horror—every flaw of the older fox’s physiognomy now jumped out to glaringly illustrate his fate. The fiend-vixen with the serene smile then repositioned him and started to mow shallow swaths across his face—russet and cream fibers from his cheeks and scalp snowed onto his thighs and the floor below.

“What are you doing to my ear!” He knew; there was a bare patch on one of book fox’s, and the soft feathery fur on their insides was…sparser than his. That done, mom moved downwards; the precipitation continued from his neck and shoulders. She was humming to herself very softly as she worked, tonal, but not anything he recognized.

“Really mom, you’re enjoying mutilating me?” Any rationalization about the need for it wouldn’t make this less traumatic—his self-image continued to slough away as the ruff below his neck was
thinned out. She worked steadily, at times stopping to carefully comb away the wreckage and contemplate her next harvest. Oh Great Spirit, Nick realized with the finality of a cell door slammed shut—she’s collecting a debt! When he’d left home all those years ago, she’d lost a son to…fuss over. He wasn’t going to be paroled anytime soon.

“Your benefactor is nineteen years older with thinner and shorter fur than yours,” mom said conversationally. “As for mutilation, if you look, he has a small scar on that ear. I ignored that since his is long healed and yours would be fresh. Now turn around!”

He did, and leaned over the back of the chair with crossed arms. “Mom, I promise I’ll wear clothes outside! I’m not a fox topiary. This is more than enough pruning.” His entreaties didn’t change the cadence of her resumed clipping.

“I need to blend this so it doesn’t look like I did what I’m doing. Honestly, you’re overdue for a good grooming anyway Nicholas. Seems I’m going to have to train your Judy how to care for a longhair.”

“I won’t be one for awhile, will I?” Nick grumbled as she worked down his back. The trimming paused and he shortly felt mom’s paws move along… “No way mom! Not my tail!” He unsuccessfully tried to jerk it away—her gentle paws easily restrained it. He played his last card. “Carrots loves my tail. She’ll be really upset if anything happens to it!” The slight whine that escaped him was to no avail, as his mistake was obvious to them both; the scissors made the only sounds for the next several minutes.

“Mom?” he said as he bagged the last of the swept clippings—thankfully a lesser pile than the mountain his fears had imagined. “Why did you risk being seen coming over here in the middle of the day? None of us are safe here until I’m gone!”

“I was careful, I drove around for awhile before I came over. Parked in the garage across the street and took the tunnel. We’d already checked for cameras there. No one saw me.” Her smile awaited his comment.

“I assume the Soren’s let you borrow something inconspicuous?” He also hoped they’d given her a refresher, she hadn’t driven in quite a few years.

“No, I used mine,” mom said with discernable pride. She basked in that for a few seconds. “It’s a Haviland Hare minivan—an ’05 that I bought from them to launder more money for you. Seems appropriate given my new family and friends don’t you think?” She gave him the credit card. “Use this, and I’ll reimburse Mr. Holcroft as needed. Fortunately for us, he’s working on another book and won’t be too inconvenienced staying out of sight for awhile.”

“Do you want your stack of notes back mom?” Use of the card would add veracity to his alias, but for her safety she needed to do all resistance transactions with cash from now on.

“No, Jack wants you to keep it in case of need. You can always split it with Kristen once you meet up. She’ll give you a list of possible places to stay since she was going to look them up for herself.” Mom retrieved a colorful ZooRailPass folder from her bag. “There’s more than enough on this card for a round-trip and several side ones if you need. We agree that you should leave tonight, and Kristen will follow in a couple of days.”

“She’d better clean this place thoroughly before she does; we have to assume they’re going to go through it after she’s gone,” Nick said. “I’m certain she’ll also have an escort on the train whether
she knows about it or not.” Given the amount of traffic between Zootopia and Concordia, and Tarija’s prior suspicions, he felt that was inevitable.

“She knows,” mom said. “Jack made certain that we’d both assume we were always under… surveillance.” Her slight emphasis of that last word made him worry that she’d become a bit too excited by her new mission in life.

“Good. You also need to assume that they will soon tag and track your car mom, so don’t come here again with it. You’re too close to me for them not to do that! Use it for routine stuff—for everything else, go park at the mall and use public…”

“Jack said that too Nicholas! I’ll be careful,” she interrupted with discernable parental irritation. Her phone gave a message bleep, followed a fraction of a second later by his. It was from Estelle and the codes indicated Skye had landed and remained free enough to communicate that for now.

Mom let out a happy yip. “Skye said she’d send us one of these every twelve hours or so to let us know—always on the hour or half hour.” She turned and started to empty her bag—a few more books, a lot of folded clothes, and a small case with a worn set of those reading glasses. He tried them. They were narrow enough to look over without difficulty, so wouldn’t be too annoying if he needed to hide behind them.

“This is you now son.” She chose a shirt and pants for him. “Go change and put all of your things in here. You’re also going to have to practice his signature and read the book! All of it, not just the biography in the back; someone might ask questions!” Mom had her ‘do your homework’ look that he remembered from so many years ago. Good behavior was unlikely to reduce his sentence by very much if she kept adding to it.

“This itches!” Nick tugged at the snug checked cotton shirt as he returned. Apparently writing about country life had less physical benefits than living it for Mr. Holcroft. At least his height and base coloration had been close enough to those of the older, lankier fox.

“It’ll have to do for now. You can always leave the top open—we’ll just gray up some more of your chest fur when Kristen comes home with the dye kit.”

Gray fur. His worry about Judy reasserted itself. “Mom, I don’t know if this might become an issue while I’m gone.” He rested his paws on her shoulders to reinforce it. “Judy’s parents and family don’t know about us being anything more than police partners, and they’ve even questioned the wisdom of that with her. She’s really afraid of what might happen when they find out we’re mates, and I’m afraid of how she’ll take that emotionally since I won’t be there for her!”

“She’s in a difficult position Nicholas, she doesn’t want to disappoint them, or hurt…” Mom’s eyes widened and she lifted her paws partway up to her muzzle. “Do you think accepting her into our family would make them disavow her from theirs?”

“I don’t know for sure mom, but I think she’s afraid they would. Judy’s told me that she’ll have to tell them before long, she’ll accept the shame and ostracism to avoid totally losing their trust. Accepting me is basically her ultimate betrayal of their values.”

I haven’t had a chance to talk to her about any of this—since she’s already gone—if she’s willing to give up her entire family for you, how could we ever question her commitment after that?” Mom had an awed look over the sheer quality of his chosen mate. “If this works out well Nicholas, she will have two families—but she’ll never be without any.”
Judy had back up. Nick pulled his mom into a welcome, tight hug—it got tighter when he heard her whisper, “You waited so long, but chose so well.”

Kristen was already inside and watched them with a bemused expression when they finally let go. “We’ve got less than two hours before you need to catch the express.” She walked over and set her supplies on the table before looking him up and down. “Good job on him Vivian! Shall we run the clock forward some more?”

Nick’s patience finally yielded to the folksy overdose as he started chapter six. He stowed Holcroft’s—no his book away and glanced at the sleeping young fox next to him. They’d doubled up for mutual support when he’d transferred to this packed full train back at the Oak Hills station. That was where the Bunnyburrow express line had deposited him four hours out of Zootopia. An hour into its run, it would only be another eighteen before this transcontinental express finally made it to Concordia.

He wouldn’t be on it when it did. The last major stop before that was Junction City; he’d decided to wait there for Kristen’s train and join her for the last leg. That would allow them to exercise their coordination, let him surreptitiously scope out any surveillance on her, and give his new persona its first operational test in a less federal environment.

It would also be a relief to escape early since this part of his journey was already rather aromatic. Forced to mouth breathe to minimize it, he was still assaulted by the scent of apparently every mammal in this car, if not the whole train. Nick wondered how the several wolves on board were able to cope with it. Perhaps the somewhat stifling air was the railroad’s way of economizing on keeping the cars warm. He put a paw to the window—it had to be rather chilly outside.

He’d been less crowded on the evening run north towards the seaports of Pacifica bay, as the majority rabbit passengers had yielded him plenty of personal space. Even so, he’d been aware of the absence of Judy’s sweet bouquet among all of theirs. When they had made the intermediate stop at Bunnyburrow, he’d not even looked over at the station on the opposite side of the train where most of them had disembarked.

That hadn’t counted; he’d hoped to first go there with his mate, invited and accepted—however unlikely it was that wish would be granted by her family. Just to pass through with the knowledge that she was hidden somewhere out there in the darkness felt so wrong, so alone for him. He’d stared out at the dim landscape on his side for a bit, then had waited with closed eyes until he’d felt them move well away.

Nick became aware that the cadence of the train had gradually slowed, they must have started their climb over the Mammoth Range that separated the Central Valley from the inland parts of the continent. According to the route brochure, this rail line was a famously scenic one through a mountain range four times higher than the peak behind Tundratown. It described breathtaking alpine forests and the matchless beauty of Sapphire Lake that they would bypass just to the north.

Unfortunately, all that would be well behind them by the time the sun rose. It was pitch black outside, and the interior lighting of the railcar wouldn’t even let him see stars through the window. So far, the longest trip he’d ever taken had been a complete bust. He’d lived his entire life within the greater Zootopia area, and as he’d left that behind, the rest of the world stubbornly remained
hidden to remind him of how truly isolated and uncertain his life would be now.

The reverse was also true. That broader world was unaware of the well-honed skills and savvy of one Nick Wilde. Until he’d met his mate to be, they had only been used to ensure his day to day survival, with occasional help sent off to mom or minor upgrades to his living conditions. Now he had a greater goal, defeating a threat to the kind of world that they all wanted to live in. This would be the defining hustle of his life, conning federal agencies out of the information that would hopefully bring down the conspiracy for good.

His greatest fear was thankfully of no concern for now. Judy was safe at home with her family, watched over by a knowledgeable professional in the form of Jack Savage. Nick would pay his debt to the hare for that by doing everything he could to protect Skye. It was a marvel—a comforting one—that neither he nor Jack would have even a moment of trepidation about the other being with their respective near same species mates.

That arrangement would be quite shocking to anyone that figured out who their declared mates actually were. Jack had the cool spy look nailed in spite of his normally more routine duties, and would be seen as a natural, probably inevitable match for the famous Officer Judy Hopps. He on the other paw, would be the object of intense jealousy if seen in the company of a widely recognized vixen—one that had likely caused numerous Todds to awaken panting and desperate to reclaim their interrupted dreams.

He and Jack shared the—certainly undeserved in his case—blessing of having been chosen by their perfect mates. Excepting the odd obsessed Cheetah police dispatcher; almost no one else would see it that way. One of those might be Kristen. She had somehow remained oblivious to what had quickly become obvious to both couples—and his mother. The flirtatious skunk probably didn’t suspect anything due to her behavior towards him—should he keep it that way or clue her in?

That complication would require a light touch to resolve if it wasn’t to interfere with their trip’s overall purpose. His easiest way out might be to pose as a couple with Skye as Jack had suggested, assuming they were able to meet up early enough. Until then it would probably be safest to talk up the vixen a bit around poor Kristen. With nothing else to occupy him, Nick continued to mentally review possible conversations with her, between others and his new persona, and with Carrots, her parents, and his mom. The track below them had become as aimless as his thoughts, with nearly constant random curves and what felt like a couple of tight switchbacks as they ascended the invisible natural barrier.

He was jostled awake when his seatmate plopped down next to him. It was deliberate as the younger fox then passed him one of the two cardboard boxes in his paws. The graphic on the lid showed that it held breakfast for a mid-sized omnivore, and bright light through the other windows also said morning. Someone had pulled the shade down over his.

“All we get in the cheap seats Mr. H, and they were going fast when I got to the dining car. Twelve dollars.” Nick gave him a twenty. He was a college student travelling back from a semester break, and had been courteous towards his apparent elder.

“Keep it, I’m sure we’ll want munchies later.” Nick perched some inexpensive and lightly scuffed sunglasses on his muzzle before he raised the shade. Mom had impounded his prized aviators along with the rest of his old identity. He opened the box to find some kind of cheese and eggwich, a fruit cup, and two breadsticks that looked whittled rather than baked. It proved to be a rare example of something prepackaged that actually tasted better than it looked.
The next several hours proved to be a monotony of sparse grasslands between repetitive ranges of arid hills and mountains, broken only by the rare dirt road. Their only brief stop was at a town that had likely lost most of its justification with the invention of the diesel locomotive. The few species he saw there all appeared to be native bovids. The grasslands improved once they left and started to follow a valley with an anemic river. Still boring.

His companion leaned over to see past him out the window, then pointed.

“Wondered if we’d see one of these groups Mr. H,” he said softly but enthusiastically. “There, almost out at the base of the hills.” Nick followed his indication to see a fairly large herd of mammals in the distance, intermittently hidden by slight undulations in the terrain as they rolled past. It seemed to consist of a couple of the bigger species, but they were hard to distinguish at this range. A few stood to the side, but the rest appeared to be on all fours!

“What are they doing? There’s absolutely nothing out here.” He knew parts of the interior could be rather primitive, Mammalian Civ class covered that in high school, but this looked like an early prehistory diorama in Kristen’s museum! Nick was treated to a younger version of his own vulpine smirk before the know-it-all student became the teacher. That prompted him to pull out a notepad and pen to play the inquisitive author.

“There’s tour companies that set up organized ‘Natural Grazes’ in designated wilderness areas. Hard to believe,” the gangly red fox said, “but some herbivorous species pay good money to wander around in the middle of nowhere and eat grass off the ground. I’ve taken this ride a few times and saw this before. Had your reaction, so I looked it up online. The Bureau of Natural Resources actually encourages this, since if they rotate through different areas, it supposed to help maintain the ecosystem.”

“Isn’t that all…rather unsanitary?” Nick asked. He also didn’t think there was much ecosystem to maintain around here as he watched it go monotonously by. He lifted the brochure. “According to this, it’s fairly high country out here; must get cold at night too.”

“I think that’s the point. And don’t forget the snakes, bugs and weather. I’m pretty sure some of these groups go naked too for the full experience! You know, reconnect with their past, just like your book Mr. H. They just take it a little further!” The fox’s grin remained as he held two fingers close together and then slowly shook his head. “You are so not gonna believe this part of it! Remember that pack of wolves? Most got off at the last stop—that place seemed to be a strictly prey town that wouldn’t want ‘em. I had to ask this one if he knew why?” He pointed his muzzle towards the front of the car where the lone lupine sat.

“Do go on, What’d he say?” Nick started to jot down substantive rather than just perfunctory notes. He’d gotten the impression that his companion was relieving his own boredom with conversation, as he hadn’t seen any other foxes on board. He also found this subject quite interesting—and a little disturbing.

“They’re predator re-enactors! They’re hired to stalk and menace the herds so they can get all defensive like. He said it even requires training and a license to work for the safari company! It seems so wrong to me.”

“It is wrong.” Both the idea and the word appalled Nick. He hadn’t heard that pernicious reminder of when some mammals had hunted others in a long time. “I’d never heard of this before. So they’re paying predators to reinforce what we’ve been fighting against for centuries! Some species still instinctively fear preds, and a lot more live and work with us, but still don’t fully trust us. Yet
some use us to feed antisocial behavior for profit.”

“I don’t know if ‘use’ is the right word. I’ll bet they don’t have to pay those wolves very much; they probably like being able to howl all they want and act all predatory!”

“That kind of mammal doesn’t give a thought about how harmful this could eventually be for them, or for the rest of society. They’re reinforcing ancient fears! Then they’re others that want to exploit those fears—real or pretend—to remove predators from society altogether. Remember that sheep mayor in Zootopia and the chemical terrorism last year?”

“Sure do Mr. H. Saw a special about that a while ago. That rabbit cop came right out and said she couldn’t have solved it without help from a fox! Imagine that! Best media attention we’ve gotten in a while.”

“We could use a little more of that,” Nick said with a nod of agreement. He pulled out one of his books and passed it over. “Here, take this; it’s signed. Show it around, I’m always looking for new readers.” He didn’t know how many opportunities he’d have to actually promote Holcroft’s work, since he did owe that to his identity donor. He wondered if these books sold better in the cities, or the rural areas they reminisced about.

They settled into silent ennui, as the world around them flowed past and grew ever more barren. Distant high mountains to the south tantalized, then gave way to outright desert and vanished behind them. Nick decided he’d already experienced enough train travel to satisfy any curiosity he’d had, and checked the brochure to estimate how long it would take them to get to Junction City. They were just beginning to cross the Great Salt Desert and had at least five more hours of bright sun and glare from the salt pans to endure. He scowled and pulled the shade down.

Chapter End Notes

I have always wondered what it meant for the various natural ecosystems in the world of Zootopia, when nearly all of the mammals became sentient and basically removed themselves from them. That would have disrupted numerous food-chains, some symbiotic relationships, and thus the livelihoods of many other species—both plant and animal. It also seems natural that at least some species would feel yearnings to return to those environments from time to time—allowing capitalism to thrive.

The next exciting installment for our fox will be—Chapter Sixteen: Into the Fire
“Why aren’t you on the train!” the pronghorn stationmaster said in surprise as he walked back into the building from the platform. “I made three announcements.”

Nick turned away from the Junction City information placard inside the front entrance. “It’s ok, I just had enough of the train last night and today; guess I don’t travel as well as I used to. I’ll pick it up tomorrow afternoon…”

“Not ok. You’ll be back on the next train out, let me see your ticket.” The antelope stayed on the far side of the room and waved him closer. “Away from the window fox!”

“What’s the problem?” Nick picked up his dad’s old suitcase and walked over—mom had brought it in her new minivan, since his was still back at the apartment. He pulled out his ZooRailPass, which was taken from his paw with barely a glance.

“In my office, though someone likely saw you in here already,” the antelope said as he jerked a hoof towards the window that faced the town, then led the way to the room at one end of the modest structure. “I’ll also need an ID to scan so we know you disembarked here.” He seemed
annoyed, but not belligerent, so Nick passed his card over. Both it and the pass were scanned and returned as the stationmaster sighed.

“This isn’t Zootopia or Concordia fox. Life’s a lot more…insular out here. This is a sheep town; tourists don’t stop here, a stranger like you couldn’t walk three blocks before the sheriff showed up. You thought you’d find accommodations? You’ll find what little they got closed to your sort. Then you’ll be a vagrant accommodated in a jail cell—like it or not. Later the judge fines you for whatever you got and then puts you on the next train leaving. I can do that without all that extra bother; just stay low here.”

Nick knew better than to argue about rights or points of law. Out here, well away from higher authority, the locals could easily justify whatever they wanted to pin on the wayward pred. This was no different than the mob, play it their way if you want to survive.

“When’s the next?” he asked the stationmaster, his resignation apparent to the hooves on hips bovid.

“Six trains a day stop here. Be less without required crew rotations. Next one’s a westbound at nine-fifteen tonight, if you’re smart, you’ll be on it! My day’s over when it leaves. You’re scanned in, so board as soon as it arrives.”

“When’s the next eastbound, I’d really rather go on to Concordia,” Nick asked. He felt humiliated at how unprepared he’d been for an eventuality like this, and the idea of having to backtrack really wanted to raise his hackles—although he suppressed the urge.

“Five forty in the morning. I wouldn’t recommend that—you’d have to stay out of sight in here overnight. The Western and Great Basin can’t guarantee your safety—or bail you out—once outside this station!”

“I’ll chance it, didn’t sleep very well on the train. At least that bench has a cushion and won’t move under me. I do want to get something to eat over at the store, can I bring you anything?” He’d waited while many of the other passengers had used their relatively short late-afternoon stop to stock up en masse across the street, and this gave him an opportunity to thank the stationmaster for his concern. He got laughter back from him.

“You still don’t get it city fox,” the pronghorn said in a lighter tone. He flicked his ears a couple of times. “Nobody dares bother passengers when we make a stop here, that would interfere with the store’s business! Besides, through passengers are basically the railroad’s responsibility ‘til their destination. Locals know better than to mess with the railroad, lest they find out what living on the moon is like! Train’s gone now, so you’re out of place and vulnerable. I just hope the wrong mammals don’t find out you’re in here after I’m gone.”

Nick finished his second sandwich while the stationmaster tapped the remnants of his box of browse into his raised muzzle. He’d gone and taken care of the actual purchases after Nick had given him some cash. As he’d waited, he noticed the station lacked even a vending machine—which possibly highlighted a weak local economy supported by strong local ordinances. Either way, this stop wasn’t much of a break for the passengers—or a home for many of them, since less than a pawful had disembarked to stay along with him.

There were a few hours before the next express, they were alone, and the pronghorn seemed grateful for even his company. Having tripped over his ignorance—yeah slick, that’s what it is out here in the big wide world—he had an opportunity to dispel some of it. He opened his backpack to
get his notebook out, and to pass over one of the author’s copies.

“I’m a writer, mostly about the loss of the simpler lives we once had—just from a vulpine viewpoint I’m afraid! My publisher thinks I’m popular enough now to expand beyond that; he wants me to try more diverse stories. I now realize those need to include species and locales that don’t seem too involved with my own. This is a part of the country that I’m obviously not familiar with, so I’d appreciate it if you could provide some perspective about this region’s history.”

*Smooth, candid, now you’re settled back in the groove slick!*

“You can see that history here if you just look around for awhile—though of course I wouldn’t advise that for you.” The stationmaster returned the irrelevant to him book, which had served its introductory purpose. “I don’t think the character of this place has changed much since the range wars.” He noticed Nick’s quizzical look. “Those mostly ended about two hundred years ago I think, and were pretty violent affairs over grazing land.”

“Mostly? Weren’t most herbivorous species integrated and cooperating much earlier than that? Although you said this town is mostly sheep,” Nick prompted.

“Pretty much all sheep, and they cooperate to keep it that way. I work here as a reminder they don’t have sway over the railroad. My little herd, a few jackrabbit families and some beaver and deer—we all live a little east of here, closer to the hills. In town, you’d better be a loyal follower of Ovis. Always been that way. Never been any goats, rodents, or predators allowed in ‘n around Junction City!”

“Goats?” That was a surprise exclusion of fellow prey. “I’m used to seeing them openly associate with each other.” Back in Zootopia, Nick knew that badger professor, with his comments about species segregation, had to be unexpectedly smiling now.

“Not here. Even you wouldn’t upset them as much as a goat—they were old rivals over pasturage! Same with horses. Cropland around here is barely adequate for self-sufficiency, with almost nothing left to sell to other places. Richer land and more water east of the continental divide—if you paid attention coming in, you’d see it’s pretty barren on this side except near the rivers.”

A few more questions before the stationmaster returned to his office sufficed to give Nick the essential character of life in the isolated interior. Even here, in the largest town for a couple of hundred miles around due to the river and railroad, federal oversight was minimal. There wasn’t enough population or economic activity to make any more of it worthwhile.

This was one of Dr. Barret’s monocultures, Nick’s memory finally supplied. Remote and reinforced by their history and beliefs, this place and others like it would be resistant to outside influences. Mostly ignored by greater society—who would have little incentive to come here anyway—they’d grown into the polar opposite of the Zootopian ideal. And he’d naively stepped off the train right into this previously abstract example of interspecies enmity. He really wanted to hear what Carrots would have to say about this.

Based on her descriptions, even Bunnyburrow was far more open and tolerant of other species. However, it was much larger, more productive, and had good connections to many surrounding communities. Small provincial towns like this were common, and cities like Zootopia those rare exceptions. Nick’s alias touched on these issues with his writings, but not in any depth. He had to go beyond that naïve idealism and recognize that there was fertile ground here for prejudice and specieism. Had the conspiracy started to explore places like this as a source for potential recruits? Or would the apparently clear-cut divisions between some rural prey species cause problems with
That might be another exploit we could take advantage of! Nick permitted himself a confox grin, which vanished again quickly. He was right to consider this a tough hustle.

Wider public disclosure of historic divisions among prey could weaken the conspiracy’s attempts to smear various preds and their businesses as unscrupulous. Or, he realized it could backfire and unite a majority of the population against the slander and scurrilous lies. We already know about the meat farm found in a prey community, that would spread the blame for exploiting mammals for food. But that would never absolve preds of the past—or possibly ongoing—crime of consuming them.

Unfortunately all preds, in ancient times or modern, were forever guilty in the eyes of their once natural prey. Yet prey species had supported certain predators for centuries rather than driving them away or allowing them to starve. What did they get in return for that long-term commitment? Service would be the most valuable—as labor, or maybe as mercenaries to fight off rivals for their own food supply.

Nick suddenly felt uneasy, had it really escalated into predators fighting proxy wars? Possibly even against their own kind on behalf of adverse factions of what should be their rightful prey? And did we in turn… Nick abruptly stood, tail thrashing, and grabbed his muzzle roughly with both paws.

“You are an officer of the ZPD, a civilized mammal, don’t ever think of anyone that way,” he growled out through clenched teeth. The thought had slipped right out. Was it that easy to revert to what everyone saw us as? Nighthowlers irresistibly overwhelmed your higher functions, but some always feared we actually only needed a little emotional nudge to release those long repressed primitive urges. The mere idea of what might have been done to use predators was so toxic that he’d allowed it to easily get to him! He paced around inside the station worried about society’s true fragility—damn you Dr. Barret—and that his prideful ability to adapt to its changed circumstances wasn’t as good as he’d thought.

Nick acknowledged the bottom line. It all came down to which side could obtain evidence to support their narrative and release it first! The conspiracy has ninety percent of the public predisposed to accept any reasonably adequate disclosure of theirs—ours has to be not only unequivocal, but we have to catch them with it to overcome that built-in bias! His pace increased; Jack was right, everything’s stacked against us.

He was brought out of it by his phone—the text from Estelle confirmed their arctic vixen remained free, but aware she was now under surveillance. Her previous two updates hadn’t had that last bit, so it gave him something else to worry about. At least it reminded him to alert Kristen that their rendezvous was postponed until she arrived in Concordia.

The golden sun had slowly improved the appearance of the landscape beyond the tracks as it settled towards the horizon. It was almost gone when one of Nick’s habitual sweeps caught the flock of four rough looking sheep as they sauntered up the other side of the street. They weren’t close enough to look his way yet, so he took the opportunity to grab his case and slip into the stationmaster’s office. He silently pointed him over to the window.

“That’s why I wanted you in here,” the railroad mammal said after a casual glance. “Normally the W&GB don’t have problems with the locals; but this is kinda early for them, word must have spread. Thing is, boredom’s always an issue here for the farmhooves, little opportunity for anything else. So they hang around the bar on the weekend, and make trouble once they get tanked
up. If they find you here after I’m gone, being in the station might not matter.” He gave Nick a card. “Send me a note when you’ve left.”

In legal terms, I’m an attractive nuisance—got it, Nick thought. This card meant he’s seriously concerned about my safety, or his own accountability—he took out his phone and put the stationmaster’s number in his contacts.

He was reduced to reading more of Holcroft’s book until well after dark, when the sound of the door out in the waiting area startled both of them. The stationmaster motioned for his silence as they heard the clack of multiple hooves on the floor, and went out to meet them. Nick pushed his case more out of sight and stood in the corner near the office entrance.

“If you boys are really waiting for the train you got four minutes.” There was the sound of a different door. “Get back here! Nobody on the platform after dark until the train stops!”

“There’s lights out here…just looking around,” said a deep voice. He heard a few steps and the same one came more quietly from closer to the office, “He’s right, nobody.”

“You all got tickets, or are you waiting for someone? That’s your only reasons to be here! I gotta prepare for arrival right now, and either I see someone get off or you gone!” Once back in the office, he pointed to Nick, then his case, and unlocked his own door out to the platform. The message was clear, be on that train!

Nick stepped out just as the train stopped, and the door was quietly closed behind him. He was loath to retreat, but otherwise risked a night outside if the sheep waited for the pronghorn to lock up and leave. So be it. The end of the platform to his right extended beyond the station, and wasn’t as brightly lit as the part in front of it. Unfortunately, before he could jog over there and conceal himself, two rams forced the issue when they came outside and spotted him. One reached behind his shoulder as the train doors hissed open.

Nick decided that his next ursine traffic stop would get off with a warning. He walked over to the train under the bear conductor’s protective gaze and paused to show his receipt. A nod allowed him to board, and he walked forward through the car without immediately glancing back. After a few seconds he did; the conductor was out on the platform herding the sullen rams back inside with her irresistible paws spread.

He had enough time while everybody was busy by the station to hurry through two more cars, and head for an exit near the end of the station platform. “Couldn’t find my bag,” Nick said for the benefit of any curious passengers as he left in haste. On the platform, he stayed low and close by the train until he could drop first his suitcase off the end, then himself. A cautious look back found no witnesses as he crouched in a conveniently deep shadow.

It wasn’t lost on him that this was the second time in as many days that he’d abandoned a train to hide in the dark by its tracks. At least he hadn’t been seen leaving it, and the present light wind should carry his scent away from the station. He curled up to muffle, then turn off his phone. He felt secure for the moment as the westbound express slowly accelerated past his weedy shelter, then quickly faded into the night. The red light on the rear car was intermittently visible for another minute before it rounded a gentle curve and was gone.

Hushed voices argued briefly before the sound of a door came. Shortly after, the outside platform lights went off, and a few clicks and thumps were followed by the departure of the stationmaster’s car. Nick cautiously looked over the lip of the platform to find it empty and dimly lit by a couple of
lights from inside the station. All remained quiet, but his sense of self-preservation didn’t expect that to last. Ok, step one—assess your situation.

You are totally on your own, way outside the only environment you’ve ever known, and haven’t exactly acquitted yourself very well, he realized. All of your professional resources are unavailable, and any trusted allies are hundreds of miles away. You must catch the next train or you likely blow your assignment before it even starts. He cringed internally at the thought of how the Chief or Major Friedkin would evaluate his performance today. Let alone Judy or Jack. If he couldn’t deal with a small sheep town in the middle of nowhere…

Annoyed by his lapse of self-confidence, Nick considered his options and waited for his night vision to adapt. His safest course would be to stay away from the station until shortly before the scheduled early morning arrival time. He also preferred to remain unencumbered, so first he set his case on the edge of the platform, then removed and put on the one coat mom had brought with Rafe’s stuff. It was usefully darker in color and its warmth would augment his shorn pride—the temperature had dropped significantly since sunset.

Next, he took a minute to restore the weeds he’d flattened to approximately their original state and scuff away his footprints before he pulled himself back up onto the platform. A little exploration of its edge found a spot near the corner that had been erosionally undercut enough to hold his backpack and case. The weeds were taller and thicker there which made it ideal—he brushed them carefully aside and lowered his luggage into concealment.

Once he was off the platform and across the tracks, he relaxed a little more. Although weakly illuminated and backed by darkness, he’d been in view from the store across the street for several minutes. No one had been outside—until now. Two more purposeful looking sheep came up the street and collected two from the first flock that were inside the store. They walked straight towards the station, and Nick retreated further into the night as soon as the building blocked their view, since sheep were very good at motion detection.

Caution said keep moving away, but he’d become interested in their excessive response to his earlier presence. An opportunity for some local thugs to harass a smaller incautious predator should have ended when they saw him board the train. The flicker of flashlights through the station windows showed that they’d felt a need to make sure he’d left. They appeared to move inside; then all the exterior platform lights were turned on.

The sudden pool of light around the station forced Nick to flop down behind a barely adequate clump of sagebrush. One sheep came around each side, and three more exited onto the platform. There was still movement inside, so there had to be at least six of them looking for him. That meant a couple of them had to have remained in front of the station while he was right around the side stashing his luggage in the weeds!

There was nothing quite like having your paranoia justified. Were they armed? He recalled the one ram that had reached for something. Flashlights were shown along the tracks, then swept around past his location a couple of times—he averted his eyes from their beams to avoid exposure due to their retroreflectivity. After a minute of unintelligible conversation, the sheep turned off the lights and closed everything up. The four local toughs went back down the street into town; the other two continued up in the direction the train had departed.

They had all acted like he was a legitimate security concern, so he decided it was time to become one. Nick followed the pair from a hundred yards or so back and to the side downwind—sheep had only fair night vision, but a good sense of smell. His own nose was already busy cataloguing the
several new scents of this unfamiliar landscape. Each was a reminder that he was a long way from home.

After a mile or two they came to a modest warehouse faintly revealed by the scattered lights of the town behind them. The two sheep briefly used their flashlight on a door, and went inside.

Nick cautiously closed the distance—there didn’t appear to be any windows in the structure, but he would be a wary fox from now on. He stepped across the two mainline tracks and found a third curving away from them a little beyond. It was a spur line that went past one side of the warehouse, with the dim shapes of low railcars further on.

He gave the structure a wide berth, whatever the sheep might have in there wasn’t worth the risk to find out. Maybe those railcars could tell him something—worth a look, he had six hours to fill. Nick kept the warehouse behind the cars for cover as he approached. There were four flatcars on a short siding, the first two unladen. The third and fourth were stacked with prefabricated panels, crates, bundled poles, and rolls of fencing and wire.

This was the local freight depot. However, it was associated with the suspiciously watchful sheep. The stationmaster hadn’t seemed well disposed toward some of them, and Nick was fairly sure he didn’t know they had keys to his station. The pronghorn had also mentioned the lack of any local industry other than agricultural. Were they worried that strangers were going to steal their farm equipment? He saw nothing unusual here, but something still didn’t feel right about it. Enough so that he wanted to find out what it was.

Nick jogged further down the spur line on the smoother ground alongside the track. The town’s few lights were off to his right; everything ahead appeared to be only scrubland, no agricultural fields at all. His intuition impelled him to keep on in the absence of anything suspicious, as did the fairly new ‘No Trespassing Government Property’ sign. Another two miles, and more shapes stood on the track—two more flatcars loaded with rails and concrete crossties. Coupled in front was a complex self-propelled open car with hydraulic equipment and a crane at the far end. It was obvious the spur line was being extended, but to where?

One way to find out—Nick broke into an easy run further along the leveled right of way. The rails ended just beyond the track laying machine; the crossties on their layer of ballast shortly after that. The night had transitioned from cool to cold, and a good run would help mitigate it. The prepared roadbed facilitated his faster pace—it was distinctly visible in starlight alone. He continued to pound along it for another mile or so, until shortness of breath slowed, then halted him.

Panting, with his paws on his knees, Nick wondered how he’d gotten out of shape so quickly. His legs were only mildly fatigued, but it was difficult to catch his wind. He really thought he’d built up more endurance than… *It’s the altitude*, he suddenly realized, I’m almost a mile up. It was another reminder that he wasn’t in Zootopia anymore.

He continued to walk, and a half-hour later came to a slight rise ahead that was limned in faint light. The prepared roadbed ended there and became a somewhat rougher dirt road. The light behind it grew slowly brighter as he walked up the gentle slope. A sudden foreboding made him leave the road and move well away from it. At the top of the rise he lowered onto all fours and crept forward until he could see into the shallow valley beyond.

There was a very large partially walled compound two or three miles away in the center of the valley. It was probably less than two hundred feet lower than his present position, so appeared quite foreshortened. Lights around the apparently square perimeter and within it were all shielded
to illuminate only the ground; he couldn’t see any direct radiance from where he watched. That, and its location behind this rise, effectively hid it from the town, or more likely the main rail line. There were several evenly spaced identical buildings, along with more bare foundations that seemed to show…that’s a watchtower on the far side.

It was a prison under construction—an enormous one. Here’s your Federal oversight slick; this effort is well beyond any local needs or resources. But why build it here? You already answered that, Nick realized. They want to keep it hidden.

The slight chill he felt lying on the ground abruptly rose to freeze his whole being. This wasn’t for regular convicts; it must have been intended for a large population of segregated predators—savage or otherwise—since nothing else reasonably explained its size or location. This could be their first direct evidence that the conspiracy had initially planned a far more sweeping version of Bellwether’s Zootopia plot. He wondered how much nighthowler-induced hysteria elsewhere had been thwarted by her overeager play for power? That psychopath’s premature efforts may have averted a far wider catastrophe last year.

That was then, this is now. Nick realized the prison’s present state of completion, plus the partially finished spur line, meant the start of this project had to date back to or even before that odious time. Construction had likely proceeded slowly to spread out costs and hide the activity, then stopped after he and Carrots had exposed Bellwether’s part of the scheme. But it seemed to have resumed. Had they repurposed it for housing or raising captured feral animals? It would be most inconvenient to have all this discovered in their xenophobic prey community—say by some wandering fox.

There was movement below, vehicles exited the compound and came towards him on the road. His present spot was secure; their lights wouldn’t be able to reach him here. Even so, he still felt his heart pounding faster than normal after twenty minutes of rest. He watched two sheep-sized multi passenger vans come over the rise and pass by—their tires firmly crunched the gravel along the road, so they seemed fully loaded. That confirmed a good portion of the town had to be in on this, they’d welcome any good employment here and the conspiracy would value an insular and cooperative workforce.

There were so many possibilities and questions to uncover here due to his serendipitous discovery—certainly bad for the conspiracy if he could get away with some hard evidence. Nick turned on his cellphone to take photos; unfortunately, the cheap burner proved to have an inferior camera as well. It did record the light around the buildings, but the image was badly motion blurred. He finally had to scoop together and build a small mound of dirt, then embed the bottom of the phone in it, before he got a couple of decent shots to save.

Nick could see little activity down there due to the distance and angle. It was too risky to go any closer, as he’d be fully exposed to their view from here on. There was a waning crescent moon due to rise soon if he wanted to get a better photo of the site, but it would make him more visible too. Better to get away with what he had—their first big break.

A glance skyward showed the great bear head down somewhat to his left, and the pole star in front of him—that put the prison around six miles north of the rail junction. Nick carefully withdrew and jogged back down the road—careful to pace himself to save some time—it was already well past two in the morning. He made it to the track-laying rig just after the moon showed, and took a few more photos to add to his meager evidence.

He pocketed the phone and turned to resume his jog; the distant warehouse down the line was now
lit by some fairly bright lights. Lights meant activity, and that he’d lost the cover of darkness unless he took a wide detour around it. He ran faster to utilize as much of the right of way as possible before he was forced into the brush, with frequent glances behind him to avoid any vehicular surprises. This was now a situation and his anxiety had noticed.

The unexpected text notification blip almost caused him to stumble. It was about time to quit the road anyway, so he walked off to the side and crouched to see what he’d received. It was from ‘Rocky’ and said ‘on track 4 am arriv’. It had been sent almost six hours ago, so he’d likely just walked in range of the local cell tower. He wasn’t going to reply and make this number more worthy of notice out here in the boonies, so off it went and out came the battery. Yeah, he’d just seen a perfect justification for his awakened paranoia.

Assuming Kristen was already on the train to Concordia when she’d sent this craftily ambiguous text, she’d be on the one he needed to catch! That would restore their original planned rendezvous. He didn’t feel his earlier message to postpone had been telling enough to make her leave a day early. Maybe that ZBI llama had pushed a bit to get rid of her.

Nick pushed well out into the sparse brush, nearly a mile away from the warehouse and further from the station. It couldn’t be helped, he had to remain unseen and going the other way around would put him nearly in town. No choice, he had to do this on all fours.

He stayed low, as his softer forepaws protested every hidden pebble and sticker they encountered. He needed to watch the sheep under the freightyard lightpoles, not his footing. One shoulder also gave him a ‘this again?’ twinge. There was still enough light cast out where he was to make him uncomfortable, and his heart was hammering again—loudly enough to make him feel the traitorous organ was saying ‘over here!’ He kept at it, and moved as silently and carefully as he could from one inadequate bit of cover to the next, until he finally reached and crossed the mainline tracks over an hour later. Thankfully, the railcars had helped block the view of the sheep busy transferring part of their load into a truck behind them.

Unfortunately, they wouldn’t shield him anymore; the workers would have a clear view of him down the spur line as soon as he moved towards the station. The moon was also higher now, and dawn had started. Any delay would quickly make conditions worse, and going further away past the tracks wouldn’t improve his chances much on the open level ground. He got to his feet and watched. The moment their attention all seemed to be away from him, he took off running. After a few hundred feet he stopped, crouched and watched. No reaction from them so far, and he’d drawn even with where the spur joined the main line. Maybe all the lights had suppressed their night vision! He did it twice more over a greater distance each time and remained unobserved.

Nick allowed some of his anxiety to dissipate as he rested for a few minutes. He was now well past the warehouse in the direction of the station instead of beyond it the other way. If spotted now, there should be no reason for them to suspect that he’d been any further, or had ever seen the prison complex. He’d just lurked around the station and waited for the train. Yeah, keep up that wishful thinking slick, you really should have just gotten the photos and come back as soon as possible!

He was about to make another dash when he spotted two sheep walking down the road from the warehouse. They weren’t close yet, so he slowly settled onto his side with his back to the road, curled up tight, tucked his muzzle, and flattened his ears. Inspiration raised his tail to disguise his shape, and he stabilized it with a paw near its base, squeezing some of the fur down around it. The sky now showed some color overhead and to the east, but objects on the ground were still fairly indistinct—particularly for sheep eyes. Nick held his tail stem with its tip growth as still as he
He couldn’t see the sheep for a couple of agonizing minutes as they ambled past his backside a couple hundred feet away on the other side of the tracks. They finally came into view, although it took another ten minutes while the sky brightened considerably for them to get safely ahead of him. Sheep had excellent peripheral vision with enough light, and he dare not follow as closely as he had last night when it had been fully dark. He finally rose, stretched out the kinks, and resumed his walk towards the now easily visible station less than a mile away. His anxiety had returned with a vengeance and wanted him to go faster since he didn’t know how much time he had left before the train arrived.

Unfortunately, the sheep had stopped outside the store and he was spotted while still over a quarter mile from the station. A low, faint rumble that slowly grew from behind also told him his time was up. With no choices left, Nick bolted for the platform and the two rams moved casually across the street to intercept him before he could get there.

Nick slowed to a trot after he turned his head, the train would cut him off before he could reach and cross to the station side of the tracks. This was it; he’d blown his chance. Even without those rams by the station, he’d never make the platform before the train concluded its brief stop and left. The express was close, and had already started to slow. His desperate fantasy of running to catch and ride it to the station was immediately quashed by the modern streamlined railcars—there was nothing to leap for and grab onto.

*Carrots wouldn’t hesitate! Keep trying for her!* Nick ran flat out again for the train—the engine was already ahead of him, and he could use it for several seconds of cover from those sheep. He saw them much closer once the last car had passed between them. They had moved out from the station to make sure he wouldn’t get near it. He swerved to run straight at them so he could get across the tracks and to better ground before they met. They slowed and produced makeshift weapons—a crowbar, and a pipe with a beveled tip.

Everything was perfectly clear now, if he lost, he was dead and disappeared. A delayed victory would be no better. If he won through quickly, he’d try his utmost to make that train with his evidence. They chose a fight to his death, but he was the ZPD trained predator.

They’re a lot bigger so don’t wrestle; use your agility. Nick angled his approach to keep one behind the other. Crowbar in back lifted a cellphone in his hoof! *Fool’s not set!* I can take them in turn! He growled and accelerated, went in low on four to pipe ram and leapt as soon as the sheep had committed to his swing—the sheared tip of the tube made an almost musical hum as it swept under him. Nick slammed into the ram’s shoulder hard enough to lose some air, but got a grip on his thick wool ruff front and back. Nick pulled himself in and levered the ram’s nose up with his elbow in one fluid motion, twisted his head, plunged his gaped muzzle deep into the wool for the throat, and bit as hard as he possibly could.

His fangs barely penetrated the skin beneath as he compressed the disgusting mouthful of wool, but it was enough. The ram aborted his backswing with a strangled bleat, dropped the pipe, and used both hooves to try to punch the smaller fox off him. Nick jerked his jaws free and pushed back right as one wool softened blow clipped his muzzle.

He landed on his feet, with arms and tail out for balance, and took in the immediate scene. Crowbar was a step closer; weapon raised in one hoof with his other reaching up to join it. The cellphone was drifting towards the ground behind him. His immediate adversary had his mouth open and both hooves still at his neck—the pipe slowly rolled in front of his legs. Nick dove for it, grabbed,
rolled, and was able to land a solid blow to the side of the ram’s knee before he could fully recover. His adversary toppled with a satisfying thud.

Nick danced away as crowbar came around his compatriot, ready to pound him into the ground. The moaning obstacle between allowed him to circle behind the second ram—instead of attacking him; Nick went for the cellphone. He was about to spear it with the pipe to deny them its use, but realized its worth just in time. He scooped it up and backed away from the enraged ram, then cocked his arm with the pipe as if he was going to dart it into the sheep’s belly. The ram flinched back and Nick took off around him for the station.

The train was still there! The fight had taken seconds; he might have a chance! Nick ran hard and flung the pipe off to the side. But he couldn’t outrun the pain that began to claw and squeeze at his lungs. No good—his strength gave way and he dropped into a stagger fifty feet short of the platform—there were mammals on it; the train hadn’t moved. Gasping for air, head down and tongue out, he lurched forward and pawed for the edge of the concrete as heavier footfalls pounded closer.

His breath was stilled as strong arms clamped around him to lift him onto the platform. The cougar in the conductor’s uniform released him to greedily suck in more air. Nick looked up at him and tried to get a ‘thanks’ out. It was more of a pathetic wheeze before he went back to panting with paws braced on his trembling knees.

“No! You can’t do that! Don’t take him! We need to arrest him for…” The ram drew up short of the platform, still holding the crowbar, suddenly unable to find more words. He lost a staredown with the resolute feline conductor, and stood in disbelief at his failure and its likely consequences.

“No! No investigation. I can’t…” the ram looked behind him toward his invisible crony out in the brush before he ran away in panic around the side of the station. The cougar allowed himself a satisfied smile. “Let’s get you onboard, I want to hear about this.”

“My bags,” Nick said more steadily as he pointed. The conductor waited for him to retrieve them from the weeds; then escorted him down the length of the platform to the first passenger car of the train. Two mammals in Western and Great Basin uniforms, a deer and a pig, nodded heads to them and walked past towards the station, while a similarly outfitted coyote headed forward to the engine cab. So close, he’d been saved by a crew change!

“We were told to keep an eye out for you,” the conductor said. “There’s something going on around here and you seem involved enough to tell me what it is. You a reporter?”

Nick made a snap judgement to trust his cougar rescuer. He hadn’t been alone—he would have failed in his mission almost immediately if not for the timely backup provided by three separate railroad employees. They were obviously aware of some unusual activity, but not about the conspiracy itself. He needed more information, and would pay for it with his own.

“No, I’m undercover. Remember the drugged preds going savage last year in Zootopia? We now know it didn’t start or end there. We need to talk in private and this must be kept absolutely secret.” Once on board, he fumbled out his receipt, which was waved away. The train started to move as the conductor led him to a cubbyhole of an office.
“Sit tight and rest up here. I’ll be back after I drop this in baggage and make my rounds.” The cougar flipped down a simple seat and took Nick’s case forward.

Seconds after, Nick heard a nearby door open quietly before Kristen slipped around the corner, bumped against him and looked up. She reached up over his shoulders and around his neck and pulled him down to her level, muzzle to muzzle. For a shocked instant, Nick thought he’d be fending off an over-amorous skunk, but she whispered urgently instead, careful to tuck her tail into the cubicle with them.

“Glad you made it Wilde; saw you get picked up out on the platform! Tell me later, need to make this quick.” Kristen disengaged an arm, retrieved and pressed a scrap of paper into his paw. “My sleeper berth—four cars back, up top, get there as soon as you can. You were right; I’m being watched. It’s a vicuna who’s still asleep right now I think. Don’t let her see you, she’s a suspicious one.”

“Vicuna? Sounds Amazonian.”

“Really Wilde? Yes. They’re like a small skinny llama. Stick legs, barely deer size. She dresses baggy to hide it. Has medium brown fur all over, a long slender neck, big dark eyes. Soon as you can.” A quick glance out along the passageway and she was gone.

The conductor was sufficiently impressed with Nick’s careful narrative to offer him the access info and password for the railroad’s freight shipment database. The cougar’s familiarity with some of the conspiracy’s recent anti-predator propaganda had made it easier to work his curiosity and fill in just the right details to ensure his cooperation. It felt good to use some of the conspiracy’s efforts against them after he’d worried earlier about the double-edged risk of using their own knowledge anytime soon.

Even better was the railroad mammal’s opinion that it was unlikely the rams would report his possible intrusion to their unknown superiors. They didn’t know that he’d been anywhere near the prison complex, and would want to avoid having to explain their negligence. He’d taken a big risk revealing that to the conductor, but felt it necessary to curb his curiosity and impress on him their need for secrecy.

The sun was up and there was more activity on board as he left the pensive cougar to walk back to Kristen’s sleeper car. A bathroom adjacent to the cubby showed where she’d hidden and listened for him. The compartments on her car’s lower level were for medium sized mammals—up to a wolf, pig, or even a non-Clawhauser cheetah. If this train was like the one he’d arrived on, the largest mammals would have their own more open plan cars coupled at the rear since they couldn’t physically fit inside the others.

Nick took the narrow stairs at the near end of the car two steps at a time and stepped into the equally tight upper passageway after he checked for any vicunas. Just three possums to squeeze past and a bobcat that barely glanced at him. His timing was good, as there was nothing strange about a fox off to bed at daybreak. Compartment doors were larger near the ends and smaller in between. Kristen had one of those—he tapped gently and it immediately slid open. Paws grabbed and swung him past her as soon as he leaned in—she was kneeled on the bed—before she closed it behind him.

“What took you so long! Decide to stop for some breakfast?” Kristen shifted to give him room to sit beside her. He struggled to remove his backpack; there was barely room to stand alongside the
bunk style bed in here even with flattened ears and a tucked tail. Seated with it beside him, he was pressed hip to hip with the skunk and could feel her shudder against him.

The snug compartment was comfortably cool, but certainly wouldn’t stay that way for long with the two of them in it. Nick placed his arm firmly around Kristen to try to soothe her and damp out the shakes. That wouldn’t help the temperature either as he thought as she responded to lean in tighter against him. He gave her a couple of minutes to calm down before he spoke.

“Do we have to watch what we say?” he asked softly. She shook her head no. Tucked under his arm as she was, he was reminded that she was only a few inches taller than his mate and felt comfortably similar nestled there. Although her body was stockier than his bunny’s, she had much longer and glossier fur, and that majestic tail; this skunk was a fine looking young mammal. It seemed he needed the contact right now as much as she did.

“What’s got you so spooked, Kristen? Whatever it is, mine’s certainly worse.” He felt her paw slide around his back to hold him as well—and their tails were bunched together behind them. This was a more intimate scenario than he’d envisioned happening with her!

“You hit the news yesterday morning Wilde. Wide coverage and they’ve offered a substantial reward for you.” She gripped him a little tighter and looked up at him. “They’ve also announced—because of you and for the safety of the citizenry—an initiative to review the backgrounds of several other predatory law enforcement officers; some by name!”

“They’re making unfounded public accusations! What was Bogo’s reaction?” This was directly against the legal presumption of innocence—there has to be department push back against this!

“I don’t know. I was on the next train out, Jack messaged it was too risky to wait any longer. I’m sorry, I don’t have the temperament or reflexes for all this undercover agent stuff and now I don’t know when it’ll ever stop!”

“It’s not all bad Kristen,” Nick soothed as he carefully disengaged from their perilous mutual hug. “I found something big out here that is bad,” he said more conspiratorially, “but it might be the break we needed.” Kristen’s face acknowledged his relief as he took out his phone, found and reinstalled its battery, then successfully retrieved the image to show her.

“They’re building a prison out here, a huge one!” He used a claw tip to point out features on the inadequate cellphone screen. “I don’t know if these are barracks or cellblocks, but here’s a guard tower and a partially complete wall. The yard’s at least a mile square!”

Kristen leaned over to look, took the cellphone from his paw, and slowly tipped it as if that would improve the resolution of the image. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Watched for half an hour, saw work crews—all sheep from the town. Its six miles or so to the north and they’re laying a set of tracks out there. I had to sneak in and out—almost got caught. I’m sure you know who it was meant for!”

“How did you know it was even there? We picked this town almost at random!” Kristen’s voice was steady and her trembling had stopped. It seemed to Nick that her scientific curiosity had come to the rescue.

“Only good stop in the area to pick. Station manager told me it was an all-sheep town; they were still far too xenophobic and security conscious about anyone getting off there—especially me. I
wanted to know why, had hours to kill, and just couldn’t resist my sneaky fox nature!” Nick shut off and put away the phone, then put a paw on the skunk’s arm.

“We have to get this to Jack and Chief Bogo as soon as we get to Concordia—don’t want to send anything out from near here. That will give you and I plenty of time to compose this text right. I also have a task for Skye but I don’t think we should send her the picture for now. We’d better use yours for the texts, not sure about sending much more from this one.” He’d decided that transmitting the images would be the last thing this phone did.

“You sure? Look at what happened the last time we collaborated. We got this whole mess rolling!” Kristen said with more confidence.

“Kristen, who else deserves to be stuck with it this time?”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, loyal readers, I did consider leaving you with a horrible cliffhanger a few pages earlier. But there is much more to come than crude literary devices!

Our next exciting installment will be— Chapter Seventeen: Vixen Vigilantes
Vixen Vigilantes

Chapter Summary

Skye and Vivian (New VP character) follow up Nick's momentous discovery in Junction City. For one: it comes with the job. For the other: an exotic new life.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a long time coming and I do apologize. I got stuck early on in writing this and allowed myself to be distracted by Cimar's Fluff files. (which I really enjoyed writing for, not having done short fiction before) I also restarted my dormant homebuilt airplane project which ate up even more time. I will try to balance my activities better from now on! On the upside, I now have a firmer grasp on the remaining plot which should help speed the creative process a bit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

10:35 Monday morning in the Castle Rock College library.

Skye wondered yet again about what circulated in the heads of many of the mammals that made up society—or that might appear on the monitors of those few with her at the library computer kiosks. Obsession with obscure hobbies—and the resources devoted to them—never ceased to amaze her. She had to admit that RailLife was an unanticipated and well-laid out website that provided most of the information Nick Wilde had wanted. All publicly available, which precluded any intrusive search that might have exposed her activities to the agency conspirators twenty-five miles to the north. There were at least four similar enthusiast websites as well—but this one had the archival data they needed.

And lucky me, Skye thought, I get to spend my unexpected day of liberty condensing all of these lists of train movements into a tidy report that shows the frequency of freight deliveries to Junction City over the past two years. Her curiosity about the odd request was temporarily frustrated, Nick’s texts from Kristen’s phone had only stated that it was crucial she find and get this information to Jack and chief Bogo. He must have felt he was onto something too important for her to know about given her precarious freedom. That wasn’t very reassuring. Once she accessed the relevant freight manifests with the company password he’d somehow acquired, Skye hoped she might figure some of it out.

Her Cassie Neal alias—developed as personal security insurance at Jack’s suggestion—had again proved its worth. Skye had been initially skeptical of Jack’s infatuation with his secret agent persona and all their related spy games—until she’d seen how useful they were to conceal their relationship as it grew. She was now thankful for the care she’d put into a dormant student ID able to pass a basic background check. At least she still easily looked the part. She occasionally referred to a binder from her backpack, or flipped a couple of pages in the random textbook grabbed out of the stacks to help maintain her cover.
Although she was presently unconfined and productive, fear still prowled her innards. Days spent anticipating her arrest had so far come to nothing. This had to be a temporary reprieve. The conspirators here either wanted to save that for a more opportune time, or perversely wished to use her to further their ends as Tarija had. The only solace was that meant they were still unaware of any active resistance on her part. At least entering this data in a spreadsheet and trying various ways to graph it out was an effective distraction.

It was well past lunchtime before she had a reasonably coherent report prepared. Now she needed someplace to send it to. Skye flicked her ears in irritation—none of them had anticipated the need to exchange anything larger than brief text files when they’d set up their comms! The cheap burners weren’t good for anything more, and she had to assume all their normal means of contact were under general surveillance. That had to include Vivian and the ZPD—anyone associated with Kristen’s initial report. Her own damn program at headquarters was likely monitoring what she might try! She knew how good it was.

Skye pulled out her replacement burner phone to text Jack—four received messages awaited her, she must have turned down the volume too far when she’d entered the library. Two were brief replies from Kristen and Vivian for her new contact list; the last two were from Jack. The first was from a half-hour ago and simply showed: **Martin cII.** The last was just minutes old and was **Martin cIII.**

Abbreviated police response codes. He’d gone from urgent to emergency! She sent her reply and confirmation word—his next arrived almost immediately, although he forgot his own authentication this time.

**Will call-2min.**

This had to be serious if he’d risk a voice call while unaware of her situation. Skye brought up the background economics tutorial on the monitor to obscure her recent work and stood to look for a reasonably private spot—the ladies was closest and would have to do. It was thankfully empty once she padded over there. She sat in a stall, leaned over and used her tail as a muff over the phone. Her claw accepted the call at the first tone.

“Spica here,” Skye hushed into her phone, aware of the bathroom’s harsh acoustics.

“Sk…Estelle? Heard from your Uncle Jay back east, he sent an email to the wrong place again. Said he’s on his way there to visit you right now. Could you pick him up so he doesn’t…try to walk it and perish from the heat?” Jack spoke carefully but sounded stressed; plus, he’d almost used her name.

“Now? Are you sure?” Skye was incredulous. Jack’s well-crafted statement left no doubt that their missing biology professor had decided to willingly blunder into the heart of the conspiracy.

“Yes, right now—ETA four-thirty at Central. I finally looked at your…research! He’s—uh—got more vintage high proof stuff with him to crack open,” Jack said urgently.

Okay, that’s why, she thought with a sinking heart. She’d tried to trace Ulric’s whereabouts from the ZPD network, but had accessed little useful info other than the Prof.’s webmail inbox. She hadn’t had the time to go through all of it and had left it for Jack. Obviously, Ulric had more evidence to hide from his pursuers—the wolf must still think it was a local cover-up—and wanted his work safe in the paws of his previously contacted colleagues. Skye glanced at the computer clock—she had just over two hours to get back and find, then convince and hide the naïve prof.
And send her report—somewhere!

“Marty? I’ve…uh finished your itinerary. Where do you want me to leave it?” Skye badly wished she could talk as plainly as Jack must have also wanted to.

“With your sister, I’ll get it from her. Now get going! Ciao!” Jack disconnected and left her staring at her phone in sudden frustration.

Skye walked out of the bathroom thoroughly vexed at Jack’s assumption that she was a calm, collected, and clever fox at the moment. That might have been true two minutes ago, but certainly wasn’t now. This new crisis thrown on top of all the stressful days before Bellwether’s transfer, and the insecure ones afterwards, had finally breached her last emotional bulwark—a sudden fearful indecisiveness sapped her resolve as effectively as a police tranquilizer. Weak kneed and tail down, she wavered a step away from her seat at the computer, now able to fully empathize with their overwhelmed skunk paleontologist. Wherever she was now.

Her paw went to the back of the chair to steady herself, and the contact induced her to slowly turn it on its swivel and sit down. Skye took a deep but ragged breath. She stared at the monitor in a trance before her paw moved seemingly of its own volition, grabbed the computer mouse, and closed the background program.

What did he mean by my sister? That doesn’t make…Oh, he must mean Judy, I’d told him what she’d said. She went to open a browser and find if....

“Looks like you’re struggling a bit with that my fetching fox! You’re in luck, I’m a comp sci major —be happy to help.” There was an all too familiar pick-up tone to the male voice right above and beside her.

Still too out of it for a proper startle reaction, Skye turned to look over her shoulder at—a Coyote! Her closest leg reacted first and caused her chair to tip precariously for a moment as she pushed away from him.

“Leave me alone! I’m fine,” Skye snapped and focused her concentration enough to give him a ‘get lost’ glare. The slender for his species and likely teenage Coyote took a hesitant step back. He wilted further as her expression firmed in rejection as she examined him.

“Just wanted to help, you looked a little lost,” he tried again far less assuredly.

“Sorry, don’t have the time,” Skye said more evenly, now aware that she’d hit the poor mammal with the full force of her defensive personality. She didn’t want to emotionally scar Mr. Inexperienced; he was just doing what young males often did around her. Unfortunately, his species and proximity had drawn her overreaction. She pointed at the wall clock above the reference desk. “I’m already late with this, just been at it too long.”

She didn’t watch his likely limp-tailed retreat, and concentrated on the monitor. Any use of Judy’s full name would be an obvious red flag…although…she and Jack were in Bunnyburrow. So he wanted the report sent there. Skye allowed a shake of her head to rearrange her muddled thoughts and entered ‘Hopps Farm’ in the browser—she got two pages of hits. The first was their business website—the intro confirmed that it was the right place. There was a ‘contact us’ link separate from their produce and order pages, so she used that—with ‘Attn. J the D’ as the header and her work as an attachment. That should be safe, Jack probably expected her to use that.
The clock seemed to accelerate as she waited for Jack’s receipt acknowledgement. Skye spent that
time back on the still open railroad website to check the schedules and platform numbers. She was
able to trace the pending four-thirty arrival back east all the way through a connection to Ulric’s
hometown of Anniston—which helped verify that it was the right one. Jack’s confirmation finally
came after five more minutes—he’d anticipated and likely quickly reviewed her report—but the
slight delay was still excruciating.

One last task before she could leave; Skye inserted the thumb drive with her sweeper program and
carefully wiped all traces of her activity from this computer. That would have to do, there wasn’t
time to try to remove records of the email from servers elsewhere.

Her chaotic mind obsessed over that fairly low risk concern, along with fears about her immediate
future, as the light rail made its way back to the Federal District. She didn’t remember this many
intermediate stops on the way down, or how time accelerated when the train slowed! Her contrary
inner voice decided to stoke the flames of paranoia even more.

*You’re running out of time, have no plan, and couldn’t expose yourself more blatantly if you tried!
There have to be agents of the conspiracy heading to Concordia Central Station to intercept that
wolf just like you are! And unlike the movies, you won’t get adjacent cells.*

Skye briefly considered contacting Kristen to see if she was in the area yet, but the skunk would
certainly have a minder that she couldn’t shake. Wilde was out of the question. She had no close
friends in town due to her furtive relationship and her own software would instantly flag any
contact with a sympathetic coworker. Her eventual sacrifice was certain, so she still had to try—
although that would get her a longer sentence. Her face sank into her paws; she hadn’t felt this
helplessly alone since she’d gotten off the boat in Port Catskill.

*Why go through with this? Go to ground and save yourself—you’ll also protect Jack and your
friends in the resistance if the conspirators can’t interrogate you! They already know about
Fairfield, would any more evidence matter?*

Jack thought it would. Also, with the wolf and his evidence under their pads or hooves, and leaks
like you and Kristen seemingly plugged, the conspiracy could twist and control it to serve their
agenda. They could use our best evidence against us. My running would only alert them to our
opposition; they already believe someone tipped Wilde about his warrant.

She had to somehow find and shelter Ulric without being arrested, but would he cooperate with a
frantic stranger? How can you approa…

*He’s a canid—you have a power! Use it!* Her interior voice decided to be more helpful.

He’s insecure and on the run, why would he even listen, let alone trust in me?

*What might gain his trust?*

Skye’s eyes and mouth widened—oh you’re a crafty fox! She pulled out the binder and was about
to rip off its cover when she realized the cardboard stiffener inside her pack was larger. A little
work with a claw and she had a suitable signboard— even white on one side.

“Excuse me!” Skye raised her voice for the benefit of the whole car—her demeanor set on
maximum charm. “Does anyone have a dark marker I could borrow?”
In less than a minute, a lady spotted hyena flipped one through the air to her and they exchanged smiles—and got a scowl from a disappointed gray fox further forward. Several non-canids rolled their eyes at the brief interplay. Skye thought for a moment, then neatly lettered as large as would fit on her card.

**Dr. R. ALDER**

**Z NatHisM**

She hoped it would do, as the familiar skyline of the Federal Center of Concordia was already visible ahead. Skye stowed her card, returned the marker, and hurried to stand near the doors—she had at most a ten minute window to spot any opposition and position herself before Ulric’s train arrived on platform six. Unfortunately, she hadn’t been in the station recently and didn’t remember the interior details well enough for any advance planning. She’d have to adapt on the fly to circumstances.

“Oh well, I tried miss.”

Skye turned to find the gray Todd seated a few feet away, a pen held up in his paw. He wasn’t too many years older, and had a small hopeful smile on his muzzle. He tilted his head slightly at her change of expression upon realizing the opportunity he provided.

“I do appreciate you looking for that, but you could still help me. Do you know this station at all well?” Skye continued at his nod. “I’ve only got a few minutes to find platform six and would really appreciate it if you could walk me in the right direction.” A camera ready smile and wave of her tail sealed the deal. Being in his company could hopefully allay suspicions from any conspirators that might otherwise recognize her. She might even be able to meet Ulric before her actions betrayed her.

Skye felt guilty for lying her way through her escort’s polite questions as he took her all the way onto the platform and paused there for more pleasantries before he finally gave up and left. During that conversation, she was able to spot two likely agents behind him—a ram and a bull—at the bottom of a set of stairs that lead up to a mezzanine overlooking the main hall. The enclosed office above probably had another one up there conducting surveillance. They’d detailed plenty enough muscle to bring in a lone wolf if he balked.

She slowly wandered over to loiter by a roof pillar on the platform that provided her with some cover from them. Once there, she worried that she’d gone too far along it if Ulric got off near the front of the train, but really didn’t want to move back closer to the agents. It was too late now anyway, she saw the train as it approached from outside—a couple of minutes early. Skye stayed where she was as it switched onto the track for her platform and eased to a stop. She held her sign up high as a flood of passengers exited and engulfed her.

Skye felt a distinct tap on her placard as she watched over a shoulder at the passengers leaving the forward car. A middle-aged wolf stood close by with a quizzical expression.

“I know this name; who are you and why are you here with it?” His voice was curious and higher pitched than one would expect for his size.

“Professor Ulric?” His widened eyes as he slightly drew back confirmed that for her. She leaned in, up on her toes, muzzle towards his ear. “I’m ZBI, and know all about the Fairfield meat farm discovery and the cover-up of your investigation into it. There’s a broader conspiracy to make all evidence of that disappear, and you are walking into a trap here. We need to find someplace safe so
I can explain more of this to you.”

Ulric stared open mouthed at her for several seconds without comment, as the flow of mammals around them started to thin. Thankfully, this train had been filled to capacity and there was another within the station that added to the throng of mammals.

“We need to move now so we can use the crowd for cover,” Skye said more urgently as she stowed her sign and tugged at his arm. “There’s a bull and a ram at the base of the stairs ahead waiting to meet you and take you into custody once they get you someplace less public. I can’t explain further if we’re both caught and thrown in jail!”

He moved at her urging, muzzle still agape. “Take my arm professor, and stay close to that pair of horses! We’ll go left when we get to the concourse.” She raised and slid her arm within his, which seemed to stir him a little. Her initial relief over their easy contact, since he’d seen and approached her first, was tempered by the realization that they were still a long way from safety. “Give me that specimen case, and block their view of me! Keep your big one. Come on! I’m not going to steal it; you have my arm. And don’t look at them!”

They made the turn, and several paces more before there was an abrupt commotion behind them—Skye looked—they’d been spotted and the bull plowed through the throng towards them amid shouts and thumps as he shoved mammals aside. She let go of a now motivated Professor Ulric and they broke and ran. A meaty thud and grunt from behind might have been helpful, but she didn’t turn to see. They wove through the congestion and dashed down the passage that led back to the regional transit station.

“They’re running—going for the local platform!” a deep voice bellowed above the general uproar. “Get the car over there!” Skye glanced about as they sprinted and suddenly spotted an emergency exit halfway along—she pointed and nudged Ulric towards it.

“This way everybody!” Skye shouted as loudly as she could over the clamor of voices, “Clear the area!” The wolf slowed and used both paws to shove his suitcase up into the bar for the largest door—he ignored the inset smaller one. He shouldered it open and set off its alarm. “Follow us, get outside!” Ulric barked out as he grasped her intent.

“To this exit! Clear the area!” Skye cried again and looked back to see that several mammals had followed behind them—and hoped they would be enough to impede their pursuers. They ran down a short lane between the stations to the street and turned onto the sidewalk, the alarm clearly audible behind them. “Some kind of big fight in the station back there! Rampaging bull!” she told the startled mammals outside as they slowed to a trot.

“We need to keep moving professor, Cherry Creek Mall’s about a mile and a half away and the food court should be noisy enough for privacy,” Skye said as soon as they had some space around them. “We have some decisions to make.” She hoped the various witnesses would take her words to heart and pin the blame for the commotion on the agents—she’d just committed one felony for the cause; there’d be more if anyone had gotten hurt.

They jogged across the light rail tracks and looked back, several dozen mammals stood or milled about in front of the main station as others still exited. Well behind, an unmarked car first honked, then flipped on a siren to work its way through the crowd, so she pulled Ulric off the sidewalk to use the landscaping for cover. They crossed the first major street mid block through a gap in traffic and turned down to the next to get out of sight faster. They rounded that corner before she brought them to a stop.
“See if you can squeeze this into my backpack. I want it out of sight,” Skye insisted. His damn case actually had ‘Piedmont University Biology Dept.’ printed on it! She held it out and turned away from him a bit. “Glad I found you first professor, you can call me Stella for now,” she said before Ulric restrained her with a firm paw on her shoulder. He set down his luggage with the other and took back the specimen case.

“Whoever you actually are Stella, I need some assurance of your own motives before I go any further with you! What do you want and what do you know about those individuals who chased us.” Ulric’s paw shifted to grab hold of one of her backpack straps as he carefully looked around the street. “How did you know I was coming!”

“Emails. I also saw the package you sent to Doctor Alder,” Skye said distinctly. “He briefed me thoroughly on its significance. I used his name on my sign instead of yours to avoid attracting unwanted attention! Your other package went to the National Museum. One of your colleagues there—we don’t know which one—alerted those trying to gather and suppress all this information. I was assigned as part of that effort and realized it was a more organized continuation of last year’s anti predator conspiracy. I among others are working to expose this corruption in our own agency!” She retrieved her badgeholder to show him.

Ulric’s expression and released grip showed his acceptance. He stuffed the case in her pack before she pointed him to the other side of the street. “Follow me from over there so no one else sees us together. We’ll take it slowly and casually from now on.” He crossed over and they resumed meandering along the busiest streets they could lose themselves on.

Once in the mall, Skye sought out the bathrooms so they could alter their appearance in case a description of them had been released to the district police. She simply removed a light top layer worn for that purpose and went right back out. Ulric took awhile longer and had utilized his suitcase to change his whole outfit. She was pleased how seriously he took their situation as they headed for the food court escalator.

Skye finished off her dessert smoothie while Jarvis, as he’d finally been able to introduce himself, bused the small table and disposed of the trash. It might look like he was being overly fastidious, but the wolf professor seemed to need the calming effect of routine activities. He’d only asked occasional questions while she had filled in details about the conspiracy and why he’d been targeted. Her binder and a regular pen were out, and she’d jotted aimlessly at those times to give the impression of business being conducted. As usual, the many mammals around them had ignored her and her ‘client’.

Now she had to get him to the address she assumed was Nick Wilde’s new lodgings. Jack had replied with that as soon as she’d sent out her ‘success’ and ‘safe’ codes once they’d arrived here. Her mate had obviously worked with Kristen to swiftly back her up and find Nick—and Ulric—a hopefully safe bolthole.

A forty-minute bus ride would put them under the cloak of night when she dropped the professor and his evidence off at an unobtrusive stop. Ulric would walk the last several blocks alone with only her directions in paw. Once there, Wilde would assume the responsibility to get him to a safer place—he’d said he wanted to be useful! She presumed sending him on to Zootopia would be best—but of course they’d continue to keep her in the dark about developments.

Because the conspirators would be out for blood after today’s botched operation, and hers would at least partially slake their thirst. After all, the station had security cameras, and they had certainly
recorded a suspiciously familiar vixen who’d conveniently wandered in at just the right time. So Skye, if you thought you’d been set up for a fall before…

Their whole resistance effort had been put at risk by her actions today. There was no plausible way she could have known about Ulric’s arrival on her own—say—by emails found on Dr. Alder’s computer. So they would all be suspect now. Had Jack realized any of this when he’d called? Right, her phone, Skye realized. She composed a message to their scattered group that basically said ‘Delivery soon, I’m screwed, going silent’ then deleted everything but Wilde’s contact and presented it to her fellow fugitive.

“Give this to Officer Wilde when you get there, I won’t need it anymore. He’s a red fox made up to look older than he is and will be staying there under the name Holcroft.

“May your pack always run strong Professor Ulric.” He smiled at her use of the wolf honorific, and offered her his paw as they got up. He followed her at a distance to the bus stop, where she relinquished his case before they boarded. They’d ride separately until she’d yawn to signal his exit. She planned to remain onboard for awhile after that.

They’d be waiting for her at the condominium tonight. Best to stay away, then maybe go out in public tomorrow and hope for the dubious protection of a more visible arrest.

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10:54 Tuesday morning at the Waterford Park archery range in Happytown.

Not as bad as I’d feared Vivian thought, as she sat high in the stands and watched the competitors and referees finish preparations for the day’s tryouts. Everything had changed enough to blunt some of the resurgent memories. She was also with three neighbors she knew, and two other’s she couldn’t place—they’d all noticed her when they’d arrived and had come up to sit with her.

She’d last been here with John—almost thirty years ago now—it was for the fall tournament, he’d almost made it past the fourth round then. She smiled slightly—his tailor’s fingers were as deft with a bowstring as they were in the shop.

Hers weren’t bad, although she’d missed qualifying both times she tried. No shame there—only those already in the advanced category could attempt to. When John had first reached that level himself, which allowed him to offer instruction to novices like her, it hadn’t taken long to notice the particular interest he’d taken in one student. Private coaching soon followed, then time together away from the range—their bond was an inevitable one and her acceptance of him and the Wilde name came swiftly.

Nicholas had fidgeted his way through the first and only tournament they’d taken him to. They hadn’t been the only set of parents to alternate minding their progeny with straddling the line, since other than lightweight toys, fox kits couldn’t participate in serious archery until after age ten. That was to ensure that the repetitive strain from regular use of a bow wouldn’t interfere with their proper growth.

Once he’d reached that age, the bows had already been packed away for years, and he’d shown little interest in any more organized activities after his futile attempt to join the Ranger Scouts. She’d been selfishly thankful for that; it would have been difficult to return here with just him then.
I would never have considered it now, but for all those messages yesterday.

It had started with a coded one from the chief of police last Saturday morning, shortly after the news of Nicholas’s criminal charges and fugitive status had been made public. It simply stated; Stay in place—do nothing. She’d endured three days of lies and speculation all across the media, along with aggressive interview attempts at her very door. She would have been devastated if not for her prior knowledge of the conspiracy and their resistance.

A substantial reward is offered for information leading to the arrest…

The official accusations and innuendo—had not only implicated her son and maligned everything he’d worked so hard to achieve, but had also tried to smear other officers at the ZPD by association. It had to have been a well-orchestrated public relations effort by the conspirators, set-up before their failed attempt to arrest Nicholas.

His freedom was only a small victory, since she was again separated from her son and he from his new mate, with a significant chance that it would be a lengthy, or permanent one. Skye, Jack, and Kristen had also left her as the lone…active subversive in the city. Her new family member, and sudden but real friendships, all had been taken away again.

Throughout yesterday, there had been occasional brief texts between them—there had to be more that didn’t include her—that had brought on hours of overwrought imaginings about what had transpired so far away.

Don’t reply Vivian, she’d decided, events have to be too serious for you to distract them right now.

Skye’s final message late that afternoon—from a younger vixen she’d felt an almost immediate connection with—had brought home for all of them the personal cost that activities over the past few days had mostly kept at bay. The night had been a horrible, fitful one—she knew she couldn’t bear to be alone any longer and had left the house at daybreak.

She’d wandered her immediate neighborhood and wondered whom she might bother at that hour for the company she needed. It was too early to head for the diner—she’d been given the week off anyway considering the circumstances—then she’d remembered their window flyer for the spring tournament this week. The walk there would fill in the time.

Vivian knew a significant percentage of the community would come even for the first day of tryouts; the tournaments were not only important to their fox culture, but they were the most prominent of the few positive attributes Happytown could put on display for the rest of Zootopia.

The work done over her long absence to upgrade the park and range seemed to have succeeded. In the past she remembered; only some other canids and a few big cats had joined the preponderance of foxes on the line. Now the event seemed larger, with several more species participating.

To her surprise, they ranged in size from a large weasel or mongoose, up through a skunk, wolverine, and several raccoons, all the way to an antelope and a kudu. There was no doubt, the bovines carried custom bows, and one appeared to have a string release mechanism for their hoof. Nimble fingers no longer seemed to be a requirement for what many mammals had long regarded as an exclusive sport for reclusive foxes.

Still, it was a good sign for the future that the rules had been relaxed to be more inclusive. They
needed as much of the broader community’s support as they could get here. It was just frustrating that for every slow improvement in larger society, there seemed to be these periodic stampedes in the other direction.

Vivian’s phone blipped as the first arrows were loosed. She pulled it out; it was from the chief and the text consisted of the words ‘Come prepared’. It seemed that the tournament and police officials were equally punctual this morning.

“I’m sorry, I was expecting this,” she told her supporters. “Police interview about Nicholas, I knew they’d have questions.” Vivian stood amid words of sympathy, “Don’t worry, they’re not the ones after him, the news said that other officers are under suspicion too!” She lifted her eyes from them, spotted a brown-furred hare on the field by the corner of the stands and sat back down.

“He is though,” she pointed out the plainclothes hare as he carefully scanned between the latest arrivals and the seated crowd. “I’ve seen him watching my house for the past few days! I think I must have slipped him this morning and he’s trying to find me again.” Her irrepressible smile was reciprocated.

“Want us to run interference so you can leave?” said the Todd from the middle-aged couple she didn’t recall.

“He looks kinda pervy,” said her younger neighbor Catherine. “I can go report him.”

“Oh yeah, he’s got a camera. Better see what’s on it!” said Renae—Vanya’s daughter.

“Yes, go with that, he certainly won’t want anyone to check it!” Vivian added. Nods were soberly exchanged, and the two younger vixens rose and worked their way down the stands. The couple followed a minute later and she went shortly after. That hare was a problem and he was about to be hit with a five fox—no six fox, as she was followed down—solution.

Renae briefly stopped to speak with a seventh, who joined their team of character assassins, then went straight to the biggest yellow vest wearing staff-mammal she could find—a wolf. Vivian had worried about keeping her grin under control, but not any more—she now felt slightly sorry for her watchful hare. She stepped down to ground level and slowed her approach to watch and listen to the initial skirmish.

“That’s him, he just stared at me real creepy as I went up the steps! And he kept doing it over and over to other vixens!” Renae started as she walked up with the wolf.

“Me too! He keeps looking at us in the seats. I think he took a picture of my tail when I walked by.” That was Catherine with a vest and frown equipped Todd in tow.

“I’ve done no such thing! I just got here and I’m waiting for my friend,” the hare stated.

“Yes you have! You keep watching the stands through that thing! You’ve never even looked toward the archers!” their last recruit chimed in.

He must have been using its zoom lens to search for her, Vivian thought. Bad move on the hare’s part—it only helped justify their impromptu retribution. Did he really think he could pick me out from all the other vixens—there were several here around her age, and the hare certainly hadn’t gotten that good a look at her before.
The couple arrived as reinforcements. “Check his camera! I think he upskirted my mate!”

“If he got me I want it deleted!” Catherine immediately tossed into the mix as she recorded the confrontation with her smartphone—to the hare’s dismay.

“Who knows what else he’s got in there. Jeez, what a perv, you think a rabbit could get some from his own!” came from the first row in the stands. There were a few snickers from the now mostly silent crowd. “He’s short enough to sneak those kinda shots!” added Renae.

“Back off now!” the hare shouted and slapped a foot, set off by the insults, “I’m engaged in legitimate law enforcement activity and you all could be arrested for interference!”

A gift from above—Vivian couldn’t resist as she paused near the gaggle. “I thought you had gray fur Officer Hopps,” she said as soon as he was faced away—to more laughter.

“You’d better have some ID and a warrant if you’re looking for someone,” stated the wolf firmly as he reached out. “Or I call the ZPD right now!”

“I’m a Federal Officer and touching me’s a felony assault!” the brown hare’s voice had a note of fear to it as his ears dropped—his loose circle of accusers hadn’t contracted, but did slowly fill in with more foxes. He hastily dug a badge out and started to show it around before he was completely blocked from her sight.

Vivian turned and walked calmly away from the now hemmed in hare—for the second time you cheeky fox! It had taken little effort, that inept lesser had mostly exposed himself, along with his ZBI, to the community. They’d be on watch from now on so she should feel more secure at home. Her mood lifted, she sent an acknowledgement to the chief as she walked to the nearest transit station—just two stops from Savanna Central.

Five ‘til noon—she walked toward the massive façade of the police station as two news crews came the other way; likely thwarted given their glum expressions. One consisted of the gray rabbit correspondent she’d seen on one of the independent stations, along with her antelope camera mammal. The other was unfortunately that bellicose sheep reporter from channel nine and his crew. She walked rapidly past them, ears up and muzzle forward to avoid eye contact. Come prepared indeed. She’d watched more than enough news recently!

“Excuse me Ma’am!” the rabbit said from behind in a quavering tone that meant pursuit. “Are you a relation of Officer Wilde’s? Do you have any knowledge of his disappearance?”

Vivian made it to the doors first, only to find a now all too familiar ZNN field crew still inside the lobby. Their porcine reporter was talking with the portly cheetah that was her first point of contact. No choice; she walked over as that sheep closed in and bawled after her.

“Are you Mrs. Wilde? Are you here to give the police information on his whereabouts?” That instantly attracted the attention of the ZNN crew, who all turned towards her.

She went right up to the reception desk as the ZNN crew backed away—to presumably frame her without having their rivals in the shot. The reporter turned away to look into his camera as the other crews hastily prepped.

“This is Al Grunley at the ZPD’s precinct one where Mrs. Vivian Wilde has just arrived unescorted…”
He seemed certain about her, so at least they’d done their background work. Vivian used Grunley’s transient focus away from her to look at the officer Nicholas called Ben. The big cat now leaned forward to see her with both paws pressed on the desktop. He flicked his eyes from her down to them and slid one aside a little to reveal a sticky note stuck to the surface just behind it. A couple of seconds later the note vanished as he straightened up and collected himself. “Can I he…” he started.

“I want to see your chief! Right now!” she shouted at him and banged balled paws on the desk. “I’ve called and called and kept being cut off or given the run-around!” She ignored the reporter’s shouts and waved a finger at his muzzle. “I’m here now and I’m going to find out what happened to my son!” Vivian took the note’s words to heart—make a scene.

“Please calm down Ma’am, I can contact our public affairs officer to help answer…”

“I want to speak with someone in authority! Now! I won’t let you hide what’s happened to my only family!” She leapt onto his desk without breaking eye contact, then took another step to force the dismayed Cheetah back against the pillar with its ZPD emblem. “Who’s taken Nicholas and where is he? He’s not a criminal and he wouldn’t run like they’re all saying!” She waved a paw behind her as a boom microphone was shoved over her head.

“I’m sorry, we’re not handling this case, you’ll have to contact…”

“Mrs. Wilde, please, when did you last see Officer Wilde? Has he contacted you?”

Within twenty seconds her arms were firmly pinioned by an elephant trunk which lifted her off the desk and deposited her back onto the floor. The officer’s bulk shielded her from the cameras as she was taken into custody and led deeper into the station. She was grateful that at least the conclusion of this episode wouldn’t make the evening news.

Their first stop was surprisingly the precinct’s break room, where it was suggested she get some lunch from the vending machines. The elephant chose a sheaf from the largest one.

“Glad you jumped up on the desk; made it look more reasonable for me to arrest you. Who suggested that?” the officer—Pennington, by her uniform tag—said conversationally.

“That was me. I assume all this was to keep them from asking too many questions?”

“Absolutely Mrs. Wilde, not the first time I’ve been called in to…interpose with the press. We’ll need to wait a few minutes, so go ahead and get something—it’s on us.”

She did, as she’d skipped breakfast earlier. It was good to have exposed the ZBI hare at the range; so she didn’t find this latest charade that much of a surprise. Even so, her apprehension about her imminent meeting remained—the chief’s public reputation alone justified that; let alone Nicholas’s comments about him.

So much for your long quiet life Vivian—what Vanya liked to call our halcyon days; and you, your lonely ones. It became so much better last year when Nicholas came home, his life turned around; you were finally content…a small but happy family again after so long. Good comes to those who wait, and it was worth it. You knew Judy would soon become a part of it and she was welcome—you would each be stronger together.
Perhaps I should start a diary for us. Dear diary: first entry, Tuesday, April twenty-fifth. I’m sitting in the police station having just been arrested for disorderly conduct and threatening an officer. My only son Nicholas has lost his first decent job and fled the city, a fugitive from the ZBI accused of drug trafficking. His new mate has left and returned to her family far away where she must keep her perverted relationship with him secret. Oh, and two family friends are under surveillance by government agents because we are all conspiring against it to protect society from collapse!

Quite a lot had changed in just a week.

The breakneck pace of recent events and urgent tasks had not allowed her to fully absorb the serious turn all of their lives had taken. It had finally caught up with her last night and nearly crushed her in the false security of her own home. She’d had no choice but to leave and continue her run down this trail—to preserve her sanity and fight for their well beings. She looked up to find Officer Pennington awaiting her notice.

“I need to deliver a brief statement to the press about you Mrs. Wilde, then I will be back to take you downstairs.” She was left alone to wonder what the various officers in the station might know about the conspiracy. For them it might be no more than a vague sense of unease that society was about to go off the rails again. Vivian wondered if any of them suspected the depth of Nicholas’s or even her involvement.

She was taken down past several holding cells—the smell of alcohol and feline revealed that at least one was occupied—and left in a room at the end that had a stepped table and a range of reasonably comfortable chairs on either side. All were bolted to the floor.

It wasn’t long before the secure door clicked open again and the chief entered. Nicholas hadn’t exaggerated, chief Bogo was an imposing mammal—each of his arms was as big as she was and one carried two thick large format books that she might find rather difficult to lift.

He took the largest seat on his side with a slight metallic groan of protest, and set the books in front of him. They watched each other critically across the wider end of the table for over a minute before he deigned to speak.

“This room provides for Attorney Client privilege, so we may speak freely here Mrs. Wilde.” His voice was as full-bodied as he was, with a noticeable accent. He pushed one of the books closer to her and turned it so she could read the title.


“This one is representative,” the Cape buffalo continued in a manner that disallowed interruption. “I have found within these pages at least four separate reasons why I should have you arrested and placed in one of our cells.” His flint-hard hoof pushed the other forward.

‘City of Zootopia—Police Standards and Practices’.

“This one contains five reasons why I should be in my own along with you.” Chief Bogo pulled the books back, stacked them, and folded his massive arms on top. It appeared he was going to rest his chin on them, but he caught himself and continued to watch her.

“I took an oath to serve and protect all the citizens of Zootopia. I have decided that supercedes these. Our other four sworn officers and agents have made that same choice. That leaves Dr. Soren and you as the untrained civilians caught up in this mess that I must still rely on. Your performance
in the lobby with Officer Clawhauser has helped relieve my concerns about you—that was well-done. I believe you have adequately convinced the media that you have not been in contact with your son, which should take most of their pressure off you.” The formidable presence across from her managed to give her a sympathetic look.

“Unfortunately, recent circumstances require me to reimpose that pressure. Your role is now as important as any of ours if we are to succeed. Can you deal with that Mrs. Wilde?”

Nick had warned her that the chief was a blunt speaker. She was being evaluated and should speak carefully. “Other mammals treat us rather unfairly, but they do mostly allow foxes to live our lives among them,” Vivian said as she watched for his reaction. “We both know society has problems chief, but my working with you to try and preserve it is the only way for me to protect my son and his…partners, since they’ve left.” Oh cuss! He noticed that!

“So yes, what must I do now?”

“Savage said he’d fully briefed you last Thursday; much has happened since then. I assume you saw some of our com traffic yesterday? Good. He found that the investigator of Fairfield—a Dr. Ulric—was about to unwittingly give himself up to the conspirators. Agent Winter successfully intercepted and delivered him to Officer Wilde who is now with him in a secure location. In doing so, she exposed herself to an immediate mammalhunt; and has unintentionally revealed our organized opposition to them. Which of us will be suspected and confronted first I don’t know. However, all of this remains a secondary concern due to your son’s discovery of this early Sunday morning.”

Chief Bogo took the police manual, removed a thin folder from under its cover, and slid it over. Inside were a few poor nighttime photo enlargements, a page of text, and a map.

“This package was paw-delivered to Officer Clawhauser as soon as he came on duty this morning—by a pair of young rabbit bucks. Agent Savage wisely assumed that all my electronic communications are insecure now and recruited those members of officer Hopps’ family as couriers. I am grateful for his and Wilde’s haste and care getting this to me, as it’s the most crucial and horrifying intelligence I have ever received. With this, they have given us a fighting chance to overcome the conspiracy we face.”

Vivian looked at the photos—she didn’t find them either clear or shocking. There appeared to be a large facility under construction that contained many similar warehouse buildings. She started to read the page—and ultimately couldn’t finish Nicholas’ report.

“This isn’t new, they planned this for us all along…I mean us,” she said weakly and patted herself high on her chest. The chief acknowledged the divide she’d alluded to.

“Yes, an enormous prison for predators built in secret by vengeful prey mammals that have carefully seized positions of power,” chief Bogo confirmed. “They will also rely on the passive support of many other citizens that will allow this without protest. This conspiracy grows more involved as we uncover it—there are many questions about logistics, finances, and the depth of government involvement that need to be answered before we can know the full extent of their plans.” Like you, I already fear the worst for most predators, many my own officers, if we can’t stop this.”

Her lunch was now a bilious lump. Would individuals be targeted first, or did they intend to go after whole species—either singly, or in related groups? Based on their own species, prey motivations could be simply to free themselves from ancient fears, contain those they felt were present threats, or be a malignant desire for retribution against all of us. Vivian wondered if the
different species of conspirators ever argued among themselves about which ones of us they wanted removed first.

_They couldn’t possibly confine all of us; we’re a minority within the total population, but still number in the millions across the country. Would that mean they’d…?_

“We no longer have the luxury of time,” Bogo said—and mercifully cut her thought short. “The conspirators are aware of us, but thankfully not about all we know. The ZBI has already substantially reduced my freedom to act through surveillance of and frequent visits to this station and possibly others. Several of my officers have endured reopened investigations and interrogations based on previously resolved citizen complaints. For the benefit of public perception, a few prey officers were included in their sweep as window dressing; they have been cleared. As the largest non-federal law enforcement agency that could oppose them, they have considerable incentive to hobble my ZPD.

“I must maintain my place and visibility here to protect my officers from these accusations and push back where I can, so I will give you several assignments to perform in my stead. Use your own initiative and coordinate with the rest of the team as best you can—we cannot meet here again—deputy officer Wilde.”

Vivian didn’t let Bogo’s serious manner faze her. Something in his voice betrayed a hint of fear over his inability to control events. She’d been told about the chief’s commanding manner and earlier distrust of foxes; and now he had been forced to put his full faith in not only her, but Skye, Nicholas, and even his little co-hustler Finnick. His almost ridiculous attempt to convey the gravity of their situation with that rank he’d laid on her showed the extent of his uncertainty and worries.

“I’ll get it done chief, I already took care of the ZBI hare that was tailing me,” Vivian said evenly to help soothe his anxiety. “What do I need to do for you first?”

“A ZBI agent had you under observation and you took care of him?” Bogo loudly recognized her mistake and shoved a hoof at her. “Tell me exactly what you did!” She shied back and waved her paws at his outburst.

“We didn’t hurt him, we were out in public! He’d lost sight of me earlier and was trying to find me among the spectators at the spring tournament. Tryouts are today and most of the community was there. After I spotted him, several of us went down separately and complained to the staff that he was harassing vixens and taking pictures of them. They forced him to show his ID. Now everybody in my neighborhood will know who he is and what he was doing to me.”

“Just to be clear Mrs. Wilde. You publicly exposed a non-Savage ZBI hare as a sexual deviant with a vixen fetish? A hint of a smile struggled onto the chief’s broad muzzle. “Great Spirit, please let there be some mammal with a video of that!”

“Definitely not Jack Savage—this one’s brown furred.” Did the chief suspect Jack and Skye? “My friend’s daughter has it all on her cellphone! I’m sure she’d be willing to help.”

“Excellent! If we could review that first, then have her release it to the media, perhaps with appropriate statements from her friends; it would fit well with this.” He passed her another paper. “Agent Winter discovered that Ex Mayor Lionheart has also been transferred—perhaps illegally and unknown to the media—into federal custody. Fabienne Growley would be grateful if you were to pass this scoop on to her. Today ideally—we need to buy time, and these events might help to discredit and distract our ZBI conspirators.”
Chief Bogo drew her back to the prison photos. “Our top priority. This evidence isn’t good enough to go public with. We need convincing proof that can’t be explained away as these could be. High quality aerial images would be a good start. Infiltration on the ground would be better, although that may no longer be possible now that they have been alerted—we were fortunate your son got away with what he did.”

“Wouldn’t agent Savage be the best one to contact for this?” Vivian asked, aware she’d be involved regardless.

“Of course, I would expect him to equip and fly on the mission. But it needs to be arranged in advance, which neither he nor I can afford to do. It will be your task to meet with and convince Derreck Growley to not only assist us by providing his aircraft, but to keep this operation and the existence of the prison secret from his nosy mate Fabienne. We cannot succeed Mrs. Wilde, unless we maintain control over the release of our evidence!

“The timing of all this will be critical. All meetings and trips need to be done in secret and kept brief.” Savage must remain visibly engaged with his ZBI cohorts in Bunnyburrow, and you must remain frequently visible within your own community here to avoid suspicion. If you come under surveillance again and need to evade it, make it appear unintentional! Otherwise, pay no further attention to it.” Bogo glanced at the clock behind her, as he’d been doing for the past fifteen minutes.

“It’s almost one and I must appear back on duty. Your performance has likely made the broadcast news by now, which means that I can expect another visit from Chief Tarija. Wait. Someone will escort you out once it is clear.” Chief Bogo hefted his books, put a hoof on the door handle and turned to her.

“One last thing Mrs. Wilde, how many foxes have I found myself relying on lately?”

Vivian let several seconds drag by. She looked up at the chief and couldn’t resist a slow wave of her tail. “I believe eleven so far.” The door clicked shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

We have several websites out there that track aircraft, ship, and train movements worldwide, some in real time. (Along with traffic jamcams) The predominance of rail travel in the world of Zootopia, along with providing several scenes in my story, would likely attract even more hobbyists.

Wolf Honorific, from MinscLovesBoo – Love’s Tales.

The originally planned ending for this chapter has been saved for the opening of Ch. 19.

We journey to Bunnyburrow for our next installment—Chapter Eighteen: Hare Apparent
Hare Apparent

Chapter Summary

Our tale follows Judy Hopps and Jack Savage to rural Bunnyburrow where life should be far less hectic for them. Unless events and family have their say.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! The writing of this chapter flourished in the fertile soil of Bunnyburrow; to over 12K words so far. Therefore I’ve decided to split it, with the second half to hopefully finish and post more rapidly than the first!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

5:25 A.M. Tuesday morning on the road from Bunnyburrow station.

Jack Savage was driving much faster than was prudent. Granted, dawn was advanced enough for decent visibility, but that excuse was rather flimsy. He’d resisted the temptation on the way down earlier—he’d needed to get the Hopps brothers with Wilde’s hardcopied evidence safely onto the early express to Zootopia.

It was dark then too, the road wasn’t lit, and you weren’t alone with your thoughts. In a hurry because you need company? You’re guaranteed to never see her again if you broadside some tractor pulling a disk harrow across the road.

Jack eased up and let the rented four wheel drive Land Commander exchange momentum for self-preservation. These rural types—if they hadn’t already started their workday—would do so soon. He sighed as his head dipped again towards the steering wheel—to catch himself with a jerk and put his eyes back on the road. His paw fumbled for the unfamiliar window switch; a good cold draft should help keep him alert.

You’re a mess Savage. Three days you’ve pushed yourself to organize logistics for the opposition’s arrival and maintain your cover. It also kept you away from the Hopps to hide your misery and duck a lot of social awkwardness—at least so far.

Constant effort and barely ten hours of decent sleep since arrival at the farmstead had drained his adrenaline and willpower. He’d spent most of two nights waiting up for Skye’s check-in texts, then had spent Sunday’s to absorb and work with Nick Wilde’s discovery undisturbed. Then he’d followed up on Ulric and found his innocently stupid email.

He knew he’d stretched the Hopps family’s patience—they needed to sate their curiosity about him soon. At least Judy had used some of her time to help deflect their interest and give him some time to prepare for the onslaught. The whole warren was already highly excited, and his visit had added to it.

Jack slowed and turned onto the road that led east towards the Hopps property. Part of the half-
section spread before theirs had been leased and worked by the Hopps for years and it had all been sold to them recently. From the overlapping narratives he’d received on his tour, the previous long-time owners had been chronically shorthanded and had decided to retire in town. The Hopps residence was close to the far end of their enlarged agricultural empire, so the decision had been made to expand the other home and split the warren. Some forty members of the family were engaged in renovations and preparations to move.

Even though they’d still be less than two miles apart, dividing the warren was apparently a big change to their family dynamic. There was a lot of angst and overwrought emotions on display to his hare’s viewpoint. Which hadn’t helped him deal with his own.

Surrounded by a horde of rabbits out here in Bunnyburrow had just made him suffer Skye’s absence all the more. It was yet another confirmation for him that his vixen was irreplaceable. That was a part of fox culture that he’d wholly embraced—the ‘we mate for life’ reputation. He wondered if Judy Hopps shared that conviction as deeply as her new mate obviously did. Earlier, he’d wanted to gently explore and encourage her feelings on the matter if needed, but due to her family’s interest in them they’d been forced for appearances sake to avoid significant private time together.

Jack didn’t know if that was good or bad. Now they each needed solace only the other could understand or provide—but they might make it worse for themselves if they tried to help each other. Risky, as they weren’t psychologists and had known each other for only a week and a half. Was she trapped by the same helpless fear that had paralyzed him?

As for the rest of the Hopps, they’d already tired of his and Judy’s forced mien of normalcy—she was already under close scrutiny due to the news about Nick. That forced his choice, he felt he needed to inform them of at least the overt part of their mission here and try to prepare them before Tarija’s minions started to nose around. If there was anything further to be discovered or learned here, he had to find it first in order to blunt the impact once the conspiracy did.

Of course, as Judy had repeatedly cautioned on the trip up, any of their evidence or suppositions divulged to even a select few would quickly spread through the family and then to the whole community—their natural gossipy socialization and the boredom relieving novelty of provocative information would guarantee that. It would be considered, she’d said, an abrogation of trust to withhold from family. Yes, she was trapped too.

Jack relaxed his grip on the wheel—again—his frustration wanted to hold it tight, but that merely risked a cramped paw. Days of agonizing still hadn’t provided any hint of a solution to this dilemma. If he forewarned the community here about why ZBI investigators would soon descend upon them, it would just make his and Judy’s opposition to them obvious and expose them to those same conspirators. Failure to act would cede them the initiative.

The small rounded hill with its distinctive tapered tower on top was already visible ahead against a bright horizon glow. That was the main Hopps residence—he’d already passed their new secondary home unaware, mired in his melancholy. As the sun threatened to rise directly in front of him, he sped back up a little to try to beat it to the warren.

It was a tie; he turned away into the property just as its first rays lanced through the clear morning air and made him squint. Jack drove past the various cars parked out front and stopped in back behind the large bus the Hopps used for major family trips. It was curious that no one had questioned why he’d kept the rental vehicle out of sight there.

*Because stress makes you paranoid and indulging that sometimes provides a hint of relief. It might keep them from finding you for another minute or two. But apparently that won’t work this
morning.

The Hopps had accommodated their guest and he was being…retrieved. His escort skipped towards him in a gingham pattern dress in white, honey and light brown that fairly screamed ‘country’. Her fur appeared to match the brown of her dress outside of the same soft white pattern on her front that much of this family had.

Jack didn’t think he’d seen this one before. He carefully stepped out of the utility vehicle as it seemed much higher off the ground now, and tried to remain upright as he turned to face her.

“Breakfast is ready!” she chirped. “Judy asked me to watch for you, I’m her sis Emily.”

She seemed to be Judy’s age and was only slightly shorter—he was certain that her exact relationship would be explained to him—cousin, sister, or littermate—just like the dozens introduced before that had already slipped his memory. Like she’d slipped away. Somehow, she’d stepped through him to close the vehicle door he’d left open. He nodded at his cleverness—he’d made her reveal her power! Jack managed a triumphant smile as he followed her inside.

The corridor that led to the nucleus of the warren seemed uncommonly long today; he’d trudged for some time before he realized the doe had come along both sides to support him. He was seated, and the scent of cinnamon and sugared oatmeal induced him to start mechanically shoveling it in. It went down warm…contentment spread…so goo…

Some time later he felt a moist cloth on his face—it wormed its way around most pleasantly—he was disappointed when it left and arms within his floated him away.

Judy decided to leave Jack sprawled as he was on the bed, but did pull the sheet partially up over him. It had taken both of them to remove the unresponsive hare’s coat—she’d hung it up while Emily had closed the window curtain. Judy left a note that said she’d taken his cellphone, and made sure the door still had directions to the nearest bathroom posted inside before they exited.

“We’re partnered together and he needs his rest more than anything Em, I’ll handle whatever comes up until he’s back on his feet,” she said in response to the look she’d received while rifling through his pockets for it.

“At least you’re not working with that fox anymore! I could barely believe last night’s video. Dad was right. Whatever made you think you could trust him in the first place?”

That slapped her ears down hard. Of course her family was upset about Nick; his renegade status had hit the news three nights ago, and her repeated deflection of questions about it had only stiffened their resolve to pry some answers out of her.

Had they finally released the museum’s security camera recording? Bellwether had been sentenced; the other trials may have ended too. If so, the timing couldn’t have been worse whether it was planned, or just coincidentally exploited by the conspiracy. Regardless, Chief Tarija would have intervened to spin it so Nick would look like a manipulative opportunist that had taken advantage of her, the ZPD, and the void after they’d removed his competition! After all, she’d been the llama’s trial run for that fabrication.

*Unless it was something else—maybe an overblown news analysis or follow up report.*

“What video?” Judy implored—in the forlorn hope they hadn’t yet watched Nick so convincingly
pretend to attack her.

“The one where mayor Bellwhatever shot the fox savage with nighthowlr and he ate you!” Emily said in mockery. She’d stopped in the hallway and turned with paws on her hips as if to add ‘don’t be so dumb!’

It felt like Emily had reached in and seized her heart. No apparent sympathy, she’d lost her own littermate’s support. Months of careful long-distance promotion of her partner to ease family concerns about him—erased by one undoubtedly slanted news broadcast. Or perhaps a cascade of them given that she’d evaded comment ever since the story had broken. That lack of context for them had been a horrible mistake on her part—she’d just been unable to come up with a plausible explanation that wouldn’t reject her family’s values or reveal their resistance efforts. Now, that video had confirmed their innate fears about violent treacherous foxes; so the avalanche of ‘I told you so’s’ and other accusatory recriminations was about to bury her.

When she reentered the main dining room, the inquisitors were already seated at one of the small tables often used to segregate or discipline unruly kits. Mom had chosen to also involve Bernice and Uncle Ellery! This was inescapably bad—mom had not only sought backup from her closest littermate, but this place she’d picked was intended to clearly remind her willful daughter to respect their joint authority.

So it comes to this, after twenty-five years little Miss Perfect is about to be seriously taken to task before the family. There’s a first time for everything and some here had long waited for this moment. You know that Friedkin’s upbraids and Bogo’s reprimands will pale before mom’s. Take it and be strong for them. Give them your betrayal and their petty revenge, they won’t know that you’ll be trying to buy their safety with them.

Judy was grateful that she wasn’t in uniform for this; it would have only accentuated their present divide. Emily didn’t look at her as she sat in the middle of the three empty seats on their side—she hadn’t included herself to offer support. There were still several dozen others elsewhere in the room—none seemed in a hurry to finish their breakfast, and only hushed conversations were audible. They’d all withdrawn from nearby tables to grant them apparent privacy—belied by the fact that she could see the insides of every ear in the room. They’d prepared for this confrontation since only adults were present.

Judy took her place across from mom after a glance upwards revealed several more pairs of ears around the lower balcony. No doubt this would be the major break of family trust she’d feared. Mom wouldn’t give up until she got the answers she wanted—Judy shook her head slightly in frustration at what was to come, which immediately hardened mom’s face.

“I’ve called your father back in. You’ve changed since we last saw you Judy; how you’ve gone out of your way to avoid the whole family is…hard for us to understand.” It was difficult to watch Mom’s face morph from stern to hurt and back again.

“I know mom; what’s happened recently would change anyone—I’m trying to keep it from affecting all of you. This investigation is very…”

“No more of that Judith Laverne!” Mom snapped. “I don’t want to hear again about how you can’t reveal the course of your investigation or talk about the facts of some case. You’re not in Zootopia or a courtroom right now. You’re home with family—who you and agent Savage keep asking for unquestioned assistance! Now we’ve all seen what you’ve kept from us for months, so you’ll need to explain that as well as your recent behavior!”

Yeah, it’s about Nick too. She’s eager to dig out the roots of whatever relationship you may have
had with him. Keep it focused on your work with Jack and force her to ask about Nick—that should help you find out what they saw or heard on that broadcast you missed.

“Mom, enough with the guilt trip! I’ve had good reasons to be like this for…”

“I will have my say,” mom stated to cut her off. Dad walked in to a now silent room, he’d obviously heard and quietly took the last seat as mom paused and waited for him.

“Ever since you left us to go to Zootopia and chase your…idealistic dream, we’ve all feared for your safety and your spirit. But as cautious as we were, as afraid for you, you still had our support. You scared us often enough that we were sometimes afraid to call you—but we always did. But since last month, your own calls back have become few and far between. Now you’ve come home having harvested the troubles we warned you about and yet you still try to ignore or even deny them to us—your own family!”

“Not what we expected from our trier,” dad said softly and earned a look from mom.

“Judy, we’ve seen the news,” Bernice started in after a glance to and nod from mom. “I know that you’re still suffering and trying to accept that you misplaced your trust in your partner and that he so callously used you. You’re still family; we want to help you through this, but it might be better for you to have…professional help if you find it difficult to…trust us. Heather can get you a referral through the clinic.”

“You’ve always been headstrong and resistant to most of our advice—look where that’s left you,” Emily said beside her. “Abandoned by that crooked partner you trusted and you still feel you have to hide away from us and reject our help! You kept talking about him, Aunt Bernie’s right, that fox is the one that’s turned you like this!”

“Enough!” Judy stood with paws braced on the table and glared at Emily; then at the rest around the table, ignoring the broader audience. “Did this mutual connivance make it easier for all of you to have an intervention you felt I needed? You brought up trust, and family, and home over and over like I’m solely responsible for upholding and maintaining those for you and nothing else! I’m an officer, I took an oath to serve and protect beyond just myself, my family, and even our species. The laws that govern my sworn duty restrict the information and operations that I can reveal to civilians!”

“You still need to be more personally open and honest, and tell us what you can say so you don’t promote this kind of mistrust in you!” uncle Ellery said.

“Yet your trust in me evaporated after a news broadcast!” Judy shot back—reinforced by several solid foot thumps.

“That you wouldn’t talk about for days!” said Bernice, voice raised. “What were we supposed to think after that?”

“Mom, tree—just you—I won’t say anything more here. I can’t let this turn to gossip.”

“Judy, we’re your family! You need to tell us these things—don’t you trust us?” Dad swept his open paw around in a wide arc. Bernice scowled at her.

“No,” she said clearly, “not with this, not here; Mom, the tree.” Mom got up with a paw on dad’s shoulder to keep him seated, so Judy turned to Emily before they left. “I trust you can check on Mr. Savage periodically, maybe you can find Heather to help if she’s around, he’s still dangerously exhausted.” She got a somewhat guilty look from her littermate—which eased her earlier
disappointment a bit.

They walked silently outside, past the garden mom preferred for most personal conversations, and out to the hill well in back. Judy surprised her when she circled the old oak on top and carefully scanned their surroundings before she settled herself in a shaded root hollow. It had been contoured and smoothed by generations of the family who had sought a privacy unattainable within the warren. Her own mere pawful of similar visits here just confirmed her proper reputation. Mom chose an adjacent spot and asked with her eyes.

“Yes, it’s that serious, keep watch mom, I still haven’t decided how much to tell you.”

“I need to understand why you’ve become so closed to us Judy. Is this something personal that has affected you…about what happened to your partner? Or did something else happen…on the job,” mom added unconvincingly.

 Yep, I oversold Nick and she’s definitely worried there was or is something going on between us. Family and social affairs have always been her primary concerns; I can’t reveal enough to dissuade her from that. She’s begun a personal campaign for the truth, and has family at her command. If only they knew just how traitorous I’ve been!

“It’s not that kind of personal problem mom, I just know some very bad things, and the simple fact that I know them is why it’s so dangerous to me and those close to me.” Judy waved past mom and down towards the warren to make the point clear. “Only a few others know this as well and some are already in hiding because it’s become known by certain…well…criminal elements that they do know. They would be eliminated to keep those secrets if found! There’s far more going on than what you’ve been told on the news.”

Sorry for the melodrama, mom. We both know gossip is gold in the burrows and I know few could withhold information this lipburning—I can’t trust anyone with this due to the likely consequences, so I can only appeal to your fear for family.

“And how did you come to know such a secret? Honestly Judy, you’ve started to make this sound like a badly written potboiler.” A maternal paw went to her shoulder. “You’re still a rookie patrol officer, why would you be endangered and entrusted with somet…”

“Mom! I’m the rookie officer that took down two crooked mayors last year! Its been noticed by mammals on both sides of the law that I’ve had entirely too much success exposing political corruption!”

“Political corruption,” mom mused. “And Mr. Savage is a Federal agent. Is that why you were assigned to him and why you’ve been so secretive—he told you to be? Who or what is it this time?” she said slowly, as if each word or phrase had to rouse the next. “Please don’t tell me you’re going after a higher officeholder than mayor now.”

“I can’t reveal any of that; it would put several others in danger if even a hint of what we’re uncovering leaks out. Our only advantage is that these conspirators don’t know we’re aware of their activities. It’s too early to expose them, we don’t know how many are actually involved yet—we need time to identify them and find more hard evidence.”

“Do those political…criminal elements have any reason to suspect that you might know anything about their plans?” Thankfully, Mom’s voice finally had a hint of fear in it.

“Only about their basic agenda. Not the really bad part. They still hope to recruit me to their cause because I’m…kinda famous and might provide some legitimacy for them.”
“They’re using Savage to do that! He’s a ZBI double agent!” Mom’s face lit up. “So Honeybun, he had my boys take some of your hard evidence to Zootopia this morning?”

Yes! That’s my avid romance and thriller reader. Dropped some clues to follow and I’m Honeybun again! I hope you can accept being part of a plot just like one of your stories.

“Now that you figured it out, I’ll need your absolute word mom. You’ve always kept our confidence and never forced us to reveal private things about one another, so we trust you like few others in the family. That’s why you’re out here with me. Please, give me your word for our safety that you won’t reveal anything about this conversation to a soul!

“You…have it…Judy.” Mom’s voice and expression both fell, as she had to realize that the role of endangered innocent civilians now included the Hopps clan. “But I think it’s too late, you avoided us for days and let speculation spread! I’ve already heard that you gave your brothers cash for the tickets yesterday…and insisted on paw to paw delivery of your photos. Don’t look surprised, agent Savage was seen buying some paper for them in town. He attracts interest everywhere Judy—there’s even a rumor afoot that he’s also some kind of professional fighter. And this morning Corey complained that things had been erased from both his and our warren’s computer after he’d helped set you up with them.”

What did you expect? Hearsay may not be admissible in court, but it fuels the burrows social network and will tease out your most carefully hidden and hence highly desirable secrets. Why did it all have to happen at once? Good luck stamping out this grease fire.

“That’s what I was afraid of mom. Agent Savage didn’t want to ask for some here and reveal what he was doing—and why I claimed it was just a overdue ZPD case file of mine. About Corey’s computer, yeah, he let us borrow it, but he loaded a keylogger program to record what we did on it! Of course Jack found that and deleted it—that’s routine security for a ZBI agent! We said our work was confidential and Corey shouldn’t have tried to snoop. I’ll bet he’s upset because Jack left him a ‘nice try’ message or something like that!”

“Jack? It seems you’re getting along well with agent Savage.” Mom’s curious tone somehow managed to enhance her already focused concentration.

I’ll never understand how she switches concerns so fast. We don’t need this complication right now. Better drive a stake into it!

“It’s OK mom, sometimes we get tired of saying ‘Agent’ and ‘Officer’ all the time—particularly when you’re working on a tough case together. Anyway, he lives in Concordia and is just on assignment here. I really don’t know anything personal about him.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to be more…amicable Judy. You do have a habit of scaring the bucks off and I worry about your future life since you don’t seem to.” Mom pondered a bit and decided to push. “He’s certainly more in line with your…interests, and I don’t see anything that says he isn’t single.”

“This is the last thing that should be on any of our minds right now! The Burrows are about to be turned upside down and I haven’t figured out how to prepare all of you for that without saying too much and making it worse!” Judy finally took a breath and looked about to see if anyone had crept within earshot. Mom noticed her caution—as she’d hoped.

“Dear, what are you afraid we might do? Interfere with your work? Or do you mean that some of those elements might follow after you two here?” Mom’s worried face returned.
Judy let another breath out, grateful that a couple more whacks on the stake had flipped mom out of matchmaker mode and back to the immediate problem.

“A lot of government people should start showing up within a week or so. They’ll be looking for certain evidence just like Jack and I will.” Judy winced slightly.

Agent Savage, cabbagehead! Don’t revive her hopes.

“It’s old buried evidence mom, mostly historical—we just want everyone to be…cooperatively unhelpful with these new investigators. Some of those agents might be fine—just mammals doing their jobs. Others will certainly be working on the conspirator’s agenda—so we’re not sure which one’s to trust right now. Don’t worry, this isn’t about anything criminal, we just need people to say that they don’t know or haven’t heard of that before when asked. Now what you can do is decide who among us would be…reliable and discreet enough to help get that word out the way we want.” She got up and held a paw out for her mother. “Nothing else—I want to talk to agent Savage after he’s rested up—we need his input and approval before we start to say anything to anyone.”

“Seriously, what do they hope to find out here Honeybun? Nobody’s ever considered the Burrows to be a hotbed of government intrigue!” Mom looked honestly puzzled by that.

“Something awful has been waiting to be discovered for a very long time. Possible evidence that might reveal where it is has been traced to this region. I honestly can’t tell you any more—I don’t want to do that to anyone!”

“So what you and Savage printed up on the computers and sent off this morning with Charlie and Devin had to be something completely different, right?”

“That’s right, it’s evidence related to events from last year.” Mom’s knowing nod told Judy that she might have revealed a bit too much. “I’ll worry until I get a confirmation that it’s been safely delivered. Should be another hour before the train arrives in Zootopia.”

They were almost back to the garden when mom took hold of her paw. They exchanged a couple of reassuring gentle squeezes. Mom always knew exactly what to do—those in the warren would consider this to be as meaningful as any explanation when they walked in.

“I’ll talk to your father first, then you apologize to him and finally sign yourself up for some chores on the list—you’re not a guest here! What do you want me to tell the rest?”

“How about this.” Judy stopped them briefly. “I had to get my case report to court by a filing deadline or they’d have to release a suspect! Say something about charges and mention again that I can’t discuss ongoing legal matters. Just hold them off a little longer.”

“You didn’t tell me anything about what that evidence you sent was Judy, except that it’s different from what you’re looking for here. Is it also that bad?”

“No, much worse. We’ve unearthed a scheme so foul that any word of it would spread like myxomatosis before vaccinations, and might be just as deadly to those exposed.”
the fluffed unconfined state of his fur—and that the rumpled pile on the floor back inside could remedy that.

Pants would do for now. The window said it was night and the overall stillness said it was of the late variety. It was unlikely he’d meet anyone wandering at this hour; but in any case he didn’t want to be caught skyclad, as the back to nature types liked to call…

**Skye! How long has it been since she last reported? Has she done so since!**

Desperate hope immediately blew away all remaining vestiges of his somnolence. Jack stifled a curse as he fumbled and found edges of the bedside table with both knee and wrist. He groped for the lamp—only the dimmer switch prevented him from temporarily dazzling himself. His cellphone sat next to it on top of a note—agonizingly, he had to turn it on and wait for it to initialize.

The note was from Judy; she’d had a long talk with her mother who’d agreed to decide which additional members of the warren they could safely utilize. He was relieved to see her mention of not discussing any of their evidence so far. When his phone finally gave out its default chime, he eagerly opened its text inbox.

There were two—one from Chief Bogo acknowledging receipt of their report on the prison, the other a check-in from Nick Wilde that indicated a forthcoming mail delivery from him and presumably Dr. Ulric. Nothing from or about his missing mate.

Little he could do now, so he’d have to wait until Wilde or Dr. Soren got some leads as to her whereabouts. At least the fox realized its importance to him. He left the cloying cheeriness of the Hopps’s guestroom to walk down a hallway nearly as dark as his thoughts about their likelihood of success; it was only marginally lit by infrequent orange nightlights. The communal bathroom had better, but still subdued illumination—he took advantage of his early morning solitude and the full hot water supply to take a long shower.

Physically refreshed, dried, and now properly and warmly dressed, Jack retraced his way along the hall to the still, dim cavern of the dining area, then down the main corridor to walk out front under the stars.

The summer triangle was high overhead, brilliant Vega right at the zenith, so dawn wasn’t far off. Before he could stop himself, his eyes sought a small inconspicuous constellation about halfway along its eastern side—he’d never seen it better than from here under this dark country sky. Vulpecula the fox—gender unspecified on the starcharts—although he knew there was only one specific vixen—perfect in mind and body—that this celestial affirmation should have been created for. Our fifth date; they’d been side by side on the warm hood of his car, a laser pointer in his paw. He’d saved that particular group of stars for last, her delight that he’d known about them had gifted him a friendly nuzzle—which she’d followed up with an even more unexpected, teasing, repetitive…**nibble**.

It had startled and excited him enough to research that vulpine behavior as soon as he’d returned home—which revealed that their heretofore casual, but clandestine and therefore exotically fun dates had just turned serious. Which to his further surprise, was expected to be solely the vixen’s choice.

*Admit it, you were still unsure after that, apprehensive actually—unaware that the Spirits had decreed that you shall become the luckiest male in all of creation!*  

Those that could bestow such perfect joy couldn’t be cruel enough to snatch it away again so
quickly, since they knew that Skye’s and his vows bound them past this lifetime through their next. It was a lovely, romantic sentiment that they would forever be together. However, there were no guarantees of that in the here and now, so he needed to make sure they reunited as soon as possible in this life.

Jack realized that although rested and ready, he’d have to carefully pace himself from now on to remain effective. He had a last look up at Vulpecula; then back down to the predawn horizon, far beyond which Skye must be, before he turned to go back inside.

*You should teach Judy so she can show those stars to her fox!*

It was a good reminder from his inner self that there were still positives in life and hopefully their futures. There was difficult work ahead—resolve and an optimistic attitude would be valuable allies. For his friends too, he needed to maintain them for their sake.

As soon as Jack reentered the warren, he saw light beyond the far end of the entrance corridor. Once there, he found the dining hall weakly lit from above, while more light came from the kitchen. Its lone occupant sensed his presence and turned in surprise.

“Oh! Morning Mr. Savage, you’re up early. Nothing’s ready yet, I’ve just started warming the ovens.” The doe sounded slightly put out, but it didn’t seem to be directed at him. She appeared to be mostly white furred, except for a distinctive chocolate brown spot centered on her nose and similar ear tips. He didn’t recall her from before either.

“Not here to bother you miss. Actually, I rather slept in yesterday and went for a walk outside.” He noticed that the dining hall felt distinctly cooler than the rest of the warren.

“Wish I could have stayed in this morning, but I put myself on the list for this last week. I’m Mellida, Mr. Savage, Judy’s sister.”

Another one to remember. At least this one was distinctive enough in both name and appearance that he wouldn’t have any problem with that. He’d have to pay more attention to the rest of her family relationships from now on.

*Here’s your chance to be more approachable. You probably won’t have too many one-on-one opportunities like this to see how you stand with her family and fix any problems.*

“Yes, officer Hopps mentioned that you all had expected duties in the warren,” Jack told her. “We didn’t want our own to occupy all of our time here—some unanticipated things cropped up after we arrived and we had no choice but to deal with them. I’m sorry if we both appeared so…serious and devoted to our jobs—we could have used a break from those responsibilities ourselves.” He hoped this friendlier excuse—weak sauce though it was—would spread as easily as the more critical speculations about them had.

“It would help if you called her Judy and used some of our names too—or aren’t you agents supposed to do that?”

“It’s hard to buck our training, Mellida. That aloof Federal formality is ingrained into our government culture,” he said and got a noticeable smile from her. A few quiet seconds passed before the doe rolled a come-on paw at him. “I’m Jack; Jack Savage,” he added.

“That’s better Jack, Jack Savage,” she said as the smile broadened. “There’s something I’ve wondered about recently.” Her smile turned crafty. “You’re a Federal agent; from the Federal district in Concordia. So why does everybody always call it the Zootopia Bureau of Investigation?”
“I’m certain it’s still the FBI on a lot of official documentation, but for years now, everyone’s been expropriating that name to seem as progressive and modern as our shining city in the west. It’s not just our agency that’s done that! Even ZNN identifies that way nationwide. Hard to buck a trend like that. I expect that they’ll probably rename the whole country one of these days. Might be the first referendum that everybody agrees on.”

“You might be right at that,” Mellida said, then pointed him to one of several large refrigerators. “If you could lift out two jugs of batter from there and set them on top of…”

She kept him busy and distracted for almost the next hour—they were joined periodically by several others that immediately set to various tasks—as an obviously well practiced breakfast campaign got underway. They noticed him work, which was good; but watched more closely whenever Mellida provided him direction, which was humbling. He did owe them that. Too bad he hadn’t been able to volunteer first, although Mellida to her credit never brought that up, so the others might assume that he had.

Jack had long since been replaced in the kitchen, and had nearly finished his plate of waffles with blackberries and jam, when Judy walked into the crowded hall. She seemed rather downcast and gave him a subtle stay put gesture, then sat several tables away with her mother and four other older adults.

He waited, checked his phone, and found a new text; two teams were already on their way up from Zootopia. His fellow conspirators had obviously procured suitable off-road vehicles to drive, so his earlier message about their unavailability in Bunnyburrow hadn’t significantly delayed them. Although fairly common among the populace, his had been the last rental of that type to be had, which was another reason to park it out back—he’d let them find out he had it only when necessary.

Jack glanced over at Judy; she was deeply involved in conversation—with her ears and chin all lowered. They had only today to prime the local community to passively frustrate the conspiracy’s inquiries—if that was even feasible. She might have realized that too.

At least geography had cooperated to keep them apart from his corrupted peers; the closest suitable hotel he’d found for them was twelve miles away on the other side of town. He didn’t know what group of mammals would show up, so if they didn’t like those arrangements, they could find something else on their own. That way, they’d be less likely to hang around here and interfere with Tarija’s desired seduction of his supposedly naïve and pliable temporary partner.

Yeah, doomed to failure since you’ll never even try, although given her present attitude, the hottest movie star wouldn’t stand a chance either.

Whoever that celebrity might be didn’t matter, he was the one that needed to find out what was wrong and get her focused back on their immediate task. Jack got up and started to walk over—Judy noticed, hurriedly excused herself, and met him halfway. She motioned them down the corridor and typed out a short message as they walked.

“I’ll send for ‘em when we’re ready,” she said softly and pocketed her phone. “Now take my paw.”

That was unexpected and didn’t seem wise, they were still in view of several of her family members.

“Do it; be casual,” she insisted just as quietly. He did, and wrapped her unresisting paw within his—her ears started to rise in response before she slapped it away in annoyance a couple of seconds later.
Jack waited until they were outside. “Trying to spread rumors that I’m…pursuing my assignment?”
He made air quotes with his fingers to try to lighten her mood. “Or just trying to deflect interest
from what we’re really doing.”

“The latter of course, unless you want me to tell on you to my big sister,” Judy managed a brief
smirk. “My mom’s idea actually, she’ll gently encourage it by telling the more intrusive ones to
leave us alone after its spread for a bit.”

“That might help in the near term,” Jack said, “Let’s hope it doesn’t get awkward later.”

“It shouldn’t; mom’s expert at managing these kinds of things.” Judy led him around the side of
the warren towards a well-tended garden. “That’s why I wanted only a few of them to see us;
they’ll argue among themselves first, and then with the rest about what really happened, or if it’s
only just innuendo. It doesn’t take much around here to keep ‘em going for awhile!”

“I’m more worried about keeping us going,” he told her. “You looked rather beaten down when I
saw you come in earlier. Anything I can help you deal with? Today’s going to be a long one; we’re
about out of time and need to get to it.”

“I’m not sure…it’s something I don’t want my family to know or worry about—I couldn’t tell them
since they’ll either want me to rest up for awhile, or insist that I see the psychologist in town—
they’ve already brought up that idea!” Judy paused and came to an obvious decision. “I had a really
bad nightmare last night…and it wasn’t the first one.”

_Not the time to tell her about your own separation anxiety Savage. She needs a friend._

“With all that’s been going on, there’d be something wrong if we weren’t all having them Judy.
Can you tell me about yours?” Jack tried for the calm demeanor of the one therapist he'd
surreptitiously seen a few years ago.

“It’s the same one over and over. The day Nick and I broke the savage predator case. We’d gotten
a lead and were gathering evidence in Bellwether’s lab—it was inside an abandoned subway
railcar. Do you know what happened in there?” Her voice was strained.

“I’ve read quite a bit about the whole case and what you did,” Jack said carefully. “You were
discovered and fought off two larger conspirators. Then you escaped in the subway car and crashed
it in the station at the end of the line. I saw photos of the damage!” He stayed with a broad
overview to encourage her to provide any details she might want to.

“There was one point where things were happening too fast to really think about—I was just
reacting—got all hyped up! We were in the control cab and fought with a ram that had broken out
the front window and was trying to get inside with us. That’s where…the dreams start.” Judy took
a couple of breaths. “We came out of the tunnel onto an open trackway and see another train
coming the other way but there’s a side track! I tell Nick to speed up to get there first, then go out
the side window and climb up top, I’m able to kick the other ram out of the front and into the
switch for the track. We turn away from the oncoming train, tip and crash! That’s what actually
happened.” Judy paused and visibly steeled herself.

“The nightmares are different. Sometimes I kick out the ram and he misses the switch; or hits it
and nothing happens, other times I can’t dislodge him at all and keep kicking! It ends with a head-
on crash with the other train and I can see the eyes of the driver right before we hit!” She was
breathing very hard. “Sometimes it’s a vague random mammal—or just eyes—last night, it was
Nick in there! I looked right into his eyes as we hit each other and died!” Jack’s arms were around
her and he felt Judy’s chest heave against him.
To be continued! We resume our stay with Judy and Jack at the Hopps warren, as events rapidly converge on the Tri-Burrows area, in—Chapter Nineteen: Bunny Burrowing
Bunny Burrowing

Chapter Summary

We resume our interrupted visit with Judy and Jack at the Hopps family farm. Conversations can not only get emotionally charged, but they can go off in unexpected directions.

Chapter Notes

Several late arriving plot bunnies necessitated some rewriting, but I did manage to shorten your wait for this chapter to half that of my recent updates as I’d hoped.

All Hail the Disney hegemon that demands so much of our attention and free time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack Savage needed the physical contact as much as Judy did—certainly for the same reason, notwithstanding her nightmares. Both their mates were under threat nearly a thousand miles away—beyond help they dare not provide. That would only expose them, and hinder any further efforts against their mostly unknown conspiratorial adversaries.

They stood there outside the Hopps warren for more than a minute, and clung to the only other available that could truly understand. She had her face tipped onto his shoulder while he stared unseeingly past her at the contoured earthy slope with its spaced dormer style windows. Jack finally noticed that one at ground level nearly in front of him framed a small face. Fixated, her front teeth visible, the kit vanished deeper into the room as soon as they made eye contact.

Oh crap. She can’t be more than eight or nine. Word of this cozy little clinch will spread as fast as her bunny feet can carry her.

“We need a coverr story—your pawsy hint just became more overrt,” Jack said in a soft singsong, as he slackened their hug. Judy’s eyes snapped open. “Brown and white with darker ears, about nine with really big eyes in the window behind you.”

Judy broke away with an abrupt about face, but only a slight sway of one window curtain betrayed the prior nosy witness. He watched her head twist to silently count windows.

“That…would be Janelle.” Judy turned back to him. “Not sure what she’ll say, it’s likely her first scandalous scoop! Oh well, let’s just curtail the truth, I was…ah…comforting you because we got a message about one of your long-time colleagues put under indictment.”

Jack nodded in thought. “Since we’ll have to explain, we could mention the other ZPD officers this has happened to, so maybe they won’t focus on you and Nick as much.” She smiled at his idea, then led him to the great millstone set in the ground to serve as a table.

“I had to be rather over the top with my mom to convince her of how serious a threat we’re facing,”
she said to him. “And explain our...my distance from them. They were really upset with me yesterday about that. She now knows that we want to keep some information from certain corrupted ZBI investigators—but I didn’t say what that was.”

“I know, you put that in your note. Our problem is that we don’t have much time before they get here to figure out what, if any, local evidence needs to be kept from them. They’re on the way up and will contact me after they’ve settled in—probably by late this afternoon. Hopefully, I can find something innocuous around here to keep them occupied with for a few days, so we can get over to Deerbrooke first and deal with any residual evidence from that primitive Coypu.”

“I don’t ever remember hearing about real feral animals while growing up,” Judy said. “Just what’s in books and movies. If there’s any local history of that, only a few around here would know of it. We can start by finding out who those might be.” She looked at the morning moisture that adorned the stone table and its slatted wooden seats—too wet to want to sit on. “Are we ready to meet with mom’s...confidants? I’ll tell them to bring towels.”

Jack nodded; she amended, then sent her text. He had to rely on Judy’s judgement here, since he had no experience with Mrs. Hopps discretion, or that of her relatives. He wouldn’t be able to decide what to say to their new allies until he met and evaluated them, so he diverted himself during their wait with a closer look at the massive stone in front of them.

The nearly two-century-old mill wheel was one of the more visible reminders of the episodic history of the Hopps warren. At six feet in diameter and nearly two thick, it was impractically large for a bunny engineered operation—they’d told him that it dated back to when the hollowed hill had served as a bovid granary. Jack noticed faint patterns on its side, and walked around to where the sunlight just grazed the surface. Yeah, thought so. He dropped to a knee and traced one of the worn carvings with a finger.

“Didn’t see these on my tour. Original builders or you guys?”

“Ours, from the first and second generations here, I’m fifth,” Judy said. “Nobody has the patience for it now even though there are still blank spots on the stone. Mostly dates and genealogy, some events—I think that one commemorates a flood.” He looked at the incised horizontal line that seemed to designate a high water mark, then back up at her. She’d stepped closer to the thick disk to point, then reached to give him a polite paw back up.

The squeals started just as they touched and before he could rise.

Their heads swiveled as one to see several younger bunnies in full run towards them from around the side of the warren, with more coming every second, then taller ones in their wake. Several of the windows now had faces in them too.

Jack realized with the speed of a mid-winter glacier that they still held paws, and that he was down on...his...

Judy released him like his arm had turned into a rattlesnake and moaned, “Oh Jack no!” Her eyes went huge as she realized her own compounded mistake—made worse when her paws clapped to her muzzle. He barely had time to lurch up onto his feet before being buffeted by the fluffy avalanche. Judy’s additional desperate “Noooo” sounded far away.

The kerfluffle packed in higher around them as the adults arrived—with embarrassing congratulations for them, and recognition of his unexpected...singular achievement. One of them held a camera aloft and took several candid shots. A brown furred doe in an apron near him scooped two small bunnies out of the crush and excitedly said as they squirmed in her arms,
“Never thought we’d see this! How were you able to convince her?”

“That’s why we didn’t see so much of you around; betcha you was try’n to work up your nerve huh?” came from a buck in denim overalls who put his paw on Jack’s shoulder. “Can’t say I blame you with her!” He grinned and turned his head towards Judy—she immediately exploded.

“It’s not what you think! He didn’t ask! Stop! Just stop already!” She clenched her right paw and drew it back to threaten retaliation for the crass comment—aborted when a doe right beside her intended target grasped and lifted her left one.

“C’mon, lets see it Jude,” said the eager feminine voice.

“Nothing’s happened!” Judy screamed in frustration as she jerked her paw away and waved both arms over her head. “He’s not my boyfriend! I already have one!”

The wave of silence that spread out through the crowd at her revelation was awesome to experience, Jack had to admit. The horrifying realization that he had only seconds to save the day for her wasn’t. The problem was that he didn’t know if he could find what wire to snip, password to type in, or code phrase to speak.

“Who is he then?” came from further out in the crowd. Jack turned and finally spotted Bonnie Hopps standing behind most of the others with an unreadable expression on her face. He couldn’t determine if she had been the one to speak. Judy unfortunately did speak.

“My partner back in Zooto…” her brain throttled the rest given her shocked expression.

“You mean that fox?” said a different, incredulous female voice.

Thank the spirits for their boon; I'm still in their favor. Her family won’t want to…can’t believe that! Just reinforce it for them!

Jack started to laugh, let it get louder—there, that’s enough, don’t go on too long.

“Oh, I wanna be there to see his face when he finds out! I couldn’t possibly imagine anything more embarrassing for a fox, being stalked by a…hungry bunny!” Jack delivered the two lines that would define his brief stage career before this audience with a measure of amusement. He hoped that the familiar to him euphemism for a pred chaser was known in this region. Agonizing moments passed before laughter broke out from several spots in the attentive throng, and he realized he’d pulled off the save.

“You know that fox partner of hers then?” said denim buck.

“Yeah, met him a couple of times before the persecution of pred officers started; he seemed all right,” Jack said to the still mostly silent crowd. He’d take this opportunity to ease as many of their doubts as he could. “They’re falsely accusing high-profile preds in business and government this time, instead of targeting random ones on the street.”

“That’s what they said on the news last night.” The welcome reinforcement came from Bonnie in the back. “All that earlier stuff about those ZPD officers might be wrong then.” She moved through the family—her paws and voice softly urged a few reluctant individuals and small groups back towards the warren. That didn’t stop the rest.

“Well, then who is he?”

“C’mon Jude, tell us. What’s his name? How long have you two had this going on?”
Even those that Bonnie had sent away stopped to listen or turned back as soon as her attention was off them. The situation was still fluid and Judy remained frozen after her earlier gaffe. Jack stepped closer and unobtrusively nudged her with an elbow, mostly shielded from view by the others pressed around them. “Better tell them about your…admirers,” he advised, and hoped she wouldn’t need a more overt hint.

Suddenly animated, Judy jumped up on the stone to point at him and declare, “Agent Savage really isn’t my boyfriend or anything like that, he’s a professional—I’m one—so your assumptions just questioned our integrity. Whoever saw us earlier was mistaken—we’d gotten a notification that another…colleague disappeared after a false accusation—just like my ex partner!” She waved her cellphone. “We were…commiserating with each other!”

“So if he isn’t, then who is your boyfriend?” was the first of several similar statements as the crowd briefly livened again.

“I don’t have a real boyfriend. He’s a virtual one beca…” Judy stopped abruptly—her nose twitched, and the realization spread on her face that she’d somehow misspoken again.

A small high voice was clearly audible over the low murmurs of the family around them. “That means he hasn’t done it?”

“With Jude the prude?” scoffed a lanky buck holding a gnaw stick, followed up by a solid slap and angry, “Harlow!” from the checker dressed doe next to him.

Jack managed to stifle his laughter; several others tried and failed. Judy looked totally mortified by their reactions, and her mother swiftly joined her on top of the millstone to attract the family’s attention to herself and restrain them somewhat. Bonnie’s paw comforted, then finally prodded her embarrassed daughter into clarifying.

“Virtual means pretend, not real,” Judy said carefully for the benefit of the misinformed kit. “A lot of mammals in Zootopia know about me because of the savage predator case last year. Since I’m …rather famous, if I didn’t say that I already had a boyfriend, which I really don’t, half the bucks in the city would be trying to get in…uh…get me out on a date!”

“Why’s that a problem? Doesn’t sound so bad to me!” said a doe that was nearly a clone of Judy. There was another smattering of laughter.

“That’s enough!” shouted Bonnie, “Becca, you’re one word away from volunteering for kitchen cleaning with Harlow.” She pointed out the unfortunate young buck. “Now the rest of you get back to your own business, we need to have a discussion in private with agent Savage before he and Judy can get to work! Day’s a wasting, there’ll be family meetings about this down the lines later.”

So the communal warren does have a distinct hierarchy thought Jack, as Bonnie and several other adults near her age herded the rest away. Judy rejoined him to take advantage of their brief respite.

“I can’t believe I did this all over again,” she said in a resigned voice. “I flashed back to that press conference again right in front of my family!”

“It’s all right Judy,” Jack said deliberately, “Not your fault! It was just too much too fast dumped on you right now. From what I heard though, it’ll work out just fine.” He briefly held her arms and gave them a slight squeeze. She lifted her eyes and refocused on him.

“That first time at the precinct, I was so nervous that I didn’t know how badly I’d screwed up until
after it was over! Here, even though I’d thought about what to say, I lost my temper as soon as we were ambushed. They set me off and I just messed up again!”

“Well, it did become a bit more salacious when you dropped the hints about your foxy. By the way, you’re welcome for my temporarily preserving your reputation.” Jack thought better of giving her a chivalrous bow—her wry expression showed she’d heard him. “Now, about the news last night? Your mom seemed to be confirming something good.”

“I think Chief Bogo felt a need to push back,” Judy said more purposefully. “There was a story on ZNN about potential judicial malfeasance associated with the reopened investigations into his officers. They mentioned the Department of Justice directive, and that it seemed to target predators since the rest were cleared so quickly. They even briefly mentioned the nighthowler plot last year, but didn’t say anything about Nick.”

“He had to be feeling a lot of heat to drop that letter right now.” Maybe her chief had the right idea; they needed to fight back with what they had rather than wait while the conspiracy kept feeding the public their propaganda unopposed. Unless it was the inevitable result of Skye’s exposure as a rogue agent, and had become a case of ‘use it or lose it’. Either way Bogo had just jeopardized their strategy of waiting for the right time to disclose their so far limited evidence. Now two of their small number had revealed their resistance.

“We’ve just lost the luxury of time,” Jack said loudly enough to be heard by the returning members of Judy’s family. They gave him curious looks, but remained silent as they all sat around the stone. Judy started with needed introductions; besides her mother, there were uncles Ellery, Galen, and Sid, along with an Aunt Tyne. A pair of cousins, Jackie and Jeremy bolstered her generation. Bonnie gave her daughter a sober nod to continue, with the reasonable assumption that he wasn’t up to speed after his extended nap.

“Agent Savage and I are here because recent events have revealed significant corruption within some of our government’s departments. That corruption has been linked to the instigation of last year’s savage predator crisis down in Zootopia. What I helped stop then was only part of a larger and still active effort to divide us along species lines.”

“That larger effort to marginalize predators has continued more cautiously since Bellwether’s part of their plot was exposed,” Jack added, relieved that Judy had recovered her equanimity. “Individuals from several species have been and are being forced from their jobs under suspicious circumstances. Their rights to privacy and due process continue to be eroded, since long established laws are being quietly rewritten to restrict their…”

“Long overdue if you ask me!” Uncle Sid interrupted. “Too many of ‘em allowed to be places where they can scare people try’n to go about their business. Then we have idealists try’n ta force it in our heads that everyone’s the same. We aren’t and nothin’s going to change that!” He glared at Judy. Aunt Tyne and one of Judy’s cousins wore shocked faces.

“Of course we’re not all the same!” Judy tipped her seat back as she leapt up energized. “But if we don’t treat everyone fairly and equally, society comes apart! We built a civilization and enjoy what we have because we learned to cooperate! If we start to separate or marginalize any species because of old fears or ignorance, where will it stop?”

“When we’re safe!” Sid shouted back at her. “We can’t live in fear not knowing when one of em’s gonna snap again!”

Bonnie gently closed her eyes, likely in embarrassment at including him, while Jack shared a look with Judy. She turned back to her uncle with her mouth compressed to a line.
“Why do you think that! They’ve already found a cure for the toxin; it wasn’t their fault, they were deliberately poisoned by Bellwether!”

“Don’t matter, preds ‘re goin’ savage again and it’s spreading! Been in the paper n on the radio. You government types been hide’n the truth again.” Sid rudely pointed to Judy as well as him. “Dillon’s got thousands of his Disciples digging out the truth you won’t face cause them reformists brainwashed you so bad you was willin’ ta work with a fox! Least we’ve got some ideas bout how to deal with these lurkin’ menaces down at the lodge.”

Oh shit! Blindsided by the obvious, agent idiot! You all saw stories in the papers and on ZNN, why didn’t any of you think to turn on the radio! Dillon’s Dispatches—how long had the conspirators co-opted media’s embarrassing rural relative to spread their propaganda?

“Uncle Sid! That fraud’s just out to make money off of conspiracy theories.” Jackie jumped into the argument. “And your buddies at the Fieldmaster’s lodg…”

“We’re not the Fieldmaster’s!” Sid almost screamed. “That’s them bovid’s over in the Central Valley! They haven’t had their lodge here for a hundred years.”

“Sorry uncle, you’re in the Tillers, right?” Jackie had a devious smirk.

“You generation has no respect! You know I’m FOG; lodge number sixty-five. Those tiller cultists and their stupid soil rituals had to build their…damn Hogan right next to our block in town! We’ve been here longer, and elect four times the membership.

“Fraternal Order of Growers,” Judy leaned and whispered in his ear. At least he now knew why she’d been less than thrilled at his choice of phone alias for her. Jack decided not to inflame things further by pointing out to Sid that the Hopps warren was—size notwithstanding—technically also a Hogan.

“Told me thirty-four years to ascend to Elect Circle Elder; that’s just one step below Exalted if you cared enough to notice!” Sid was on a roll. “By our oaths, we’re responsible for the welfare of this community even if most these days fail to appreciate it!”

Another misinformed self-important busybody. Jack was ready to remind him that Judy’s and his responsibilities were significantly broader when she slowly shifted an arm towards him and lifted her paw in restraint. “You said you’ve come up with ways to better protect us?” she said to Sid in what he assumed was an artificially curious tone.

“We gave it a lot of thought. Several of us felt declawing and defanging was still justified if preds insisted on living in our community. Some didn’t even want to require muzzles, it was too…provocative they said, given those outside courts and their populist laws.”

Okay, he’s as speciest as they come, and the rest of the group is quietly letting Judy and her cousin spin him up. Let’s see where this goes.

“If they’re known…like have a job or some business here so they’re like on an approved list; they just call ahead so we know to expect ’em. We’re try’n to be fair. Otherwise, they’re met by an escort so they don’t surprise people or go where they shouldn’t.” Uncle Sid’s voice was one of explaining obvious practicality. “So preds with a need to visit pay a fee for their escorts—helps take care of our unemployed—and helps weed out the ones that got no reason to be here!” He looked pleased by the unassailable logic of his argument.

“That’ll promote tourism,” Jack deadpanned.
“We don’t get enough of them to make a…”

“We do for Carrot Days and the Berry Festival!” Judy cut Sid off and developed a distinctly predatory look for a rabbit. “Folks come from all around and quite a few are omnivores, so we sell a lot of produce to them. Nobody seems to mind that! Now, I assume your reasonable restrictions would apply to all dangerous mammals?”

“Just those what are…equipped and predisposed to threaten those that can’t defend themselves,” Sid recited what sounded like his lodge’s attempt at a policy statement.

“So you’d include physically dangerous prey mammals like…pronghorns, goats, or deer? Better dehorn and deantler them to be safe before they get upset and stick somebody!” Judy talked right over Uncle Sid’s attempts to object. “What about larger ones like horses or buffalo that could…I don’t know…maybe kick or step on someone? Better hobble them to prevent that. Maybe require escorts for those that have weaker eyesight to prevent accidents. Are you going to have allowable strength limits? What about unruly kits? Have you decided which ones will require leashes or…maybe muzzles in public?”

“No reason to restrict decent civilized mammals Judy! They aren’t the problem n you know it. Just those…disposed to a violent nature by bein’ preds! We seen for ourselves what happened in the city, and we got a right to take reasonable measures to protect ourselves,” Sid said with an initial note of uncertainty that he overcame towards the end.

“Maybe while you’re at it, you should force us bunnies to file our teeth down to some permissible limit; after all, it’s entirely possible we could lose our temper and give someone a nasty bite of our own.”

“Don’t keep bein’ foolish about this, Judy! We’re seriously try’n to prevent a tragedy caused by some vicious pred revertin’! Nobody gonna get bit by a bunny!”

“Years ago,” Judy spoke clearly and sweetly. “Uncle Terry ate a Midnicampum Holicithias flower, lost control and viciously bit mom. Remember?” Bonnie lifted her arm.

There were several metaphors that could apply to what he’d just seen; Jack chose the one where Judy had stalked, then pounced on and efficiently dispatched her prey—the look on Uncle Sid’s face acknowledged her triumph. He marched away with splayed ears after Uncle Galen told him he was quite done here.

“Over half the residents of Bunnyburrow would certainly agree with him Agent Savage,” Bonnie said quietly after he was gone. “Be assured, we here don’t share those views. I’m sorry about the…hasty and judgmental conduct of some of us this morning, but I wanted you to be aware of the kind of resistance your equal treatment arguments might meet here.”

“Along with their uncritical acceptance of our opponents comforting propaganda,” Jack noted. “Several agents of that opposition are arriving this afternoon and will fan out through the area in coming days seeking certain information—that we’d rather not have them find assuming it even exists.

“So we need to find out if there’s something here that could be used to falsely accuse and discredit predators everywhere.” He looked around at Judy’s relatives. “Are you, or is any one else you know, aware of any local evidence, or stories, about primitive, unintelligent, feral mammals that may have lived in this region? That’s what we need to keep hidden.”

They all glanced at each other and remained silent, although Uncle Ellery momentarily looked like
“There are a few stories that get passed along, but they’re very old, and may just be native species legends. Old Nara Hopps at the Bunnyburrow Historical Museum in town might know more about them. There’s a more…credible one about that memorial field east of the Yardley warren’s property.”

“Oh yeah!” Judy perked up and looked at him. “The spookiest spot in Bunnyburrow—it’s a few miles north of here. Rumor is that it’s an old cemetery, although there’s no markers or anything else—just the grove.” She didn’t notice her mother’s annoyance.

“It’s a shameful thing and it’s time you know the whole story since you keep on about adult responsibility,” Bonnie stated firmly to her daughter. “The rest of you should hear this too since these two think it’s going to become a problem for all of us.

“There’s a good sized field there that hasn’t been cleared or planted since before we settled here. It’s just left alone by common consent, although most now don’t know why. They might think it’s a preserve for native plants and trees—it’s certainly the largest natural spot left down in this valley. Part of it is the grove of trees that attracts the morbidly curious, maybe twenty or thirty acres as I remember, with a clearing inside that’s sunken a bit.”

Jack wanted to grind his teeth, but refrained. Bonnie Hopps seemed to be emulating Dr. Soren in not getting to the point.

“This valley was first extensively worked by larger native mammals like bison, elk, and possibly bighorn sheep or deer. When they became productive enough to need to store, and learned the benefit of milling their…” Bonnie paused and returned the annoyance that must have crept onto his face. “You were told the what of this place when you were first shown around, right? Now you will learn the why.”

Time was short and what he wanted to say wouldn’t help, and since she hadn’t been along for his tour of the warren, he just gave her a nod.

“This place was not only a mill to process their bounty, but it was a safe place to store it. Back then, as it gets related, there were large numbers of…smaller mammal inhabitants that competed for the grain they grew that supposedly could not be accommodated or bargained with. We rabbits first came into this area after the agreements that exchanged many of the smaller mammal holdings in the Central Valley for theirs here; so only those accounts were left for us by those original natives.”

So her point’s at the end of a spear and I definitely got it; Judy got skewered too, she looks a bit ill.

“What we call the memorial field was called the field of retribution by our native bovid predecessors,” Bonnie said very carefully. “I have never heard of anything more about who or what might have suffered it, but we must assume that any evidence of your feral mammals—certainly rodents—would be found there.”

“Mrs. Hopps, what do you know about the history of modern rodents in your valley?” Jack didn’t want to make any assumptions about the implications of her statement without some more information—they needed to be sure of this.

Judy’s brown-furred cousin Jeremy answered him instead after a glance at Bonnie. “Mr. Savage; I help keep track of family genealogy, and have studied local and national history—I majored in that
subject which means I still work around the farm.” He shrugged. “There really aren’t small rodents in Bunnyburrow—some squirrels are about it—most of the rest tend to live further south closer to Middleburrow. Like us, those species are eastern or old-world immigrants that started to arrive out west almost two centuries ago. This area was pretty virgin territory for them—almost no similar native species and only small, often tribal populations of the larger mammals.”

That’s what we learn in school; the numbers of mammal species originally living in Laurentia decreases significantly as you go from east to west. We immigrants brought our new, inclusive society to those eastern shores, showed the natives the benefits of our alliances; then expanded westwards into rich new lands. Dr. Soren’s boss, Dr. Alder did tell us that our familiar history had been ’somewhat—sanitized’.

“These valleys of yours are comfortable and productive lands; good places for mammals to live, right?” Jack received a few nods. “So why were they mostly empty of advanced species when you first arrived?”

“Because there were more primitive species already living…here,” Judy said wonderingly. She slowly looked around in realization that her childhood home might be quite relevant to their present interspecies crisis.

“And some of the few modern natives we met here—at least the small ones—may not have been here that long either,” added Jeremy as he rubbed the darker brown patch around his muzzle pensively. “They must have still been arriving and displacing the ferals.

“I’d use a stronger word than ’displaced’ Jeremy!” Uncle Ellery finally joined the conversation. “There’s no sign of them now, so they must have completely died out—or been exterminated!”

“Assuming they ever existed,” Jack said, waving his paws to take charge. “We have two choices: one, it’s a story with no basis in fact and the issue goes away; or two, species that existed until very recently here have left no evidence of that at all. I’m having a rather difficult time accepting that.” Unfortunately, their actual evidence for recent feral mammals was not only scanty, but was for two larger species not indigenous to this area, both being originally Amazonian.

“We have to believe it agent Savage,” Bonnie said firmly. “The original storehouse dug into this hill was carefully sealed against intrusion by even the smallest mammals. We have early family accounts from when it was remade for our own needs.

“Don’t forget the snakes Bonnie!” Ellery said. “Some of ‘em were still seen in the valley by our first pioneers, but none ever since.”

“Not really uncle; there’s still rare sightings of them way out in the hills even today; so there’s likely a remnant population of feral rodents for them to…live on,” Jeremy noted. “Some of the reported snakes were big enough they couldn’t be…eating just insects.”

“So if we accept that feral rodents recently lived in the valley, at least in historical terms, and likely still do in the wilderness based on our circumstantial evidence,” Jack said thoughtfully, “what real evidence might they have left behind here?” No one spoke up right away, so he answered himself. “They seem to have been actively removed…if it was by predators…like bobcats, foxes, weasels and so on…they’d have been consumed, that would of course leave no intact evidence.”

A couple of the Hopps looked uncomfortable—Aunt Tyne had visibly twitched when he mentioned bobcats, and now abruptly stood, her paws clutching her peach and light brown lined dress. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this! I think I’m…going to make sure nobody is listening to us,” she said tremulously as she backed away.
“Or, if essentially a whole population was...exterminated by disease or by those prey mammals protecting their food stock,” Jack continued, “how were they...all disposed of?”

“Bury ‘em, burn ‘em, or leave ‘em to scavengers,” Jeremy said, ticking off the choices on his fingers. Bonnie and Judy’s faces disapproved of his flippancy, while aunt Tyne increased her distance as she watchfully paced around them.

“I don’t see how large prey mammals could have...succeeded so thoroughly,” Judy put forth. “Maybe they did hire predators to help. Were enough of them available back then?”

Jack wondered about the stunned look from Jeremy for several seconds before what was certainly the same thought struck him too.

The abrupt pulse of immigration and rapid expansion of western settlements caused by the discovery of gold! A significant number were preds, particularly the railroad workers. In addition to their on-site labor well inland, they had to transport most of their food from the seaports, since many other species wouldn’t do it for them, according to the popular history that remained—after the rest had been ‘covered up to hold together the present’.

“No refrigerators, and where would they get ice in the summer?” Jack said to puzzled looks from all but Jeremy, who voiced the problem.

“Most modern fully predatory species first immigrated by ship once the goldfields were found, since they had no reliable food supply for a long overland trip—even if partly by rail. They always had to live near a seacoast or large rivers to fish in, since they couldn’t preserve most of what food they had available in those days.

“There wasn’t a transcontinental railroad then, so until locomotives were eventually shipped in and enough track laid, loads would have taken several days, not hours, to get from Pacifica to the sites scattered throughout the Mammoth foothills.”

“And fish rot,” Jack finished for Judy’s cousin.

“What about dried insects?” Judy said. “That seems like it would’ve solved their problem.”

“As yummy as a box of crunchy bugs sounds,” Jeremy answered, “It wasn’t a developed industry back then and wouldn’t have met demand. Neither would the local rivers; they would have been fished out pretty fast.”

“It also wouldn’t exactly be popular with their agricultural neighbors,” said Uncle Ellery. “Meal bugs are pretty much the same ones that could strip our fields bare if they got loose.”

A sudden and significant number of obligate predators working in the mines and on the rails with no logical way to feed...and a missing population of...Oh Spirit of all Life!

Jack slowly looked at the Hopps family members seated around the great stone. Only Judy’s expression mirrored his thoughts. Her eyes begged him to let her remain silent.

“Live food doesn’t spoil,” Jack said softly into the silence of perdition.
Since our split-chapter visit with the Hopps warren was unexpectedly just savaged by the plot bunny of Caerbannog, you will have to wait and see how all of the scattered threads of this tale fall back together, starting in—Chapter Twenty: Inside Out
Inside Out

Chapter Summary

We catch up with several of our dispersed resistance characters, a couple of them join forces, and others meet a new one. Bunnyburrow still has some emotional moments and in distant Concordia, the hunt is on.

Chapter Notes

I know, another interminable wait for this chapter, but in compensation, you get my longest so far! It's broken up into convenient segments as we catch up with several of our dispersed heroes. (Skye, Judy & Jack, Nick & Kristen) Some minor issues like the planet screeching to a halt, cancellations of my other activities, a recalcitrant relative who wouldn’t take things seriously, (They do now) and general existential dread stalled my output until late March. However the Hopps Warren is full of plot bunnies and they kerfluffled me into finishing this installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9:23 A.M. Wednesday April 26th, near the Hampden Township main square.

Skye started to worry that she’d missed the old Carrel Foundation library, when she finally spotted it through the trees two blocks down to her left. She had given Concordia’s outlying suburb’s modest civic center a wide berth on the way there to avoid as much public exposure as possible. It had been a long retrospective passage back to a deeply buried fear.

Two nights ago, after Professor Ulric had departed, she’d ridden the bus around its route for hours; numbed by fatalism. At least she’d had mobile shelter on a night grown chill, and might remain free for awhile if her hunters assumed their quarry had gone to ground. Her fellow riders had dwindled in number until she remained alone past several stops at a time. Once the bus’s run had ended for the night at its main station, she’d decided to remain there. Sometime pre-dawn, she’d been nudged awake and subjected to a crude pick-up attempt by a rather pungent and seedy aardwolf—which let her utilize the pawhold Jack had taught her.

That incident prompted her to find a place less exposed and reawoke the motivation to remain free and useful for as long as possible. An early bus got her to the stop closest to the post office where she and Jack kept an anonymous mailbox. Roughly between their homes, it had spare keys, ID’s, a transit pass, and some emergency cash in generic sealed envelopes. It could also serve as a drop box, although she hadn't had anything to leave for Jack other than her continued appreciation for the precautions he taken to protect their relationship.

The printed papers taped above and below on the inside of the twenty-four hour box lobby said that it would now open at nine in the morning—probably to encourage homeless mammals to seek an overnight city shelter instead. That change prompted her cursory look around the dimly lit outer lobby for new security cameras, as they were generally made obvious in public buildings for
The delay had given her time to find a modest diner and enjoy a rich breakfast—and to brood over her immediate future. Once back at the post office, she’d joined the group that formed outside and politely let the rest go in first to occupy the staff while she went to find her box. She’d taken some of the cash and left her ZBI ident and driver’s license behind—no need to make it easier for other law enforcement to ID her. Her trusty student card would serve for now, and she could go back later if needed—or able to.

Or maybe not. She’d turned to find that a bushbuck in a mail service uniform had just mounted a poster into an open bulletin board case. Skye recognized her official agency photo from across the room alongside another image likely from her advertising days. She’d damped her momentary panic since no one had looked at her and both photos had shown her well-groomed in winter coat. Her night of fitful sleep at the bus station seemed to have provided sufficient camouflage, so she’d slumped her posture to reinforce that. A little refuge in audacity had then walked her over to gaze at her wanted poster.

_Wanted for sedition, bribery, and incitement; also aiding and abetting a known fugitive, she’d read. Do not approach! Arctic vixen suspect trained in paw to paw defensive techniques and may be armed. $10,000 reward for information leading to her live capture._

She must have really put some fear of exposure into the conspirators, given how this exaggerated portrayal of her evil had been printed up and distributed overnight. It was to be expected since she’d just done that to herself. It had bolstered her decision to avoid further risk to Jack and Nick by not hiding out, even temporarily, at their places. The rather paltry reward posted for her—annoyingly less than half of that offered for Nick—also suggested they still needed to keep their finances under control. Her government employment also hadn’t been mentioned, as that might shine some light too close to them.

Those thoughts had given her something to focus her efforts on. A cautious search for a thrift store in a less upscale part of the city had dressed her down to public scorn rather than approval. An old coat found there had doubled as a groundcloth in an overgrown corner of Greater Englewood Park, where she’d slept rough for the rest of that day—as Nick’s term for it proved accurate. Once night had fallen, and shortly after the start of her wary fifteen-mile trek here, she’d been chased out of another actual street vixen’s presumed ‘territory’.

As desired, she’d at least looked the part Skye thought, thankful she’d avoided any propositions during her furtive journey. Now it was time to move back up the social ladder and get to work. She walked to the shaded side of the familiar neoclassical building common to so many communities, and found a darkened ground level window partially shielded by a bush. It would serve as a mirror—both for herself and to keep an eye out for any curious mammals behind her. No one was visible inside or out, so she shucked off her backpack, partially stripped, hurriedly groomed herself, and changed into her better clothes.

At the top of the wide steps with their heavy curved banisters, a neatly printed sign greeted her—New library hours: eleven to five—so there was still over an hour to kill. She scowled and sat off to the side mostly out of sight from the street, and considered that this intolerant and possibly irredeemable society—just might deserve its pending fate.

All right Skye; so you don’t like your sudden fall back into that fearfully uncertain life that you thought was safely ensconced in your past. Got complacent, did we? Yes, we. It was a game for us, or just our place to keep others safe in their perceptions of reality. But although life remains fragile and fate capricious, you’ll still try to improve society, knowing that change is everyone’s
greatest fear and they will resist it any way they can.

“You look lost in your thoughts, would you like to bring them inside?” said a somewhat raspy female voice from high above. “It seems neither one of us is used to the new hours…although I don’t recall you from before miss…”

Skye looked up—well up—along tall narrow legs that sported knee braces, past a foreshortened skirt and conservatively clad body, to where the elderly giraffe’s head looked down at her from an inclined, reticulated neck.

A flash of her student card and complaint about the college’s full study hall covered her being an unfamiliar patron. After some sympathy over the poor fox’s lack of even a smartphone, Skye was escorted to a pair of somewhat larger and fairly old computers on a broad high table. The librarian encouraged her to ask for help if needed, then went and carefully sat behind her desk with the aid of a sturdy pole next to her seat.

The library’s high ceilings, and the giraffe’s central location and lofty viewpoint allowed her to monitor nearly the whole first floor and some of the second through the open atrium. She seemed an ideal mammal for the job. Her curious nature was a concern, but fortunately the computer’s monitor was angled enough to keep any work private without it having to be obviously turned away. Skye raised the oversize seat all the way and jumped into it.

First the morning news, she found a follow-up to the initial story about Bellwether’s transfer to the Federal District, so either ZNN or the Growley’s had continued to do their part. Most interestingly, the article noted that the Prairie River Prison’s staff seemed surprised about their notorious new inmate, and it also included a distant telephoto shot of their own arrival at the airport. Skye was in it, partially obscured by another agent as they walked ahead of the convicted ex-mayor in orange.

That suggested Lionheart wasn’t with his successor at the newer prison, since they were both involved with the savage predator crisis, and joint incarceration there shouldn’t be unexpected. Her earlier search from the ZPD network hadn’t found any records of his whereabouts, or that of the chemist who’d refined the serum, so determining those would be a good way to resume her resistance.

To start with, the Meadowlands prison near Zootopia where Bellwether had been incarcerated was close to the regional Federal facility—yet they’d flown her back to Concordia instead of doing a simple local transfer. Since the conspiracy wished to remain hidden and had their own problems with resources and trusted personnel, they seemed to want to keep important…assets closer to their center of power.

*Our public exposure of Bellwether’s move forced them to take her to PRP. Otherwise she would certainly now be sequestered with the other principals of the nighthowler plot for an as yet unknown reason. As to where…*

Skye hesitated and decided to first open the word processor and type out a letter detailing her various suppositions. It could be amended and finished later and might save a few minutes, since she was about to expose herself again. It was still a bit before eleven, so unless someone had changed the interval or decided to make an immediate system request, her ZBI program had another hour before its next correlation summary would drop.

She typed the address for the Terra mapping website into the browser from memory—her tail thrashed in irritation as the earlier generation machine leisurely loaded it. The index map of Laurentia finally displayed with its heavily pixilated coverage of areas around major cities, rivers, and seacoasts. Vast swaths of the interior still remained blank.
Well, let’s see if that’s improved recently. In went her memory stick with its ZBI access code for the restricted part of the site. She didn’t bother with the basic anonymizer also available on it; that freeware wouldn’t throw her program off the scent. It was a race now.

The refreshed index showed little change, so enhanced coverage seemed a low priority. There was supposed to be an earth-observing satellite in the works to address that, but Jack wasn’t available to ask if it had been launched yet. Skye initially spent a minute trying to find Junction City—without success—that part of the interior still didn’t seem to rate.

Or it had been obscured. Nick Wilde had obviously discovered something involving freight shipments out there. She was about to access a list of additions and updates to the photographic database to see if there was evidence of any deletions, when a sudden realization froze her paw. \textit{If I can’t perfectly cover my tracks, it might tip them off that we suspect something going on out there—and Nick and Jack didn’t want me to know about it!}

Frustration at being kept uninformed was compounded by the certainty that it involved crucial evidence—that she couldn’t be entrusted with due to her vulnerability. Skye stilled her tail again with a clenched jaw effort, as the librarian had begun to notice it flick about.

\textit{Ok, let’s go thirty miles east from Concordia—the old prison should be out near Deer Trail south of the transcontinental highway. There’s the town…further south. There we go!} Skye knew that scrolling around the Terra index was innocuous—but zooming in on specific images might not be given her restricted and certainly logged access. She clicked and dove earthwards with lowered ears.

For a site abandoned forty-five years ago, it looked as she expected it to; sagebrush encroaching in the perimeter clearing near the fence, roads spotted and streaked with dirt and…faint tire tracks along that one! She followed them from the main access road—to a building with two partially shadowed vehicles parked alongside amid marks left by others.

This image was from almost three months ago, the low sun angle and small patches of snow in shaded areas confirmed that. There were two earlier ones in the archive—from two and four years ago—neither showed the more recent disturbances to the site.

Lionheart and some of the rest just had to be there. She’d likely involuntarily join them at some point. It was isolated without being too remote, and there would be no reason for anyone other than her to suspect nefarious goings on there. Various…deliveries would of course be nocturnal. That might be why they hadn’t covered their tracks—literally—on the Terra site. Skye downloaded a few versions of the serendipitous image, zoomed from wide context down to the building within the prison, then finished her speculative letter.

“I’m sorry miss, we don’t have the budget to provide a public printer or stationary,” answered the kindly giraffe, “isn’t there that Office Outlet closer to the college?”

\textit{Can’t email from here or make hardcopies. Need to leave now—it’s almost noon.}

Skye removed what evidence of her activities as she could—the old machine struggled with her sweeper software and even hung up at one point. She was partially at fault; their development team had assumed this version of the operating system had already gone extinct. Once finished, she hastily left the nearly century old book palace behind.

The office store presented an unacceptable risk since the librarian knew of her and had recommended it—they might also keep a record of what she printed. Her nocturnal backstreet sojourn into this mostly unfamiliar area meant that she had no idea of what local businesses were
where, and her phone remained with Ulric. So she was incommunicado with information possibly crucial to her own survival. Her tail started to twitch in frustration again—she glanced back at her agitated flowing pride.

*I could send semaphore with it if anyone still understood that. Or just give up and scream—I wonder which would have greater range?*

There was no choice but to head back down Hampden’s main avenue towards Concordia and hope that something useful would turn up—before some of her corrupted co-workers did. She needed to distance herself not only from the library—chosen because it was likely beyond any initial search for her—but from this community as well, since she obviously didn’t belong here.

Skye hadn’t considered it last night, but this township on the edge of the metroplex was mostly home for larger cervid and bovid species—she’d seen no small mammals and only a few predators; and they’d been in cars. She paced off another three miles before the welcome sanctuary of an Omnivorium Buffet appeared. They served a diverse clientele and someone there might provide information to a now rather hungry fox—as she’d neglected breakfast earlier this morning.

A better mood hurried her toward the promised shopping center a block ahead—her full belly, inappropriate clothes and backpack restrained her from actually breaking into a jog over there. The helpful ringtail possum cashier had seemed—taken with her—with a friendly smile that had grown to reveal far more teeth than she possessed. Another species of male that she could add to her list of admirers.

Skye put that diversion out of her mind once she found the package service store. She bought two small bubblepack mailers and took them to the DashBok’s Coffee a few storefronts away, ordered something she really didn’t need, and sat inside to write. She smiled at herself and the impression Jack’s spycraft had made on her, as she peeled each sheet off her notepad before writing on it to avoid doing that to the ones below.

Jack’s was easy, send it to the Hopps Farm with a few stars drawn for the return address, disguise the lump of the memory stick with a couple of folded napkins, and add a brief backup note about the relevant files. Nick’s required a lengthier explanation that hopefully wouldn’t provoke rash action on his part—she cautioned that he needed to both contact Jack for more detailed information, and change his lodgings as soon as possible.

*Because it’s inevitable I’ll be…induced to compromise everyone when they find me. And just like that, her mood soured again.*

Skye took Nick’s envelope, addressed it with the aid of the memory prompt she’d written on Jack’s code card, dropped in the letter along with her post box key, then sealed it. A trip to the ladies disposed of the card—along with one from the AblePaws company found when she scoured her backpack and the pawbag stuffed in there for other items that might betray her. She sighed in relief as their fragments flushed away and felt even more once she’d dropped off the envelopes and left the delivery store behind.

*Nick will get his overnight, but they only guaranteed three-day delivery to Bunnyburrow. Should’ve checked on that. And that business card! Carried it around with me for a week! That would have exposed most of us if I’d been arrested like I’d expected. Events have pushed me into recklessness—I absolutely can’t afford that anymore!*
out of the way and seedy enough to overlook whether their guests had identification or not, but that hopefully avoided offering rentals by the hour.

Unfortunately, this neighborhood seemed agreeable enough to not host such lodgings. The closest that might, meant a few more miles of mid-day exposure for her. Back streets wouldn’t do, she needed something as soon as possible and they’d be on busier streets like this one. If she could find a phone store, that would be good too. Skye tried to appear inconspicuous while she walked and watched for any sinister traffic up ahead.

A half-hour later a flagpole signified something governmental up along the other side of the street—her cautious approach revealed a post office. She wondered when they would get their copy of her poster if they didn’t already have…

“Hold up fox! Remain where you are and turn around!”

Skye couldn’t help but react with the guiltiest of flinches to the harsh bray—she twisted back to see as she heard car doors open from just behind. A large black sedan had tinted windows and a white government plate; two equines and a ram emerged. They’d reacted so fast—maybe had her description from the library already—then coasted up while she was distracted! Don’t stare, run! The ‘phut’ and sting in her backside came simultaneously—she reflexively yanked out the dart—which hurt more than it had going in. Two more steps, a stumble, and the darkness did something topologically weird as it enveloped her…

10:45 A.M. Wednesday, at the millstone outside the Hopps warren.

“What do we do now?” Judy asked plaintively. “This makes everything worse. I mean we still don’t know who the instigators of this conspiracy are! They’re supposed to be our villains, but with this, who is now?” Everyone’s stunned faces around the table reflected back the despair she felt on hers.

“They won’t be villains if they find out about this, it’s a gift from the spirits for them,” Jack Savage said tonelessly. “After this, any feral animals discovered only confirms this predatory guilt they promote. They’ve already primed the majority of the population for it!”

“With the numbers of pred immigrants, this couldn’t be just foraging…I mean hunting,” Jeremy mused, stuck on his historical puzzle, “It had to have been…fairly industrialized. You know, producers, suppliers…with regular transportation to…”

“I bet those Catmull’s and Grey’s were involved! Those families been threats here since we came!” Aunt Tyne snapped from behind. “Maybe this means we can finally be rid of em!”

Judy’s guts turned to wet sand and anchored her to the bench as all their clandestine work against the conspiracy unraveled. This was irrecoverable—the secret was out—the family wouldn’t hold it—they’d lost everything. Jack’s open-mouthed face only confirmed that for her. She buried her own in her arms as her ears flopped forward onto the cool stone. This was it—predators—her Nick—would be vilified, expunged…it’s inevitable…

Voices were yelling. The anger drew closer and buffeted her. Mom’s became dominant.

“…rude, she’s not at fault for what’s happening here!”
“I wasn’t blaming just Judy! She’s liberal, naïve, and couldn’t help but get used by those preds she had’ta trust! We have to do what’s right, come together and protect the warren!”

“You swore that this would remain a private meeting, Tyne! They’re in a very difficult position and telling us as much as they can!”

“Not when the warren’s safety is at stake Bonnie! You and they brought this down on us! He said more federal agents will come! I won’t lie to ‘em cause of him.” She glared at Jack.

“I gave Judy my word that I’d keep what she told me! I’m telling you she was right to ask that of me. Agent Savage too. This has to stay with us for…”

“No Bonnie!” Aunt Tyne stepped closer and pointed a finger. “We seen too much now to let you three keep your secrets on this. I think we heads all need to have a discussion about this warren’s leadership! I’ll get it started if you won’t!” She wheeled about and stalked towards the side of the entrance porch, where a few pairs of ear tips quickly withdrew.

Bonnie hesitated, then gave chase and shouted back over her shoulder, “Jeremy! Find Stu, bring him in, Erin and Charlie too if you can. Judy, go on with your work, call us later.” Uncle Ellery and Cousin Jackie hastily followed her after they exchanged brief glances.

Judy watched mom’s rarely seen foot pursuit of another Hopps adult. Somehow their discussion had released something unexpected and ugly from Aunt Tyne. She’d always seemed reasonably pragmatic before now, so was this new or just long hidden?

“This all was too much for her to handle, she’s scared and defensive,” Uncle Galen said, reading her. “Bonnie n I didn’t expect her to be like this. You’ve had time to investigate and accept your findings as they come—we haven’t. They’ll try to calm her down.”

“Do you think she really understands the need to keep this secret?” Jack looked increasingly perturbed as the seconds stretched without either of them answering him. “Alright then, can they keep her from spreading this any further?”

“Don’t think so Mr. Savage,” Uncle Galen admitted. “She’s runnin’ on emotions now, an as you heard, our warren’s safety outweighs any promise she made. They should keep this among the heads for now, but I expect if they try to hold her back after that, she’ll get even more defiant.”

“So my citing the criminal code about interfering with a police investigation might just push her into exposing us to what she sees as the…legitimate authorities?” Judy said, tossing out her useless high card.

“Probably…although she is worried about your warren,” Jack said thoughtfully, “Maybe tell her that divulging this information will bring all those large, intrusive non-lapine government investigators over here to turn this place upside down! With interrogations for all! I mean, that…unfortunate field isn’t too far away from here is it? So guilt by location.”

“I should be there for the…discussion Mr. Savage, I’ll bring that up. Meanwhile you two should do what you can while you can—you’ve got some names now.” Uncle Galen took his leave and walked away with drooped ears—he never was one who relished conflict.

“Unfortunate field,” Judy repeated slowly to Jack after Galen had gone, “You mean another possible…animal farm?” She was upset by her continued reluctance to accept that such a monstrous thing might have happened so close to home.

“Or at least a packing and shipping facility,” Jack suggested. “It seems well located in this valley
for that. On one paw, I’d like to know who started and ran that operation, and on the other, it wouldn’t be good if anyone ever found that out. So who should we start with?” Jack glanced at his notepad. “Let’s finish with your family first…this Nara Hopps in town?”

“Actually she isn’t a relative Jack—Hopps is a fairly common name for rabbit families; there’s at least six others that I know of in the area. We’re just the largest and most prominent. Anyway, she’s at the local history museum; I think it would be a waste of time there. They won’t have much that goes back further than 1870 when Bunnyburrow proper was founded. I remember that from a field trip. About those other names; I think we should talk to Gideon Grey at least…he’s another fox I know that buys produce from us.”

“A nice relaxing road trip sounds great right now—ever since I arrived, I’ve found this rural home life of yours way too stressful to properly carry out our…assignments.”

“My big sister might find that rather forward of you Jack.” She gave him a tolerant smile, then an up-and-down appraisal; his eyes questioned that. “Come on inside, we need to country you up a bit first, you still look too federal for folks like Gideon to be comfortable with.”

The warren’s entryway, common room, and main hallway were far more crowded than the time of day warranted. It seemed like no one had left for work—or they’d been pulled back by tendrils of the grapevine. There were even several kits around that should have been off to school. The conversations near them muted as they passed through towards the dining hall—where only a dutiful few had remained to start setting up for lunch.

“Ah Judy, wait a sec,” Emily said contritely from in back of them as she padded closer. “This really is a lot bigger than you and your…old ZPD partner now, isn’t it? I mean I heard mom trying to shut up Tyne—something about a threat to the whole family and compromising your work!” A paw on Judy’s arm halted her. “They’re clearing the whole third floor, and got Farley and Uncle Brent watching the stairs! Mom also told me some more earlier, and to stop ragging on you…I’m so sorry Judy.” She seemed to want a hug.

“Yeah, it is Em; thanks, I needed you back.” Judy gave her one. “Aunt Tyne’s blabbing is our biggest threat; you’ll have to mollify her somehow, or she could focus a lot of government attention on the warren. She shouldn’t have been at our meeting. If you want to help, we need to get going, but Mr. Savage here really needs to look a lot less…”

“Secret agenty?” Mell said as she joined them and favored Jack with a hesitant smile.

“Still stuck on kitchen duty Mellida?” Jack said as her smile grew. Judy didn’t remember them meeting, but obviously they had.

“Just through lunch Jack Jack, so I don’t have to sign up again for awhile.”

*Okay, that’s a bit weird. And somehow their ear and facial patterns sorta…work together. One of us will just have to disappoint her later.*

“See what you two can find for him; a regular shirt, maybe a hat; Devin’s about his size. We’ll also need one of our cars,” Judy said as her sisters smiled at each other through Jack.

“The light green Lapilander has a full tank,” Em said as Jack rather reluctantly followed her. Judy headed for the keybox back in the entryway to snag it before someone else did.

“They both wanted to see me in overalls and a straw hat,” Jack grumbled as the Hopps warren receded behind them. “I’ll be charitable and assume they needed a distraction from all the family...
conflict?

“Not necessarily. There’s usually a lot more work than fun to be had out here; we’ve all learned to
make our own whenever the opportunity arises. It does mean that at least those two finally decided
to accept you. His blue, fine crosslined heavy cotton shirt and darker blue knee length shorts made
him look far more relaxed and approachable than his suit had, although the ‘Grow’n Greens’ cap
he’d been supplied with sat in his lap, not on his head. Judy knew he wanted time to get used to it.
“Gid’s shop is about a half-hour away.”

“Can you give me some background? Your Aunt Tyrant hinted the Grey’s might have some
involvement in the food service industry? Other than as a present customer of yours.”

“I don’t know about that Jack. Not many pred families live in the Bunnyburrow area, the Grey’s
are about the closest foxes to town and that’s not very. They’ve always been shunned around here,
so that family’s a pretty reclusive bunch. Gideon’s been changing that recently, he’s opened a
bakery and found some local customers and acceptance for himself. He partners with my dad as a
supplier—he only gave him a chance because of me.”

“Was that due to your prior less scandalous partnership with Nick?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, I kept talking him up to get my parents to accept him as a safe partner for me on the force,
although I think I overdid it. I’m sure a couple of my siblings still think he might be my boyfriend
even after this morning.” Judy slowed to turn onto the road that slanted back towards the train
station. “I actually think one of them hopes he is!”

“Ah, a faint glimmer of acceptance pierces the dark mantle of society’s intolerance to ease our
shame!” Jack said theatrically. “Nevertheless, it remains wise to be cautious.”

“About that Jack, you and Skye have a lot more experience dealing with it than we do. How is it
that you two have…gotten away with it for so long? Skye didn’t tell me much about that, she was
more interested in my issues.”

“Basically, we give mammals what they expect from us. If you asked any of our co-workers,
they’d say we absolutely hate each other. Around civilians, we always exhibit the normal
animosity, disparagement, and distrust found between our species. Skye and I play a constant and
elaborate game of deception to keep it that way.” Jack put the cap on.

“Jack! She was doing that when we went out! Playing the professional to keep attention off us. We
were two females and society still wouldn’t allow us to even act like friends in a restaurant!
There’s other mixed species pairs—even across pred-prey—that I see associate without
disapproval, but our particular choice of partners is maligned by nearly everyone!”

“Because our hypocritical society has artificial boundaries, situational morals, plus all those fears,
instincts, and species incompatibilities Dr. Barret lectured us about. We have to accept and yield to
them to avoid censure or worse from our fellow unenlightened citizens. Skye and I have carefully
explored where and how sharp those civic boundaries are to avoid cuts and stumbles. I’ll gladly
share our wisdom with you who follow in our furtive steps!”

“You’ve accommodated to society; Nick and I are still learning to live with it. But I don’t know…
about my…I…Jack, you saw my problem back there; how were you able to deal with it?” She
stared straight ahead; her paws gripped on the wheel to prevent any of her usual embarrassment-
driven mannerisms.

“Skye and I have both avoided relative scrutiny altogether, my expectations burdened bunny! I’ve
managed to give my distant and much smaller family the sad impression that I’m now a work-focused, confirmed bachelor! You’ve obviously tried and utterly failed at that with yours.” Jack reached over and placed a paw on her shoulder. “I don’t mean to be impudent Judy, I just think you and Nick are going to have a tougher time with your public relationship than we’ve had. Society’s strictures ensure that.” Jack let his paw linger.

He wanted her assent to continue. “How so? Just remember, since you’re becoming part of our Hopps collective now, you’ll eventually have to explain yourselves to them too!”

“A joint confession might make that easier… on the four of us at least.” Jack chuckled briefly and released her. “That might not seem so bad after we’ve all sacrificed to save society from itself. Changing it will be a lot harder though; that’s what I meant.”

“Why is acceptance so hard for everyone—It’s not like I want to intrude in their lives, I’d be happy if they just ignored ours!” Like I try to ignore Bucky and Pronk’s... relations.

“They can’t Judy. Beliefs and morals are a major part of most mammal’s identities. Someone else flouting them is seen as a direct attack on themselves—and relationships are as personal as it gets!” Jack paused to remove his cap, and briefly rub the base of his ears.

“There’s several things that can make any interspecies relations seem wrong to others without them considering the partners involved,” he resumed. “Pred prey is a major one, excessive size difference is another. A dissimilar appearance will put off many, for some even fur patterns are enough, let alone wholly different morphologies. Cultural issues, and past histories between their species also come into play, like with ours, as do the political considerations. And then there’s the really big one! Perceived physical compatibility issues for those with vulgar minds—and those possible abominations against nature; hybrid kits”

“Politics shouldn’t intrude in mammal’s private lives Jack. We do have some rights!”

“It may not impact things in your world Judy, but it’s a huge deal here in Concordia! Numerous pairs or groups of rodent species—along with a few others—have very similar physical appearances and can sometimes hybridize! Each one shames wayward members and competes with others to preserve their identities, so they don’t lose their seat on the Council of Delegates! Official species status is a bitter subject of debate in that chamber.”

This was an interspecies issue she’d never thought of before, but it seemed obvious once considered. It had never come up in her academy training, or on the job; officers were supposed to remain publicly apolitical.

Gideon’s bakery had come into view ahead; she silently drew Jack’s attention to it. On her last couple of visits home, she’d either passed the converted gas station and minimart at night, or when she had a morning train to catch. Now that she finally had a chance to stop, it stood unattended with no vehicles present. She slowed, and turned their utility runabout in past a neatly carved sign that advertised ‘Gideon Grey’s Real Good Baked Stuff’.

“Might have to call the folks to get his number—not sure I want to do that yet.” Judy parked by the side of the store and led their way to the entrance to see if that information was there—she smiled at the delightfully painted panel set in the window beside the door. It showed a running Gideon with a warm pie in his outstretched paw—the movable clock hands and lettering behind him said he’d be back at one.

“Twenty minutes, we can wait,” Jack said, then peered inside.
Judy took a closer look at the well-done caricature, whoever had made it had left a small signature at the bottom just by the windowsill. She crouched to see…

“Sharla?” She stepped back with ears rigidly erect, as Jack turned in surprise at her exclamation. “Uh…someone I’ve known since we were kids! She’s absolutely the last one—other than me—I’d have expected to make that for him!” Judy pointed at the panel.

“So you and this Sharla had past issues with Mr. Grey?”

“Yeah, past at least for me. Gideon was the school bully, but he went to therapy some time back and apologized, so we’re good now. I’m surprised by Sharla’s thing though, the last couple of times we spoke she didn’t mention anything about him or this place.”

“As long as it doesn’t hinder us today—you’ve made the Grey’s sound like a difficult family. Maybe we should wait out there.” Jack gestured to the table and benches that had replaced the old gas pumps under the canopy in front.

They sat, and Judy took a moment to admire Gideon’s landscaping efforts around his sign and table—they had supple wood shaving groundcovers with neat stone borders. Dad had mentioned that he’d turned out to be a hard worker. She turned back to Jack.

“You were saying that Nick and I would have a harder time with social acceptance than you’ve had. Why’s that? We’re in similar situations; I’ve just caught my fox, Skye’s already got you, and we’re all together in law enforcement.”

“So true Judy; Nick and I are really lucky guys. First, it’s that you’re now more famous than I’ve been—so not only are you under a political microscope, but you’ll also attract more media scrutiny. As for those other reasons I mentioned that set mammals off about inters; we tic off some of them, you two check off all of them.

“We’re guilty of all of them? Why do you two get off with a lighter sentence?”

“For one thing, we’re much less of a visual mismatch for the casual observer. We’re closer in height and build, and at least in winter we have nearly the same shade of fur. Skye’s an arctic vixen, her ears and muzzle, perfectly shaped as they are, are proportionally shorter than a red’s. We’re both also in the habit of dressing well, even outside of work, so the professional association aspect is always with us at some level.

“You unfortunately, have chosen a ruddy, seemingly unrefined vulpine partner who’s over half-again your height and at least three times your weight! Anyone seeing you two out of uniform and…associating on the street will naturally assume that you’re involved in something disgusting, or slightly more charitably, that the poor little gray bunny is being cruelly coerced and oppressed by…”

“My pimp—we’ve already gotten those looks a couple of times,” Judy complained.

“Exactly. So unless you two assiduously play our little avoidance and animosity game when you’re out together in public, unenlightened mammals will get thoroughly squicked out imagining you two being together behind closed doors. Those more biologically ignorant will be extra horrified by the possible little mixed results of your behavior.”

“That’s ridiculous Jack! Those few hybrids anyone ever sees have to come from similar parents and still look pretty much like them. Look at us! Hares and bunnies are basically the same thing to most other mammals, and we still can’t…procreate with each other.”
“Certainly doesn’t stop us from trying!” Jack emphasized with a knowing smirk. “There’d be lots more of us if we didn’t have that outlet to gain…experience. Avoids all those adorable little surprises! Seriously, a lot more mammals than us choose temporary or even long-term partners from closely related or physically similar species in order to practice safe sex. It’s society’s not-so-secret that nobody admits to or wants to talk about, but that many still take advantage of.”

“I’ll admit it wasn’t much of a secret in my family, those…kind of issues never are with as many members as we have. Personal privacy’s a vague concept at the Hopps warren. Although I don’t recall hearing that particular…option ever being discouraged.” Judy had slowly become annoyed at the persistence of Jack’s smile. “Alright Jack Ravage, I assume Skye knows about your past lifestyle choices?”

“Of course she does, we’re completely open with each other. And I’ll be open with you too Judy because I think you might need this. My past intimate adventures not only prepared me, but also were what likely saved me from having a major cardiac event when Skye decided our dates should become more serious. And we’d worked up to that point cautiously, as you and Nick need to; believe me you’ll want that journey to last!”

Somehow, they were both already standing—she welcomed his hug. “Jack,” she said over his shoulder, “I think…no, I know Nick expects me to lead; to be the vixen! I’m…not really confident I’ll be able to handle that role.”

“Are you forgetting your backups? Vivian would insist on being your vixenology coach—and Skye would be willing to help if Vivian would ever allow that!” Jack gently pushed her back to arm’s length, then let go.

_I can’t ask Nick’s mother for relationship advice! He’d find out somehow and make sure I’d never ever live that down! No, that’s the old Nick, he wouldn’t now, he cares too much about me to do that. But should I force him to live with that conflict? I already know Skye would be discreet._

She looked up at Jack—and gasped as his face collapsed to limp-eared lifelessness with dulled eyes that stared down past her. He wavered and looked ready to fall—she seized his arms and guided him unsteadily backward down onto the bench.

“Jack! What’s wrong, c’mon look at me!” He didn’t react at first—she resisted the urge to shake him, then tilted his chin up—his eyes slowly focused on her.

“Jack, say something, you’re scaring me!” He expelled a breath and feebly waved a paw at her as she reached for her cellphone.

“I felt it…something bad happened,” he said weakly. “I don’t know what. Maybe just me.” That was slightly stronger. “Just a…existential dread I guess?” He was breathing more evenly now.

_I hope it’s not Skye! He didn’t say that and I won’t! Maybe he can’t admit it! Would I have felt something about Nick? We’re apart too. Some mammals have a connection; how much time does it take to develop?_

“I’m sorry I lost control again, it just seems like we’re constantly chasing behind events.” He slowly turned and stared fixedly out to the east.

It had to be about Skye. Judy felt a prickle between her shoulder blades at her close brush with something…paranormal. This had to be much worse than how she’d felt after Tyne’s outburst, and still Jack held it in so it wouldn’t affect her! He’s in need…
“Jack, we’ve been so stressed out since this started; remember my nightmares?” She sat on the bench and held him. “We don’t know when it going to build to be too much and just boil over on us. I got it twice this morning, now it’s your turn. No one should have this stress, we don’t deserve it but the world picks the heroes it wants. It’s ok if we’re like this with ourselves; we just have to be strong for everybody else. Need this again?” She started to work her paws up along his ears.

“I’m…better.” He raised a paw and stilled hers. “Let’s leave the relationship reminders for later, alright? We need to keep busy and see where this goes today.”

Judy tried to invoke her own latent psychic powers and make Gideon hurry up.

He finally arrived after they’d spent an indeterminate time mired in their thoughts, and parked his van by the Hopps labeled vehicle. He exited and walked back towards them.

“I kin help you folks now…hey, hi Judy, whose your friend there?” Gideon looked Jack over and seemed to give her a slight nod of approval.

Not you too!  “We’re on special assignment together Gid, I’m afraid we’re working today. We need to ask you a couple of questions about….”

“We could maybe get something for lunch first?” Jack jumped in; “It sure smelled good over by your bakery. I’m Jack Mr. Grey, we’re just looking for some local background information that Officer Hopps thought you might help us with.”

Thanks Jack—I did start off a little strong there. C’mon, think cabbage head, this’ll likely be sensitive for his family if they were involved.

“Shore; mostly breads, pies, muffins and such, not so much on fixings, couple of jams and vanilla ice cream is all. C’mon in, you haven’t seen my place yet!” he said proudly.

It was actually quite inviting inside; knotty wood paneling covered the walls and made up the sales counter, along with two simple but solid display cases for his wares. Two old but well refinished tables and several different sizes of mismatched chairs provided for those customers who didn’t want to wait before indulging. They went with his suggestions, and Jack quickly paid for them with cash to Judy’s relief—she’d felt Gid was about to offer them for free and it might help smooth the way if they supported his business.

Gideon waved them to a table and bustled about for plates and utensils before pulling back a chair and joining them. Judy kept his shop the subject of their occasional small talk for the next ten minutes or so of flaky, gooey goodness. Finally, her curiosity grown intolerable, she pointed at Sharla’s sign by the door.

“She done the window curtains too. Her family don’t live too far away, an she works part-time here on Fridays n weekends. Been a right help keeping this place up.”

That begged more questions—best left for later. Sharla was still taking classes at Middleburrow Technical College, and seemed to be spending lots of her free time from that here. Not much ever seemed to change around the burrows, Judy remembered—unless you went away for months at a time. Gideon caught her attention again.

“Judy, don’t mean to pry…seen the news…what happened to that fox fella you was working with?” Gideon said carefully, watching her.

Jack’s face confirmed the gift she’d just received. Gid had given them a perfect opening for the likely unpleasant conversations to come. It wasn’t even about her; he clearly wanted to know what
had happened to a role model for his fellow foxes.

“Speciest authorities are targeting predators again; like the nighthowler thing last year Gid,” she said, “only they’re being sneakier about it this time. My ex-partner is just one of many they’ve falsely accused. We think he’s in hiding—like several other pred officers we’ve lost from the force recently. Back in Concordia, prey politicians are changing laws to make doing that easier!” Her peripheral vision caught Jack’s look of approval for her careful explanation. “We thought that sheep mayor was the only one behind this, but it turns out there were others she was working for. We’re trying to find out who they all are!”

“Some of these prey officials and agents,” Jack said, “are trying to find evidence that will support their cause. They think some of that is right here in the burrows and have come looking for it. We’re here to warn you to be careful what you tell them—they will seek you out soon and ask questions,” he then paused to let Gideon take it all in—she stayed silent too.

“What are they looking for around here? What are they gonna ask about, and what don’t you want us to tell em?” Gideon’s voice slowly grew warier.

“We don’t want them to find out about the past history of this region—the valley before we came here,” Judy said patting herself. Only a few here really know that history. If these speciest investigators get them to talk about it and look for supporting evidence, they’ll know that local predators were running a…food serv…” She was stopped by Gideon’s paw waving, open mouthed expression.

“They’s just rumors been used against us preds for years by you all!” he accused loudly as he held his paw in front of them. “Aren’t they?” he then asked plaintively, as he pulled it back and looked contrite. “You need to talk to Gran, but I don’t know if they’ll wanna see ya.” He looked really uncomfortable now.

“Gideon! We aren’t here to accuse anyone of anything,” Judy said hastily, “We just need to keep whatever happened back then secret, so these mammals can’t use it to vilify and oppress all of you predators again!”

“If you can help us understand even some of what happened, we’ll know better how to keep it away from them,” Jack added.

“Can you let me be for a bit? I need to make a call.” Gideon stood and wandered back behind the counter. They took his hint and went outside to wait.

They’d been back on the bench under the canopy for a good fifteen minutes before they saw Gideon adjust the sign in the window, lock the shop, and dejectedly walk over to them.

“I’ll take you in my van, the family don’ like seein strangers come up, cause we’ve been done wrong by folks around here for a long time.” Gideon led them over before he got in—Jack had to stretch a little to open the door on their side. The bench seat was ample for the three of them—they all stayed silent as Gideon started up and drove down the road.

“Need to letcha know a bit about our own history Judy,” Gideon finally spoke when they passed by the train station a few miles beyond his bakery. “We lived around here for a really long time til we got pushed out by your kind. You know the rails that were put into the Bunnyburrow packinghouse bout forty years ago? Those two small hills bout halfway along? That’s where we’d lived—right between em. They had to put the line right through there—eminent domain,” he said bitterly. “Plenty of land around, but they just had to go through where we foxes were! Oh, they paid us for it, cheap as they could since it wasn’t prime land! Enough for us to pack up and move anyway.
Bout broke my grandad, they told me he wasn’t never the same after that. Family rebuilt and restarted the business this side of Middleburrow, but it never got back the way it was.”

So it wasn’t just mindless bullying on Gid’s part, all the Grey’s had good reason to hate us, Judy realized. He’s bitter over events that had to have happened close to twenty years before he was born. She agonized over what to say back to him, and came up with nothing that wouldn’t sound disingenuous. Just as well, her posture and face seemed to satisfy him.

“They’re only agreein to this cause of you Judy, you Hopps was the first bunnies to give me, and by that my family, any help at all. You got respect from foxes that know bout you, you trusted one to work with n kept telling other folks to treat us like people too!”

“Trust you too Gid, you helped me more than you know.” She smiled at him to thaw the ice some more. Thank the spirits he didn’t seem to have seen my press conference!

“I got em to agree to listen to you, but your friend here should be careful, maybe just keep quiet at first.” Gideon gave Jack a good look before he put his eyes back on the road. “Mr. Jack, you some kind of wrestler or something? Whatever—and don’t neither of you show pity for em! My family’s proud!

They drove up a short extension of the valley toward a more forested part of the eastern foothills. Once past the last small farm complex, the road turned to gravel and Gideon slowed. Later, they went by what appeared to be a small lumberyard, with cribs of wood under rain shelters, and a longer building open at one end where two red foxes in overalls watched them go by. The Grey’s planked house was set into the slope beyond. It seemed to have undergone periodic expansions or renovations based on how weathered various parts of it looked. It was all so rustic that the poles with electrical service looked out of place.

This explained the utilitarian woodwork in and around Gideon’s pie shop—it had likely been a family effort to reestablish a presence closer to their original property. They parked below the house and were met as they walked up by what were presumably Gideon’s parents. They stood on their porch as if to defend it, so she and Jack stopped short, as did Gideon. The vixen of the pair glanced past them briefly; Judy turned to see the two foxes from the sawmill as they walked up behind them. They stopped and folded their arms.

The tension stretched until Gideon yielded. “Ma, dad, this here’s Judy Hopps and Mr. Jack.”

“Savage” added Jack. One of the foxes behind them snickered.

“Stifle it Gareth!” Gideon snapped. “This here’s serious, she try’n to help us again for things go bad.” His father on the porch nodded and pointed at her.

“Thanks for seeing us Mr. Grey, we’re here because there are teams of prey ZBI agents up in Bunnyburrow right now trying to dig up evidence to justify more discrimination against preds. It’s only a matter of time before they come here and question you, because they’ll find out from others that you’ve lived here long enough to likely know about it. If they think you do, they won’t stop until they squeeze it out of you.”

“What evidence might that be?” said Gid’s father. Judy noticed that neither of the haggard foxes looking down at them had offered their names.

“That there used to be primitive small mammals living in this valley that were exploited to…supply pred workers back in the gold mining days.” Judy said, deciding to lay it out and get this over with. The reaction she expected didn’t come; the pair merely exchanged glances before the vixen spoke.
“So you do know. We’ll get my mother; you two sit right here.” She and her mate moved a small bench on the porch over close to one end, then went inside.

She and Jack sat and Gideon followed to lean on the porch rail. His two brothers also stepped up into the house.

“Sorry,” Gideon whispered, “They don’t want you in the house ta…smell it up with bunny.” His brothers returned carrying an old wingback chair—their parents followed with their own smaller seats. They turned it to face them and gingerly set it down—slouched within was a shrunken vixen ancient enough to likely qualify for Kristen or Dr. Alder’s preservation skills.

The breeze by the house was fitfully weak right now—but they were still downwind of the foxes in front of them. Judy felt Jack’s paw briefly on her arm, he also knew bad blood remained here. This whole—presentation of the elder—dragged her back to an earlier one, with a far smaller head of family that demanded respect.

The younger vixen sat close and filled in the older on their recent conversation—distinctly and slowly. Again, no introductions were forthcoming. Judy forced herself to look at Gid’s Gram—her experiences with various elderly Hopps members hadn’t prepared her for this example of pushing the boundaries of age. The wizened vixen had extensive bare patches of mottled skin on her forearms, neck and the crown of her head. Her ears looked like veined wrapping paper where the slanting sunlight caught them. What remained of her sparse tail fur was nearly white. However, the fox’s eyes remained bright and aware as she whispered at length back to her daughter.

“Those who have wronged us now offer easy help that also benefits them,” Gideon’s mother repeated while he looked uncomfortable. “Now they ask for what they say will hurt us more than what they have already done.” More whispering went on between them.

Dad’s partnership with Gideon came at a cost none of us realized, to his family; he dealt with the enemy! Yet they obviously support his business; are they that in need, or is it that desire to reassert themselves?

“You are here because you are one of the few that has offered acceptance of us. The rest accuse us of doing what they have always done to us. What of him?” The younger spoke, the older pointed a fragile stick arm at Jack.

These vixens spoke frankly. Was part of their attitude resentment at opportunities denied over a lifetime? Unlike her safe and prosperous upbringing, this family had long been persecuted for what they were. Even Nick had yet to open all the way up about his past. She was still learning about fox’s lives. Jack took her rumination as a deferral.

“Like Officer Hopps, I try to work for the equal benefit of everyone. I’ve met her fox partner and call him my friend and am proud to call an Arctic fox another.” Jack spoke clearly for the elder vixen’s benefit, then pulled his badge and gave it to Gid to pass along. “I, and others like me in the agency, are opposed to those above us who wish to unlawfully restrict other’s rights. Knowing that, you could now turn us in to those prey agents when they come. Trust for trust.”

Woah! You pulled this one at the clinic, Jack! You think there’s really something here worth risking our exposure? You’d better…right. Skye already pointed a big arrow at us.

“During my life, I’ve always kept some of what my grandfather told me from the family story you all know,” Gideon’s mother relayed and pointed out her family. “You could’ve told that part to the bunnies without me, so you want to know the rest. Do you want ta trust em with it?”
“We don’t want to know what your family’s specific involvement was, just what went on in the valley back then so we know what needs to remain hidden,” Judy said. “We aren’t here to expose names and assign them guilt; that all ended generations ago.”

“But that’s exactly what these prey conspirators want!” Jack stressed. “Solid evidence of past predatory guilt to justify further restrictions on all of you today! For them, any names would be a publicity bonus.”

The vixen’s whisper conference lasted a couple of minutes before Gid’s mom issued the verdict. “She says maybe you’re one reason she was told and made to remember for so long. She’ll tell ya, but feels she’s only got this one time in her, so listen and don’t interrupt us whenever we hafta stop.” She gave Jack an affirmative nod when he held up his notepad. Judy distinctly felt the younger vixen was eager to hear more as well.

“We Grey’s came here when the valley was first being cleared for planting. Those dumb oxen n elks were pulling down and burning off most of the trees; we started taking some of the wood off their hooves an set up our first mill. Business was good, we’d brought better tools and the natives and newcomers were happy to trade for our cut timber. We provided materials and sometimes labor to help build some of those first farmsteads around here.

“There was some native foxes here too, we joined to work together right quick so it’s hard to tell whose who these days! That first place grew ‘til we had over a dozen families living around the mill. Mostly us foxes, but some coyotes too, and even bobcats. Things were good; those large mammals mostly weren’t bothered by us—until they moved out and those smaller mammals start...” A bony arm stopped Gid’s mother’s opening narrative and the whispering resumed. The younger vixen’s face slowly soured as she listened.

“So the Grey’s were deeply involved and confessed their personal guilt after I said we didn’t want that. Do they want absolution from me, or are they just unburdening themselves? This doesn’t make sense unless this is so personal for them it’s the only way she can tell it.

“We were so busy, we had to go to hardwood boxes boiled in creosote to cut down on them gnawing through it too quick. Some needed dividers to keep em from gnawing on each other! They really was just animals. We couldn’t keep up with demand, the better ferals kept getting harder and harder to find, so we set a grain field to pen and breed more of them. We built our packinghouse right in that field along with capture boxes for em to hole up in.

“That only lasted for a few years. We knew they’d build up the boats n curehouse, it was just a matter of time for they had salted and smoked fish rolling up into the mountains. But what really
stopped it for us all here was those tall white cats what brought in those real big water rats and raised them over by the mountains! Our valley’s business was gone like that, the bigger natives had already started to move away and you bunnies and others were about to come in. Money had been good enough that some of us could move away from their sins and start over. Those like us who stayed burned and buried ours. Every bit of em.”

_Those tall white cats_—the words echoed within her skull as she pawed her forehead and slowly absorbed them. Everyone on the Grey’s porch remained silent—the ancient vixen in the wingback sipped from a cup with her daughter’s help—Gideon traded glances with his brothers. She turned to Jack—head down, phone in paw, he texted with grim determination.

“What do we do now?” Judy asked plaintively.

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5:50 P.M. _Wednesday, at the Bookwyrm’s Cave author’s week promotion._

Nick admitted to himself that it hadn’t been a bad afternoon of hustling…marketing his…uh… _Rafe Holcroft_’s books. He finished his… _Rafe_’s signature on the last of the thirty-odd copies the bookstore had scrounged up after he’d been gratefully added to today’s group of obscure writers. All of the bigger names were scheduled for the weekend. Nick reached the book over and thanked the retired jackal firemammal who’d decided to take it—after he’d spent fifteen minutes relating his life story to the unexpectedly knowledgeable red fox.

The canid wandered off to make his purchase as the other three authors on today’s panel—an elderly goat fantasy writer, a prairie dog new age purveyor, and the self-improvement donkey with the very down-market radio program—gave him annoyed looks. They still had numerous books on their tables, with the goat’s stack the smallest.

_Not my fault my life experience gave me an unfair advantage—the best kind of advantage! While you spent months or years cooped up writing, I was out hustling, selling! Getting lost in fantasies is easier than trying to improve yourself, and Holcroft’s are at least more widely relatable than those ‘Capricorn’s Realm’ books likely are._

It had been so easy to outdo his competition. Their large neat stacks of books just showed to passersby a continuing lack of interest from others. A clever fox knew to always keep a smaller untidy number on his table as if he were running out. Whenever potential customers were in sight, he would often pretend to consult a list and autograph one at length, then set it in the box down beside him with a note stuck in its pages. Only he knew it was the same copy each time. Add his well-honed schmoozing skills, and he generated fairly steady sales. The old goat at least had started to catch on towards the end of the day.

Nick’s satisfaction was at odds with the fact that not a single dollar had crossed his paw. Finn would’ve been scandalized. Finally venturing out in public to exercise his neglected skills, along with the bits of information he’d gleaned from some of his customers, had been sufficient compensation for now. The real Mr. Holcroft’s meager cut should come off of his publisher’s sales.

At least he hoped so; this was a…novel avocation for him—the effort to payoff ratio he’d observed here didn’t seem like it would keep these writers fed, let alone sheltered. Still he’d discharged his obligation to Mr. Holcroft for his…identity donation, and word of that diligence would eventually filter back to mom too.
Nick leaned back in his chair and stretched a few kinks out—he’d been planted there since one. His eyes followed the painted slender scaly thing that slithered around the walls of the main room just below the ceiling. It had owlish glasses on one end that made it a friendly beast. The free quarterly community guide that had informed him of this event a few days ago had noted this was Concordia’s most patronized bookstore.

Which had also made it an opportunity to arrange a relatively safe meet-up with Kristen—although it was late enough now that she was likely a no-show. He consulted the community guide again, and found a seemingly decent restaurant where they might blend in. It wasn’t too far away, so he sent her a text about it that hopefully wasn’t too cryptic. He finally picked up his bag, went to the bookstore manager to collect his token appearance fee—it would at least buy him that dinner—and left to walk over there.

His satisfaction at being out in public again and involved—he’d found separate lodgings for Professor Ulric yesterday and had sent off his specimens to Jack—lasted just past his hope that Kristen might still come by.

*Skye’s still missing; she hasn’t checked in since she turned over the prof. Jack’s got to be frantic for information I don’t have. I owe him something!* That nagged him throughout his stroll, even after Kristen’s affirmative reply finally arrived. He had nothing, and the vixen’s disappearance wouldn’t exactly make the news.

Nick was willing to wait awhile for a booth for two to open; he needed to give her time to arrive. Once tucked away back near the bathrooms, he delayed ordering as much as he felt was reasonable while he eyed the entrance. He finally selected a generous casserole with veggies and tuna chunks, to be followed by a slice of blueberry pie. It was the first opportunity since he’d left to avoid having boxed or late night convenience store fare.

Kristen made it before his dinner did—the skunk sashayed through the restaurant in an electric blue top and slightly more subdued turquoise skirt, a white necklace complimented the visible part of her stripes. Numerous pairs of eyes followed her progress, so Nick set his bookbag up on the table as she slid into the booth with a final swirl of her tail.

“Here you go Ms. Mosswood, invoice’s inside.” Nick said distinctly enough to be heard by those few nearby. “They were getting antsy, so I’ve already ordered—got you a salad to start.” Kristen gave him a small smile and nod as he beckoned the waiter over, then she set the bag down beside her and perused the menu. With Deflection Inc.’s business concluded, the waiter took her choice away and the other diners returned to their meals. They’d now leave the two less-than-popular mammals near the corner to each other’s company.

“Sorry I didn’t come earlier Nick,” she said furtively. “I spent the afternoon over at ZBI headquarters asking around.” Her small smile returned.

Nick’s breath caught and the questions piled up on his face—her smile broadened with an affirmative nod. Their apprehensive, reluctant volunteer had just pulled a not so minor ‘gotcha’ on him! That young skunk across the table seemed to enjoy being a mass of contradictions. Dull researcher or flamboyant hot-rodder—nervous Holli Homemaker or junior agent Flirt—maybe she was a bit manic-depressive?

Or he was being unfair to a more complex mammal. Dinner arrived and he had to wait while she tucked into her salad. Halfway through it, Kristen condescended to release him from frustration.

“Relax rookie,” she teased, “I took the day’s last public tour!”
That actually made sense. She’d already had a run-in with the agency—this would have to be seen as open and natural curiosity from an inquisitive scientist. Great idea, but worthwhile? “And what secrets did you pry away from the heart of darkness?” he asked.

“I went because of Stella; to see if I got any reaction when I asked after her. There were enough visitors that we got broken into small groups and I made sure to be in one with a pred guide. I don’t know if I was spotted going in or already had someone tailing me, but I realized it when they needed to stay close on the tour.”

“Excuse me, but this all seems a teensy bit out of character for you,” Nick said, leaning closer to keep his voice down and because it seemed to bother a Roan antelope pair several tables away. “How did you uncover your admirer?”

“She was taller than everybody in my group. I’d stood sorta between two of them so whoever was watching me wouldn’t know which I’d go with. It was good confirmation, but what I really noticed was a flash of recognition toward her from our Coati guide when he came in! Kind of a ‘why are you here’ thing.”

“Just in case,” Nick turned his muzzle toward the doors, “What is she—and wearing?”

“A Puku, although I wouldn’t expect to see her anymore, I made her thoroughly reveal herself today!” the skunk said proudly.

“Puku? And do remember to keep it down.” Nick cautioned.

“You’re the biologist. Now how exactly did you ask about our…Stella, and what kind of reactions did you get? Do you anticipate any problems as a result of such…forward behavior on your part?” Nick leaned in some more—Kristen responded in kind.

He heard a faint snuffle of annoyance from the buck of the roan pair seated in the middle of the restaurant, and Kristen winked at him. All right then, let’s see how well we coordinate with this! His answering smile prompted her to slowly raise her tail and start an even more leisurely wave with it. He lifted his in response. Nobody besides the antelopes seemed to have noticed that, and when the buck began to mutter something they whipped their heads around to stare him down for a second—Nick also briefly put a possessive paw on Kristen’s.

The buck started and almost upset his beverage; the bumped table and his hoot of outrage drew other diner’s attention. When some turned around to find the cause of his ire, he and Kristen had already dropped tails and slid back into normal postures—they watched the antelopes with bemused expressions like the rest.

“They gave me a condescending look when I came in,” Kristen noted, turning back to her dinner. “There’s nothing wrong with the way I publicly present myself! Thanks for helping me tweak those jerks.”

“You are…quite colorful sometimes. I thought you were trying to keep a low profile.”

“It’s just this one outfit, the rest I brought are suitably plain. So far I’ve given those speciest conspirators of ours no cause to see anyone other than ol’ boring researcher me, just like Martin
suggested! Tonight I could become someone else and pull some attention away from you!” Kristen looked rather pleased with herself.

“As one male having observed another’s discomfort, his attention wasn’t just on you as a member of a distasteful species, but on who you were with, another he likely despised.” Nick placed a paw at his throat. “That buck; he is jealous! Old scruffy me just doesn’t deserve this kind of personal attention from a fine young specimen such as yourself. That masculinity-disparaging trauma supersedes his dislike of filthy mixers and inferiors!”

Kristen laughed aloud and he joined in briefly—as he fixed his gaze on the antelopes to justify it. They scowled back most satisfactorily. “Now that our break from reality is over Miss flirtatious, how did you hustle the ZBI?” he said more cautiously.

“Right at the end of the tour, I asked my guide how I could contact this agent, and gave him Skye’s business card. I told him that she’d been responsible for the transfer of my specimens to the national museum, and that I needed to talk to her as some of my included research notes were missing. Said I’d called her number several times without getting an answer!”

“So you let a pred employee know that one of theirs was unavailable?” Nick surmised.

“Yes, then that Puku jumped in and asked who—he told her, then she told me Skye was on assignment in Zootopia. I said no, she’d flown back here with them last Friday and given me her card; they didn’t think to ask me when she did! Then she said there were major realignments going on and that Skye had likely been immediately reassigned.”

“That last bit—was that exactly what that Puku agent said?” Nick said eagerly.

“About the…major realignments? Or Skye’s…” Kristen seemed oddly thoughtful.

“Yeah, that,” Nick interrupted, “That’s an interesting word choice since Professor Ulric mentioned the same to me regarding his office and home break-ins. Some group he’d never heard of had left flyers behind demanding, get this, a ‘realignment of past academic doctrine about mammals moral evolution’. We talked about it and decided this was a connivance to cover up those attempts to seize any Fairfield evidence he might still have.”

“Hold on,” Kristen pulled out a tablet and started to work it intently. “I hope it’s still here; didn’t screenshot that one, she muttered. “Yeah! Here it is, you’ll love this.” She turned her tablet and pointed at the screen, then let him take it.

It was part of an address yesterday by the Chief Arbiter to the Commons Committees. Any irritation about his being subjected to political verbiage evaporated when he spotted ‘Justice Department initiatives’ and ‘societal realignment’ embedded within the text.

Kristen took back her tablet. “I only recalled this when you said Ulric had mentioned it too. I’d noticed it in passing earlier because the Puku had stressed the word just a bit.”

“Do a search on that will you? It’s still possible this is only a chance thing; see if you can find any significant correlations!” Nick noticed their ocelot waiter on the way over and drew Kristen’s attention. “I’ve got dessert coming; order something, we’re more secure now.” The dinner crowd had thinned; the booth behind Kristen was already empty and the nearest table seemed soon to leave as well. The Roan antelope pair was already up and gave them a last dirty look as they exited.

She concentrated on her tablet until her dessert’s arrival made her smile a little. Nick made sad fox eyes at her ice cream volcano with its chocolate lava until she spooned a slumped foothill onto his
piece of pie. He watched her read and indulge for several minutes—the skunk appeared to have quite a sweet tooth—then she slid her tablet back over.

He found several in just a minute or two as he scrolled down a long list of otherwise trivial hits. There were seven mentions of realignment in transcripts of Chief Arbiter Garwood’s recent speeches, two in a Justice Department press release, and four more in editorials under a ZBI byline Jack had disclosed. “I say no coincidences here; seems like internal signaling or maybe related to a name for the conspirator’s organization. Shadowy cabals and gangs do like their cryptic names. Do tell me if you think I’m wrong doctor?” She shook ‘no’ and shoveled in another mouthful of her dessert.

They both remained silent until the plates were gone and the waiter had left with his cash. They had possible names now—one of them up in the governmental stratosphere, above mere delegates, representatives…and mayors. They’d been dealt an Ace, but there were more cards to come and they were already all-in.

“Did you hear anything at all about Skye’s whereabouts during your infiltration?” Nick asked forlornly.

“No, nothing. Although I did find that a recent acquaintance of yours had unfortunately made the regional newsfeed this morning. This is the main thing I wanted to show you tonight.” They exchanged the tablet again and Nick read:

Mr. Arvie Lamont, sheep age 37, has been arrested in Junction City and charged with ovicide in the second degree. The victim—name withheld pending notification—was apparently stabbed in the neck with a broken bottle during an early morning altercation outside of a convenience store. According to responders from the sheriff’s office in town, alcohol was involved. Both individuals were employed as warehouse...

“Nick, remember, they tried to kill you,” Kristen said, misinterpreting his expression.

“I know, it’s not that. I drew blood, but the punctures were shallow, in no way life threatening on someone his size. I dropped him by taking out his knee! Kristen, this is much worse—the conspirators aren’t covering up an accidental death—they gave a terminal interrogation to a crippled failure! His death is also a warning for the others. They now know I was there, have a good description of me, along with my likely destination and arrival time!”

“Nick, I was on that same train.”

“It’s only a matter of time before they make that connection and they also know where you’re staying. This is what we’ll have to do.” Nick reached across the table and held the now trembling skunk by her shoulders. “We both go back to your hotel right now and pick up your stuff—if it’s safe! Then you’re coming and staying with me, I’m sure they don’t know where I am, at least for now. We should be safe for tonight but that won’t last.”

“How will they really recognize who you are! Your mom and I did a really good job on you.”

“When I disembarked there, the railroad scanned my ID. Here, I’m probably caught on security cams. Holcroft is compromised, I’m compromised, and so are you! We are so very very screwed since I spent all day publicly exposed in the bookstore down the street and you were tickling the dragon in his cave.” Nick got up, then urged Kristen to her feet. “If we don’t go now, we’ll probably find out where Skye is sometime tomorrow!”
Chapter End Notes

And there we have it! The cliffhanger hat trick. At least I didn’t tie little Nell to a railroad track, although our plot train continues to accelerate!

Our next exciting installment—Chapter Twenty-one: Predilections

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