To Mend a Broken Hart

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To Mend a Broken Hart

by Nievelion

Summary

Just why was Leodore Lionheart so determined to keep the savage mammals a secret, what was he truly hiding? The answer will not only shed new light on his actions, and offer hope of redemption, but be critical in helping Nick and Judy once more save Zootopia from species division and chaos. Lionheart/OC, implied WildeHopps.

Notes

"Hey...your Majesty." The ever-present baton banged on the outer bars of his cell door. "Look alive in there. You've got visitors."

It was hardly the first time he'd ever received that particular mocking dig—that would have been, what, in grade school at Sahara Central?—and it would surely not be the last. And despite everything, he couldn't help squaring his shoulders and sitting up straighter on his cot, for it did make him feel more respected, with more authority, even though he remained a prisoner.

Many had believed him possessed of just such vanity and arrogance, believed all lions secretly carried it in their hearts no matter how much they denied it or how well they hid it. But he had always seen it not as superiority, but an understanding of responsibility. He and his kind had held power for a very long time, as long as civilization if the old stories were true, and it wasn't simply because of greater strength, a hunger for power, an innate ferocity and bloodthirstiness, or a clever maneuvering of the masses into a position of leadership. It was because of a natural confidence...a strong, moral sense of right and wrong...a determination to see justice done...and an ability to inspire trust, faith, and service from others.

Some lions—many, if he was honest with himself—were sadly willing to abuse these traits, take advantage of the rest of society, making all sorts of false promises and deceptive claims in order to gain something for their own aggrandizement. It was often said the term 'sleazy politician' had originally been coined because of lions, and even the most average and lower-echelon maned feline in Zootopia was capable of such manipulation and guile if he wished it—to get the chance to laze...
about with others at his beck and call, if nothing else. And while they had a better reputation for kindness, compassion, and generosity, lionesses could actually be worse if they put their minds to it.

Yet Leodore Lionheart had always known such acts and mindsets to be wrong, to be unworthy of one of his talents and intelligence. He had been determined from a young age, and especially upon graduating from ZSU near the top of his class—political science degree clutched firmly in paw—to do right by the city and its mammals, to prove why so many were still willing to give handsome, regal-looking lions the benefit of the doubt. He was, he knew, exceedingly attractive as well as charismatic...but none of that mattered if it were not employed in the name of the public good, if he were not selfless rather than selfish. If he looked like a king, then he needed to earn the obedience, respect, and goodwill that went with such a title.

Slowly his ears drooped and laid back in his chestnut mane. Well. Now we know just how strong those principles weren't, when you were pushed to the wall.

Sighing, the former mayor set aside his copy of Fancy Cat and regarded the policewoman beyond the metal barrier with a world-weary, saddened gaze most unlike the calm, friendly, personable demeanor he usually adopted—especially for the press. "I see. Well then, I do believe I am at your immediate disposal, Officer...Swinton, isn't it? As I don't have any other pressing engagements monopolizing my time." He managed a small, lopsided smirk.

"Funny." The blond-haired pig reacted to his getting her name right though, probably without even being aware of it—standing up a bit straighter herself, tugging her uniform shirt smooth, and adopting a proper posture and gait as she moved to unlock the door with the key ring kept at her belt.

"I remember you," he added casually, as if only making conversation. "I presided at your graduation ceremony from the police academy, didn't I?"

"Yes." Swinton paused, then shot him a sardonic look as she swung the barred door open and stepped aside to allow him to pass, her other hand meaningfully gripping the handle of her nightstick. "And when Chief Bogo assigned me to jail duty, you were the one to approve the transfer."

The irony wasn't lost on him, but Lionheart only smiled (if a bit tightly), smoothing out his own blue prison garb before striding out into the corridor. "And I stand by that decision, Officer. You are a credit to your department, and I'll be sure to let Bogo know that the next time I see him."

He meant it to be a genuine compliment, but whether it was his phrasing or something in his tone or even the way he walked, Swinton narrowed her eyes frostily, slamming the cell door just inches behind him. Unable to help himself, the lion flinched visibly. "That's nice. I'm sure he'll appreciate a
good word from a convicted felon." She didn't grab his arm, but she did deliver a rather forceful push to the back of his shoulder. "Come on."

Wincing, the lion felt his smile falter even further into a very weak and timid example indeed. And that, Leodore, is a reminder of why you were never the real brains at City Hall...

By the time the two of them had reached the immaculate, white-walled visiting room, Lionheart had managed to recover his dignity (something else he felt befitted his stature and appearance), and also started to wonder just whom his visitors were. Visitors in the plural, Swinton had said. So it wasn't Bogo, who always came alone, or Gazelle come to make a peace offering (she would not have been alone, always accompanied by at least one of her burly, looming backup dancers, but he hadn't met with her since she first became the spokesmammal and welcome ambassador for Zootopia). So who? Reporters, again?

For a moment of mingled distress and shame, he began to fear it was his parents—elderly, but still quite strong, and strong-willed—or almost as bad, his brothers. He didn't know who would be worse, and he didn't think he could face any of their cynosure and disappointment in him. But then a thought occurred to him, one that caused hope to actually flare in his breast...

And it turned out to be absolutely right. For on the other side of the table, perched on a high-legged chair to keep her eyes at the proper level, was the very familiar, blue-clad form of Judy Hopps.

Lionheart stopped—luckily well inside the room, so when Swinton slammed the barred door behind him and took up her suspicious, watchful post, it didn't come close to hitting him this time—and stared at the rabbit. There was no possible way he could forget her, of course. Not only had she been the valedictorian in her class at police academy, and the first rabbit assigned to the police force under his Mammal Inclusion Initiative, but she had been the one to personally lead his arrest at Cliffside. She was also, he saw, accompanied by the slender, rather shifty fox who had been with her that cold, windy night above the waterfall, sauntering out as confident as any feline and seemingly unperturbed by the looks shot him by any of the cops on duty, even Bogo. He vaguely recalled the news reports in the months after Bellwether's arrest, one of which had mentioned that a fox had aided in the sheep's downfall and later attended police academy. He hadn't realized the fellow had been partnered with Judy, though it made sense in retrospect.

It also made him wary. When he had given his request to the warden, passed on through the Cape buffalo, that he wished to meet with Officer Hopps, he had hoped to meet with her alone. As unlikely as that was—even after the Pred Scare had ended, with the explanation proving it had nothing to do with biology or an inherent danger in meat-eating mammals, no one was likely to trust him for a good long time to come, certainly not a small bunny—he had counted on the resourceful, brave young lapine to dismiss any concerns raised by Bogo or other members of the ZPD. And he
had believed if he did get her alone, even with guards standing outside the room, he would be able to persuade her, turn on all his charm, appeal to her sense of justice and civic-mindedness, to get her to do as he asked.

But with this cynical, suspicious, distrustful fox at her side...?

After a few more moments, Judy cleared her throat and spoke. "It's been a while, sir." She seemed to hesitate over the last word, but went on gamely enough. "I wish I could say it's good to see you again. But I do have a pretty big caseload back on my desk at City Center, so maybe you can move things along and explain why we're here?"

The fox pursed his lips and observed, casually, "As dashing as your countenance is, Leodore—may I call you Leodore?—I think what Carrots is saying is we don't want to be staring back at it any longer than is strictly necessary. And if we really wanted to, we've got your mugshot back at the precinct to fulfill all our needs."

For a moment Lionheart bristled instinctively, he could even feel his mane puffing. But then he forced himself to calm down and, shooting the vulpine a deprecating look, he seated himself at the table. Trying not to be conscious of his handcuffs, he clasped his paws before himself and adopted his best conciliatory, contrite expression.

"Forgive me, I wasn't expecting anyone other than Miss Hopps. In fact I am frankly surprised she even agreed to meet with me at all." Although he kept his voice low and modulated, he couldn't fight back the tightness in his chest and throat. Steady. This is important...too important to overplay your hand and ruin things now.

"I wasn't going to," Judy admitted. "You haven't exactly done much to inspire trust lately." Indeed, ever since he'd entered the room she had been watching him warily—not so much the way prey had been eyeing predator during the crisis (and for much longer, truth be told), but the way a good cop eyed a dangerous perp.

He'd expected this, and launched into his rejoinder at once. "Look, I know you have no reason to believe anything I say—"

"True," the fox—Nick, was that his name?—interjected.

"—and that after what I've done, I don't deserve anything but exactly what I've gotten—"
"Right again!" His voice was even more flippant now. Although Lionheart restrained his temper by sheer force of will, he couldn't completely hold back the growl in his voice, or stop from clenching his fists in a manner that made ripples pass all the way up his arms so that his shoulders strained at the prison uniform.

"—but, I would appreciate it if you would try to see things from my position here."

Hopps shot the fox a meaningful, dirty look, but when she turned back to him her violet eyes didn't lose much of their hardness. "And why exactly should we do that?"

Lionheart clenched his jaw now. "Do you really think," he said, as softly as he could manage, "that anyone, even you, would have made a better decision if you'd been in my place? Surely you can admit that what we were facing was not something they cover in political science and government management classes—or police academy, for that matter."

A beat. "No, they don't," the rabbit replied, just as softly.

"Anyone who isn't biased—against me, against lions, against predators in general—would tell you that prior to this, I was doing an excellent job at running this very diverse, very large city. Anyone who is even a bit realistic would acknowledge that politics is the art of compromise, and sometimes compromises are dirty by necessity. Corruption is often unavoidable in the halls of power—but I ran a good, clean campaign, I did not fill City Hall with relatives or mammals to whom I owed favors, and in fact I removed a great deal of corruption. The Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Supervisors, is this ringing any bells, Hopps?"

He paused, then added quite firmly, "And since you graduated at the top of your class, I am quite certain you know all about Chief Bogo's predecessor, who was implicated in at least five counts of bribery, ten counts of negligence, numerous violations of procedure and fair dealings with the public, speciesism, perjury, and blatant disregard for the actions and attitudes of the officers under his command. That blue line you hear tell about? Well it was rather thick, not thin at ZPD! I personally fired that greedy, worthless ass—" He meant that literally, as Chief Jack Hemion had been an unprincipled donkey so determined to do things his own way that Lionheart swore he was the source of that particular stereotype of stubbornness. "—and it's because of me he's currently in a cell here while Bogo is your superior."

Judy's gaze, if anything, became even flintier, but then she nodded once, emphatically, before planting her paws on the table before her. "I don't deny any of that. You have done much good for the city. But need I remind you—"
"Yes, I am well aware of how I have hurt Zootopia! Even though that's the last thing that I wanted."

He hadn't intended it, but he ended up shouting this, the words echoing quite prominently in the otherwise empty room. He just hoped the officers could also hear the pain in them...and that it was absolutely real.

Whether they did or not, both of them were only gazing at him silently, perhaps a bit stunned or else waiting for him to continue. And after working to steady his breathing, and keep his voice from breaking, he did so, much more quietly.

"You know I had nothing to do with what happened. I told you so the night you arrested me—but I understand how bad it looked, what else were you to think?" He couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice and didn't bother trying; Bellwether had played them all so very well for fools, and he was the King of Fools. "Now that you know about the Night Howler, though...I would hope you would understand. Of course I was thinking of my career, who wouldn't in my place? But did it ever occur to you that perhaps the reason that mattered to me was because I was desperate to save this city...that I couldn't do so if I lost my position...and that I didn't trust whoever might follow me to do it in my stead?"

Gripping the edge of the table until he heard the plastic creak warningly, he managed a mirthless laugh. "And didn't I warn you what would happen if the news got out as to just who was 'going savage' and who was not? That we didn't know why it was happening or how to stop it, let alone cure it?" He hated to use the 'I told you so' argument, but considering how Zootopia had nearly dissolved into anarchy and chaos, prey against predators, fear and hatred sweeping everywhere, and all of it orchestrated and presided over by a ruthless, calculating demagogue who would do anything to retain power for herself and those like her...

Judy stirred at last and nodded woodenly, her expression sober, pensive, and unsurprisingly a bit stricken. "You did, and you were right," she said, mollified and matter-of-fact. But her voice shook a bit with her next words. "And I did my part to help with that too, even though I didn't mean to."

Heartened by what seemed a bit of sympathy in those encouraging words, Lionheart pounced on this. "Exactly! As I said, I was trying to protect the city. Do you have any idea what would have happened if I had not held those mammals—for their own good, I might add!—in a facility where they could be kept safe, studied, given all the help medical science could offer, instead of out on the streets where they would have gone on a killing rampage?! Do you think a regular hospital could have handled them, or kept them from hurting themselves or others?"

"If I had contacted the families of those involved, to let them know their loved ones were as safe as they could be under the circumstances, and to ask their permission to keep them restrained, how many do you think would have said yes? How many would have demanded I release them into their
custody, to some hospital closer to them or even into their own homes, because 'it'll be fine, he would never hurt his family'?” His stilted sarcasm was rather cloying and snide now, even to him. He tried to dial it back.

"How many, even if they had agreed, would have been able to keep it secret so that the press didn't get hold of it? All it would have taken was one. And if the truth had come out sooner, we would have seen the same thing we did, only maybe worse...hate crimes, rioting, terrorism..."

Now it was Nick who cut him off. "Are you honestly trying to say this is all just a bum rap? That you weren't just looking out for number one, like everyone else in this world, that you're 'not a crook', and you should just be released from custody and—?"

"No, of course not!" the lion scoffed. "Whatever you think to the contrary, I have far more integrity than that." At the fox's skeptical look, he waved a huge paw, the links of his handcuffs swinging and reflecting the cold, antiseptic light. "Mr. Wilde, was it? Let me speak to you, predator to predator. I saw that rather ill-considered press conference your partner gave. So I know you understand how easy it is for someone to be swayed to think the worst of mammals like us...to make assumptions on facts not in evidence, to use the legal vernacular. I would think you, of all mammals, would understand what I have been subjected to here. But, that does not mean I intend to circumvent rule of law."

He glanced from Nick, who was the one looking grim with jaw clenched tightly now, back to Judy—who, he saw with a flush of guilt, was looking rather horrified and upset at the mention of that disastrous press conference where a few thoughtless words from her had divided the city. "Whatever my reasons and justifications, and however good, noble, and well-intended they may have been, they were still illegal. I may have done it for the right reasons, but it was still the wrong thing.

"I was still an accessory to kidnapping, I obstructed justice by concealing what I was doing from Bogo, I misappropriated government resources, and I violated due process. Believe me, I know. I am not innocent here. That is why I did not resist arrest, and have not retained a lawyer for anything more than assuring my rights are protected and my trial will be fair. I may not have a leg to stand on, but that has not stopped high-powered defendants before. Surely you noticed I wasn't fighting tooth and claw against the system?"

The question was rhetorical, but Judy answered it anyway. "As a matter of fact, I did. I just thought you'd seen the writing on the wall and knew there was no point. But you're saying you think this is justice?” Her tone was dubious, though whether at him admitting such a thing or it actually being just, he wasn't sure.

"Yes and no. I think the city needed a scapegoat—that Bellwether wanted me to take the blame for her crimes, so she could take over and out of misguided vengeance against me—and what I had done made me the easy and only real target. I think everyone was so willing to believe in the corruption of
politicians, and my conflict of interest as a predator, that they were quick to judge me, to write me off so it looked like something was being done, the system was working. But that doesn't mean I was faultless and didn't deserve some kind of punishment."

He took a deep breath, looked from one cop to the other, but mostly focused his imploring eyes on Judy. "I'm going to do my time, pay my debt to society. And when I am released from prison, I intend to do everything I can to make it up to the mammals of Zootopia." *Including you, Miss Hopps,* he thought fiercely.

For though he couldn't admit it aloud, he had deeply admired her for her achievements at the academy, and been pleased she was the first beneficiary of the Mammal Inclusion Initiative. That she had been a boon to the ZPD was unquestionable, after what she had done to stop Bellwether. If he could manage to win even a modicum of respect back from her...

For a long time, no one spoke, the only sound being a soft "hum" Nick made under his breath and the squeak of the rabbit's chair as she shifted about uncomfortably; he couldn't tell if this was because his words had made her feel guilty for doubting him, or because despite them she still intended to refuse any leniency with him. "That's very kind of you to say, sir." This time she uttered the term of respect far more sincerely. "But while I'm very glad to hear it, I didn't have to. Because Nick here had already convinced me to come and hear what you had to say."

Lionheart's jaw dropped...but when he finally managed to turn and look at the fox, the smug and lazily dismissive look that seemed to be his default expression had been replaced by one of serious, calm acceptance. "That's right, Lionfart," he deadpanned, and it was a testament to how stunned (and grateful) he was by the other predator having defended him without him knowing it that the lion didn't snarl at that hated nickname.

"You see, everything you said dovetails rather neatly with what I'd told Carrots here not too long after Bogo shared your request with us. As soon as we knew someone was actually targeting predators to go 'savage', and we saw what this was doing to the city, I started questioning what we'd been told, and what we concluded. As soon as we knew your woolly little assistant was behind it all, and had stood the most to gain all along, you looked a lot less guilty. And I had a lot of time to think about things from your side, while I was at the academy."

Nick paused, glanced at Judy, then actually smiled warmly. "I just thought it'd do Hopps here better to hear it from the lion's mouth, so to speak."

Again, silence descended, lasting so long he was afraid Swinton would come and say his time was up before he could finally tell them why he had called them here. Privately, the feline took back every negative thought and judgment he'd had of the fox. Then at last Lionheart said, gently, "Thank you. You have no idea what it means to hear you say that."
The rabbit glanced at her partner and smiled a little. "I think I do. But as heartwarming and important as it is to hear your side of the story, what I don't understand is why it took you so long to tell us...and why you did, if you aren't trying to convince us to get you out of jail."

The former mayor nodded slowly. "Well now, the first is quite simple, I wanted to make sure that a cure had been found and the city was safe again. I knew that was paramount to everything else, and no one, not even you, would listen to me until that had happened regardless. As for the second...because understanding where I am coming from is essential if you are to help me with what I do want."

Both of them blinked several times at this. Then Judy continued, "And that would be...?"

Lionheart took a deep breath, let it out, and rumbled, "There is one further reason why finding the cure was so important to me, personally. Yes, I was trying to protect myself. Can you blame me, when I myself am, as I told Dr. Honey Badger, a very large and potentially dangerous predator?" His words started coming out in a rush as he confessed his fears and worries—partly to arouse enough sympathy that they would understand his motivations, but also because he simply couldn't help himself.

"Do you have any idea how terrified I was that I could be—in fact, likely would be—the next target? Do you know what it's like to imagine yourself losing control, intelligence, sentience, everything...regressing back to our savage past, where instinct and hunger and bloodlust governed all, and only a heartbeat separated you from tearing a fellow mammal to shreds instead of lazily lounging by a waterhole?"

Even now, thinking about it had the feline so frightened that he could actually smell his fear musk in the air, something that had never happened before in his life (at least not for many years), but which he'd become quite familiar with in his visits to Cliffside. Even aside from the repugnance (but somewhere, buried deep down, secret attraction...) of such a mindset, for someone like him to lose control of himself was a personal fear that made his nightmares all the darker, more twisted and sweat-soaked.

From the looks on both their faces, his visitors knew exactly what he was talking about, but somehow it didn't surprise him when it was Nick who said, "Yeah, actually we do. But other than making it so we have to take our nice, new uniform pants to the laundromat, what's your point?"

"Just this." Again he took a shaky breath, pulled himself together. "Not only was I afraid for myself...I was afraid for someone else I care about. Not only was I trying to protect myself, I was trying to protect them. And not only was I trying to learn what was causing this, to find a cure, so as
to help the city, I was trying to learn it to cure someone who mattered personally to me, someone who I had already seen go through the very thing I feared.

Judy sat up straight, ears erect, whiskers twitching. "What are you talking about? We rescued all fifteen mammals, and none of them had any connection to y—"

"There weren't just fifteen savage mammals," Lionheart said, softer than ever now. "And they weren't all at Cliffside."

Dead silence greeted this pronouncement.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure Swinton wasn't listening in, Lionheart went on. "Didn't you ever stop to wonder how I knew about the savage cases? Didn't you ever wonder who Patient Zero might have been?" He reached across the table toward Judy, dared to take her paws in his, as he poured his heart and soul into his next words, as he became more and more frenzied and intense in his efforts to convince her. She had to know, she had to help him, everything depended on it! If she didn't...he would be truly broken. He would be dust.

"Please, Officer Hopps...Officer Wilde." He directed his words at the fox as well, but didn't take his eyes off the rabbit, though. "Please. I need your help. I do need out of prison—but only temporarily. Only I know where this last mammal is, and only I can be allowed to bring him the cure. If you let me do this, in secret, without any of you knowing who he is...after which I will return quite meekly to my cell...I'll do whatever you want. Make restitution. Refuse to run for office again once I've served my time. Whatever you want."

"You should do that anyway, Leodore," Judy said—but it wasn't snapped, demanded, or hissed...it was said gently, with sympathy and caring. Her paws squeezed his back, and those huge purple eyes of hers bored into his. "And as much as you've shown you aren't to blame for this, that you don't deserve all the hate and distrust you're getting, I wouldn't be doing this for your sake. If I do it, it'll be to help that last mammal."

Meanwhile, Nick leaned in from the side, and he was smirking again. "Consider it done, your Highness. I'll send a bill and expense report to your re-election campaign."

Ignoring the regal terminology again, he brushed the fox aside. All right, maybe I don't take back everything I thought about him. "I wasn't planning to do that anyway." As the other predator stared at him, startled into silence once more, he pressed on. "I only made that offer to show you how very serious I am about this deal. I'll agree to whatever stipulations you do want, I'll sign the paperwork, I'll call my lawyer off, I'll get on my knees and beg Bogo if I have to. Or you." His voice was
breaking now, and he didn't fight it anymore, he didn't stop the tears that he felt welling up in his eyes from running down his cheeks and falling to soak the fur of both his and Judy's paws.

"Please. I'll do anything. Please, say you'll help me."

He broke off in a sob...one that turned into a shaking, shuddering gasp of tearful relief, as he could see in the rabbit's softening gaze what her answer was going to be.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, I had never thought I'd be writing fanfiction for *Zootopia*, mostly because I love the movie as is and didn't feel I could add anything to it, or that whatever potential the world and characters had, I was more interested in what Disney had to say on the matter in future sequels. But also because I couldn't figure out what story to write, what to focus on, how to approach the movie's themes and subject matter. I finally did though, so here I am!

This story, as you can see, is mostly Lionheart-centric. To anyone who knows me this should be no surprise. But also to anyone who knows me, you can see I am not going easy on him any more than I did Tai Lung. (Not that I compare their crimes at all, but both of them are characters many fans of the respective movies hate and/or refuse to give any leniency or forgiveness.) There will also be plenty of stuff for other characters to do, and lots of fun with Nick and Judy including hints at their possible romance for those who want that sort of thing. ;)

Lastly, along the way I'll be doing my usual thing of pointing out shout-outs and sources if I feel a need to, but I'll also be explaining animal puns thanks to the universe in question. This chapter contains one in Bogo's predecessor as Chief of the ZPD, Jack Hemion. Not only is a jack a male donkey, but the taxonomic name of the Asiatic donkey, or onager, is *Equus hemionus*. Considering Bogo's own name is Swahili for buffalo, it seemed fitting—surnames relating to species is apparently a feature of the Zootopian world. Also, I can't move on without noting that Lionheart's bit of recognizing/remembering Swinton is a subtle nod to her having been the Mayor (and actual ringleader of the anti-pred conspiracy instead of Bellwether) in the original script. Though there's also another reason she's in the story...
"Well, Leodore? What do you think?"

The impeccably well-dressed feline paused to take stock of his surroundings—not City Hall itself, although the architectural marvel which combined the best of modern design with features meant to hearken back to the natural beauty of mammals' primitive past was indeed quite thrilling to behold. And he had to admire the symbolism of it, too—two towering pinnacles of pure white stone, standing for predator and prey, with a magnificent waterfall pouring down between to join them in unity, all of it surrounded by well-manicured grounds, carefully tended groves of acacia and kigelia, and with a giant crescent entranceway of marble and gold curving across its vast facade. A true jewel in the crown of Zootopia's Savanna Central, and one of the most memorable and beloved of all of Frank Llama Wright's buildings.

But all of that lay out of view, for of course the newly-elected Mayor Lionheart was inside said building, standing in what was now his office, to be exact. Yet that didn't make the view any less impressive or a source of pride. The room was, quite frankly, enormous, to the point that if he were to sit down behind the long wooden desk even he would look tiny, and everything about it bespoke luxury, strength, power, confidence, and trust. Marble sheathed it as well, both floor and walls, with artfully-inset panels of makore and iroko wood in swirling, alternating bands, while giant windows behind the desk commanded a breath-taking view of the city's tallest and most unusual skyscrapers. The desk chair itself was a massive piece of furniture covered in imitation black leather, while flagstaffs flanked the desk, bearing the city seal of Zootopia itself and the multicolored patchwork which represented the united mammal species. On one wall hung the Key to the City on its teak
plaque, while a shelf below held the numerous awards and honors which had been granted to past occupants of the office. There was even a lovely rock garden below the shelf as well as winding along the windows, all to add to the natural, soothing atmosphere of the place.

Lionheart turned to face his companion—though such a word hardly seemed fitting for the Assistant Mayor of Zootopia, and could never truly cover what this mammal and his friendship meant to him—and smiled warmly as he gripped his lapels in both paws. "Why, my dear Mr. Stagmire, I think it's an office fit for a king, of course."

Massive antlers (they had to have sixteen points by now) cast strange, overlapping shadows on the double doors behind him as the deer shook his head disapprovingly. "Leo," he chided under his breath. "None of that. There's no audience here, no adoring public—and if there were, you know very well that such an attitude would actually not go over well at all."

The feline grinned even wider, showing his teeth in his patented goofy smile that always managed to disarm even the stoniest of hearts. "But there's an audience of one. Are you telling me you're not impressed?" He thrust out his massive chest with a deep inhalation, knowing how very well this set off his magnificent, well-groomed mane, its rich hues shining like a sunlit forest that lay dappled by shadows at the fringes.

The stag narrowed his eyes flatly, crossing his arms over his own broad torso. "I've known you since you were in onesies, it takes a great deal more than that to impress me. And on that note, don't make me tell the press about your novelty-print underwear."

In spite of himself, Lionheart flushed, but quickly covered his embarrassment by also crossing his arms and turning away with an arrogant uplift of his chin. "Well, if you're going to be that way about it. You never let me have any fun."

"We're not here to have fun," the cervine retorted, albeit good-naturedly. "We're here to bring dignity back to this office and make Zootopia a better place." He paused, then smirked. "Besides, I'm having fun."

For a few more moments they mock-glared at each other. Then both of them burst out laughing.

Buckley Stagmire. As the deer had stated, they had known each other for so many years, since they were young children...growing up together as next-door neighbors (though they hadn't realized it until encountering each other in grade school) in the district where the Meadowlands bordered downtown—his family even had a street there named after them!—separating when the Stagmire family moved away from Sahara Square, reuniting again briefly in high school when the Lionheart
family came back to Savanna Central, then attending Zootopia State University together. No matter how long they were apart, they always reconnected instantly, no matter how much they changed at the core they and their relationship remained the same. And he was the best friend Leodore had ever had—or ever would, he believed.

Despite being predator and prey, they had always had so much surprisingly in common—both had been athletes, determined to get their young bodies into peak physical condition, but both had also been excellent students and focused on their education. Although admittedly Buckley had always been the more intelligent of the two, with Leodore focusing more on his natural gift for charisma and persuasive speaking. This had caused their relationship to quickly settle into “face” vs. "brains", with the lion employing his flair with oratory, emotional appeal, and personable connectedness while the stag backed him up with concrete ideas and plans, the feline being the big dreamer and idealist who aimed for the moon while his competent, diligent, and meticulously cautious companion provided the support that would let them still land among the stars if they missed—and have actual, achievable goals supported by realistic resources when they got there.

In high school Leodore had been class president, while Buckley had been treasurer; the cervine had been the valedictorian and the maned cat had finished lower, although still well within the top ten. In college the lion had risen in the ranks to summa cum laude to Buckley's magna cum laude, and this despite him originally falling into the typical trap of fraternity life—his friend had made sure to steer him off that course, urging him to apply himself and become a model student because of how much he believed in him, believed he could help make the world a better place...and that it would be a colossal waste of his talents if he didn't. And they had remained in lockstep when after graduation and almost two decades of highly visible and lauded work in the private sector—the deer in the business world, the lion in the non-profit and philotherian—Lionheart had entered politics, spending several years as a City Councilor, after which they had both decided to run for the highest offices in the city.

Now, having run on a platform that played perfectly into the symbolic imagery of City Hall—the unity of prey and predator—with Leodore as the King of the Jungle and Buckley as the Prince of the Forest, they had taken the election with a sweeping victory. Everything had played out like clockwork: by growing out his antlers, Buckley had presented an image of strength and power, one that reassured the prey voters that despite Leodore still being the taller of the two, his running mate could "keep him in line" if necessary; meanwhile, the lion had played up the claim (which as far as he knew was entirely true) that he and his family were descended from the very mammals who had first sworn the Pact of New Beginning at the waterhole that had become Savanna Central's celebrated fountain.

From there it hadn't been hard to parlay their old nicknames as the king and his advisor into a very near truth. The final touch had been Buckley's former status as co-owner of Hexward Pharmaceuticals—the revenue from selling his shares in the company, as well as his renown as a "miracle maker", had greatly aided Lionheart's campaign, while the stag's divestiture had been a clear sign that there would be no conflicts of interest, no corporate espionage or unfair tax breaks to benefit big business and its rich CEOs, in their administration. And of course, there had been the Mammal Inclusion Initiative...something which, while it was obviously geared to appeal to prey
voters, both of them had planned and ironed out together, something both of them genuinely believed in and supported with all their hearts.

Now...now after years of working toward it, they were here, they had the power to put this and many other laws and ordinances into effect, to make all their dreams for a more just and equitable city, a true utopia, come to pass. That, more than the elegance and beauty of their surroundings, was what had Lionheart filled with awe, responsibility, and pride.

Letting out a contented sigh as he once more ran his paws along his lapels and down his expensive suitjacket, Leodore shot his friend a warm, fond smile; while he privately thought it was own dashing, handsome visage that had looked best for the cameras and brought their campaign the needed boost (anyone who claimed how a candidate looked and thus made them feel did not matter for their chances at winning was either a liar or far too naive about the way the world worked), he had to admit Buckley had always looked just as attractive to the public. Rather hard not to, with his build nearly matching Lionheart's, the ruff of fur surrounding his neck and chest being almost as thick and luxurious as the lion's mane, the rather classically-shaped features of his tapered muzzle and scoop-like ears, and his dark eyes that managed to be kind, stern, and incisive all at once.

"We did it, Bucky." The private nickname came easily to him, here in the empty office, just as 'Leo' had for the stag (and which was why its use hadn't bothered the feline). "We've made it to the big leagues."

"You mean we weren't there already?" Buckley replied dryly. "Or should I say you were; affluent, influential, heir to one of the richest, most well-connected and respected families in Zootopia..." He gestured idly in the air with one hoof, as if each of these undeniable facts were of no moment, something so familiar and commonplace as to be easily dismissed from consideration, and Leodore had to snort back a laugh; the deer's accomplishments at Hexward had made him just as meritorious, just as impressive and trusted by the public. But as if he'd been reading the predator's thoughts, Stagmire suddenly smiled approvingly. "I never doubted we'd get here, Leodore. Never doubted it for a second."

"That makes one of us." The stag blinked at him in some surprise, but Leodore shrugged as he turned to stride slowly, thoughtfully, toward the desk and the view behind it. "Oh, I know we ran an excellent campaign, we are both admired and respected pillars of the community, and when we put our minds to something, there's nothing we can't do." He paused, running a claw lightly along the wooden trim of the desk. "But you and I both know we are also extremely progressive...and there are many elements, especially here in Zootopia, who are against what we stand for, worked very hard to discredit us...and will do anything they can to put a stop to us now that we're in office. It was not a done deal by any means...and just because the polls are in doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels."

Buckley seemed even more startled at the lion's thoughtful and insightful analysis; while Leodore
was more bombastic and impulsive, less patient and methodically efficient, than his friend, he was hardly stupid either. And it didn't take a genius to understand what forces had been and would continue to be arrayed against them in the coming months and years. If he had rarely ever advertised his cunning, it only gave him one more ace up his sleeve against his enemies—and even Buckley himself, just to keep him on his hooves.

Of course, the deer wasn't off his game for more than a few moments. "I never said we should. I was merely reminding you that although the road which carried us here was rocky, and we will still be swimming against the current when it comes to our political future, I believe in us, and always will." He smiled, coming up behind him to rest a hoof warmly on Lionheart's shoulder, before adopting a more severe look. "As long as you follow my lead, of course. You may be the mayor now, and you've got good instincts and bold plans for the city—but they'll never get off the ground if you don't listen to my advice. Trust me, I can work miracles for you, too."

"Now who's got the swelled head?" The feline said it sardonically though, with affection in his voice, as he looked back at the other's sincere, focused expression. "You deserve it, though. And you know very well that while I've got a mind of my own, I will always take what you say to heart. There's no one else I'd rather have by my side, Bucky."

His assistant mayor chuckled softly. "By your side, rather than behind or below you. Very good, you're learning. Stop it, though, you're embarrassing me." Indeed, he was turning a deep and ruddy red beneath his brown face fur. Coughing to clear his throat, the deer moved past the desk, stopping to gaze out at the city...watching the sun gleam off of countless windows and steel frames in every skyscraper, the water shimmering in Bayou Bay and Zootopia Sound, as well as the Lion's Tail River that wound past Sahara Square for its water supply and the Mongoose River that carried shipping for the Rainforest District. The train flashed brightly as it zoomed by toward its station, and there was even a glimpse of a low-flying plane. Then Buckley started, as if remembering something. "Oh, I almost forgot."

Turning again, he crossed back to where he had left his things by one of the room's many shelves, picked up a small, brightly-wrapped package, and brought it to his friend. "Your congratulations-on-winning-the-election gift."

Lionheart raised an eyebrow. Stagmire was a caring mammal, but he was also not known for demonstrative acts, especially ones which required an expenditure of money; while no miser, he was extremely frugal. "Gift-giving? How unlike you."

"Don't worry, it's already starting to bore me," the stag replied dryly. "Besides, I got a very good deal on it. Go on, open it." There was something about the expectant and far-too-innocent look on his face...
Carefully and tidily the lion undid the crimson bow and opened the bright yellow tissue paper to reveal a plain white gift box inside. He opened the lid, shifted aside the cushioning stuffings...and as he pulled out the novelty coffee mug inside so he could see what was written on its side, he began to laugh.

"You're welcome," Buckley offered impudently. "Just so you won't forget our college days together."

Smirking down at the message printed on the side of the cup, he drawled, "As if I could! And this particular bit, you're never going to let go of, are you?"

It was an old joke between them...started by how paternal lions in general appeared once their manes grew in to full and heavy lengths, aided by the way Leodore had tended to look out for the new freshmen in high school and again at college, fulfilled by how he had always been there for Buckley—from when he was picked on as a child before he hit his growth spurt (and the weights as well), to when he lost his father in that terrible car accident, to how he'd made sure the overly-studious and introverted deer actually took time out to eat, sleep, and have something resembling a social life. And now that they were both in their forties, and the lion actually looked the part...

"And lose the best ammunition I have to puncture your ego, when you get a bit too convinced you're the hottest thing on the market?" Buckley's eyes twinkled with merry malice. "Not a chance."

"I'll have you know," Lionheart replied, with as much aplomb and formality as he could muster, while running a paw haughtily back through his mane, "that there is nothing undignified or unattractive about being fatherly." He paused, set the mug down on the desk so the words "World's Greatest Dad" faced out into the room, and then grinned. "Besides, you know a man with kids is always a hit with the ladies."

Stagmire laughed genuinely, even as he scoffed, "You actually have to have some of those for that to work. And tell that to the next fellow you see burping his baby on his shoulder-bib, only for it to miss. Or need I remind you of every one of my own father's terrible dad jokes?" Even as Leodore winced at the memories, the deer relented with a small sigh. "But seriously: congratulations, my friend. You've earned it. And I look forward to working with you here, Mr. Lionheart." And he held out his hoof.

The lion took it without hesitation, shaking slowly, firmly, with quiet confidence and strength. "Likewise, Mr. Stagmire. I think this is the beautiful beginning of a whole new relationship for us." And this time he gave his dashing, charm-the-press-and-public smile.

Even if he was absolutely going to get his friend back for that mug. He didn't know how, and he
didn't know when, but one way or another, there would be payback.

By now he really should have expected this. He had known Judy Hopps long enough to understand how cursedly idealistic and unrelentingly optimistic she was, even when common sense and reality and pragmatism all spoke against it—especially then, in fact. He had seen her beat her little lapine head against problem after problem...being so small in a world that literally looked down on her, being a prey species (and specifically a rabbit) in a world that dismissed her alternately with scorn and condescension, being the first of her kind in a very difficult line of work, being relegated to a lowly meter maid (never mind that this was how all beat cops in Zootopia started if he had any say in the matter, and that it was an excellent way to receive a crash course in understanding and memorizing the city), and of course the savage mammals case that had turned out to be more far-reaching, and more sinister, than he could ever have imagined.

The fact she had succeeded at all of these, and with flying colors in most cases while bouncing back with alacrity from the times she failed initially, had only encouraged her to be even more determined, to believe she could do anything if she set her mind to it. Against his will, he had come to admire this about her and accepted she was the best new recruit his department had had in many a year—assuming, of course, that she drew upon the encyclopedic knowledge she'd gained at the academy and actually went by the book more often instead of being so damned impulsive.

Yet none of this changed the fact that when she came to him and explained just what Leodore Lionheart had called her to prison to speak with her about, and what she had agreed to, Chief Arthur Bogo was stunned speechless for a few very long moments before he leaned forward, planting his hooves on his desk...and as he glared at her from behind his glasses, growled in a slow fury, "Hopps...are you...out of...your bloody mind?"

To her credit, the rabbit didn't back down or even cringe, remaining quite still perched on her chair with her paws clasped on the desk, though she did look somewhat apologetic. "Actually, sir, I was more thinking it's the right thing to do."

"You do not get to decide that, Hopps, and by doing so you have stepped out of line. Not that I'm surprised!" He snorted, though he realized even as he did so that there wasn't as much force behind it as he'd have liked it—more disgruntled than truly furious.

Judy fixed her gaze on his unwaveringly, ears erect, jaw set, as she replied with quiet confidence. "With all due respect, sir, while I don't get to decide what the law says is right, I do get to decide what my own morals and conscience say on the matter."
If this had been after her first posting at ZPD (which was, as he'd bitterly and irately informed her at the time, purely a political move on Lionheart's part), he'd have laid into her at once, made the windows vibrate with his bellows as he gave her an earful on where she could shove her personal opinions—even without City Hall, the press, and the public breathing down his neck, the simple fact was he didn't have the luxury of looking beyond the law and placing it in proper context. Not when it was often difficult simply to uphold the law itself to begin with. And after the graft and corruption of the city government (and specifically, his predecessor's administration), Bogo had only been too aware of how critical it was to be seen adhering to the letter of the law rather than creative interpretations of it.

On the other hand...he had also, in the last few months, received a very sobering wake-up call that simply following the law, not considering its ramifications, acting on assumptions and face value rather than checking to ensure his officers' actions were in step with the spirit, not just the letter, was just as dangerous. Not just to his credibility and the public's trust in his department, but to guaranteeing true justice was done and things like that nasty Bellwether plot weren't able to get off the ground, let alone get that frighteningly close to succeeding and becoming the new normal. The world might be broken, but that didn't mean he shouldn't fight to repair and salvage what remained, or should stand in the way of someone who still believed it could be done. Not if he wanted to keep it from being truly smashed beyond all hope.

To put it succinctly, as much as it rankled him, he should want his officers to have hearts and minds like Judy's. To know all the laws and rules like the backs of their paws, but to also understand why they were adopted, what they truly meant, how they affected real lives in the real world...and to be the first to voice objections when the law stopped being fair and needed to be modified or outright replaced, not blindly enforced.

Still...that didn't mean this particular application of generosity and goodwill was the correct course. Or that he shouldn't hold Hopps accountable for going with her gut instead of not thinking things through.

Leaning back in his chair, the Cape buffalo removed his spectacles and rubbed at his temple and forehead with one hoof. He definitely felt a headache coming on. But after a few more moments he replaced his glasses, looked over them at Judy, and then sighed heavily. "It's the right thing to do," he echoed her, sardonic and wry. "You realize, of course, that whenever you say that it means more trouble for me."

The rabbit chuckled nervously, rubbing at the back of her neck...but she still didn't back down, only shrugging a bit and flushing even as she kept up that winsome, perky smile. It made him want to vomit...but he also knew he wasn't budging her on this. Not without more information, and a more conciliatory approach.

"Explain to me again what that puffed-up pussycat wants...and just why I should be signing off on
this—" He caught himself just before saying 'hare-brained.' "—ridiculous plan of yours instead of revoking Lionheart's visiting privileges and putting you back on parking duty for a month." All right, so that only cut back on the vinegar by a tad, but it was the closest he'd ever come to honey, and she knew it.

Even as he listened to her once again launch into the story the lion had spun for her and Nick, why she believed in his sincerity, and why she felt this was not something they could afford to ignore, Bogo reflected that while hardly anyone would fault him for being reluctant to grant the former mayor any leniency, he really should be more willing to listen than he was. While the sad state of reality was that politicians were often cut from the same cloth and their ratio of underhanded, dirty tactics to genuine concern for and championing of their constituents' needs was usually skewed toward the former, he had to admit the difference wasn't always one of degree. Lionheart in particular truly had been better than most mayors of Zootopia in living memory, and while some would accuse the Cape buffalo of favoritism since he owed his job (and the relative leeway he had in carrying it out) to the feline, he couldn't deny that the cat had done right by the city, the voters, and the majority of his administration.

Perhaps that was why Bogo had been so hard on him, so unforgiving; because Lionheart had had such promise, had set the bar so high with his previous words and actions, that to have him turn out to be prone to the same corruption and self-interest in the end had felt worse than usual, a personal betrayal. You were supposed to be better than this, Leodore! he had found himself fuming that rainy, foggy night outside Cliffside, and he was certain he hadn't been the only one—in fact the sentiment had actually been expressed nearly word for word by many pundits and others in the media when the story broke.

Yet now as he listened to Hopps explaining not only what it was Lionheart wanted—not a slap on the wrist, a greasing of the gears, special treatment, even a waiving of the law altogether, but a simple mercy mission in return for which he was willing to give the lawyers carte blanche in prosecuting his case—but why he had acted as he had, Bogo finally found the red haze fading from his mind. Because the truth was, the way Judy laid out the lion's words (and he knew they were Lionheart's, not just a softened or more flattering re-statement by the bunny, because she'd recorded the whole conversation—thankfully, on something with far more memory than that ludicrous carrot pen of hers), he could understand the predator's position better.

It didn't take much thought at all to imagine how Lionheart had seen the plague of savage mammals as a personal threat to him—not just his position, his career, his power, but his own sanity and life. In fact Bogo realized with some discomfort that if he'd been in danger of becoming a savage, he'd have done just about anything to prevent it...and if the possibility he could were to be leaked to the press, he'd have been just as determined to prevent that—less because of his job than because he didn't want that sort of tripe to gain any foothold in the public consciousness; the way the city had nearly fallen into hysterical armed camps over all this had disgusted the Cape buffalo as much as it angered him. This didn't mean he condoned circumventing or breaking the law, there had to be a better way...but he could admit, if only to himself, that the options were rather limited in such a situation and panic didn't make for the best mindset in which to consider them.
All that being said, though, even if the lion had been trying to prevent the rise of fear and hatred in Zootopia, had genuinely wanted to find the source of the savage attacks and cure it, and had only made use of corruption to staunch the bleeding so to speak, Bogo didn't like the way Lionheart had treated him throughout all of this. While he would not say the two of them had ever been real friends, they had certainly had a cordial and amicable relationship. He had trusted the lion, had thought the other mammal trusted him. They had worked together on a number of civic projects, another example of how predators and prey could come together for mutual advantage.

He had wholeheartedly approved of Lionheart's Mammal Inclusion Initiative—it was having the results forced on his department he resented, not the policy itself or what it represented. And it had been a genuine pleasure working with City Hall to clean up the city, particularly during the lion's most recent term thanks to the competency, brilliance, and unimpeachable integrity of the Zootopian Department of Justice as led by the previous Assistant Mayor, Buckley Stagmire. Hell, he'd even had a number of enjoyable and amusing poker nights with the feline!

So to have Lionheart refuse to confide in him, to confess to him the truth of what was going on so they could pool their resources and find a legal but still clandestine means of addressing the situation...to instead lie to him, use him, keep him and his men running around trying to clean up the mess on the pretext of appearing to be doing something, only to leave him holding the bag when the scandal broke...it hurt. He didn't like being kept in the dark, he absolutely hated being anyone's patsy or fall guy...only the fact Bellwether had done far worse, and in fact played both of them, mitigated his resentment to a manageable level.

(When the truth had come out, during the lion's interrogation, that all the directives from City Hall pressuring him to find the missing mammals had come from Bellwether, delivered via the government's official channels and e-mails, so as to expose both the mayor's hidden doings and the growing "plague", the buffalo had felt a right idiot. But why should he have been suspicious, when nothing had ever been out-of-place or unusual? The sheep had even known far too well how to imitate the imperious, forceful tone of the mayor's writing, and when backed up by the occasional meekly apologetic call from Dawn, to the tune of "I'm sorry, Bogo, I know you're trying really hard, but I just got this in from Lionheart, and he is super duper miffed about those missing mammals..." None of that changed, however, the fact the feline had still allowed him to waste time looking for something the location of which he had already known all along, all so he'd be kept distracted from any activity at Cliffside.)

But while if he had ever heard Wilde's speech to Hopps about "not letting anyone see that they've gotten to you" he would have agreed emphatically (if not for quite the same reason), Bogo also knew he couldn't let this hurt keep him from making a rational decision here.

Namely, that as much as he gritted his teeth at the way Hopps was undercutting his authority again, and as much as a big part of him worried this was all some scam intended to leave the ZPD with even more egg on its collective face while Lionheart got away with his crimes, this was a problem that deserved redress. If even half of what the lion had said was true, resolving this would be a coup for the department, would cut off at the knees any last lingering attempts to capitalize on the sheep's
divisive scheme, and would leave Lionheart himself utterly in their debt and at their mercy. So long as, of course, they were careful to consider every eventuality, prepare for any sort of treachery or deception. And, he also had to admit, at least this time Judy was keeping him in the loop...

The sudden silence in the office alerted him to the fact the rabbit in question had finished speaking. Looking up from where he'd had his eyes fixed on the blotter, Bogo regarded her stonily, refusing to grant her any leeway in this; just because she was right, and Lionheart had them both over a barrel, didn't mean he had to like it, let alone that he'd capitulate just like that. Even aside from his standards, that way lay madness, as he'd have Judy or Nick constantly using his good graces to try and obtain all manner of favors in the name of the common (or personal) good, regardless what the law had to say on the matter.

Lifting one hoof, he pointed accusingly at the lapine, waited until she swallowed a bit, then spoke more soft and low than ever—something he knew was far more menacing and unnerving than any raging shout, even if his temper kept him from applying the insight more often. "All right, let me make one thing clear here, Hopps: if, and I do mean if, I give you the go-ahead on this, it will only be with a clear chain of command, under my direct authority, and with my stipulations strictly applied. No cowboy cop vigilantism from you and Wilde on this—if matters get out of control, if there is a greater danger than you expected or can handle, you let. Me. Know. Because in case you'd forgotten, the ZPD isn't just some resource for you to siphon off and use to forward your own goals, and I'm not just your boss. We enforce the law, we protect the citizens first...and we are your backup, we will be there for you as needed, as long as you keep us informed."

Judy looked deeply mollified...but also touched, to judge by the warm flush in her cheeks and the way her ears kept shifting between lying back and perking up. Bogo had to force himself not to visibly roll his eyes. *The last thing I need is for her to get some fool idea that was an invitation to hug.* "Th-thank you, sir. I won't let you down, I promise."

"Hmm." With that noncommittal (and deeply dubious) grunt, he shuffled the papers on his desk and continued in a slightly less belligerent tone. "Very well. In that case, allow me to describe the preliminary protections you're going to have to agree to if we move forward on this—no questioning me on them."

She nodded.

"First, a tracker."

Judy smirked lopsidedly. "Already on it, sir. I may be fast, and Nick is sly, but if we let Lionheart out of our sight he could get a really big headstart on us—and quite the head of steam. I was going to requisition one from you as soon as you gave us the green light."
Bogo paused. On the one hand, this was a very good sign of Hopps actually thinking ahead, coming up with workable plans that relied on more than her intellect, intuition, and innate belief in the goodness of mammals. On the other hand, he hated being second-guessed or having his orders appropriated to justify her own desires. The only way this would have been more infuriating was if the smart aleck Wilde had been the one to say it.

"Good, we're on the same page then," he answered at last, letting the moment pass. "Something easily concealed and undetectable. Ankle strap, I should think, camouflage colors. And on that note, he'll need a change of street clothes. Prison uniform is too noticeable, and there's no way in hell I'm letting him have a suit to wear."

"Again, my thoughts exactly, Chief. It's like our minds are becoming as one!" She grinned impishly, and Bogo felt vaguely ill at the thought. *Bloody hell, anything but that.*

Ignoring her, he continued, "Hopefully this will be a relatively swift and painless matter, but just in case, we don't need anyone recognizing him and giving the game away. This way, if someone does think he looks familiar, they'll just chalk it up to coincidence." No one ever thought they'd encounter a celebrity or other famous individual in their everyday lives, something it was nice to count on for once. And as far as everyone knew, of course, Lionheart would still be in prison.

"You'll also be taking an unmarked car. Although this will be official police business, the less mammals who know about that until after the fact, the better. And from what you've told me and Lionheart has hinted, we won't want bright lights and sirens drawing attention to wherever this missing mammal is being held anyway." He frowned to himself; it would be far better to simply have Lionheart tell them where the mammal was and be done with it. If the fellow was in as much danger as the lion suggested, he'd hardly withhold his identity or location for the sake of privacy if it would mean the other's death. Still, cooperating with the lion would go far toward establishing a good rapport, something which would be absolutely needed when this whole thing went to trial, it would earn them Lionheart's unconditional cooperation in turn, and it could well be he was correct to keep this under the table.

"Finally, you and Wilde will not be going with him alone. I want one other officer with you."

Hopps stared at him, flabbergasted; he could tell already by the set of her jaw and shoulders that she was ready to argue with him, and he even knew what her reasoning would be. "But, sir, I—"

"I *said* no arguments, Hopps."
"Do you really think it's wise, though?" she persisted, as if she were the bull here. "I mean, you just made it clear we need to keep this as quiet as possible. The more mammals who know—"

She had a good point there. "Which is why it will only be one," he countered. "As you just stated in regards to his ability to escape, Lionheart is much larger than either you or your partner. If something goes wrong, he could easily overpower one or both of you. Having someone else there with you on the scene means you won't have to call for backup unless things really get out of hand." Somehow he very much feared they would, but at least this way there was a chance this could be contained from the start.

Judy frowned herself now. "I hate to keep bringing this up, but I was the valedictorian at police academy, and Nick graduated near the top, too—"

"Didn't forget," Bogo said in an echo of the past—but this time he said it gently, even a bit regretfully, rather than blunt and dismissive. "I just don't think it's enough. Yes, both of you can take out an opponent much larger than yourselves, but it's better to be safe than sorry. If it makes you feel any better, you have the pick of who goes with you, and they'll be under your direction—for this case only, so don't get any ideas."

That seemed to take the wind out of her sails. Blinking several times, she fell silent, apparently considering and discarding rebuttals or else just mentally going through the ZPD roster. Finally, with considerably less grace than usual—she'd probably been hoping for that slight promotion in regards to her fellow officers—the rabbit said, "Okay, fine. I'll take Delgato, if he's available."

In spite of himself he found himself nodding approvingly; Delgato had a good head on his shoulders, and could be trusted not only to keep quiet but also be calm and dependable in a crisis. "He is; good choice. Out of curiosity, any particular reason?"

She smiled. "I like him, for starters. And he's always treated me fairly. He's also smart, one of the best detectives on the force. And I figure it might help put Lionheart at ease to have another lion around. Delgato's a lot less boisterous and easily set off than Johnson, so that really makes him the only choice."

Hopps was making far too much sense; Bogo eyed her suspiciously, waiting for the catch, the mask to drop as she reverted to form. "I'll have Clawhauser get in touch with him and gather all the necessary equipment. Now...what about your end of the deal?" As she looked at him quizzically, he narrowed his eyes. "You know very well it's going to require some...special finesse, getting him out of prison for this."
Again she rubbed the back of her neck. "Um, well...I know you're going to want to go before a judge, get the right court order and all..."

He snorted. "Damn right I am." Even if he weren't the sort to always play by the rules unless he had no other choice, they had to do this legally or anything which came of it wouldn't stand up at the trial. He pressed his mouth together grimly. "But...?"

Judy bit her lip. "But, you and I both know that'll take a while. Lionheart seems to think there's a time factor on this...that if we don't get to this last mammal soon enough, it'll be too late. And I think he's right. His panic is too genuine to mean anything else."

He'd heard the lion's voice on the recording and was inclined to agree; he'd never heard Lionheart so terrified and out-of-sorts, not even when he was arrested. The question was exactly what this meant...and what they'd have to do to prevent whatever the former mayor feared from coming to pass. "So...?"

"So, either there's something about where this mammal is that calls for getting to him quickly...or he's afraid if the mammal stays too long under the effects of the Night Howler, it'll become permanent."

Bogo hissed under his breath, even swallowed hard; he hadn't even considered that, hadn't wanted to. And even if the savage hallucinations themselves weren't permanent, being exposed to a psychotropic drug like that for too long would likely cause some form of brain damage regardless. "There's also another possibility, Hopps. As you know, all the ram officers who had been suborned into aiding Bellwether's coup are now in jail with her, suspended from the force and awaiting trial."

At least he hoped they'd been bribed; if they'd actually been loyal to her from the start, and placed under his command as deliberate moles... "But the ones you found at that secret lab got away and are still unaccounted for. They were the ones carrying out all the shootings, so they have to know not every target was acquired by us at Cliffside. If they get wind of this last mammal's location..."

He didn't have to say anything more; Judy's nose was twitching violently—not in fear but in righteous indignation—and she had risen from her seat to glare boldly up at him, fists clenched at her sides. "I'd like to see them try! But that makes it even more imperative we get this taken care of as quickly as we can. So..." She took a deep breath, then went on, "We can't afford to wait for the court order. Or for the DA's office to publicize the deal and its terms.

"We're going to have to break him out ourselves. So to speak."

Bogo stared at her, aghast. She really has gone mental on me. How could she ever think I'd...?
Obviously reading the warning signs from his face, she quickly held up her paws. "I don't mean that literally! I mean...we have to make it look to everyone—the law, the press, the public, Bellwether's goons, even the rest of the ZPD—that Lionheart is still right where he belongs. Because we pull a switch."

The Cape buffalo shook his head slowly, feeling his headache heading toward a migraine. He felt like burying his horns in the desk, or covering his eyes with his hooves, but he would never display such maudlin emotion in front of her. "Hopps, what did I tell you about this being real life? Not a Howlywood blockbuster at the local cinema?"

Judy laid her ears back. "Not a hustle, Chief! Not exactly anyway." She took yet another breath, tapped her foot impatiently for a few moments, then leaned toward him, paws on the desktop. "Okay first off, obviously we can't spring him from the joint as long as anybody who's not in the know is on guard duty. Especially not Swinton."

"The 'joint'? Bloody hell, she really has seen too many movies. "Are you actually suggesting that I, or one of my officers, would be a party to a prison break?"

"Of course not. That's why somebody else will be involved—us. If things go wrong, you can say you didn't have anything to do with it, that it was just two rogue officers using contacts outside the police department, and if it goes right, the court order will make it an allowable exception because of the stakes involved—Lionheart's plea bargain, the danger to the public from another savage mammal, and so on."

Bogo couldn't think of a judge on the bench who would go for such an ex post facto explanation, not even if Stagmire himself were arguing the case, but the way she described it sounded at least a bit more plausible. And he couldn't think of a quicker way to get a prisoner out without anyone being the wiser. Feeling trapped, the police chief grasped at another straw. "And what about whatever officer is on duty? You'd better not tell me you're planning to assault one of your own—"

"Of course not!" Judy burst out, sounding extremely offended. "We'll just...get someone else to stand in for the guard, just like we'll have someone take Lionheart's place in his cell. By the time Swinton comes back for her next shift, nobody'll have any idea what happened."

This was getting more complicated, and bizarre, by the minute. "And just how, pray tell, are you going to effect these miraculous exchanges when there are security cameras everywhere inside the prison?" he drawled sarcastically.
"Easy." She raised her eyebrows. "Hack into the system, get it shut off on some kind of technical glitch, or reroute the signal to show a looped recording of empty corridors and a lion prisoner still in his cell. Whatever. Nick knows a guy."

"Of course he does." Before Judy could lash out at him for fox prejudice, it was his turn to hold up a hoof. "I meant because of his having been on the wrong side of the law for much of his life, Hopps, not his species." As she backed down, he stared at her, hard and unrelenting. He knew he should be quite bothered by the fact that the rabbit was able to come up with ways to circumvent the laws and the police department so readily, but then again being an officer who could predict the means and methods actual criminals might use to do so just made her all the more valuable to the ZPD. He hoped.

Finally he continued in a tight voice. "I must be out of my mind to even consider agreeing to this, but I don't see many other options. However, just where are you going to find someone to replace both Lionheart and a prison guard on such short notice?"

The rabbit crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll ask Mr. Big for help."

Bogo knew of the crime boss of course, there was no way anyone in power in Zootopia couldn't. When he was appointed as chief of police, Lionheart had in fact made a special point in informing him of just how much power the little arctic shrew had and that, even had he the right-sized officers to enter Little Rodentia to bring him to justice, the attempt would be fruitless. Mr. Big knew too many mammals, was owed too many favors by the richer elites as well as those in the halls of government, and if brought to trial there would be no testimony or evidence against him, merely protestations of being a beloved philotherian and shrewd businessmammal who had been framed by jealous rivals. At best, the whole thing would be a farce, a waste of time, money, and mammalpower; at worst, it would mark him as an enemy on Mr. Big's map...someone to be done away with quickly and quietly as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

What was almost as bad was how Lionheart explained to him that he actually needed Mr. Big's presence. For not only did the shrew provide a sense of decorum and dignity, not to mention a respect for rules and the law, that the criminal element in Tundratown at least (if not elsewhere in the city) adhered to, but he was responsible for ensuring Little Rodentia was kept clear of any other criminal elements, particularly the seedy side of things. It was basically a case of "scratch my back and I'll scratch yours"—the understanding that as long as Mr. Big was allowed to go about his business as he saw fit and kept his mammals as decent and civilized as possible, he in turn would guarantee public safety so there was no need for law enforcement to get involved in his domain.

So to have the shrew brought up now at all, let alone in the context of requiring his direct assistance, was galling to say the least. At the same time...it absolutely allowed him the plausible deniability Hopps was talking about. And while he had appreciated after the fact (though he could not say so to the press and would not say so to the rabbit officer) that Mr. Big had been essential in cracking the
case, both via his connection to Otterton and Manchas and his assistance in procuring a confession from Weaselton, this would be something different altogether.

If matters went wrong...this might actually be a way to get rid of the shrew once and for all. Or at least have something to hold over him, should criminal doings under Big's jurisdiction ever get out of hand. Stagmire, again, would absolutely appreciate the deft maneuvering and legal weight of such evidence, whenever he came back from that damned sabbatical of his—he'd never approved of the crime boss, or how every mayor for the last several decades including Lionheart had tiptoed around him and his predecessors or even accepted bribes in exchange for keeping the peace, and would dearly love to prosecute, if he got the chance.

While he'd been contemplating all this, Judy had been watching him warily, obviously expecting another outburst. When at last he looked up again, she hastened to gainsay him. "Now don't worry. I'll be the one to talk to him—not you, and certainly not Nick! They're on better terms than they used to be, but no need to take any more risks than we have to, heh!" As he wondered just what Wilde had done to earn the shrew's enmity, and wished Big didn't already know as it would surely make great blackmail material, the rabbit continued. "I know he'll help us though. He may not have any more love for Lionheart than you do—" Again, he had discounted her insight. "—but this is still all part of the same plot of Bellwether's, which he was absolutely against. He has a lot of mammals he can call on for favors, and you know how good he is at keeping secrets."

"God only knows how well I know. "Fine, go ahead then. But I hope you're right, Hopps. Since as I said, I can't see any other way we can pull this off. It had just better be worth it in the end, on all sides, or so help me..."

Before he could stop her, Judy had leapt across the desk, wrapped her arms around his massive neck, and planted a kiss of gratitude on his cheek. While he was still frozen into stunned immobility, she was already jumping back to her chair and from there to the floor, heading toward the office door. "Thanks, sir, I knew you'd see things my way! I'll leave Delgato to you, and Nick and I'll get right on our end of the matter."

She paused in the doorway and smiled reassuringly at him. "It'll all be okay. You won't regret this, Chief, I promise." And then she had vanished into the hallway.

Bogo glowered after her, even as he had to admit that kiss hadn't been as traumatizing as he'd thought it would be. The hug, on the other hand... "I already do," he grumbled flatly to the empty office.

Chapter End Notes
Only one animal pun this time, but one I'm particularly proud of—when I read in *The Art of Zootopia* that City Hall was designed with a waterfall to symbolize the unity of predator and prey, I was immediately reminded of the famous house Falling Waters, so I decided that in this world, Lloyd Wright's counterpart also designed City Hall. Too much fun. I also enjoyed giving Chief Bogo a first name for an obscure but amusing reason. While it turns out it's actually apocryphal and not a genuine translation, there is a legendary story that the name of the mountain Cader Idris in Wales (as noted by Susan Cooper in *The Dark Is Rising Sequence*) translates to "the seat of Arthur." Since Bogo's VA is Idris Elba, I thought referencing this with his character's English name would be a nice bit of sneakiness. Bogo's line to Judy, BTW, about how "whenever you say 'It's the right thing to do' it means more trouble for me", is a quote from Auron of *Final Fantasy X* regarding Jecht.

Finally, the character of Buckley Stagmire, who will obviously become much more prominent later, is the brainchild of a dear friend and fellow writer here, 6wingdragon, author of [*The Neverwere Moments*](#) (currently on volume 1, [*Trustworthy*](#)). If you haven't read his story you really should as it is fascinating and phenomenal. When I needed a character for this particular role he was happy to volunteer him, since he had no real plans to use him directly onscreen. (This has since changed, but he is also fine with my having an AU version of him.) So with some assistance on his appearance and backstory, I have made him my own and he couldn't be more tickled pink. (The reference to Hexward is also from my friend's story, although here you can be assured that the company is nowhere near as shady or disquieting as it seems to be in his work.) As far as Buckley's appearance goes, the nickname he was given during their election campaign should give you a clue: he's basically an anthropomorphic version of the Great Prince of the Forest, Bambi's father. Which, per the sequel/midquel, means he would be voiced by Patrick Stewart. ;)

As to exactly how he could be Assistant Mayor only for Bellwether to be it later, I've already explained somewhat by revealing he is now currently Zootopia's DA, but more will become clear in future chapters.
Everything was going well, all according to plan, exactly the way she had hoped for. Which, even for someone like Judy Hopps who was hard-wired to believe the best and never give up hope that things would turn out all right in the end, had her beginning to twitch her nose and gnaw her lip worriedly. Because when she was honest with herself, she knew something like this could never play out simply and easily...and maybe it was Nick's influence, but the rabbit began finding herself looking for, even expecting, the ground to drop out from under them at any moment.

Chief Bogo had been true to his word, not only obtaining the tracker, unmarked car, and other equipment they would need for this venture but also a mike and wire—ostensibly to aid she and Nick in communicating with each other as well as Delgato, should any clandestine infiltration be required at whatever place this missing mammal was being housed, but it would also be extremely useful in helping the fox stay in touch with his partner-in-crime while the hacking of the prison security cameras was taking place. The Cape buffalo had also arranged it so the next officer on duty after Swinton, the polar bear Andersen, was given the day off...but he did not inform the pig of this, so that she would see nothing unusual when Mr. Big's bodyguard Raymond appeared in his place.

Speaking of the arctic shrew, he had indeed seen the value, when Judy approached him privately, of not only ensuring no more savage mammals could cause trouble in the city but of having Lionheart in the debt of law enforcement. Like Bogo and Nick, Mr. Big was quite conversant with the way the world worked, particularly politically, and thus seemed convinced as a matter of course that without such a debt, the feline would emerge from his time in prison virtually unscathed in reputation, ready
and willing to begin his career right where he left off.

While Judy no longer viewed that with as severe a negativity as she had before seeing things from Lionheart's point of view, she still felt uneasy about the idea of him getting off with only a slap on the wrist, let alone resuming a place in the halls of power of Zootopia—at least not without having indicated he had learned a lesson by his experiences and would do things differently, more altruistic and honest in his dealings. The promise he had made in return for their assistance, while it hadn't been ironed out in detail just yet, would go far toward reassuring her—and, apparently, Mr. Big.

As a result, he had not only lent them Raymond for the subterfuge, but had offered her the aid of a member of his coterie to take Lionheart's place. Not another crime boss, but someone who was nevertheless highly-placed, trusted, and powerful (he would have to be, to still be in that sort of world while being close to Lionheart's age). She had never heard of this Vinny Corlione—although Nick had, and from the way he had swallowed slowly and offered the lion both a formal handshake and a deep bow, she suspected it was better that she hadn't—but he seemed nice enough.

Oh, there was a glint in his eyes every now and then which matched his very full mouth of predator's fangs and made her decidedly uncomfortable, and she suspected his debonair facade concealed a vicious ruthlessness that far outweighed whatever Lionheart was capable of past or present. But the fact he was willing to do such a thing as go to prison (even temporarily) for Mr. Big, and was confident of his release when their mission was complete, spoke volumes for his trust in the shrew, and in this bunny he had never met. Or that he has a lot more faith in the mob's power than he does the success and effectiveness of the criminal justice system...

In any event, he had elected to accept the role, and accompanied them without objection or complaint when they were obtaining the equipment, rendezvousing with Delgato, and even picking out the clothes Lionheart would be wearing to blend in better with the population. In size and build Corlione was surprisingly similar to the former mayor, his coloring only differed in being a slightly deeper shade of tawny gold for his pelt and more streaks of dark brown and black in his full mane, and while he had a similar accent to Mr. Big himself, it was much fainter—and when needed Judy found he could conceal it completely, in fact imitating Lionheart's own voice in quite an uncanny fashion.

The rabbit didn't want to think about why the shrew might have a subordinate or colleague who could so easily replace the former mayor, just as she didn't want to think about most of what Mr. Big did; while she had befriended his sweet-natured daughter, and he had been accepting of her for this as well as her work in bringing predators and prey together again, Judy still couldn't stomach his line of work, and very much dreaded the day when it and her own occupation would inevitably come into conflict. For now, though, she enjoyed it while she could and took what she could get from it...even if it felt like ends and means, compromising her principles.

As for the other member of their group, as much as she had initially resented his being assigned to them by Bogo, she had to admit Officer Delgato's presence was rather a relief. The younger lion had
appeared at the reception desk just as Clawhauser had finished passing over the last of the equipment and she had signed off on the requisition forms, and she could tell from one swift look three things: that the Cape buffalo had already briefed him on the nature of this case; that the lion held more than a hint of disapproval and even indignation over at least some aspects of it; but that he was determined to follow orders and would cause no trouble over them.

While the look he gave her was searching, even a bit worried, she also saw he was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt until she explained herself, something that made her heart go out to him. He didn't give Nick nearly as much acceptance—less because he was a fox, she thought, and more because he was still the rookie at ZPD even more than she was—but he still nodded and made it clear he understood and would not contest the chain of command. As for Corlione, while he must have known why a Lionheart-lookalike was needed (and so didn't flinch or otherwise react to the startling resemblance), Delgato otherwise showed no knowledge of the bigger cat's identity, which was certainly a plus.

As Delgato took the wheel of the unmarked car and drove the three of them toward their destination, Judy eyed him sidelong. Aside from what she'd said in the chief's office, she really didn't know much about the lion. She knew his given name was Manuel, that other than when he joined in on the rambunctiousness in the bullpen he was a very quiet and soft-spoken sort (whether this was something he'd unconsciously learned or openly adopted to set prey at ease around him, or just a natural inclination, she didn't know).

She knew from Bogo that when Manchas was brought in with the other savage mammals, Delgato had been assigned to his room in case he came out of his feral state and translation were needed—with English not being the black jaguar's first language, it had been speculated he might be thinking and speaking in Spanish when coming back to himself. The same was true when the cure was finally distilled and administered; she'd heard from Grizzoli that Manchas had indeed been muttering only in his native tongue then at first, so Delgato's assistance had been invaluable.

Clawhauser had also noted, in his usual effervescent, adorably charming way, that the two predators had formed a real bond as a result, with Delgato often visiting the jaguar at his Rainforest District home when he was off-duty, to check up on him but also hang out at the local clubs.

Beyond this, though, the rabbit knew nothing more, though she wanted to; she wanted to know all her co-workers and, if possible, call them friend to various degrees. Maybe this case would let her do so with Delgato, assuming the underhanded ways they were having to skirt and bend the laws (or offering assistance to Lionheart at all—she had no idea how he felt about the former mayor) didn't make it more difficult.

What she did know was, as much as she trusted Nick with her life and felt closer to him than anyone else in Zootopia, she had to admit the fox was...mercurial in his moods and not always reliable, at least not when it came to defusing tension or maintaining balance in as disparate a group as they
would be working in. Delgato was, she thought, a steady force for calm and control, a rock the waves of her wild eagerness would wash harmlessly against, a place of safety when Nick's cynicism and darker, less law-abiding impulses might swirl like deadly whirlpools around them.

Judy smirked to herself. *I've been reading too many of Mom's Hare-lequin novels. Still...if Delgato could be a help rather than a hindrance, she certainly welcomed him.*

By the time they arrived at the prison, had made it past the guards' checkpoint without any difficulty, and parked near the massive, well-secured building, she was on tenterhooks over what could possibly go wrong. Delgato was waiting in the car (the less he knew about or witnessed directly during this part of the case, the better), while the rest of them would enter together—even with the assistance of Raymond and the camera hacking, Nick thought it best and she agreed that they needed to play things as casual and normal as possible. Which meant one lion going in, one lion coming out, as if they were simply escorting an important visitor for Lionheart—a member of his family, perhaps.

The fox, meanwhile, was finishing seating the headphone bud in his ear and arranging the line for the mike down the inside of his uniform shirt—the instrument itself was situated behind his lapel which, as was typical for his laid-back, "smooth operator" self, was turned up alongside his neck, leaving plenty of room concealed in his thick russet fur. "Finn? Hey, Finn, you alive out there?"

A faint crackle came from the earpiece (the equipment was actually state-of-the-art, at least on the ZPD end, and Judy was fairly sure nothing but a rabbit's sense of hearing could have detected it), and then she could hear the fennec fox's familiar irascible growl. "Nah, this's just my ghost speaking to ya. Seeing as I died of boredom waitin' for you bozos to get here. I know ya gotta obey the speed limit and all, but *jeez.*"

"Hello to you too, Finnick!" Judy leaned in close to Nick so her voice wouldn't carry, but still found herself waving as if shouting at him from a mountaintop a long way off.

"Heya, Judy. Sorry about giving your partner there a hard time." Something in the fennec's voice softened, as it always did when she interacted with him; though he would never admit it, she knew he was more grateful than could ever be put into words for what she'd done for him and his fellow predators in the end, and especially Nick. She also rather thought he was still touched by the Junior ZPD Officer sticker she'd given him what seemed a lifetime ago now, though again he'd throw himself off the Tri-Burrow Bridge before saying so. "But really, I've been waitin' here for over an hour, and while I'm sure ya know better than I do whether or not loitering's a major offense, doing it near the main city jail ain't in the same ballpark. 'Specially not if you're a pred like me."

Peering about while he was speaking, she finally noticed the van with its familiar lavish fantasy mural painted on the side, parked in an out-of-the-way side street beyond a steel fence that ran right alongside the main complex; the area in question happened to have a burned-out (or broken) street
light, and the other buildings looming overhead cast the whole area in shadow regardless. She didn't think Finnick had anything to worry about since the vehicle was practically undetectable...but then again, she didn't have night vision like some of the other cops on duty here did, nor did she have the experience of living daily with prejudice, suspicion, and paranoia that predators did, especially in a big city.

"Don't worry," she answered him soothingly. "I'm sure everything's all right. You're still here, which means nobody must have spotted you—or if they did, they didn't think anything of it. And if there's any trouble, Nick and I are already prepared to vouch for you with the chief, so your part in this can be made semi-official after the fact."

Of course when Nick had joined the police academy, any and all con jobs with the fennec had to go by the wayside, and while the two vulpines remained friends, they had to limit contact so Nick could honestly say he was unaware of any illegal operations Finnick might be undertaking. But from what she understood, the fennec was trying to go straight for the most part, since Nick had offered him assistance in various bureaucratic paperwork to obtain the licenses for legitimate businesses, which Finnick had grudgingly accepted.

At the moment he was still living in and operating out of the back of his van, but he was also making use of one of his lesser-known skills in hacking and code-breaking to enter the computer and IT industry—which was how he was assisting them tonight. For the sake of how critical this task was, she was willing to look the other way for whatever else Finnick might have on the side, and she hoped Bogo would be too. Keeping their interactions on a need-to-know basis would help with that.

Meanwhile, Finnick was snorting, as he if had run through the same thoughts about their interwoven relationships and, unlike her, had found the whole thing more than a little unrealistic. "Yeah, right, I'll believe that when I see it. You got some swampland down near Outback Island to sell me too, while you're at it?" Before she could do more than furrow her brow and grumble resentfully, he went on in a more mollified tone.

"Well, whatever, I'll hold ya to that, toots. Anyway, everything's set and ready to go. That fence ain't made to keep real small mammals out—" Because of the dangers of different-sized mammals being forced to co-habitate, particularly in a place filled with those who were willing to break the law, prisons in Zootopia were segregated by size. "—so I was able to get the wire-feed in real easy. I'm tapped into the city network, and I can override it with a loop whenever ya give the word."

Nick finally broke in; sometimes she thought he resented how relatively friendly and kind his old friend had become toward her (particularly when he remained as caustic as ever toward the bigger fox), other times he seemed to consider it a genuinely heartwarming blessing. (He'd never gone into detail with her about Finnick's past, but she gathered it was as bad as his, if not worse.) Right now, Nick seemed to be in the former mode. "That's great, Finn, you're a real trooper for the cause, but do you think you two can cut the chit-chat short? As you so astutely pointed out, we are rather working
For a moment the silence on the other end of the wire was chilly. Then Finnick grunted and said, "When you're right, you're right, Wilde. Sorry, again. You know I think you're doing a good thing there, long as ya stay off my back, of course. Old habits and all that. The bunny and I can catch up another time." There was a fond smile in his voice as he said this. "Let's get a move on then. Lemme know when ya get to the security door."

As the line buzzed with him ending the connection, Corlione let out a soft chuff under his breath that turned into a chuckle. "You mammals have some very strange friends, may I say. But then I suppose our association is rather...unorthodox as well."

"Yeah, you can say that again," Judy muttered. "Come on, time's a-wasting."

In record time the three of them made it across the parking lot to the door Finnick had indicated; while Judy was naturally light on her feet and Nick was as stealthy as any fox could ever hope to be, the mafia lion was surprisingly soft-treaded as well. She supposed it was another way in which predators were once able to track down and slaughter their prey, eons ago, but it still startled her when extremely large predators proved capable of it. What this said about Corlione, in his line of work, was better left unspoken, but it did make her gradually more concerned about this aspect of the plan.

Outside the door, the three of them took up positions beyond the line of sight of the hallway cameras, Judy and Nick on one side, the lion on the other. Peering inside through the glass of the inset window, the latter informed them softly that he could see Raymond, in Officer Andersen's uniform, seated at the security desk but no other personnel about; at this time of night, outside normal visiting hours, this made sense, as the only ones who would be allowed on the premises would be officers of the law or those delivering summonses and other orders from various judges or from City Hall.

(A new mayor had not, as yet, been chosen, since it had taken some time for the parties to agree on candidates and do any campaigning, let alone for the special election itself to be arranged, and in the meantime the City Council and the Board of Supervisors hadn't wanted to give up their temporary power just yet. That was another reason this matter had to be handled swiftly, as any new mayor would not only provide much stricter oversight and attention, he or she would be sure to specifically keep a close eye on Lionheart and anyone who visited him.)

Knowing everything was in readiness, Nick fingered his headset and signaled Finnick. "Okay, buddy, we're there. You sure you got this?"
"Does an otter get born knowing how to swim?" came the retort. "Hold on, I've got the image saved already, gonna turn off the security cameras in three...two...now." A faint beep sounded over the line, followed by a satisfied chuckle. "Nick Wilde, you are now the Invisible Fox."

Nick put a paw to his chest. "I thought I already was! You wound me, Finn, you truly wound me. In fact, isn't that a redundancy? I do believe you have just insulted our entire species. Your Fox Membership Card is hereby revoked, expect someone to come and claim it from you shortly."

"Cute, Wilde, real cute." Judy thought she heard genuine mirth in the fennec's voice, though, as well as a tightness which suggested he was struggling—though whether to keep from launching into a blistering tirade or bursting out in gales of laughter, she wasn't sure.

"Do you two mind?" she hissed. "And need I remind you, Slick, that our first encounter involved me spying you crossing a busy street, slipping into a crowded ice cream parlor, and melting a Jumbo Pop. Not to mention when you tried giving me the slip later. Not exactly covering yourself in stealthy glory there."

"Ah, that's just because I wanted you to see me." The fox waved a paw magnanimously. "What good is pulling off such a perfect hustle if there's no one around to truly appreciate it?"

The rabbit would have laughed at the wide-eyed look on his face, if they weren't in such a potentially dire situation. "Was that a hint of sour grapes I was detecting there, Mr. Fox? Now quit the clowning and focus. We can crack up later, when we're away from here and safe."

"Fine, fine. I suppose I can give him a rain check. So long as this world isn't too long without my good looks."

Why, you... She'd be more upset, if she didn't know by now that this endless snark and teasing banter was a defense mechanism Nick used to cover up, not only his own insecurities, but his fears when he was in an uncertain and dangerous situation. The fact he was worried worried her more. "Shh! Let's just get going."

As soon as they opened the door and slipped inside, Judy felt ten times safer—which was ironic, since normally this would be where they were under even greater scrutiny and their actions would be severely limited. But outside, anything could happen, any number of unexpected arrivals or spontaneous official visits. Still, she couldn't help the eerie feeling in the middle of her shoulder blades as the three of them moved quickly but as casually as possible down the hall to Raymond's station. The polar bear nodded to them, just as if he were an actual cop doing his duty, then stepped aside and led them to the visitors' waiting room while he went to fetch Lionheart. So far, so good.
The sound of the ursine's footfalls and the keys jingling on his belt faded into the distance, and then the three of them were alone in the white-walled room. After being reassured three times by Finnick that he had similarly blocked, looped, and rerouted the camera signal for this room as well, Judy finally let out the breath she'd been holding and turned to Corlione. "Okay, you'd better start getting those clothes off. The sooner we're ready to make the switch and get out of here, the better."

In other circumstances, again, those words would probably have earned a number of laughs, or at least a raised eyebrow—in fact Nick looked ready to comment—but the lion got there first, nodding and beginning to remove the street clothes they'd had him change into in a warehouse parking lot before approaching the prison. "A very good idea, yes. Though if you don't mind, could you turn your back...?"

Judy realized that, without being aware of it, she'd been staring at the big cat as he took hold of the very incongruous hoodie they'd grabbed for him from a Big and Tall store, prepared to lift it over his head and expose his bare torso. Gah! Now on top of everything else, you're an ogler? Nick's gonna have a field day with this one. Quickly she turned her back, face flushing crimson, and settled herself in to studiously watch the door.

By the time Raymond had returned with a rather befuddled Lionheart (they hadn't warned him in advance when they'd be coming, so there was less chance of someone overhearing and ruining the scheme), the mobster had removed both the hoodie and T-shirt underneath, as well as the cargo pants, leaving him clad in only his boxers. Somehow the feline didn't look too concerned (when she watched him from the corner of her eye) being so vulnerable in front of the prisoner, although perhaps the polar bear's presence had something to do with that. "Miss Hopps? Mr. Wilde? What's this, are we—?"

"Yes!" the rabbit cut him off peremptorily. "We've got someone covering us on the tech end of things, no one can see us or what we're doing. If we time it right, all anyone will see on the cameras is you still in your cell, while we high-tail it out of here to...wherever this missing mammal is."

For a moment that felt far too long to her, Lionheart gazed down at her, his eyes wet and gleaming. "Thank you, Officer Hopps. Thank you so very much. You truly are a credit to the academy, to the ZPD, and to the city."

"Please, call me Judy." She shifted uncomfortably on one foot; even if she knew she was doing the right thing in the end, the means she was using to get there didn't exactly feel like the most honorable and heroic at the moment. "If we're going to be spending some time together, names are better than titles."
"And yes, we all know what a bastion of virtue our little Carrots is," Nick stepped in smoothly. "But if you could get out of that prison uniform and get dressed, your Majesty?"

Once again, the lion's mane bristled, but he relaxed and nodded, moving to the table where Corlione had laid his garments. He let out a soft grunt. "I know I can't draw attention to myself, but this? I haven't worn anything like this since my days at ZSU."

"That's precisely the point," Nick shot back. "Do you think anyone would ever dream of who you really are, if they see you dressed in something they know you wouldn't be caught dead in? Besides, beggars can't be choosers." Judy knew he was right, of course, but she rather thought from the smugness in his voice and a certain gleam in his green eyes that the fox was enjoying this far too much for simple practicality to explain it.

Lionheart set his jaw, but nodded. "You make very good points. Fine." As he started unbuttoning his uniform, revealing that his thick, chestnut mane ran all the way down his chest (before Judy hurriedly turned away again; she was running out of places to fix her gaze), the lion said to his replacement, "Don't I know you? You look familiar, and I don't just mean because we could use each other as grooming mirrors."

Corlione shrugged eloquently. "You may, you may not. But as I believe the police are fond of saying, what you know, if you do not say it, cannot be used against you in a court of law?"

Several minutes passed as the two cats finished divesting themselves of their clothes and then began donning the other's; it turned out the former mayor was in slightly better shape than the mobster, seeing as the latter had more fat on his frame and overall more rounded curves, but in all other respects their builds were remarkably similar, so only a bit of loosening of waistlines here and leaving a button undone there was needed. At last Lionheart was dressed in the civvies they'd procured for him, while Corlione wore the blue prison garb; the former had had his mane drawn back in a ponytail tied off by Judy's quick and nimble fingers while the latter's flowing locks were undone and spread out in a vast carpet over his chest and back. Judy could tell the difference between them (as could, she was sure, Nick), but as far as anyone else was concerned, the same lion would be leaving the prison as entered it.

Lionheart reached out and took Corlione's paw, shaking it slowly. "Thank you. I appreciate what you're doing for me as well, whoever you are." The way he said these last words made it clear to the rabbit that he did, in fact, know very well who the other was. "Though I do wonder why."

"Miss Hopps, she makes a very convincing argument. It is very hard to tell her no—or stop her from doing anything."
"That's God's own truth," Nick averred with great feeling. Judy elbowed him, hard, and he spent the next part of the conversation unusually silent thanks to doubling over and gasping for air.

The other lion went on. "Anyway, my...associate likes her very much, he owes her and sees her as family now. Whatever she asks for, she gets. And me?" His smile was as wicked and suggestive as ever. "Let's just say he made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Before anyone could ask him what that meant (though she thought Lionheart looked a bit gray in the face), Corlione departed with Raymond for the cell where he'd be serving out the ex-mayor's time for the nonce, and Judy forced herself to snap out of it and move to the lion's side. Gazing up at his looming figure, she got his attention with a quick foot-tap, then began fastening the tracker around his ankle.

"Okay, so this will let us know where you are at all times—and that's not exaggeration, the receiver has a 3-D grid with pinpoint accuracy. Just a precaution, but I'm sure you can understand why we can't quite trust you out of our sight. Plus if somehow we get separated this will let us find you again." As the metal made a satisfying click, she felt a knot of tension leave her, making her feel much lighter on her feet when she scrambled up on a chair and from there to the table to offer the much-bigger mammal the other item Clawhauser had given her. "And this of course is a Bluefang, it'll let us stay in touch with you if there are places you have to go that we can't. Since you did say you're the only one who can find this mammal."

As the lion nodded, accepted the earpiece, and fitted it carefully into place where his mane concealed it completely, a recovered Nick finally stepped back into the conversation. "Okay, and now, Disguise 101: you need to stop being yourself. The perfect disguise doesn't look like a disguise, but it won't do any good if you still walk and act like the mayor. I know this will be very hard for you, Leodore, but you're going to have to be considerably less lordly. Relax those shoulders, slouch even, and walk with a slump. It'll keep you from standing out like a fox in a rabbit burrow." He winked with exaggerated care at Judy; she glowered, even as she had to allow she wasn't sure how, or even if, she would ever take him to Bunnyburrow.

Lionheart gazed down at the fox for a long moment, solemn but otherwise expressionless; she didn't know if he was disapproving, contemplating, or even bothered by what Nick had said. Finally he replied, softly, "You know, normally I'd tell you I'd be hard-pressed to do that, Mr. Wilde. But right now, after what I've done, and what has rightfully been done to me? That shouldn't be difficult at all." In spite of herself, Judy felt her heart go out to him; he looked so sad, and so very ashamed. That's good, it means his contrition is real and there's hope for him. But that doesn't make it hurt any less.

Nick seemed to have picked up on this too, but after a brief pause in which he stood with his mouth open and one finger raised, he brushed it aside with a brisk nod. "Yes, well, it's actually quite easy, your lion-ness. Heck, everyone else in the city does it on a regular basis. Haven't you noticed what
living in a place with so many huge buildings towering over you does to a mammal?"

The feline nodded again, this time looking introspective and even mildly impressed. "A very astute point. But you'd know better than most, wouldn't you, your fox-ness?"

Before Nick could shoot back a resentful remark to that unfortunately equally shrewd comment, Judy stepped in again with a dry quip of her own. "The day you see a fox of any lordly capacity is the day you know the city's been turned on its head." She couldn't keep the smug grin off her face as her partner stared at her, poleaxed. And that's for your little exchange with Finnick outside. Score one for the sly bunny! "Now then, if that's all clear, shall we get going? I'm not sure how soon Officer Swinton will be here for her shift, but the sooner we get out of here, the better. We do have a mammal to rescue, right?"

Lionheart's visage shifted instantly to one of hardened resolve and deep pain, while his shoulders slumped as if assuming a burden that had weighed them down for a long time before; the change startled her. "Yes. Yes, we do."

Outside, there was a brief delay as Wilde held some hurried exchange over his own earpiece with someone unseen—the one who had, apparently, been in charge of protecting them from security—and then the fox ended things with what sounded like "I owe you one, buddy" before turning back to face them. "Okay, everything's set. The cameras are rolling again, ol' Vinny is safely locked away in your cell, and Raymond will keep things quiet until the shift change. We're in the clear."

"And who was that, may I ask?" Lionheart couldn't keep the nettled tone out of his voice; he had placed his life and freedom, and those of the one who needed to be saved, in their paws, and while he trusted them (or at least, he trusted Judy), the more mammals became involved in this, the more chances there were the whole thing could fall apart. Especially when he had no idea of their reliability.

"No. No, you may not." The way the fox said it was surprisingly amiable. "In fact it's better if you don't know. Just trust me on this, his part in the proceedings is finished anyway, so why don't we get to our trusty vehicle so you can tell us just where we're headed, hm?"

Yes, they kept coming back to that and rightly so: their destination, something he had refrained from revealing for as long as possible. Mostly because he was concerned they either wouldn't believe him, or wouldn't understand why all this cloak-and-dagger work and hidden plotting was necessary once
they learned the location. He'd explain that too, of course, but it would take too long and he'd rather do that on the road, in the privacy of their vehicle.

So he followed along as meekly as he could, adopting the posture and gait Nick had advised, until they were back in the unmarked car and heading out for the checkpoint gate. The vehicle in question was rather large and impressive, one of the higher-priced and better-equipped examples in the ZPD fleet, and naturally enough it was sized for medium-to-large mammals since that was what the majority of the force consisted of.

It did, however, make for some amusing and awkward arrangements in seating; on the one paw, both Nick and Judy were small enough in comparison that they were forced to share the passenger seat, held in place by the same seat belt. The fox affected nonchalance, but from the sly glint in his eyes Lionheart suspected the fellow enjoyed the situation far more than was healthy. The rabbit, in the meantime, seemed to be in a state of perpetual blush. As for the former mayor himself, he was actually forced to bend over and hunch down so as to fit beneath the low roof and within the cramped back seat. There are times I enjoy being a Barbary lion. This is not one of them.

The only one who fit the vehicle's dimensions was the driver, whom he recognized with a start as Officer Delgato. The smaller lion (but still well-built, enough he was fairly certain the cop would hold his own against him should a fight become necessary) didn't growl, glare, or otherwise show any outward sign of disapproval, but something in the set of his shoulders and his expressionless face told Lionheart the feline was unhappy with him, or this assignment, to some degree. Not that it wasn't something he could handle (and in fact, he'd expected it no matter who was involved), but it did make things more upsetting.

"Where to?" Delgato said, clearly trying to keep his tone light...but there was a faint edge to it that belied the softness. Oh yes, there would be issues between them, and they'd come to the fore sooner or later. But once the rescue had been a success, none of this would matter.

Lionheart told him...and the other lion gave him a long, penetrating look before putting the car in gear and aiming them toward the gate. Wilde and Hopps, too, shot him meaningful glances—the rabbit merely puzzled and curious, but the fox far more suspicious and skeptical. He didn't blame them...but once they were on their way, they'd have his explanation soon enough.

Fortunately for the success of their mission, but unfortunately for his readiness in facing their firing squad, passing through the checkpoint happened flawlessly and without hassle, as the officer on duty barely even gave his hoodie-clad self a second glance. So it was that far too soon they were departing the prison environs, heading down the streets of Savanna Central toward the northern districts of the city. And as soon as they were a safe enough distance away, Judy twisted about in the seat to peer back at him—purple eyes narrowed and ears twitching.
"So explain something to me, Leodore. How is it that this missing mammal of yours remained unknown, never discovered, and is now in such danger he needs immediate rescue no matter what resources have to be mishandled, what laws have to be broken...if he's actually still in Cliffside?"

The ex-mayor flinched instinctively; her tone wasn't resentful, angry, or even sardonic as he had easily concluded was Nick's standard approach, but there was just enough accusation in it to make it hard for him to look her in the eyes. "Yes...well. Did you really think that I would put any mammal in that condition where there would not be skilled and intelligent medical personnel to look after them? Following from that, that I would brief any more doctors and staff than was absolutely necessary, if my intent was to keep the matter secret and not incite panic in Zootopia? And since I had a place right on hand, with all the equipment and facilities required...

She nodded agreeably, but pressed her point. "So, the reason we needed you was...?"

Lionheart sighed, gazing out the window at the streets and buildings passing by; at this time of night there were few mammals out and about, which was why she and Nick had chosen now for his "break-out", but there were enough that he was encouraged to lean back in the seat as best he could, deeper into the shadows. At least Delgato was wisely choosing less-traveled side streets rather than the main thoroughfares that would still have bright neon signs blazing no matter how late it got. "It's quite simple, Miss Hopps...Judy. He was kept on the premises, yes, but behind much stronger security than the rest of the mammals. Security that only I can get you through."

"Really?" Unsurprisingly, Nick sounded extremely dubious. "Fine, I'll admit code-cracking isn't quite my forte, but if you could have simply given it to us..."

"It's more than just a code," the lion retorted. "There also—"

But the fox interrupted him with a knowing smile over his shoulder. "Ah, gotcha. Let me guess, two-mammal rule? A bit overdoing it if you ask me, those victims may have been dangerous, but they were hardly on the level of a missile launch bay...still, I'm sure you had your reasons and it's certainly secure enough." He paused, frowning. "But if you had the key with you when you were arrested, the jail would have taken it with the rest of your belongings, and it'd be child's play for us to get hold of it. And if it's still at Cliffside, then—"

The feline was the one to cut him off now. "There is a third layer of security as well," he growled. "If you will please be quiet, I'll explain." When Wilde was silent, albeit staring at him with both eyebrows raised expectantly, he continued, soft but firm. "There is a code, yes. There are also two keys which must indeed be turned simultaneously to provide entry, one belonging to Dr. Honey Badger, the other to myself but kept in an encoded drawer just outside the room. Lastly, however, there is a voiceprint-activated scanner tied to the final lock...one that is keyed to my voice, and mine alone. And no, a recording will not suffice." This last he directed at Judy, who'd had her mouth open
to object, surely to make reference to that carrot pen of hers, which had been mentioned in several of
the stories reporting on how Bellwether had been captured and her plot revealed and verified.

For several long moments the car was utterly quiet, the only sounds being the engine, a cough or
clearing of a throat in discomfort, one of the others moving in their seat, or the occasional blare of
music from another passing vehicle. Then, unexpectedly, Delgato spoke from the driver's seat, his
voice as soft as Lionheart's had been. "You weren't kidding when you said stronger security. But
what I'd like to know, then, is why. What made this mammal so special that he needed so much
protection...or more to the point, why were you keeping him hidden away?"

It took all of Lionheart's strength of will not to dig his claws into the seat and rip it open—the
question and its implications were that unsettling, his reasons that private and revealing. Slowly he let
out a shuddering breath, forced his mane and hackles to lie back down, and said through a tight jaw,
"I'm sure you would, Officer. But as far as I'm concerned, the reasons for my placing this mammal
where he is still apply, and unless it becomes absolutely necessary, I have no intention of telling you
his identity or why he is so well-concealed. Just trust me when I say it is for his own good, that it has
nothing to do with anything illegal, and that you will not be put in any greater danger than you
already are by not knowing."

Delgato snorted derisively, but he didn't press the matter; he was, after all, the "follow orders" type,
and would be well familiar with the higher-ups only telling him what he needed to know. He felt
terrible about keeping this from a fellow lion, but he had no idea how the cop would react to the
truth; with a matter such as this, he had often found to his disappointment and outrage that mammals
could surprise you, ones you expected to be decent, understanding, and supportive being anything
but. I'm sorry. You're really better off not knowing, all of you.

His wretched, tortured thoughts were broken into by Judy speaking up again. When he looked to
her, the rabbit seemed puzzled, but also feeling her way toward a realization. "Well what I want to
know is, if this is how this mammal has been kept secure...and he's been like this all the months since
Bellwether was arrested, while Nick was attending police academy...how has Dr. Honey Badger
been able to take care of him? Is that why you're in such a hurry to get us there?"

Sharp girl. "That is part of it, yes. As you might imagine, someone in his condition can't be fed or
taken care of in the normal manners. The other mammals were given dishes of food and bowls of
water through slots in their cell doors—" His face burned at the memory; seeing fellow mammals
reduced to such a state had been both disgusting and heart-wrenching, something which had
unsettled him and had him on edge as much as the situation itself and the threat it posed to him and
the rest of the city. "—but this last mammal was kept sedated and bound in his bed and fed
intravenously. Repeated doses of the tranquilizer as well as new bags for his drip could be
administered via a special set of robotic arms the doctor could manipulate from outside; there was no
possible way I could get away from City Hall often enough to let her in every time she would
otherwise need it. But obviously, such a state of affairs can't last indefinitely. And now that there's a
cure for Night Howler, it doesn't have to."
The rabbit was staring at him with a look that mirrored his, sorrow and nausea mingled with fierce determination. "When this is all over, Leodore, I might just press you, hard, for that explanation—I want to know just what justifies putting this mammal under such conditions—but you're right. We can't allow it to continue any longer. I'm assuming he wasn't on the same floor as the others, or Nick and I would have found him."

Lionheart shook his head, choosing to ignore the rest of what she'd said, for now. "No, his room is on another floor, even lower down in the asylum." Left unspoken was the obvious corollary that the very fact no one had known of Patient Zero's existence until now, and all the other mammal victims reported missing had been found together, meant the ZPD hadn't bothered to search any farther than necessary either. "And if you three will ensure the place is clean and uncompromised, and that I'm not disturbed, I'll find him and the doctor and release him as soon as we get there." Exactly how he would get the patient out without them seeing him, let alone recognizing him, he had no idea—a surgical mask might conceal his features, but his species would give him away in about two seconds flat, he feared—but he'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

Judy and Nick exchanged a meaningful look, but the note of finality he'd pressed into his voice seemed to have silenced them for the duration. In any event, an uneasy quiet settled over the car, and as they passed from the last lonely street light's pool of radiance into the darker, shadowy outskirts of Zootopia's northern district, Lionheart only gazed out into the fog-shrouded shadows and retreated into his thoughts. The others did the same.

Around an hour or so later, when it was drawing close to midnight, they had finally turned onto the highway that connected Tundratown to the Rainforest District, from there entered the same side maintenance tunnel his Pack in Black had taken with Manchas that eventful night over six months ago, and followed the lone, winding road up along the dark, empty vastness of the eastern Meadowlands to the place where that single enormous edifice perched precariously above the churning cataract. By the time they had done so, Lionheart was so nervous and watchful that he practically jumped at every shadow, and while he didn't know his companions well enough to judge their states of mind, he rather thought they weren't much better off.

Delgato's paws were rather white-knuckled on the steering wheel (and he didn't think that was due to the dangerous nature of the asylum's lone link to the outside world); Judy seemed even more hyperactive and energetic than usual, constantly bouncing and twitching in her seat; and while Nick acted as laid-back and devil-may-care as he'd been ever since the former mayor had first laid eyes on him, there was something about the set of his shoulders and how his fur occasionally rippled and flattened that suggested even he was unsettled. Of course that could have simply been thanks to bad memories of the place, considering how he and Hopps had been compelled to escape it, but somehow he thought it was more than that.
And as they arrived at the gates to Cliffside, Lionheart felt their location wasn't conducive to relaxation and calm, either.

Looming out of the shadows and brume, the crumbling pillars overgrown with vines and creepers stood athwart the blacktopped drive, the giant wrought-iron gate spanning between them forming a dark grille the metal bars of which gleamed and glistened faintly in the waterfall's rising mist...as if the barrier were weeping slow but steady tears to the cracked stone. Above, the lettering which spelled out the name of the facility could be picked out in the car's headlights, almost shimmering as the moist air made their beams quiver and flicker. At either side, the entrance was guarded by two statues atop pedestals, a bear and an impala, dressed in the guise of doctors and with arms outstretched in what was clearly meant to be welcoming, reassuring gestures...but even beyond this grim locale and the dark, windswept night, there was something far too sinister about them to set anyone at ease. He shuddered.

For a long time, the car was silent, idling before the gate while all its occupants stared along the narrow ribbon of road extending out, far across the bridge's struts and abutments, over the endlessly crashing waterfall to the craggy rock where the asylum towered into the black throat of the sky. The place was massive, desolate, and brooding, seemingly carved from the very stone it stood upon yet also spider-webbed here and there with the dark green fingers of climbing ivy and thorny brambles. Like a thunderhead towering above the land, it cast its shadow across the water toward them, details only visible here and there where they were illuminated by the relatively tiny pools of light from electric street lamps, casting their diffuse pale grey into the great, empty shadows cloaking the river. There were even strange striations and curves in the hospital's walls to suggest a mix of organic and mineral origins, although no other statuary was visible. Somehow that didn't make the place any less ominous.

"I can see why no one would think to look here...why no one would even want to come here," Judy said softly. "I guess that was the point? To keep mammals safe...keep patients who were...unbalanced...away from everyone else?"

Lionheart sighed. "It wasn't always that way, from what I understand. If you can believe it, it was originally a 'health retreat.'"

"Isn't that just a euphemism for 'nuthouse'?

The lion flattened his ears. "Well yes, if you want to be pedantic about it, in the old days such places were called sanatoriums: places for health, to recover one's sanity by retreating from the world for a while. But no, from the stories I heard as a cub, it was a beautiful and charming place once. Many mammals passed through its doors, all the better for it when they rejoined the rest of society, and even the ones who had to...take a more permanent leave of absence had the best doctors and nurses
money could buy, beautiful grounds, a stunning vista, plenty of excellent cuisine and entertainment of all sorts. Mammals believed in taking care of the infirm in those days, even when it was only of the mind, and the rich could afford it for their less stable...family members."

He had been going to say 'black sheep', but aside from the offensiveness of the term, it was far too apropos considering the Meadowlands were where most of Zootopia's ovines lived. Sourly he reflected that this was most likely how it had been so simple for Bellwether to learn where he'd been keeping the savage mammals and thus ensure Judy and Nick would find their way there to catch him red-pawed; Cliffside might have been forgotten by most still alive, but he would not be at all surprised if his erstwhile assistant still had family here who could inform her of the abandoned asylum. He knew she had lived here once, from both a few stray comments she had made and her accent, and it was quite possible she had lived here right up until her arrest. Beyond that, he had never known much about her personal life, an oversight he now regretted...not only for how useful it could have been in putting a stop to her plot, but because if he'd bothered to show interest and caring for her in such a manner, it might have prevented it from ever germinating in the first place.

Judy, meanwhile, was speaking again, sounding deeply saddened. "What happened then?"

He shrugged, sighed again. "What always happens, I'm afraid. Mammals start off with lofty intentions and aspirations that fade into greed, contempt, or simple negligence. Money becomes scarce, or gets slipped into unsavory pockets. Facilities become both too much in demand and not properly tended, so they become far too crowded even as they slowly fall apart." He gestured out the window at the mountainous hulk. "This place is old, Miss Hopps—it was around in my grandfather's day, possibly even his father's. It was a hospital for treating and curing many diseases before it became a house for the mentally ill. But there were too many inmates, not enough funding, standards fell, those in charge stopped caring or couldn't do anything about it even if they did...eventually the place became such a travesty and broke so many laws and conditions of decency that it was forced to close. I shut it down myself, during my first term."

"That sounds rather familiar," Nick observed. "Wasn't there another hospital that happened to? I mean, a really famous one."

"You're not really narrowing it down there, Mr. Wilde. It happened to a number of them," Lionheart said dryly. "But you're probably thinking of Bethleham Hospital, whose name ended up shortened to —"

"Bedlamb!" the fox burst out with a smug grin that almost seemed to touch his ears. Everyone stared at him, rather aghast, although he thought for the briefest of moments that the ghost of a grin turned up the corners of Delgato's muzzle too. "Get it? 'Cause...we're in the Meadowlands, and—"

"Yes, Nick. Thank you, Nick." Hopps rather looked as if she wanted to bury her face in her paws.
But all she did was eye her partner reproachfully...until she saw the apologetic look on Lionheart's face. "What, sir? Don't tell me you..."

He coughed behind his paw. "While his joke was in poor taste, I'm afraid the actual name given to that hospital wasn't much better. They called it Bedham."

The vulpine snorted back a laugh. "That would've applied just as well to Cliffside, your Majesty. I may have only seen it the once, but it is quite the pigsty in there."

Judy smacked his arm. "It's a good thing Swinton wasn't here to hear that."

Delgato, meanwhile, was finally putting the car back in gear and aiming it forward, slowly but steadily, through the gap in the gate from when it had been left standing open the last time law enforcement was here; he still looked apprehensive though, and his fellow lion didn't think it was because of the narrow road out across the falls. "I don't know, Wilde. I was in there too, and you're right about how filthy the place is...but I was more thinking it looked like something out of a horror movie."

Privately the former mayor had to agree with him, even as he reflected uneasily that one of the most unsettling and disturbing of horror writers—who had also created an asylum with a history not far different from either Bedham or Cliffside—was H.P. Lambcraft...and as much as his name suggested the same bad pun Nick had employed, Lionheart also recalled what else the fellow was known for. Species-ism, particularly against large predators like lions. He doubted any such personage was involved with the financing and construction of Cliffside, or what it later became, but the coincidental connection was eerie enough that he was more determined than ever to get in, find the one he came for, and get out again as swiftly as possible.

The lapine seemed to be of the same mind as he was, since her nose was twitching, faint but still discernible in the darkness, and her violet eyes were round and wide as she stared ahead toward the entrance doors of the abandoned hospital. "Right. Then let's hope Dr. Honey Badger can play her part quicker than a racing hare, and then we'll be out of here with that mammal before you know it."

Carefully, cautiously, Delgato continued to aim the unmarked car along the narrow highway, the slender span that linked Cliffside to the shore seeming but a thread that might snap at any moment even though he knew it had held secure and strong for decades, while the hospital towered higher and darker above them. Finally, after what seemed eons but was really less than ten minutes or so, they reached the center of the falls and the broad parking lot which fronted the structure. Just as at the former checkpoint at the start of the bridge, there were no guards here any longer, wolves or otherwise; there was, after all, no longer anything to protect or keep secret.
He did, however, see the vehicle he recognized as Madge's parked not far from the main door, which was an encouraging sign. Nothing and no one else seemed to be about...just the empty pavement, ghostly in the arclight, marred only here and there by cracks with weeds growing through, damp patches where the river's spray had splashed it, and bits of ancient trash caught in the spiny brush, quivering in the strong wind.

They parked just on the other side of the door, mirroring the other lone car, and then after several long moments of gazing at each other, taking stock, and taking some deep breaths, they all climbed out and stood in the cold, misty night. The sound of the falls was an endless roar, mingling with the shuddering of the rock beneath them as the water raged past it, pounding and churning around its base as if determined to break it free and topple it into the yawning gulf below. One day, eventually, it would indeed erode the stone to the point both it and the building that stood upon it would fall from the heights, but that was thankfully a geologically distant day.

In the meantime, though, it made it somewhat hard to hear anything else, including each other as they exchanged words regarding what was to come, at least until their ears had adjusted. The wind was also howling almost as strongly to further whip their voices away, and causing each of them to turn up collars or otherwise strive to block out the worst of the frigid air currents; for the first time Lionheart was grateful for the hoodie the others had forced him to wear.

Gathered close, the four huddled by the cracked steps leading to the hospital's great doors. But as the lion noticed how all three officers had their sidearms at the ready and seemed united in their intention to enter the abandoned facility with him, Lionheart quickly and vehemently shook his maned head. Resting his paw on Delgato's shoulder, then Nick's, he had to scuff his paw near Judy to at last gain her attention as well. "No! I want all of you to stay here and stand guard, until and unless I have need of you."

Instantly, of course, the rabbit glared up at him, shoulders thrown back, ears erect, nose twitching—this time in indignation. "You have got to be kidding me! I told Bogo I wouldn't let you out of my sight, and I meant it. Besides, what if you need help in there, getting him out? Or...something else goes wrong?" The slight pause in her voice as she said this last, and the way her eyes darted instinctively toward Cliffside's entrance before fixing on his countenance again, was unmistakable—she was clearly afraid of the place, and just as importantly, worried about what might be hiding in the darkness within.

At any other time he would have been touched by her apparently genuine desire to help protect him, as well as aid him in his rescue. But he would need time to figure out how to do the latter without the three cops identifying the mammal immediately, and he hardly expected there to be anything inside the hospital that would require backup; at worst, there was the possibility the tranquilizers might have worn off and not yet been re-administered, but even aside from Dr. Honey Badger drugging him up again, Lionheart was the largest mammal here and could more readily handle an awake and volatile 'savage'. 
"Thank you for your concern, Miss Hopps...Judy. But this is something I have to do myself. I told you this would be one of the key aspects of my deal, and you accepted it then. As for Chief Bogo, what he doesn't know this time really can’t hurt him." He paused at the hardness that entered her violet eyes, then glanced at Nick and Delgato before continuing. "Besides, isn’t that what the Bluefang you gave me is for? And Mr. Wilde's headpiece? And didn't you tell me exactly how precise that tracker of yours is? I promise I will stay in close contact with you...if anything goes wrong, believe me you will be the first to know." He managed a wry smile. "And in that unlikely event, I suspect you'll be at my side far faster than I could imagine."

Judy looked rather galled to have to admit this truth; her fox partner, meanwhile, re-holstered his gun and thrust his paws casually in his jacket pockets (though he didn't doubt for a moment that Nick could have it out again instantly). "Well, you don’t have to twist my arm, Leodore. Going in there once is plenty enough for me, believe you me. I don't care what you told us about how nice and clean and beautiful this place used to be, or how compassionate and benevolent the staff were—as far as I'm concerned, this place was born bad and rotten to the core, with plenty of mad scientists and unethical experimentation on its inmates for years. And since I am rather attached to my pelt, I won't be going in there again unless I have no other choice."

The rabbit posted her fists on her hips and peered up at him. "Where’s your sense of adventure, Slick? Or your ambition?"

"The first one is somewhere down at the bottom of yon cascade, Carrots. And I thought you knew by now my only ambition is to live until I am very, very old."

Flicking his eyes to the side, Lionheart somehow wasn't surprised to find his fellow feline was listening to the banter with a rather amused smile. When he caught him looking, though, Delgato immediately went stoic and cold once more, only nodding briefly. "Fine. We'll stay here. But just let me add my voice to Hopps’—you try anything funny in there, and it'll be the last thing you do before you wake up back in jail."

Swallowing slowly, the former mayor turned away, unable to find any words to refute that statement or try in any way to reassure the younger lion. Then, as Nick and Judy stood watching, the former with one eyebrow raised, the latter wary, Lionheart checked his earpiece once more, took another deep breath, and then climbed the steps...opening the heavy doors with a groan of hinges rusted by the endless damp and passing inside.

He had to go a fair number of paces down the main entrance hall before the light faded enough for his eyes to adjust. While it did provide a welcome relief from the blackness, it was in the end far too wan and diffuse to provide much illumination; far better to use his excellent night vision to see the way instead. When he could see again, the lion paused, gazing up at how the ceiling of the vestibule soared high overhead, lost in the shadows, but with countless, ponderous buttresses from which hung gigantic cobwebs like a filmy white curtain; the stirring of the air by the wind at the door made them
swing and dance unnervingly, as if long-fingered paws were reaching down to grasp him.

The rest of the room was mostly cleared of rubble and swept clean, since it had been where his Pack in Black had brought the maddened mammals on their way down to the laboratory below, but the place was still crumbling with age and disuse. At one side stood the vast remnants of what had once been the reception desk, the polished wood now dull and rotted into kindling by moisture. A single wheelchair stood nearby, ghostly in the shadows, as if waiting for an occupant who would never return; closer to a door opening into one of the many halls burrowing through the asylum, an empty IV stand gleamed faintly. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear water dripping...slowly, cadently.

Lionheart took yet another deep breath, then swiftly shifted to shallow ones so his nose would not be either overwhelmed by the stench of mildew and decay or made to sneeze by the must and dust in the air. The place was old and empty, that was all. Haunted by ghostly memories of the past, perhaps, but not by actual spirits, sad rather than frightening so long as he kept his imagination from running away with him. And he had no reason to linger here; he knew the way down the passages and stairs, and the sooner he got there, the sooner he could leave and never have to see this dismal, lonely place again.

He fingered his earpiece. "Wilde? You reading me?"

A soft pop and hiss, then the vulpine's sardonic voice. "Loud and clear, big guy. Run into Nurse Rat-ched yet?"

"It's her night off," the lion quipped right back, and in spite of himself was pleased to hear an appreciative chuckle. "Everything's clear, doesn't look like anyone's been here who shouldn't have been. I'm going in...it's down several levels, but I don't think this instrument should have any trouble penetrating the walls." Left unsaid was how easily Judy's smartphone had been able to operate in the asylum's lower levels, both to record his own incriminating words and, to her embarrassment and his timely warning, receive a phone call from her parents. No, signals would not be a problem, which was funny considering the place had been built long before modern technology had even been thought of, let alone invented, and quite far away from the rest of the city as well. Honeycombs in the rocks? Perhaps it's porous? Or maybe standing out in the middle of a waterfall makes for great reception.

Nick, meanwhile, acknowledged him with another click and then all was silent once more as Lionheart started down the central hall of Cliffside.

It took longer than usual to find his way, because while he could see in the shadows as if it were brightest daylight and he knew the way well, he had to keep stopping to listen, checking to see if there were indications anything was amiss, anyone had come and gone who should not have...or
worse, might still be on the premises. But he never saw anything except the occasional track of a 
badger in the dust; it had been so long since his last fateful visit here that his own footprints, the 
wolves', even the ZPD officers who arrested him and brought the savage mammals out for transport 
elsewhere, were all gone.

Of course there were still indications mammals had been here...simply from long, long ago. 
Everywhere he looked—whether down side passages, through the doors of rooms left standing eerily 
open, or right on the floor before him—were signs of the hasty departure when Cliffside had been 
abandoned almost six years before. Folders and manila envelopes; countless pieces of paper spilled 
from patient files; medical instruments and trays; plastic pill bottles rolled into corners; gurneys and 
chairs stacked in piles or shoved up against walls; more wheelchairs forming huge stacks nearly to 
the ceiling in places; fallen lamps, broken tables, bedpans, rotting mattresses and rusting bedsprings...

Adding to all this the cracked and peeling paint, plaster falling from the ceilings, broken glass 
everywhere, tattered curtains and dangling bare light bulbs shifting and swaying with his passage, 
and the place was quite ruined and disturbing indeed. Battered by the elements and time, inhabited 
only by creeping spiders and insects, forlorn and unsettling by turns. But empty...a threat to no one 
except by its dilapidated state.

Still, he couldn't help but flinch every time he heard his own footfalls echo back at him as if someone 
else were keeping pace...or lay hidden in the darkness ahead. Or when something skittered through 
the heaps of trash, or a shuddery silhouette appeared when grimy mirrors in the distance caught his 
reflection, or light from the street lights outside managed to cast his shadow weirdly on the walls. 
And every so often he also caught sight of some of the old murals and friezes which decorated the 
place from its early sanatorium days...but so faded and unrecognizable now that all he saw was 
glimpses of eyes and faces which only made his heart leap into his throat before he realized they 
were neither living nor spectral. He heard his breath rasping in his ears and his heart pounding faster. 
*Stop it. You're alone here, there's nothing dangerous. Now, down three more flights...*

After another brief check-in with Nick (during which Judy also made sure to chime in to emphasize 
how quickly she could be there if he asked), Lionheart found himself passing the door that opened 
into the laboratory where the other mammals had once been held. The eerie light of one or two 
computer monitors, a few CT scans on permanent display, and other medical equipment still hung in 
the air, but there was otherwise no sound or movement, nothing to suggest the doctor or anyone else 
had been there since all the evidence and reports had been removed to aid in finding the Night 
Howler cure.

As he passed by, the lion considered. Originally the wolves at the gatehouse would phone in to let 
Dr. Honey Badger know he was coming for a visit or that they had captured another patient; now 
that they were all gone, no such warning system was needed, but he knew the floor where the last 
mammal was being kept had special sensors which would trigger if motion was detected. Hopefully 
when these went off—with a flashing light and a faint, quiet beep rather than any shrill alarm—she 
would not be given a heart attack by his sudden intrusion in a place where she was supposed to be 
alone.
Fear began to give way to anticipation as he drew nearer to his goal, and once again he could hear his heart thudding in his chest as he turned down the final stairwell, coming to the door he had haunted just as often as the lab above. Swallowing against a dry mouth, he rested his paw on the stainless steel handle...paused...then inputted the code into the access panel and slowly pushed it open. The hall beyond was as dark and shadow-filled as those he had already traversed, lined with more doors he ignored to focus toward the one at the far end—but as he stepped inside and let the door close behind him, he froze.

*Thump. Thump thump. Thump thump.*

Had his heartbeat grown that resonant against his ribcage? It had to be, it sounded the same...and yet he could not shake the nagging sensation that it came from somewhere external. Somewhere...someone...else in the darkness ahead.

Lionheart stared until he was certain his eyes would pop from their sockets. Nothing. No movement. No other sounds. No shapes rising out of the gloom. Only the thousands of pounds of rock and concrete rising overhead. Dust. Quiet. Utter stillness. But still, that regular thudding.

*Thump. Thump thump. Thump thump.*

Slowly, step by step, he made his way down the corridor. A trickle of water pooling at a join between wall and floor. A rusted syringe. More disintegrating paper; it was amazing how quickly everything fell to entropy in this environment. An empty set of steel shelves.

The sounds were getting louder. And no matter how much he tried to deny it, to pretend otherwise, he was certain they were not caused by him. Yet they still sounded so very much like a heartbeat.

*Thump. Thump thump. Thump thump.*

His paws trembled briefly, as he had a sudden flash to what had always been his favorite tale of horror and suspense by that master storyteller, Edgar Allan Paw, because it had been the most insidious and terrifying of them all. There was no lantern here, no bedroom door, no wooden floor to conceal a vicious and wicked crime.

But was that the beating of a hideous heart he heard? It couldn’t be, and yet...
Closer, closer he drew to the chamber where the mammal was held behind state-of-the-art security, the thumping growing louder in his ears to match that thudding within his chest, until he was surprised the others didn't hear it over the Bluefang. Or could they not hear it, because it was all in his head?

Then, just as he about to chalk it up to a guilty conscience like the murderer of "The Telltale Heart" (in this case, because he secretly feared and worried that he had waited too long, that there was no longer anyone alive to be found strapped in that bed), he heard the sound again. Much closer, much louder. Still just as regular and rhythmic, but it sounded...different somehow. Hollow, but with a solid force behind it. Determined to draw attention.

His eyes widened.

Pounding. Thudding. Against something.

Breaking into a sudden run, he burst down the hallway, burrowing deeper into the otherwise silent structure—and there, just to one side, a door he had never paid any attention to on his trips down here, but it was visibly quivering, shaking as something on the other side slammed against it with that regular tattoo. A key still stood out from the lock, and in seconds he had turned it, put all the strength he had into his muscular prowess, and wrenched the stuck door open.

The room beyond was only a tiny narrow cupboard—a broom closet, or more likely a place to store drugs and other tools of the medical trade for the asylum's patients. There was only one thing in it now—on the floor, bent and twisted into a ball of fur and cloth, eyes wide with mingled fear, frustration, and rage. Bound extremely tightly with coils of rope tied in intricate knots—as she would have to be, as one of her species would usually be strong and stubborn enough to break free of normal restraints—so that her hands and feet were brought together in a painful-looking backbend. But she was lying in such a way that she'd been able to twist about and bring her heels against the door with that constant pounding that had so unsettlingly echoed through the lower halls of Cliffside.

Dr. Honey Badger.

Lionheart only had a few moments to stare down at her in shock and disbelief, swiftly turning to desperate fear as he realized what this meant. What had to have occurred. Then he turned and sprinted the rest of the way down the passage, even as he knew it was far too late. Yes, there it was ahead of him, the door which, like the one Judy and Nick had used to enter the lab above, was brand new, stainless steel. At one side was another access panel, its buttons glowing a lurid green in the shadows. On either side of the entrance were the twin keyholes...both with keys in them, turned sharply to left and right. The voiceprint panel was pulsing steadily.
And the door was open, standing ajar by several feet.

He looked inside...the room was a shambles. IV stand toppled and smashed, its bag leaking all over the floor. Trays, bottles, and tables were overturned and scattered everywhere. The bed, too, had been tossed onto its side, pillows and sheets ripped and torn so that the stuffing spilled out like piles of melting snow, mattress toppled out of the frame. But there was no one in it, or amid the wreckage on the floor.

Falling to his knees just inside the door, Lionheart worked his muzzle soundlessly before finally letting out a choked sob. "Oh no...no...I'm so sorry...Bucky, please forgive me...oh, Bucky..."

Chapter End Notes

When I needed to come up with a lookalike for Lionheart who could take his place in prison, I was immediately reminded of a piece of fanart—the very one I used as the chapter header art—which was basically a "what if" Lionheart had been the mob boss instead of Mr. Big (with tigers as his bodyguards instead of polar bears), so I chose to make the lion another mafia figure. And since Mr. Big was himself a parody clearly inspired by The Godfather, the name Corleone (re-spelled to be even more animal-like) was the natural one to pick. I made up Vinny, however, since Vito was too highly-placed as head of the family to be useful for a plot like this, nor would Mr. Big have any ability to order him to help Judy. What I didn't realize however (though I really should have, since I took both Spanish and French in high school and college) is that this name was even more appropriate...because it actually is Italian for "Lionheart"! Talk about wonderful serendipity...

I know that code-breaking/hacking aren't exactly implied to be skills Finnick possesses, but nothing in the movie really denies it either, and I both needed someone to fulfill that role and wanted a way to bring the fennec into the story if only briefly. And of course his line to Nick about being invisible is a shout-out to Riley speaking to Ben Gates in National Treasure.

The entire scene at Cliffside, both the approach to it and the backstory Lionheart gives it, is meant to hearken to Arkham Asylum (and its real-life antecedent, Danvers) from the stories of Lovecraft, but I also had fun tying it into Bethlehem/Bedlam and the origin of the name. My apologies for all the sheep puns, but as Nick stated, with the Meadowlands involved it was kind of unavoidable. And fun! As was setting the whole creepy scene (I wished we'd gotten to see much more of the place in the movie, hence its return here) and making the obligatory Poe reference. I would have used the name James Howe did for his Bunnicula books (Crow) except I wasn't sure I wanted to go with the notion of sentient birds who happen to live elsewhere. I guess this means my Poe was a wolf—appropriate, since one of the rumors/conspiracy theories regarding his death was that he contracted rabies, and werewolves have long been a staple of the horror genre. And speaking of wolves, the Secret Service-types who worked for
Lionheart are apparently so used to doing cover-ups and making people/evidence disappear, and they wear such dark clothing, that giving them a punny name based off the Men in Black seemed to fit. :P

Lastly, I know the official canon says that Nick was at the police academy for nine months; other sources I've read, however, suggest that the median time at police academy in the US is three months, with a further probationary period of three months when assigned to the force, and I am operating under the assumption that my story takes place early in Nick's probationary period. So it's only been about three to four months since the movie ended, and that Dr. Honey Badger has been taking care of Bucky. (Not counting the time between the press conference and Judy's return to Zootopia, of course.) Short enough to still be at least somewhat believable, I think, particularly since all the unrest in the city and Lionheart's legal woes would have kept Madge from being able to contact him or do anything anyway. (If I could have made the time shorter, I absolutely would have, but unfortunately I am constrained by the timeline of the movie, the nature of police academy, and the plot's need for Nick to both be a cop and be in the story at all. Having to make contrivances to make this possible sucks, especially when nothing I came up with would work perfectly, but there it is.) Anyway, it's obviously also long enough that Bucky absolutely needed to be rescued now...although, as you've seen, still a bit too late. :(  

“C’mon, ya little coward! Do it! It's what you're meant to do, shows you're a real buck. And ya wanna impress the rest of us, don’t ya?”

Leodore Lionheart frowned, his little face scrunching up with the intense focus and effort of it—it was far more natural for him to grin, to set others at ease or simply because he was genuinely a kind and sunny lad, but those words and the tone of the speaker were all too familiar to him. Straightening the burgundy tie of his school dress uniform (khaki and tan, neatly pressed), he squared his little shoulders and marched across the blacktop toward the corner of the old brick facade of Sahara Central's main building, where he could hear the voices coming from.

Not many students were still about, as it was almost the end of recess, but enough still chased, pounced, laughed, and shouted on the playground that there would be witnesses to whatever
occurred. And a few who stood about idly chatting noticed him too—some waving and smiling brightly, others stepping back out of his way and even bowing to him in a way that always made him distinctly embarrassed yet also obscurely proud. For some it was because he was a predator, for others that he was a lion specifically, and still others because they knew of the rich, prominent family he belonged to. Depending on his mood, such attitudes could either lead to useful followers or annoying sycophants; at the moment, he was just glad they weren't getting in his way or asking intrusive questions.

Reaching the corner, the cub drew himself up to his full, diminutive height and then peered about. As he had feared, a small group of three bullies had pinned one other helpless child up against the wall—one actually holding the poor boy in place, a second poised for what looked like a punch to the gut, while the third stood arrogantly in front of his victim, arms crossed over his chest; clearly he had been the speaker.

What startled and confused Leodore was that all four of them were deer. He had heard rumors, and been told stories by his brothers, about stags and the manner in which they competed for dominance...roughing one another up to either prove their manliness (and impress the does) or win more allies for their 'herds.' He'd always thought it to be exaggerations, examples of stereotypes that no self-respecting mammal would lend credence. But here they were...three bucks who looked to be a couple years older than he, enough they had started maturing so their antlers had grown out beyond mere nubs (though still quite short and velvety), and judging by their thicker, bulkier bodies they were jocks, too. And they were menacing a much smaller, thinner, spindlier buck who looked as if he'd be cringing if they weren't keeping him braced, or even sinking down onto the ground. Typical bullies, though what they'd been saying sounded...a bit odd, to him.

Clenching his little fists, the lion stalked across the sandy pavement, tail lashing viciously behind him even as he felt his heart pounding faster and his chest getting tighter...with fear, not excitement or adrenaline. "Hey! What do you think you're doing? Leave him alone!"

It was almost comical, how swiftly they all flinched, jumped, or otherwise reacted to his sudden shout, then froze in place. As soon as two of them saw who it was accosting them, their eyes widened like full moons—it was well known how powerful and connected his family was, not to mention being major donors to the school. Plus, of course, he was a predator. Never before had Leodore been grateful for the instinctive fear this tended to engender from prey, but if it helped him put a stop to this behavior and protect someone who needed it...

The third deer, however, the one who was clearly in charge, only narrowed his eyes and glared harshly at him; his fur was an even darker brown than that of his companions, and it fit him. "Well look who it is. Leo-dolt. Almost didn't recognize ya without your mirror."

Heat burned in the cub’s face, and his fists tightened until he felt his little claws digging into the palmpads. He forced himself to stay calm however, to answer as coolly as possible. "Steffawn
Hasselhoof. I should have known it would be you. Whenever there's trouble, you seem to be at the heart of it. And you can't go anywhere alone, you always have to have back-up." He snorted. "Some brave buck."

The deer somehow glared even more hatefully, and for a long moment Leodore had to fight not to step back; the fact he lowered his head briefly, aiming those small but sharp antlers in his direction, probably had something to do with it. "Lions always talk big, but when it comes to the real thing they're just scared kitties who run away and let the girls do all the real work. Or maybe you think your money'll save ya?"

More stereotypes, even if tinged with grains of truth. More nastiness designed to enflame him. It was working. Moving closer, step by step, he reached up and undid the top button of his collar, deliberately loosened his tie. Then he started unbuttoning his cuffs so he could roll up his sleeves, exposing the tufts of chestnut mane flowing from each elbow. He didn't have much muscle, yet, but he had enough to deal with a bully if he had to. His mother would be unhappy if he got hurt, or damaged his uniform, but he thought his father would understand. Anyway it didn't matter; he knew what was right, and if he was lucky he wouldn't have to do more than bluff.

"Neither, Hasselhoof. You think you're all that, but you're not. And if we end up called to the principal's office over this, I bet I know who'll be believed." Steffawn had been in trouble numerous times, even in detention, while Leodore was a model student.

Unfortunately his words seemed to have shocked the other bullies out of their stasis, and now the pair was flanking their ringleader, both cracking their knuckles, flexing their arms and shoulders, and overall looking as belligerent as possible while they gave him matching nasty grins. Their names were Clover Antlerston (though he went by Clove, thinking that far more bucklike) and Ronald Whitail, and while the latter had white fur flowing down his neck onto his chest (as well as on his tail) and the former was a more caramel brown, they were otherwise cut from the same cloth as Steffawn, only dumber. They couldn't be talked to or reasoned with, and he couldn't help swallowing hard.

Catching this, Hasselhoof smirked, letting the little buck collapse back against the building while he sauntered over, hooves in his pockets. "Not so sure now, are ya? Even if you're right, you gotta make it to that office first...and my boys and I aren't in the habit of lettin' witnesses talk, if ya know what I mean. So why don't ya cut your losses and scram if you know what's good for you? Get back to your little pride, keep makin' believe you're in charge of anything." He paused, then glared over at his victim. "Besides...this is none of your business. Just trying to get him to join up with my herd. It's something all bucks do, if they know what's good for 'em. But then you wouldn't know about that, would ya? Preds never think what prey do matters."

For the first time, the deer crouching against the wall managed to speak up, albeit in a very tremulous, plaintive voice. "B-but...I don't wanna be in a herd. Y-you guys just...beat up anybody
who's weaker than you...to try and show you're better..."

The leader of the bullies turned on him, nostrils flaring and snorting almost like a bull's, fists clenched and black eyes blazing. "Shut up! We were offering ya a good chance to make something of yourself...if you can't see that, you deserve to get beat up!"

Leodore looked from one to the other, emotions careening between confusion, disbelief, and quiet rage. Finally he found his voice again, and even he couldn't believe the amount of menace his little growl managed to carry. "So what he says...it's true?"

Hasselhoof sneered over his shoulder. "Of course it is. How do you think bucks like us get anywhere? We stick together, we get big and strong, and we show everyone else we mean business. Just like our dads." He puffed his chest out proudly. "Anybody who doesn't, they're just pansies. Chickens instead of bucks."

For a moment, no one moved. Then slowly, deliberately, Leodore crossed over to stand between the bullies and their target...bracing himself with both feet as he held up his fists defensively. He could feel cold sweat trickling down from beneath the short mane he'd begun to sprout just earlier this year, as well as down the inside of his dress shirt, but he did not back down. He couldn't. There was too much at stake here. "Well you know what I say, Hasselhoof? No means no. If he doesn't want in...then leave him alone. And I for one think he's got the right idea, not wanting anything to do with that kind of thing."

The deer stared at him furiously, but continued to hesitate, and Leodore thought he'd managed to get away with his bluff...until Steffawn moved closer, looming over the lion until his silhouetted form blocked out the afternoon sunlight blazing across the desert dunes beyond him. "You really don't know when to quit, do ya, Lionfart?"

Red suddenly overlay the cub's vision, that insult one he simply couldn't take lying down, and with a roar that was sadly more cute than truly threatening, he leaped at Steffawn. But that was what the deer had wanted, had been goading him to do...and even if it protected his victim, it had still been an unfortunate mistake.

Leodore tried, he truly did. He held his own as long as he could, as best as he could, and did manage to get in some good kicks and punches, a very solid slug to the gut, and even a knee to the groin once. But Hasselhoof gave as good as he got, and his larger size and bulk made his blows land a lot harder, causing a lot more damage. And it turned out that despite their short length, his antlers were far more dangerous than they appeared. For after making the lion cub cry out in anguish when he took a fist to the side, a punch to the face that made him bite his lip so blood flowed freely down his muzzle, and repeated blows to his chest, shoulders, and thighs that he knew would leave very large bruises, the buck bent forward and thrust his lowered head right into Leodore's
face. He stumbled backward, trying to keep the poor bullied deer between him and the wall, and suddenly he felt agony radiate outward through his face as the razor-sharp inner edges of those young antlers scraped over his nose and came this close to scratching both his eyes out.

Eventually the pain, and a certain light-headedness that came from the amount of blood he was leaking from his wounds, kept Leodore from maintaining his stance. Collapsing backward onto the ground, he still somehow wrapped his arms around the little deer, shielding him with his own body. And after several more agonizingly long minutes during which all three bullies joined in on kicking and slashing at his sides with their merciless hooves, they finally relented.

The crunch of gravel and pavement sounded as if it came from very far away, echoing in an odd muffled way, and then he was able to see Ronald and Clove passing around the corner, two featureless shadows throwing their heads back in laughter as they slapped each other on the shoulder. Beside him, he felt as much as saw Hasselhoof pausing to look down on him in contempt before spitting.

"Maybe that'll teach ya a lesson, Leo-dolt. You're no king. You don't got no power over me. And ya sure don't get my respect, or any prey's. You're just a rich little pussy...cat." The pause was deliberate and insulting. With that, he let out a nasty laugh of his own and strolled away, leaving the back lot of the school in silence.

How long they lay like that, Leodore didn't know. But after letting out several long, deep breaths (and wincing as he felt enough pain in his sides he was certain he at least bruised several ribs), the lion managed to roll over, brace his shaky arms beneath him, and lever himself up off the little deer. The fellow had big brown eyes that just made him want to hug him tightly, and they were naturally filled to overflowing with tears—but also, to his secret pride, awe and more than a bit of hero worship.

"Y-you...you saved me!"

"Well of course I did," the lion cub answered instantly, trying to balance a certain amount of bragging with modesty and not at all sure he succeeded. "You really think I was going to let them hurt you...or make you do anything you didn't want to do?"

The deer flushed, dropping his gaze and voice. "Why not...that's what everyone else does. Especially predators. They take one look at me...not into sports, just books...little, skinny, weak...if they aren't picking on me themselves, they just look away and pretend they don't see."

Sitting up and leaning against the sun-baked bricks, Leodore clenched his jaw...wished he hadn't, as
both his sore fangs and his split lip let out a lancing shot of pain...and shook his head. "I don't care what everyone else does. My mom and dad always taught me, 'You're a lion, that means you look out for everyone who can't take care of themselves, everyone who isn't strong enough, fast enough, smart enough. Everyone's got a gift, and it's your responsibility to make sure they get a chance to use them.'"

Wiping away his tears, the deer sat up as well, a certain resentment burning in his eyes that rather made Leodore think this fellow had a lot more fire, determination, and strength than those other bucks had between all three of them. "I can take care of myself," he retorted; then, after an awkward pause, "Or...I'll be able to someday, I swear!"

"That's the spirit!" Looking down at himself (and wincing at how dirty, torn, and blood-stained his jacket, shirt, and pants had become), he shook his head and gave the other a lopsided, rueful smile. "And well...I didn't really do too well there myself. Looks like we both gotta get bigger and stronger, huh?"

The deer smiled at that, tentatively at first and then more broadly and eagerly. 'I'd like that. I'm sorry about your face, though...um, I don't even know your name.'

Leodore reached up with one paw to gently explore his face. It didn't take him long to find two deep cuts, one under each eye, and several others slashing across the bridge of his nose. Staring at the vermillion staining his pads when he pulled his paw back, he shook off the anger and fear bubbling up within, tried to be as nonchalant as possible to set the little buck at ease. "Don't worry about it. They look worse than they really are. And hey, just means I've got my first scars from fighting the bad guys and defending my pride, right?"

Both of them stared at each other in shock as it sank in what he'd just said, so easily and blithely. Then he rushed on as he held out his other paw to shake. "Anyway, my name's Leodore. Leodore Lionheart."

A snort escaped the deer's muzzle and then he started to laugh, if a bit weakly. "Guess your parents are as bad with names as mine, huh?" Even as Leodore was bristling, he went on, "Mine's Buckley. Buckley Stagmire."

Suddenly he understood what the other meant...and as it sank in how unimaginative and obvious, how on-the-nose and species-conscious their parents had both been in naming them, he too started to laugh. As the deer took his paw and shook it gently, he felt his cheeks turn as red as Buckley's. "Okay, I guess ya got a point there. My dad just...really wanted me to be proud of being a lion. It's an old family name. It...it means 'Lion's Gift'. Must be because of that whole thing with lions and God in the Bible." He ran his paw back through his mane, his face now rivaling the pavement for radiating heat waves.
Buckley was still chuckling, but he didn't look skeptical, annoyed, or contemptuous. In fact that admiration still shone in his eyes. "Well, maybe it'll fit someday. But...your last name does right now, Leodore. You've sure got the heart of a lion. You were so brave!"

Said heart swelled inside his chest, and he couldn't help beaming, but after a few moments he managed to modulate his voice to one of caution. "Thanks, Buckley, but I'm only brave when I have to be. Though...for you, I will be as often as you need it. I'll always come and save ya, I promise."

The deer broke out in an even bigger smile. "No one's ever done that for me before, especially not a predator...thank you. Thank you so much." Using his paw for support, he struggled back up to his hooves, pausing only to fetch his bookbag from where the bullies had tossed it, before he offered his shoulder to the lion cub. "But we'd better get you in to see the school nurse. I don't want you getting infected or anything, Leodore, or I bet your dad'll kill me."

Under his breath, Leodore muttered, "Don't worry, I'm more likely to be the one killed—by my mom, for ruining my uniform!" As they moved toward the corner, each supporting the other so they could walk, slowly but surely, with growing confidence and strength, he did add one thing, though. "If you don't mind though, I'd like it if you called me Leo. That's what all my friends do."

Pausing at the corner, just out of sight of the rest of the playground, the deer rested those huge eyes on him, somehow even wider and more liquid than before. He spoke in a hush. "A-am I your friend, then?"

He squeezed the other's side, nodding firmly, without hesitation. "If you'll have me. I think more predators and prey should be friends, don't you? I think anyone can be anything they want to be here in Zootopia. Or they should be!" That had a very nice ring to it.

Buckley swallowed, smiled again, and nodded as he placed his hoof in Leodore's paw. "I couldn't agree more. In that case, you can call me Bucky. Friend."

Something odd seemed to pass between them...strong, deep, meaningful, that made his throat dry, made his heart pound even faster, and he swore if he had any say in the matter, no one and nothing would bring harm to this deer ever again.

"You bet I will. Friend."
'I'll always come and save you.' That's what he had promised Bucky as children, and even if he'd never had to truly put his money where his muzzle was beyond their years of being bullied ('rescuing' him from homework in college didn't count), he had meant the words with all his heart and always been ready to live up to them if it became necessary. But now...now, when it was finally, irrefutably, critically essential that he fulfill them...he had failed.

Too late. I waited too long. Someone found out about him, tracked down where I had hidden him, and took him away. Why, he didn't know, unless it was to get back at him for all he had done (and not done) or someone who had a grudge against the deer specifically. But they had, he had no idea where they had taken him, and it was too late. Fool. Idiot! You smug, overconfident bastard. So certain of yourself. So sure you had cleared the biggest hurdle, that once you got Hopps on your side and procured a way out of jail, it'd be clear sailing getting Bucky out and to the cure he needed. But you failed. Failed! Too late, too late. The Play-King of Zootopia has lost the Prince of the Forest.

How long he knelt there, he had no idea. All he knew was that by the time the insistent beeping and crackling in his ear had reacquired his attention, he was slumped in abject misery and defeat, his cheeks and chest mane were stained with his tears, and the steel floor around him bore the dents of repeated battering from his pounding fists. Odd, that he couldn't feel any soreness or bruising, any pain at all...

Cackle. Pop. Focus, Lionheart. You've still got others counting on you, watching your back. Perhaps they can help. "Leodore! Leo! Come in, Leo!"

Letting out a shuddering sigh, then taking a breath to try and steady his voice, the ex-mayor reached up and pressed the proper button on the Bluefang. "Calm down, Judy. I'm here. What is it?"

For a long moment he swore he could hear the rabbit's building frustration and disbelief in the silence that followed. Then she burst out in a hissed whisper, "What is it? What is it? Oh, I don't know, could it be that you haven't answered us for the last ten minutes or so? That before that, all we could hear over the wire was the sound of you running and breathing like you were about to pass out, and what sounded like pounding on a door? That the tracker told us you had an extremely elevated heart rate—most likely from fear? No, nothing about any of that should concern us at all."

"Goodness, Carrots." Wilde's voice sounded both startled and warmly approving. "I had no idea that I was rubbing off on you so well, that almost matched my level of snark. We'll make a fox out of you yet."

In other circumstances, Lionheart might actually have laughed—at the unladylike growl Judy made
under her breath if nothing else. But as he slowly came back to himself, he realized they needed to know what had happened as well. And that he had completely forgotten poor Dr. Honey Badger, still bound tightly in the closet. "Ah…sorry about that. Something…merited investigation immediately." Before Judy or Delgato could snap at him for his decidedly non-informative answer, he went on.

"I could…really use your help down here. The mammal's gone, someone else found him first, and there's a prisoner to deal with. Your forensic expertise would be most appreciated." Quickly he gave them directions to the floor this lab was on, and the code for the outer door to the stairwell, then signed off to the sound of Nick's very reluctant sigh.

He assumed it wouldn't be long before they arrived at his side—apart from how on tenterhooks both Judy and Delgato had been to get more thoroughly involved in the case (or get him back in their sights), the rabbit and fox in particular were extremely swift on their feet. He should have just enough time to free Madge, though, and ask her a few pointed questions…as well as reiterate that Bucky's identity must remain a secret.

Getting back to his feet, Lionheart studiously avoided looking at the smashed and ransacked lab, instead making his way back down the hall to the door he had left standing open. Dr. Honey Badger was still on the floor, and he wasn't surprised to see what a doctor might call 'mild annoyance' in her dark eyes. Even though he'd needed to see for himself the proof of Bucky's disappearance, the lion couldn't help flinching guiltily. Hurriedly he knelt by her side; it was like being in a cops-and-robbers movie from his childhood, only this was deadly serious.

As he was able to loosen and tug down the gag that had been stuffed in her mouth—it looked like the strap from a straitjacket—Madge let out a huge gasp, then began to speak hoarsely. "Thank God! I had no idea if you'd ever be able to tell anyone I was still here…or if you even would. I thought no one would ever come, and I was going to suffocate in here, or die of thirst!" Despite her stubbornness and willpower, he could see tears standing at the corners of her frightened eyes. "I never would have forgotten you," Lionheart rumbled softly, which was true; even apart from how important she was to Bucky's continued well-being and the hard work she had done on the Night Howler 'epidemic', she had been a friend of the family for years. "But tell me, what happened? Did you see who did this to you, or how they got in?"

"Not exactly." Honey Badger sounded furious with herself. "I was just going down the hall to Mr. Stagmire's room, to see to his needs for the night before going to bed, when I heard the outer door open—whoever it was had the code. They came up behind me…I could tell there were three or four of them, looming over me, but before I could turn around and see who they were, two of them grabbed me and had me pinned in a chokehold. I fought like hell, of course, but they managed to shove me in this closet, get my arms and legs behind me, and tie me up. Then they took my key, locked the door, and went on down to the patient's room."
She shook her head. "The whole thing was over in only a few minutes. And they blocked out what light there was from the hall, so I never saw their faces or species. Just silhouettes. They were bigger than me, and strong, and they knew how to fight, that's all I know."

Not for the first time, Lionheart regretted not investing in proper lighting for Cliffside; he'd been trying to keep his activity here and the savage mammals a secret, and an unusual spike in electrical usage would have raised suspicions. But forget stumbling around in the dark or general creepiness, the problem with making somewhere a good place to hide was that you weren't the only one who could do the hiding. As he worked on her bonds, he grunted. "It's all right, Madge, you did the best you could do. Though I'd appreciate it if you'd forget the patient's name until I tell you otherwise. I'm not alone here." Which was a very good thing, but could also be very bad if he didn't play his cards right.

Although he'd never been a Junior Ranger Scout or anything similar as a cub, he'd still always been good at knots thanks to his nimble feline fingers. But these knots were extremely tight, stubborn, and frustratingly intricate. The ropes themselves were also practically impervious—it might have been the material, but he also thought from the smell that they'd been treated with something to stiffen and harden the fibers—so he could not slice or cut through them even with his claws, but he was able to slip them beneath the individual coils, prying and inserting and twisting to slowly but surely loosen them. Whoever tied this knew what they were doing. And didn't want her getting out any time soon.

Finally, after several more eternal-seeming minutes, he was able to loosen the bonds enough to start working her free. Letting out a sigh of relief, the badger helped him as her limbs became able to move, and once she was able to wriggle the rest of the way out she began rubbing feeling back into them. "Again, thank you. I wish there was more I could tell you, but I don't know why they did this, or even how they got here and got in. I—"

"Actually there is a way you can help further." He leaned closer, his face intent, his voice roughened by his urgency and fear. Seeing how she instinctively cringed back, and remembering to his renewed shame how he had let his temper get out of control and rather terrorized her during their last encounter here, Lionheart pulled back again, forced himself to speak more gently. "I'm sure there are a number of ways they could have found their way here—the last Night Howler patient still being at Cliffside wouldn't be hard to guess. And the code for the outer door could be cracked, or someone could simply have stolen it from my effects at the jail or my desk in the mayor's office. But I need to know: how did they get past the voiceprint lock?"

"I'd like to know that myself."

When Lionheart turned and looked behind him, he wasn't at all surprised to find Judy standing there, arms crossed over her chest and an expectant look on her small, intent face. The other two officers
were behind her in the hall; Nick was affecting his usual casual, disinterested air but his ears were constantly erect, his tail swishing, and his eyes darting about to look at everything and nothing in case something were to come upon him unawares out of the shadows. Delgato had his gun in paw, not even pretending to be anything but vigilant, suspicious, and calculating, although he did glance once at Honey Badger with concern, gaze softening briefly.

The doctor, in turn, hesitated for a few moments; the last time the police had been at the asylum it had been to arrest Lionheart, but clearly they weren't threatening him now, nor had they accused her of any wrongdoing or tried to detain her as she had been then. The fact they were all here together hopefully underscored for her that this was a (mostly) legally sanctioned operation, making it safe for her to talk... "Oh...uh, good to see you again, Officer Hopps. I...I don't know how to say this, really, but even through the door, while I was bound and struggling here, I could hear them going after the patient. And..." She paused again, flicked her eyes to the bigger feline, and then said, "I heard you. Or someone that sounded like you. It was definitely your voice somehow, sir. Or close enough to it the scanner accepted it."

All of them stared at her, and then at each other, dumbfounded, for several confused and horrified moments, before they began talking in fierce, urgent voices.

"I don't believe this!" Judy was bristling with so much outrage, a ball of so much furious and intense energy, she seemed ready to run right up Lionheart's body to deliver a kick from one of those large bunny feet to his chin—or else simply jump straight from the floor to do the same. "You told us in the car over here that a recording wouldn't work! So how in the heck did they get in? What aren't you telling us? Have you been lying to us—again?"

"Of course he has," Nick scoffed. "He's a lie-on." His eyebrows waggled meaningfully.

"Hey!" Delgato snapped, eyes blazing in the darkness, far more menacing than Lionheart had ever seen them (although admittedly it hadn't been often). "I know you love to make lame jokes at other mammals' expense, Wilde, but now's not the time or place. I'm starting to see why Hopps here didn't like you at first—for a pred who's been stepped on all his life, you sure like throwing the rest of us under the bus when it suits you." He paused, then turned the same dark gaze on the ex-mayor. "You could be right though this time. I don't think he's told us everything by a long shot."

While the fox was glaring back at Delgato, fists clenched and tail puffed (though there did seem to be a cloud of guilt hanging over him as well, and he'd flinched visibly at the start of the other lion's tirade), Judy swiftly changed her tactics, rushing in between them with both paws out as her voice turned soothing. "Nick, can it! That was way out-of-line and you know it. Delgato, it was still just a bad pun, he didn't mean anything by it except against Leodore. I'm sure he completely forgot who else's company he was in. Didn't you, Slick?" She stared pointedly at him over her shoulder, waited until the vulpine nodded jerkily but firmly, before she turned back to Lionheart.
The former mayor was himself fighting down his temper once again—not only was Nick's joke in extremely poor taste and the last thing they needed in a tense situation like this, the fact Delgato seemed to agree with the sentiment (just not the species-ist way it had been expressed) was just as upsetting. But he only clenched his jaw and growled, "I did not lie to you. When I told you a recording could not be used it is because I was assured by the techs involved that it could not. I suppose an extremely sensitive microphone and digital technology could manage a perfect recording, but for that sort of thing you'd need something recorded in very close proximity—something like a TV broadcast or a ZooNet livestream wouldn't be good enough. I don't make it a habit of one-on-one interviews...and anything like that would be kept locked up in the vaults at ZNN. Surely you don't think someone there is behind this?" He snorted. "And who could get their paws on that sort of equipment to begin with?"

Hopps looked taken aback at this, her expression growing thoughtful as her mind shifted into high gear, but now Nick inserted himself into the conversation again—sarcastic as always and unsurprisingly resentful after Delgato's undercutting response. "Your Majesty, try not to show your class pedigree so much, hm? Just because you don't know of any way to get hold of equipment like that, or journalists' private files, doesn't mean the rest of us lowly peons don't. The ZBI, and plenty of other government and law enforcement agencies, are always having to scour the Net, hunting down not just hackers, spies, code-breakers, and other dark ops types, but the software, websites, programs, and equipment they use to do what they do...and the places where they find or make them.

"Anyone with the determination and a connection—and we're talking who they know in the underworld here, not just a modem—can find this sort of thing if they know where to look. Normally I'd say they wouldn't have had the time or patience for this sort of thing...but they've had at least the three months I was at police academy, if not the three months before that between the press conference and when we caught Bellwether. And if this patient is as important as you say he is, they likely wouldn't give up no matter how much time it took."

Lionheart felt his chest tighten; the fox was making too much sense, and while it was a good thing to have him thinking and examining the situation critically instead of dwelling on snark or getting into it with Delgato, the answers he was coming up with were anything but reassuring. Since not only did it indicate Cliffside was nowhere near as safe for Buckley as he had believed, but that the range of possible suspects in abducting him—and places where they could have taken him—had just expanded greatly. Particularly if the kidnappers in question knew who and what Buckley was, beyond their personal relationship.

While he was contemplating this, meanwhile, Delgato was giving Nick a grudgingly respectful look; apparently he hadn't realized how good a cop the fox actually was, but Lionheart had to admit once he got past his own initial prejudices (and the fact Wilde seemed to not hold him in high regard), he knew there was no way Bogo would even have accepted him at Precinct One, let alone partnered him with someone as intelligent and thorough as Judy, if he didn't have the brains and know-how to excel there.
"You've got a good head on your shoulders there, Wilde. When you bother to use it." The vulpine bristled (did he really think Delgato was going to forget, let alone forgive, his thoughtless remark that quickly?), but the smaller lion went on, sounding more worried now than anything—and his thoughts were aligning precisely with Lionheart's. "But if you're right, then how are we going to find this missing mammal? We need a way to narrow it down from just those who had the means to the ones who also had motive and opportunity."

Judy was nodding firmly in agreement, but before she could say anything Lionheart cut in again—as an awful thought had come to him, stirred by the mention of mammals with hacking knowledge, and who else had been involved in a recent operation where hacking had occurred. "Wait a minute. There's something we overlooked here. Or someone. I don't know how he could have done this, or why, but we all know someone who could have easily imitated my voice, and fooled the third lock."

Delgato looked blank, as he hadn't been there for his extraction from the prison, but the two smaller mammals froze—the rabbit looking absolutely stricken, the fox as if he were about to smack his forehead, hard, and then start insulting himself for a change. "Oh no...you don't mean...?"

"Sweet cheese and crackers," Judy muttered, eyes wide with guilt.

Lionheart nodded slowly, grimly. "Vinny Corlione."

Once again, there was an awkward silence—and then they all started talking, all at once or one right after the other.

"I told you not to get Mr. Big involved," Nick snapped accusingly.

"Hey! This is not my fault!" Judy quivered from head to toe.

"Do you see any other idealistic country-bunnies here, who think one little good deed saving the mad mobster's beautiful daughter suddenly changes everything, makes her father a fine, upstanding, trustworthy member of the community?"

Delgato interjected with a snarl of disbelief. "What? You have got to be kidding me, muchachos. You got that nasty little shrew involved in all this?" In his agitation, his accent had grown much stronger.
"I don't know what you're talking about." Although she elevated her pink nose, he thought the rabbit sounded far less certain of herself than usual. "He's a perfectly civil gentlemammal—a lot more than certain present company, let me tell you!"

"Uh-huh. Right. We are talking about the same guy who tried to ice us?"

"That was different. He didn't know who we were then, we had trespassed on his property, and your history with him didn't help."

"So now this is all my fault?" Wilde pressed a paw to his narrow chest, sounding mortally offended. "When you're the one who blurted out to him that you were a cop? Who went onto his place without a warrant? If it hadn't been for that Fifi—"

"Her name's Fru-Fru!"

"—anyway you're dodging the issue. You were the one who went to Mr. Big for help finding someone to take Lionheart's place in jail, and you didn't even question who the guy was, where he came from, why he wanted to help—"

Choking, strangling sounds came from the other lion's direction. "You broke him out of prison, switched somebody else for him?! I thought you just got a court order, and that other lion was just there for show, an insurance policy, or something. Oh, man..." Delgato placed his head in his paws.

At any other time Lionheart might have been a bit smug that someone who clearly thought he'd gotten what he deserved for breaking and evading the law was finding out his own fellow police officers were no better, that everyone had a line they'd cross if something bigger and more important were at stake. Except he couldn't feel good about encouraging Judy to act in such a fashion. Not when he knew (and had admitted) what he'd done had been wrong despite the good intentions behind it. Not when Judy was such a good-hearted mammal who should not have to face such a crisis of conscience when it wasn't necessary. And not when this particular rule-breaking might have gotten all of them, but especially Bucky, in worse trouble.

"Anyway, this doesn't matter!" Hopps burst out, breaking into his guilty thoughts. "Even if you were right, why in the heck would Mr. Big, or Corlione, want to kidnap one of Bellwether's victims? They'd have no reason to want to continue the horrible things she was doing! Mr. Big was only too happy to help us, and it'd be in both of their best interests to do so again!"
Lionheart wasn't so sure of that—not that he doubted her word that the arctic shrew's assistance had been willing and wholehearted, but even aside from the fact that two of the victims had been associates close to him and his family, Buckley was prey, not predator. A seemingly savage prey could have an entirely different use, especially with the current state of Zootopia. And then of course there was just how useful it would be to both Big and Corlione to get rid of the city's District Attorney...

But he couldn't very well tell any of this to his companions, or the whole truth would come out. He'd tell them if it came down to it, if it was a matter of that or Bucky's life, but not before.

Luckily he didn't have to say anything, as Nick was speaking again. "And what if someone paid them well enough to do it? Especially if that someone didn't tell them who they'd be taking, or what they'd be used for?" He paused, frowned a bit. "Of course that means there's more mammals involved in this, but if we can make the connection to Big, put the pressure on him or Corlione, I'm sure they'll squeal. Probably let their accomplices take the fall, hoping they can talk themselves into a lesser sentence, like usual."

"So does that mean this missing mammal has been taken to Tundratown?" Delgato looked up, and while he still seemed a bit overwhelmed and infuriated, his dark eyes were sharp and his expression focused. "Or Sahara Square? I'm assuming that's where this Corlione has his mansion or penthouse suite, whichever."

Now it was Judy's turn to step in again. "Look, I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. We haven't even cased the crime scene yet, that should hopefully tell us who we're dealing with, and where we have to go from here." She paused, then said firmly, "And even if...Mr. Big really is behind this somehow, we just locked Corlione in jail. Before that he was traveling with us. So how could he have been with whoever took the missing mammal, to imitate Lionheart?"

The rabbit turned to Dr. Honey Badger, who had been silent all this time, looking quite out-of-sorts at being surrounded by so many larger mammals as well as police officers dissolving into such heated debate, and had been trying to hunch back inconspicuously in the closet. "How long were you locked in there, ma'am?"

The doctor blinked for a few moments, then looked at her watch. "I...I'd have to say about two hours. I always start my rounds at ten o'clock, and it's after midnight now."

Hopps nodded encouragingly and thanked her. "So that's enough time for whoever did this to get the patient out of here and leave Cliffside before we got here to see them, but definitely not enough time for Corlione to have done it in person before we took him with us. So we're back to where we started, with a recording." She shook her head, then glanced sidelong at Nick. "I'd guess Big or Corlione would have the contacts, and the money, to get the kind of equipment needed to make a
recording that good. Or even one of Lionheart that the press has."

Lionheart rumbled, and though he tried to keep the accusation from his own voice, he didn't think he succeeded very well. "What about whoever helped you hack into the prison security cameras? Couldn't they have gotten hold of a crystal-clear recording of me? Recorded something with Corlione before you picked him up? Or even made one from him while he was at the prison with us? It could even have been done without his knowledge, or Big's."

Judy took a step backward, ears stiff and erect, then swiveled to stare at Nick. "No. There's no way Finnick would...is there?" She sounded hurt...but also despairing.

Wilde put up both paws defensively. "No. No, absolutely not. He may not have much love for his Highness here, or any predator or mammal larger than himself, but he wouldn't be a party to whatever's being done with this missing victim. And frankly, Carrots, I am shocked you would even suggest such a thing."

She was the one to flinch this time, but even though she looked both sad and distressed, she didn't back down. "Yes, Nick, I like him a lot too. But I can't ignore evidence, I have to pursue every avenue, even if it ends up leading to someone I personally care about. I can't let that sort of thing influence my judgment. Besides, if he is involved, he may not even know the real plot. You know as well as I do how compartmentalized these kinds of plans tend to get."

Delgato rubbed at the back of his maned neck; now that the turn of the argument had moved toward a friend of the fox's, he seemed to have had his sympathy aroused somewhat. "She's got a point. Especially if this Finnick might be working for Big now."

A flicker of uncertainty darted across Nick's face, and when he spoke there was a catch of hesitation in his voice. "No. No, he promised me he's going legit. And he wouldn't work for someone who had it in for me."

Judy bit her lip. "But he was there an hour before we were, by his own admission. And he had access to everything we were saying in the waiting room, all neatly diverted onto the other feed he was running. How easy would it be to make a recording from that?"

The smaller lion shuffled his paws. "Renato is a legit limo driver, you know. Used to have his own business once, does his taxes right and everything. And this Otterton fellow is a florist. Just because Big is crooked and runs a lot of illegal operations doesn't mean everything he does is dirty. Hell, your friend could be working for him and not even know it, if Big or Corlione is using a front business."
"And he knows you and Big aren't...well, exactly enemies any more," the rabbit added. "After he helped me find you again, he was there when we took Weaselton to Tundratown to make him confess."

If it hadn't been for that crack about lions, and his overall attitude throughout this venture, Lionheart would be feeling sorry for the fox, who appeared literally cornered by all of their logical points. Actually, he did anyway; he knew exactly how it felt, finding out someone you had trusted and thought close to you had secretly betrayed you, and if this Finnick really were involved, it would be as upsetting to Nick as it was to Judy finding out Big and Corlione could be behind everything.

To Wilde's credit, though, he quickly pulled himself together, rose to his full height, and adjusted his police hat atop his head. "All right, I have to admit, it doesn't look good, and you've all made enough of a case I have to consider it. But right now everything we've said is just speculation, circumstantial evidence. We don't know if any or all of it is true. All we do know is, there's a mammal still missing who needs us, and while we don't know why he was taken, we can find out where and by whom. If we all put on our thinking caps, and examine that room with all the forensic knowledge they stuffed in our heads in place of mush back at the academy. Sound good to everyone?"

Instantly, as if to make up for all the suspicion, anger, and vitriol that had been flung around for the last several minutes, both Judy and Delgato nodded and agreed in unison, and Lionheart was right behind—if there were anything in the room to identify Bucky, he'd have to make sure he found it before they did, but otherwise the fox's course of action was absolutely the right one to take if they were to get to the bottom of all this. So with Dr. Honey Badger trailing along behind them, the group quickly made its way back down the hall to the wreckage of the patient's room.

As they stepped inside, Judy had already removed her smartphone and was using it to illuminate the floor, the same as she had that night six months ago; since both Nick and Delgato were nocturnal, they performed their examination without lights, while Lionheart stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed over his chest, and Dr. Honey Badger huddled nervously behind him. It didn't take long for the rabbit's phone to reveal a set of tracks on the polished steel floor, made by wheels bearing old, disintegrating rubber that left deep black streaks on the metal—the wheels of a gurney, Delgato identified them, and the doctor had to agree it resembled much of the older equipment here at Cliffside. So now they knew how Bucky had been removed.

But as Nick was feverishly searching among the fallen debris that had once been the bed, hoping to find any further clues, he suddenly stiffened and looked up, ears erect and swiveling. "What was that?" he hissed.

Everyone was silent, went still as they strained to listen for any sound in the endless tomb-like darkness of the old asylum, but no one seemed able to hear anything out of the ordinary. "What was
what?” Judy whispered back, and for a wonder even she sounded uneasy and anxious. The former
mayor knew exactly how she felt. More and more I am regretting not having this place torn down,
stone by stone and tile by tile, back when I ordered it closed. I cannot wait till we leave this place,
and not just to find Bucky…if I have any say in the matter, I am never setting foot in here again.

The fox, meanwhile, had turned to stare toward the still partly-ajar door, out into the echoing hollow
of the hallway. Frozen as he was on paws and knees in the midst of his search, he rather looked as if
he’d been hit with the Night Howler too, every inch of his body tense, quivering, on the verge of
fight or flight, green eyes wide and vividly bright in the shadows. Lionheart had to fight not to take a
step back; despite being over twice the vulpine's size, he didn't like the look in those orbs at all. He
might not have been reduced to a feral state, but something had blatantly set off his inner instincts,
and the lion didn’t know which was worse—that Nick looked no different in some ways from
Bellwether's victims who had once been housed in this godforsaken place, or that he himself could
not sense what had so distressed the smaller predator…and so had no idea what might be about to
happen, who or what might be about to ambush them.

Very slowly, he started to turn himself, peering back over his shoulder. Dr. Honey Badger was
already looking as well, and even Delgato had paused in kneeling by the fallen, smashed IV stand to
direct a very spooked gaze toward the ghostly passage extending into the distance.

Nothing. No one appeared. No sound came. Straining, he could faintly hear distant vibrations—
creaking and groaning as the weathered walls settled, as ceiling supports and floor struts which held
the building secure above the falls shifted in the wind. Very far away, what sounded like a loose,
banging window; dripping water; an old, unsecured chain swinging against a wall; even, if he wasn't
imagining it, the subsonic sound that was the endless rumbling of the river pouring down beneath
their feet. But nothing more.

Then, just as he was about to snap at Nick for getting all of them worked into a nervous terror for no
reason—after all, whoever took Bucky was long gone—there was a click…the tiniest of beeps…and
then the whirr of machinery.

It came from the door.

All of them burst into motion at once it seemed, save Nick where he remained crouched and
unmoving on the floor, and that was their undoing. Lionheart was too massive to get up to speed
quickly enough, and his lumbering caused him to trip over Dr. Honey Badger. He just managed to
avoid falling on her as she scooted to the side with a growl and a shriek, but his sideways twist in
turn put him in Delgato's path, making the cop tumble right over his head and land sprawling as if he
were attempting to swim across the floor. Only Judy, the smallest and fleetest of them all, managed to
make it in time—putting all the strength of her haunches into her leap as she sprang toward the
narrowing gray rectangle that was the exit.
Seconds after she slid across the smooth metal of the threshold, the door slid shut, settling into its seating with an audible and ominous click of interlocking latches that sounded like thunder. Another beep, much louder, and then a steady red light began to burn alongside the jamb, a malignant crimson eye that only stared unblinkingly at them, telling them of the finality of their fate.

Delgato tried to rail against it anyway, scrambling up and rushing to the sealed metal panel—searching in vain for something his fingers could grasp, a crack or crevice his claws could slip into, and when that failed pounding and straining at it with all the strength in his young muscles. But it was useless, and Lionheart didn't have to look at the bristling badger's leaden expression to know it matched what made his stomach sink toward his feet.

Something…or someone…had set off the proximity alarm, or programmed a timed release. The lab door was locked shut, and with them on the inside, away from the access panel and the voiceprint scanner, there was no way out.

Chapter End Notes

Not a lot to say this time. The opening scene is obviously meant to parallel young Judy defending her friends from Gideon Grey (I even made Leodore and Bucky the same age Judy and the others were, in my mind anyway), which should explain a few familiar lines. Of course since Lionheart was inspired by Mufasa's character design and Bucky's, as I said, was based on Bambi's father, this means their young selves essentially resemble cub Simba and fawn Bambi. You may now commence the adoring "awwww"s! ^_^ This also explains a familiar Lion King exchange from the two. The physical description of Steffawn, and the name of one of his bully boys, was meant to suggest Ronno. I am also pleased to have provided an explanation for Lionheart's scars that isn't the usual (he had a dark/troubled past). As for the meaning of the name Leodore, that's actually official from the Wiki, since it is of course inspired by Theodore which means God's Gift. This will become significant a bit later on.

Sorry for the evil cliffhanger but you'd better get used to these! As for the conflict/debate between the characters, what it all means, who is right and who is wrong, and who is behind all this…you'll just have to wait and see. ;)
Between the slipperiness of the steel floor and her own softly-furred footpads, Judy wasn't surprised when she slid several feet down the hall before coming to a halt. By the time she turned back and was rushing to the hospital room, the door had of course already closed and locked. Staring up at the access panels well above her eartips, she glowered fiercely. *Horse feathers! If it isn't being prey or a rabbit, it's the larger world refusing to accommodate itself to us smaller folk.* Not that it would do her much good anyway, for while the keys were still in the locks and either Lionheart or Dr. Honey Badger could call the code out to her, the hermetically-sealed panel would muffle the former's voice enough he could not activate the voiceprint machine, she wagered.

Still, she had to try. "Guys! Dr. Honey Badger? Can you hear me? Are you okay in there?"

The pounding tattoo of fists on the inside went silent, and then an audible growl turned into a familiar accented voice. "What do you think, Hopps? I'm locked in here with a manipulative felon and a know-it-all fox who's got a permanent reservation at the 'bitter, party of one' table. What could be wrong with that, huh?"
Another silence. Then, from Nick (and sounding as if he were still crouched on the floor): "Gosh, Manny, that may be the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me. Is everyone going to start turning into a fox around me? Not that I blame you, but—"

"Quiet, you," Judy cut him off, but she couldn't keep the amusement and admiration out of her voice. That was a good one, Delgato. Never knew you had it in you. Nick had better watch out, you can keep up with him after all. "Mr. Lionheart?" she ventured then, a bit worried.

The larger lion let out a long, slow sigh; when he spoke he was once again back to sounding despondent. "I'm here and alive, Miss Hopps, which is the best I can say at the moment. Since I have no idea how we're going to get out of here."

She stiffened; that was not only not the answer she wanted to hear, it was one she hadn't expected. "What? I don't understand! I mean, surely there has to be a way—"

From the sound of Lionheart's voice, he was leaning against the wall next to the door...probably resting his forehead against it. "You're talking about a room that was meant to hold someone in—most recently these savage mammals, but long before that, mammals who were not sane or able to function in society. Even if they were restrained, there had to be further precautions taken to ensure that if they ever broke their bonds, they would not be able to escape and wreak havoc in the facility. The doctors and nurses were not expected to enter the patients' rooms often, especially the more unstable cases—and when they did, there would always be someone on the outside to let them out when they were finished. There was never a contingency for any of the staff becoming sealed in, because it was something that was manifestly impossible."

Judy felt her heart racing anew as panic started setting in; no, this could not be happening. The case might have seemed too good to be true, one where it could not possibly be as simple and easy as it appeared, but this... Even though it was not in her nature, she immediately started considering doing as Bogo had demanded of her, calling in backup from the rest of the ZPD if things got out of hand. But even aside from the fact doing so would be tantamount to giving up, admitting they had failed...that she had failed...at something that had already been an uncertain and unsanctioned mission, there was another, equally important point: as much as this was an unforeseen and dangerous complication, they'd barely even started their investigation and had no idea where the missing mammal was or who had taken him.

Even assuming Bogo and his team could bring equipment that would cut through the door or otherwise release those trapped inside—not a guaranteed assurance, there—this wouldn't allow them to save Bellwether's last victim or fulfill their deal with Lionheart. Not to mention that bringing swarming cops, lights, and sirens to Cliffside once again would completely blow the lid off the secrecy of their plan. If those opposing them didn't already know they were on their trail, they certainly would then, and any chance of tracking them down and freeing their prisoner would be gone.
No, they would have to figure a way out on their own. 

As if her racing thoughts had been picked up by those on the other side of the steel panel, Delgato let out a frustrated growl and began snapping off words between his fangs. "I don't get it, though! How could anyone even know we were coming, to set a trap like this up? I mean, we didn't even know where we were going till we left the prison! You never told anybody where the mammal was, right?"

This last must have been directed at the other lion, but the cop only waited a brief beat before continuing.

"And I can bet you made sure all the cameras in this place were shut down when you started having your wolves bring mammals out here. Even if Bellwether knew where it was because she had access to the jam cams, she's in prison and couldn't tell anybody either. So how'd they know where to go...or that anybody would be showing up here after them? Unless this door just automatically closes after a set time, or something."

The former mayor sounded absent-minded as he replied. "Oh, I'm quite sure now that Bellwether knows all about this place, I'm starting to suspect her family's been in the Meadowlands for generations. In retrospect I should have thought of that...but then there really wasn't anywhere else to put them, and as far as Dawn went I had the wool pulled over my eyes as much as anybody else..." Delgato's resentful grunt at the first part of his statement blended almost uncannily with Nick's snicker at the inadvertent pun in the second part, but Lionheart didn't even seem to notice.

"But you're right, I told no one, and made sure no one knew what was going on here or who was involved—except my wolves, who are all completely loyal to me, and Dr. Honey Badger here."

There was something fierce, even noble, about the way he attested to the canines' devotion to him, and for the first time Judy began to wonder: could the lion have allowed his arrest and not fought against the charges because he was also taking the fall for his men, and the doctor? If so, it put a whole new spin on his actions and the things he had told them that made her criticize her own fairness...and acknowledge Lionheart's sincerity.

While the rabbit fought against a certain guilty conscience rising up within her, Nick spoke up thoughtfully. "Well now...I can't begin to guess how they found this place and your missing mammal, whoever they are, but I can tell you it doesn't have to be some pre-programmed instructions in the lock. See, you may have been behind bars, your Majesty, but anyone who knew about the patient you were holding here and might be looking for him could guess you'd find a way, somehow, to tell someone and get them out here for a rescue attempt.

"If they knew he was important to you, they'd know you wouldn't give up on getting him help. That cat-and-mouse game you were playing with Bellwether—even if you didn't know that's who your opponent was—shows just how determined and clever you are." Amazingly, the fox gave this
compliment without sounding reluctant or sarcastic at all, though she did think his voice sounded rather quavery. Was he that spooked from being inside Cliffside, or from being trapped again? Or was it something more?

"Thank you," Lionheart interjected wryly. "Though I should point out that if I'm right, and Big and Corlione are behind this, they already knew we were looking for another Night Howler victim, so they had time to arrange for an extraction team of some sort to get here first. Assuming they had a way of observing this area, or were simply very good guessers."

"Unfortunately true. But branching off from that, it'd be only intelligent for the ones we're after to assume someone else would eventually show up here. And whether they were trying to keep the mammal from being found, or anyone from finding out who they were, they'd have plenty of incentive to trap possible pursuers or rescuers. However they managed to get past the voiceprint, they could just as easily have used that same method to arrange the door closing a set time after they left."

Nick paused, and she could hear in his voice the lopsided smirk that had originally so infuriated her, and even now still made her roll her eyes and snort...when it didn't make her smile right back. "What I'm going for is this: whoever did this seems to be the cloak-and-dagger sort, and those who work in the dark always plan for someone tailing them; always."

For several long moments there was only silence from the room beyond. Then Delgato muttered, "I hate it when you're right, Wilde." Which only made her partner chuckle even more openly.

Before this turned into another round of fox-baiting, Judy intervened, if a bit impudently. "Okay, well you'd know that better than anyone, wouldn't you, Nick? Still, there's got to be a way to wipe the programming, or at least trip the lock. Dr. Honey Badger?"

After a few seconds she replied, diffident and uncomfortable. "Well...I'm not sure. I'm a doctor, not a computer technician. But I think there may be a way." Her voice projected upwards, as she spoke to someone well above her height. "Sir, wasn't there supposed to be some sort of override?"

Lionheart didn't respond right away; when he did there was a definite annoyance in his voice, though whether because he'd forgotten such a thing existed or what its nature specifically was, she had no idea—until he answered it for her. "Yes, but for the life of me I can't recall what it was. I know there was supposed to be another code..." Chuffing deeply, he seemed to toss the matter aside.

"I do remember this, though: while every precaution was put in place to ensure the patients here could never escape or harm their caregivers, there did need to be a way to get them out in an emergency. If the asylum had to be evacuated, but the power was out, they'd need a way to get these
doors open. And it's quite simple too, thank goodness." He actually chuckled. "Just find something large, heavy, and durable and use it to smash the control panel."

In spite of herself, Judy started laughing as well, if in a bit of hysterical relief. Simple, and cathartic too! "Oh, is that all?" she said archly. "Well then in that case, hang on, boys. I'll head back up to the entrance hall, find a nice big chunk of the debris, and be back before you know it." And so saying, she was off like a shot down the corridor; she thought she heard Nick calling out after her, but she couldn't be bothered with that. No, she was focused, she had a mission again now. She knew if they put their heads together, they'd figure out a solution, and as soon as she'd broken them out, they'd be back on track and the mammal could be found and saved.

*We all make a good team*, she realized as she ran through the grayish darkness, surprised and uncertain how to feel about this. But anything that helped protect the innocent was good in her book, and if it encouraged old grudges to be buried, old habits broken, and new leaves turned over by those who had done the wrong thing, all the better.

By the time Judy had retraced her steps through the stairwells and halls that had led them to Lionheart, searched until she found a piece of shattered rock from one of the walls or ceilings that she deemed sufficiently large enough (but not so large she couldn't carry it back), and returned, she had already run through a number of scenarios in her mind based on the wild, if cogent, theorizing they had explored in the patient's empty room. As much as she had resisted the implications and conclusions both Lionheart and Nick had come to, she realized with growing dread and a touch of despair that they could very well be right, in generalities if not specifics.

As much as she liked Fru-Fru and appreciated the assistance her father had given them in the Night Howler case, the rabbit knew there was a good chance Mr. Big would take advantage of her generosity—*no, admit it, Hopps, your naivete*—to pull off some clandestine illegal operation right under her nose. The fact it might have happened far sooner than she had convinced herself it would made her heart sink, but she couldn't deny the possibility.

Even the fact he and Corlione would on the surface seem to have no reason to kidnap one of Bellwether's victims didn't necessarily mean anything. Off the top of her head she could think of several uncomfortably plausible reasons they might do so, ranging from gaining some sort of leverage over Lionheart—or *the ZPD!*—via blackmail, to a retaliatory attack against the city as revenge for Bellwether's plot, to simply deciding (whether thanks to the sheep's aborted coup or his own hunger for power) he was no longer content ruling and making money from the shadows. In the name of peace and stability, because he no longer trusted the legitimate authorities to keep things under control, or because he had decided the time was right and he should strike before someone else had the same idea, Big could very well have orchestrated a plot of his own, or even planned to co-opt that of the prejudiced ex-Assistant Mayor. He was bold enough, brilliantly subtle enough, and it was likely no worse than anything he and his organization had done before.
Worse, it was even more likely this was all Corlione's doing, as some way of supplanting Big and taking over the criminal underworld as well as Zootopia itself. The arctic shrew seemed to trust the lion implicitly based on both his high rank in the mafia and having recommended him for this mission; as intelligent and sophisticated as the rodent was, he possessed an Old World sense of loyalty and noblesse oblige that, even as it would be mortally offended by any betrayal of one of his own, also could not contemplate such a thing ever occurring; and she couldn't discount the chance that another form of species prejudice (or even size prejudice) could factor into this as well.

On the lion's side, she knew he was extremely well off, and if he possessed holdings in Sahara Square as was likely, he was poised in a position of extreme influence (geographically as well as financially) in the city. If he wanted to become don, and didn't want to wait for Big's demise (or his blessing to take over in his stead after he was gone), he would have to plot against him in some manner. This could be the first step in his plan.

Either way, whether Mr. Big was the mastermind behind everything or he was as innocent as the rest of them and only the feline were to blame, she may well have played right into their paws. As for Finnick, while she refused to believe he would be a party to any of the possible motives she'd ascribed to the mobsters, Delgato's surmise regarding him being an unknowing pawn in the scheme held the ring of truth. Or more likely he had nothing to do with it at all, and the recording had been obtained in some other way.

What mattered in the end was, she had screwed up big time. Again. And while she prayed and hoped the fallout from it wouldn't be as calamitous as what had occurred six months ago, she couldn't be certain. Even though she believed she had learned her lesson, her idealism and trusting nature—ironically, not toward Lionheart as she had initially feared—might well have set off another powderkeg. And this time, she had no idea what the consequences might be, as this was far more nebulous and obfuscated. All she could do was follow the trail wherever it led, do all she could to protect Zootopia and its mammals, and when she was in the right position, with the right information, pounce…and trust her partners in this would be there to back her up.

Especially Nick. Perhaps only Nick.

You’re such a darned, cockamamie fool. And she wasn't sure she meant this berating thought for her police and detective work…or something else altogether.

Looking up from her reverie, Judy realized she was back in the lower level corridor again and let out a slow exhalation. One step at a time. Whatever happened next…in any sense…would have to wait until she had freed the others and they could finish examining the room for evidence. For now, it was time to show off her skills, both those she’d honed at police academy and those which were innately lapine. All she had to do was move back far enough down the hall, take a running start, and her
powerful legs would carry her easily up and forward, high enough to reach the panel and with enough momentum to bash it to pieces. As long as she took into account the weight of the chunk of concrete, of course…

After hefting the stone experimentally to gauge this, Judy maneuvered herself down the hall to what she believed would be the requisite distance, hiked up her rump a bit, braced her feet, and fixed her gaze on the blinking panel ahead of and above her. She took a long, deep breath...held it...narrowing all her focus down to only this one moment. Then, with a flurry of movement and a burst of speed, she sprang and ran, leaping and bounding, hurling herself along the metal-sheathed passage—until at the right second she slammed her feet down and jumped.

Upward, forward she flung herself through the air, the rough stone held tightly in both paws before her, ready to swing and smash. And then, when she was only a few feet away from the panel, the door slid open all by itself.

"Miss Hopps, wait! I already—"

Letting out a strangled shriek, she of course could not stop herself since she was in mid-air with nothing to grab onto. The rock smashed into the panel, shattering glass, plastic, and metal, sending keys scattering, cracking the screen and making sparks fly as the wiring was shorted out. After flickering fitfully for several seconds, the computer operating the locking system failed, lights dying into darkened, scorched parts that gave off a terrible smell and plumes of black smoke and steam. Along with it, the lights in the voiceprint scanner and the keyhole locks also went out.

Falling back to the floor and landing with a light thud, the rabbit dropped the concrete and glared up at Lionheart where he stood looking down at her apologetically, framed in the now-open doorway. "Really? After all that, letting me go to all this trouble, get a nice head of steam going, you suddenly decide now to get your memory back?"

The towering lion looked even more, well, sheepish, interlacing his pawfingers and shuffling his feet. "Ah, I am so very sorry, Judy. The entire time you were gone, I was wracking my brains, trying to remember the override code Dr. Honey Badger mentioned. I finally remembered it just before you arrived, and since it turned out there was an access panel on the inside as well..." He trailed off and tried for a cheesy smile; unlike when he'd done so at her graduation ceremony, it was neither convincing nor very photogenic...though it was, oddly, still somehow endearing.

After glaring a few more moments she sighed and shrugged in a 'what-can-you-do' manner. "Oh well. Gave me some time to think, get my head in order, and be ready for the next step in the case. So it's not a total loss."
Delgato peered past the bigger lion’s shoulder, eyeing the door that had retreated until it was nearly secreted completely in the wall. "Maybe it's just me, but I think you also made sure that mechanism is busted, so there's no way it can get set off and trap us in there again. I don't know about you, but I'd call that a win." He paused, then jerked a thumb back behind him. "We kept looking over the room while you were gone, too. And Wilde found something pretty important."

Indeed, Nick was strolling up past the doctor, almost between Delgato's legs, and although he still displayed a certain twitchiness and discomfort, overall he looked his usual smug, lackadaisical self, and the way he sauntered made Judy groan under her breath. *He's going to be even more insufferable now...* Still, if he had indeed found critical evidence, she couldn't dismiss it or his contribution. Lifting her smartphone and unlocking it so its light cut through the dim shadows of the hall, she aimed it down at what the fox held out in his splayed paw.

Two things lay there in plain view—an old, grimy matchbook and a curly, twisted bit of grayish fur.

Inhaling sharply at the latter, Judy reached out and applied the lightest of touches…and her suspicions were confirmed when the material had a certain soft, puffy give to it, compressing and then returning to its original rounded state. "Wool," she breathed.

The single word seemed to float and echo in the still air of the confined room. Then, as everyone stared at each other, Lionheart said slowly, "So that means…"

"I think so," Judy said. She exchanged a meaningful glance with Nick. "The chief warned us what might happen if Bellwether's lackeys were to find where this missing mammal was being held. We didn't even think about the fact that maybe they already had." Again she exhaled, and this time a certain amount of tension went with it. If this meant what it seemed to, then perhaps she hadn't failed so severely after all. If what it indicated was correct, this was something she could handle. She and the fox had dealt with this before.

Dr. Honey Badger, understandably, looked rather confused. "Er…I know I've been sequestered out here for a while, but I do get some news. I thought those rams had all been locked up with Ms. Bellwether." She said the name sourly, as well she might; a doctor such as she must find what the ewe had done even more twisted and deplorable than most.

"Yes and no." Quickly, even as her mind was racing on what this information meant, what to do with it, and where to go next, the rabbit explained about the secret lab in the abandoned, sealed-off train station Weaselton had led them to, where Doug and his cronies had been holed up cultivating and distilling Night Howler to its most concentrated and overpowering essence. As she did so, the former mayor looked pained and shook his heavy, maned head. "Something wrong, sir?"
Lionheart slumped his shoulders a bit. "Banyan Street Station, on the Animalia Line. It's been shut down for years, decades even. For a lot of reasons, but mostly because that part of Savanna Central has fallen into disrepair, and has been losing its population, too. It has the same design as the Van Horn Station at the Natural History Museum—both of them closed recently for construction, I might add, not shut down permanently...and I'm afraid I'm the one who told Bellwether about them." He winced.

"As you might expect, she covered a lot of the administrative details at City Hall, including the budget, and she wanted me to justify the extra expense in getting the museum and its station back up to code and open for business again—she didn't seem to care very much about the past, I imagine because thinking of it reminded her of when predator hunted prey. I really should have realized then what kind of prejudices she had, and what they might lead her to do..." He broke off as he saw the impatience on Judy's face and returned to his point.

"Anyway, I told her that not only did I believe we need to remember our history, but that I thought it a shame something that has always been a critical part of the city's infrastructure should be dismissed as irrelevant just because monorails and airplanes are the wave of the future. I mentioned Banyan Street, and that if I could I'd like to restore many of the old, forgotten stations on the lines, including out into the Meadowlands."

Again he paused, and this time his quiet voice had turned sad and regretful. "I had no idea what she would end up using it for. She actually seemed interested then...mentioned that when she was growing up, she'd always loved watching the trains go by, even gotten to ride a few when there was a 'Steam Days' festival and the engineer chose to stop for passengers. It was one of the few times we ever seemed to find anything in common..."

Judy didn't blame the lion for looking introspective and confused, as she herself felt rather uncomfortable and heartsick at hearing of this other side of Bellwether. After all, she too had once thought the sheep to be a friend and ally, and a good and caring mammal, and ever since discovering the truth had found herself constantly looking back and second-guessing herself...reconsidering odd turns of phrase and expressions, actions which had seemed altruistic and selfless at the time but had actually turned out to have ulterior motives, things which if she'd been paying better attention at the time might have clued her in, so she could stop the Assistant Mayor before she had gone too far, gained too much power.

To hear again now of the things which made Bellwether a complex and contradictory mammal, different aspects to her character and life, made the rabbit distressed all over again. She didn't want to consign anyone, not even the ewe, to the "irredeemably evil and beyond all help" category...but neither did she want to think about things that would soften her opinion too much, make her too willing to make excuses and justifications for her. What could have happened to her, to make her turn out like that? She didn't think she wanted to know, but it had to be more than simply being treated callously by Lionheart...
After several more long, awkward moments during which everyone looked at each other uncertainly, Delgato finally spoke again. "So...does this mean Mr. Big and Corlione aren't involved after all, just Bellwether's goons? Or are they working together, somehow?"

Nick snorted with great feeling and a skeptical chuckle. "Isn't that the million-dollar question? Normally I'd say there's no way predators and prey would join forces on something like this, especially not these prey and in this climate. But then six months ago I'd have said no one would even think of trying to carry out a scheme this complicated and twisted, let alone actually come so close to succeeding in it. I think we have to admit that nothing's the same any more, and we have to throw out a lot of the old assumptions about what's possible or the way things are done."

"Thanks, Slick," Judy drawled. "Nice to know I can always count on you to be my regular little ray of sunshine."

"You're welcome, I'm here every night and twice as long on weekends." It was a measure of how ill at ease the fox was that his remark was only half-hearted, lacking its usual bite. And the rabbit had to admit he was right to be, for the points he had raised were worrisomely valid. "Anyway, what it really comes down to is, we still don't know how someone was able to fool the voiceprint scanner, and right now the only lead we've got there is Corlione. So if those rams really are involved too, then..."

Delgato frowned, and as she glanced up at him Judy was heartened to see his eyes flicking back and forth along with his racing thoughts; she had praised his intelligence to Bogo and meant every word of it, and personally always enjoyed watching his mind at work. "Maybe, maybe not. All you've got there is some wool. Even assuming it wasn't planted to throw us off the trail, we all know there's an easy way to explain it without those rams—or any at all—having been here." He stared pointedly at his fellow police officers.

For a moment the rabbit's mind was blank as she tried to follow the leap in his logic...and then she had it. "Of course!" She smacked her forehead and shot Nick an emphatic look. "Remember the undercover op the chief authorized your first day in the bullpen?"

The fox looked nettled at not having made the connection first. "How could I forget? Wolfard never looked more ridiculous. Next thing you'll be telling me he was wearing Grandma's nighties or practicing heavy breathing techniques for when he dropped by Swinton's place." From the look on Delgato's face as it twisted and writhed visibly, he agreed (with the latter imagery, if not the former) and was on the verge of laughter.

Everyone else looked understandably befuddled, however, so Judy quickly explained again, this time about the sheep costume their wolven partner had worn to infiltrate the sheep community and root out any other hidden criminals that had hitherto been ignored by the ZPD because "everyone knew
sheep were as harmless as their fleece." She ended with, "What Officer Delgato is getting at is that someone might just want us to think Bellwether's unaccounted-for rams are behind this, when really it was just mammals in costumes. Mammals working for Big or Corlione, for example."

Looking again to Dr. Honey Badger, she added, "Are you sure there isn't anything else you can tell us about those who assaulted you, ma'am? Not to sound stereotypical again, but I was always told badgers had a very acute sense of smell."

The doctor looked if anything even more distressed. "No, you were told right, Officer Hopps. But I'm afraid I was so startled and frightened by the struggle that I couldn't register anything I might have smelled at the time. The way they had me tied, I couldn't see their heads either, to see if they had horns. And they were wearing some kind of long-sleeved bodysuits, so if they had wool I certainly couldn't tell. They did have hooves, but that doesn't narrow it down very much, does it?"

Nick was smelling the wool in the meantime. "No, ma'am, but I can tell you this isn't synthetic. It's the real deal all right."

Delgato raised an eyebrow dubiously. "You can really tell that just from one sniff? I know foxes have good noses too, but…"

Her partner smiled in condescending fashion at the lion, and Judy knew with an inward groan that he was about to make the other cop pay for that disparagement. "Question my observational skills, do you? Then tell me, my dear Mr. Delgato, how it is that I know you are quite the avid painter in your spare time? Since you're far too withdrawn to chat randomly about your hobbies at the precinct, and I've never heard any of our esteemed colleagues asking you about them in any case."

For several spluttering moments the feline stared at him, face turning red beneath the fur, until he finally managed to stutter, "Ay caramba! How did you—?"

Nick performed a theatrical bow. "Well, I could wax eloquent about how I've noticed your paint set and brushes in your locker from time to time, or how I could detect oil and turpentine on your fur when you were late to work and didn't wash thoroughly enough. But the easiest way is right there." And he pointed at Delgato's paws. Instinctively he lifted them—and all of them could see the telltale stains of paint on some of the pads. Despite how smug the fox was being, Judy had to grin in admiration. Good for you. I told you you were officer material.

"Now that I have given my bona fides, if I may continue?" Delgato made a vague gesture, still looking rather stunned and wondering. "So yes, this came from the back of a genuine ruminant of the ovine persuasion. But the word on the streets is that some sheep sell their wool for all kinds of things,
and all kinds of reasons—to disguise themselves, to make some easy money on the side, and so on. So again, it really doesn't tell us anything without more information."

Lionheart stirred again, and this time his expression was both bleak and decidedly nauseous. "I'd rather not get into it just now, Mr. Wilde, but I should point out to you that whether wool or...other portions of their bodies, those sheep you're referring to are not always willing when they give it up. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

"Thank you, your Majesty, we absolutely appreciate you leaving out all the gory details." Despite his flippant tone, Nick did look quite thankful—not to mention unsettled and even rather angry. Judy herself was appalled, and was quite determined to get to the bottom of the ex-mayor's claim as soon as she got the chance. "As I was saying, however, we do need to know more if we're going to find these kidnappers and save your bosom companion. Luckily for us, the other piece of evidence I so cleverly discovered will help us do that, I believe, as well as narrow down just which ungulate the good doctor here has so kindly informed us about." And he held out the matchbook again so that the rabbit's smartphone could illuminate it.

It didn't take long at all for her to see what the vulpine was indicating with one claw—one on the back of the cardboard, a stylized depiction of a leaf, from a plant she was very familiar with in Bunnyburrow. "Clover?" she ventured.

"Close, but not quite. I mean, yes that is what the logo shows, but it's meant to be a little play on words." Nick smiled easily, warming up to his subject as he always did when it was something he was an expert on. "Remember when I told you I know everyone? I also know everywhere, or at least a large enough cross-section of the city's splendorous sights as to make no moment. This, Carrots, comes from a rather infamous little bar found in the seediest part of Zootopia, right on the outskirts where the rural Meadowlands begin."

He made a flourish. "The Cloven Hoof. Frequent, as you may imagine, by all manner of herbivorous species but, in what is most useful for our purposes, most especially those woolly grazers who have been such a thorn in our sides."

Judy blinked a few times, for while she knew Nick was extremely knowledgeable about the city and its denizens, she never would have guessed he'd be aware of matters of interest only to prey species. In fact considering his background; the story of what had happened to him at that Junior Ranger Scouts initiation; the view so many mammals had of foxes (which no matter how hard she had tried to resist it, to keep her family and town's culture and her personal experiences with Gideon Grey from unduly influencing her, had managed to worm its way into her beliefs as well); and in particular the long and often antagonistic history between his species and sheep...well with all of this, she'd have assumed that Nick would want absolutely nothing to do with them. If not dismissing them in outright contempt. It certainly fit the attitude he'd sported when they first met.
But then again, if he did see sheep as a kind of enemy for him, it usually paid to be as informed as possible about those opposed to you.

The others, meanwhile, were giving blank looks again; clearly none of them had heard of the place. Finally Delgato, having recovered his dignity and composure, said in a level tone, "All right. But how does that help us? I mean, I doubt the ones who snatched our missing mammal would have taken him there, even if he weren't maddened by Night Howler."

"Of course not," Nick scoffed. "However, the matchbook is proof they were there at some point, possibly not long before coming here considering we are still on the edge of the Meadowlands. If we go there, we may be able to question some of the patrons and learn about our elusive rams—remarks they may have made, places they might have been headed, perhaps even their identities. However, there are two problems with this scenario."

Judy crossed her arms; if he was about to suggest that even in an unmarked car, three cops could not visit such a place without provoking the clientele into either fleeing or turning dangerously belligerent, they had all brought changes of street clothes in case it became necessary to track down their quarry elsewhere in the city. "And those would be...?"

"Firstly, the itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny, tiny little fact that the Cloven Hoof caters to prey and only prey. No preds allowed. Perhaps you haven't noticed this, my fluffy-tailed, boisterous bunny, but our happy company consists of nothing but fanged, meat-eating beasts save for your lonesome lapine self. Are you seeing the crux of the dilemma now?"

The rabbit narrowed her eyes and flattened her ears. "You know, I'm starting to think 'snark' is your native tongue."

Nick shook his head disapprovingly. "Only just starting? I have clearly not been educating you properly. What would my mother say?"

"I'm sure I don't know, but I do know this: there would be absolutely no issue whatsoever with me going into this bar. Unless you're seriously going to stand there and tell me you still think I can't take care of myself without you." She bristled in anticipation.

Holding both paws up, the fox put on an expression of such innocence Judy would have collapsed in a fit of giggles, had she not been caught between offense and her usual thirst to prove herself. "Would I say such a dishonest thing? I do recall quite vividly how you saved my furry keister from a
certain rampaging jaguar, not to mention an oncoming speeding train. No, I am simply concerned whether you can handle yourself undercover in such a rough and dangerous location—something I have yet to witness firsthand, may I point out."

Judy paused; she could see something else in Nick's eyes, in the way his ears twitched and shifted up and down independently of one another, how big his eyes looked in the darkness, and she realized what had been left unspoken. He wasn't just worried about her ability to infiltrate such a place, whether a country bunny could feign like she belonged in a gritty, low-class establishment. He was worried about her. Her heart melted. Nicholas P. Wilde, you old softie. Am I surprised by you each and every day? Yes, yes I am.

Managing a small but warm smile, she hooked her thumbs in the loops of her belt and shook her head a bit. "I see where this is going. Well, let me tell you, partner, contrary to what you might think, I didn't crawl out of the burrow yesterday. And my town has its fair share of less-than-savory businesses. Even some real dives. You just have to know where to look. So I do know how to act the part if I have to."

To her instant gratification, Delgato was already nodding along with her, approval and faith in his dark eyes; he had no difficulty believing she could pull this off. Lionheart of course had no such assurance, nor anything in his knowledge of her to really decide one way or the other, but aside from the fact he was beholden to her the entire time he was out of jail, he simply seemed willing to go along with the majority if it would lead to rescuing the missing mammal. It was Nick who had to be convinced.

Chuckling a bit ruefully, the red-furred canid had that gleam of admiration in his eyes she first remembered from when he'd realized how well she had hustled him, and again at the entrance to the limo service's grounds in Tundratown. "There's that spitfire heroine I know so well...well, maybe you can at that. But you forgot there was a second problem: this isn't just a prey bar, or a slummy bar. It's a biker bar. So even if you can pull off that kind of attitude, I really don't think you have the right wardrobe for it. Especially not in our car with us."

Judy stared at him, not having even thought of that particular possibility. For a moment she gritted her teeth as she cursed inwardly; she didn't want him to be right about this, and not just because it was their only lead. She wanted to be able to demonstrate she could handle this side of law enforcement, too. But she didn't see how—

Right as Nick and Delgato exchanged a knowing and disappointed glance, and Lionheart looked ready to close his eyes and put his face in his paws in despair, she suddenly remembered something...and grinned slowly, satisfyingly, at the fox until he fidgeted as if on the verge of slinking out of the line of fire.
"Actually...I think I may have a solution to that one too. Let's get out of here and make a pit stop at my place. We've lost enough time as it is." And wait till he sees what I've got in my closet.

It didn’t take them long at all to work their way back up to the entrance and depart Cliffside—this time they weren’t trying to stay quiet and secretive, there was no one whose presence from which they had to conceal themselves, and the urgency of their mission had increased dramatically to the point speed overrode caution or safety to some degree. The most delay, in fact, came from dealing with Dr. Honey Badger who naturally enough would not be coming with them. Lionheart had let the badger know that he considered her relieved of a duty the call of which she had gone above and beyond, and that he wished her to stay safe and protected, gathering whatever records were left of the patients (and especially her final one) until the ZPD came to relieve her of them.

Judy, in turn, had insisted she stay put but assured her that as soon as the missing mammal was found and his kidnappers in custody, someone would be sent to bring her back to civilization and depose her again—this time far more gently and impartially. With that, the four of them had slipped back into their car and raced along the ribbon of highway toward Zootopia proper, leaving the doctor standing solitary and still, a figure in white with one paw hesitantly upraised in Cliffside's shadowy doorway, before she had disappeared back into darkness and distance.

Upon reaching Savanna Central again, Delgato had had no problems following Judy's directions, and soon they were pulling up outside the Grand Pangolin Arms. This late at night the rabbit had to be exceptionally sneaky and soft-footed when slipping inside—like many older mammals, her landlady Mrs. Dharma Armadillo went to bed early and was a rather light sleeper, and she hated to have tenants going loudly in and out or doing anything to disturb the peace, truth be told. (Judy might wonder exactly how it was the Oryx-Antlersons were still allowed to live here, then, except she knew they kept their loudest arguments to either the mornings or early evenings. Plus they lived many floors above the landlady so could, to an extent, be as raucous and disruptive as they liked. Aren't I just lucky then, getting to be their neighbor?)

So Judy crept up the front steps; passed through the main door with only the faintest of clicks from her key, while also opening the panel just enough to let her small form slip inside without the hinges creaking; and similarly darted up the inner staircase until she reached her tiny room.

Grinning as she closed the door softly behind her, the lapine cop only ran a cursory eye around the room to note everything was just as she’d left it—Mrs. Armadillo was also something of a busybody and a snoop, so she always made it a point to check; even if she’d been the sort to bring her work home with her, something regulations and contamination procedures strongly frowned upon, she knew better than to do that when her lease-holder (not to mention various maintenance types) might come into her room without notice. Then, letting out a brief, contented sigh—for even after
everything, she still found the weathered, poorly-furnished, narrow and cramped, weakly-insulated room to be, well, homey and charming—she crossed to her even tinier closet and began going through her admittedly-limited wardrobe.

It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for, one of the few things her big sister Harley had given her when she'd left Bunnyburrow ("because even you can't be Officer Prim twenty-four/seven"). She'd shoved it to the far end of the rod and promptly forgotten about it what with far more pressing matters on her mind, but as soon as Nick had mentioned the kind of place this Cloven Hoof was, and that she couldn't have the right apparel for an undercover operation there, she'd remembered. And she had to admit, as she quickly stripped out of her uniform and donned the...much more casual clothing, that it wasn't just the prospect of shocking the others—especially Nick—that made her want to wear it.

She wanted to wear it for herself. To be different, bold, saucy, and even a bit naughty. It was perfect for this mission, and now she'd finally get to loosen up, show more of who else she was at heart...

About fifteen or twenty minutes later, when she reached the bottom of the stairs and slipped out the door of the Pangolin Arms as quietly and effortlessly as she'd entered, Judy was practically bouncing on her footpaws; despite the fact their mission had become far more complicated and dangerous than she'd originally hoped it would be, that she might have made it possible by involving Mr. Big and his criminal empire, and that the poor missing mammal was still in grave danger, the rabbit was excited and practically glowing. Because after all of those upsetting developments, she needed a pick-me-up like an all-night shift called for the strongest coffee in the city…and because if she could impress this group, especially Nick, then she'd do as well at the Cloven Hoof as she had boasted. And that meant she'd be one step closer to solving this new mystery.

She was not disappointed. As she appeared on the stoop and descended to the curb where the unmarked car was parked, Leodore happened to glance in her direction—and for several long moments his gaze passed right over her, clearly not even recognizing her. When her identity did register, the former mayor started visibly, leaning against the vehicle while his widened eyes seemed unable to look away. Delgato, by contrast, took one look at her, ran his gaze from head to toe, and began to clap slowly—not in mockery, but with firm and unwavering approval.

And as for the vulpine? For the first time since she'd met him, Nick was speechless. Paws spread, jaw dropped and hanging, eyes bugging from their sockets, her partner looked on the verge of passing out, and while a strangled sound came from his throat, nothing else emerged.

Judy grinned smugly as she stopped and posed on the last step. She knew she'd chosen well, and would thank Harley at the first opportunity. For now, she simply reveled in the attention and, yes, the desire she'd incited in the cynical and world-weary fox. It was a toss-up which part of her new outfit was likely responsible. She wore a pair of skintight, imitation leather pants of smooth, glistening black which hugged every bit of her lower half—but especially her backside—and over it a set of
threadbare, stonewashed blue jeans with holes in the knees; the tightly-cinched belt bore a large, eye-catching, brass-plated buckle. But above that was an even greater show-stopper: a sheer black nylon top that left both her shoulders and her midriff bare while also accentuating her bosom, and atop that a black jacket with a red satin lining and steel accouterments at the elbows, shoulders, and wrists. These matched the chain-link choker she wore around her neck, just as her fingerless gloves matched both jacket and pants. A pair of sunglasses pushed up onto her forehead and the application of lipstick to give her mouth just that hint of sensuality were the finishing touches.

"J-Judy?" Nick managed to stutter at last. "Buh…buh…"

"Brilliantly stated, Holmes." She smirked openly. "Did you plan that one out all night?"

As Delgato started to laugh and even Lionheart let out a soft, deep chuckle, the flush of what she was sure was arousal in Nick's cheeks swiftly turned to one of embarrassment, then resentment. Finally regaining control of himself and concealing his emotions behind his usual sardonic mask, the fox raised an eyebrow, smirked in return, and ran his gaze familiarly up and down her ensemble before pursing his lips and speaking in his usual dry tone. "Bunny-buns...you really have outdone yourself this time. I stand corrected." And he clicked his tongue while cocking his fingers at her like the sidearms they carried.

"About time you noticed that," Judy grinned impishly. That's score two for the sly bunny! At this rate she would be winning this evening regardless what else happened; it bode well indeed...if she didn't let herself get too overconfident again. What was undeniably clear was she'd not only proven herself yet again able to keep up in Nick's world (or even surpass him), she'd made further inroads toward deepening their relationship.

If she could ever figure out what it was, what she wanted it to be, and then decide whether or not to pursue it.

Fortunately (or not), there were far more critical matters on their minds that had to be dealt with first, forcing her to set that aside for now. Most notably, the state of affairs between the various members of their group...for while they had not exactly been on the same page to begin with, the events and revelations at Cliffside, their arguments and debates and interactions, had left them even less united now—their emotions more fractious, their interests far less aligned, and their suspicions and uncertainties more pronounced in ways no amount of jocularity and banter could disguise or smooth over. It made her concerned for their chances moving ahead...and it bothered her on a more underlying level, too.

Glancing sidelong at Delgato in the driver's seat as he directed the car back the way they'd come through Savanna Central, then diverging farther west at Nick's directions away from their previous route, Judy frowned. Although she stood by her decision to select him as their backup, both because
of his intelligence and his general temperament (as much as he’d gotten frustrated, offended, or impatient by turns, she knew Johnson would have been far more vocal and pugnacious about it), she realized that her lack of full knowledge of Delgato had contributed to this state of affairs.

Namely that she had underestimated how much Nick’s casual snarkiness and extreme air of confidence would rub the young lion the wrong way...and, unless she missed her guess from the looks exchanged between the felines, that he apparently did hold a grudge against Lionheart as well. *Grr. This is the last thing that I need!*

On the plus side, at least he was completely onboard with rescuing this last missing mammal, and so even if it alternately annoyed and infuriated him to be forced to work with the fox and the former mayor, the leonine cop showed no inclination to do anything but be professional about it until the matter was resolved. And the other thing she had been most concerned with—that Delgato might have lost respect for her intelligence and moral code, both because she had chosen to work with Mr. Big and might have played right into his or Corlione's paws in doing so and thus endangered the city yet again—did not seem to be in evidence.

At least, he had been quick to support her determination to go undercover at the Cloven Hoof to pursue the lone lead they had obtained, he had let the matter of the arctic shrew go (if only for now), and he had been willing to consider other options as to who the kidnappers were and how they had infiltrated the asylum after Nick had analyzed the wool.

This would make their mission far more likely to play out successfully...but it would also ease her heart. Since she not only wanted to make more friends in the ZPD, she wanted her colleagues’ support, respect, and trust. She might keep picking herself back up after falling down and trying again no matter what, but it made it a lot easier if there were others by her side to help...and not just a former con artist. And while losing Nick had been something her heart couldn't stand, she didn’t want to drive anyone else away, either.

She sighed, then glanced up at the rearview mirror where the back seat seemed filled by thick bulk and frazzled, flowing expanses of rich, voluminous mane. Even now, after having listened to Nick’s cogent and persuasive reasoning before making that first jail visit—which she had gently but firmly refused to do until after Nick had graduated from police academy so that he could accompany her for the moral support and extra set of ears—after promises made, deals struck, and determined rhetoric made to Bogo on his behalf, she still wasn’t sure what she thought of Lionheart.

That he was genuinely worried and upset, even terrified, over what had befallen this unknown friend and victim of the Night Howler was undeniable. His reaction to finding the patient gone, his solicitousness toward Dr. Honey Badger, how subdued and despairing he had seemed both while trapped in the isolation ward and after they'd begun piecing together the possibilities of what they were facing...it was all quite real and, she was sure, could be taken at face value.
Then, too, as much as she had been nervous at allowing him to run relatively free (tracer and Bluefang notwithstanding), and had especially been alarmed at his insistence upon entering Cliffside alone, she had to admit he had given them no trouble nor done anything which suggested some elaborate scheme to secure a better plea bargain or even make a break for freedom. Granted, he'd known they were aware of his every move, the abandoned hospital had had no back door or any other way to get in and out—And there's no way any of the toilets there would be big enough to flush him down, Judy smiled to herself—so being on his best behavior and following their commands otherwise would seem the course of wisdom.

One thing she knew Leodore was not was stupid. Impulsive, stubborn, willing to overextend himself or take risky chances if there was something in it for him or the dividends might be high enough, but not stupid. Still, even if his apparent docility was all or mostly an act, until such time as he got what he wanted or the status quo changed, she believed she could trust he would continue to be as helpful and relatively obedient as he had been so far.

But...she still didn't know who the missing mammal was. She didn't know why he was so important to Lionheart, what had required such secrecy and insane security precautions, why he had been given such special treatment, why the former mayor had waited so long—even after the Night Howler cure was found—to ask for their help, or why the big lion continued to keep mum about all of this. The fact he was doing so, even after the mammal's kidnapping and the possible involvement of organized crime and a renewed danger to Zootopia, had to mean whatever the reasons were, they were compelling.

And she had to believe that revealing them would put the poor fellow in as much danger as he currently was if not more, or else Lionheart would tell them in a heartbeat. But none of that really reassured her. There were too many unknowns, they were being forced to take too much on faith, and even if the Barbary were completely on the up-and-up, the not knowing was becoming more and more upsetting.

What else might he think was only on a need-to-know basis? Could she really trust his judgment, after what he had done? He had, after all, already lied to them once about the missing mammal still being in Cliffside. And even though he'd turned out to be absolutely right about the importance of keeping the savage 'outbreak' from the public until it could be solved and cured, that didn't change the fact he'd still broken a number of laws...and that his desperation and fear had caused him to make poor choices and left him just as vulnerable to Bellwether's machinations as the rest of them.

He might have learned his lesson from this as he'd claimed to her and Nick, he might not, or he might only think he had until the moment he would be tested again. She would really rather not have that moment come when the lives and safety of herself, her partners, or the rest of the city might hang in the balance.
Yet what else could she do? She had no proof...he deserved the chance to make up for his mistakes...and until he gave her reason to believe otherwise, he was a wealth of information about Zootopia and its history—particularly that which had been glossed over or even left out of the textbooks back at Woodlands. The ugly truths, the less noble and idealistic facts which had been concealed behind propaganda and rumors, the sorts of things Nick had first confronted her with after she tried to expose his hustle and which had been so easy for Bellwether to exploit once she had maneuvered into the right position.

She would have to use Lionheart to learn these things and place them in the proper perspective, she feared, if she was to solve this mystery and achieve everything they all wanted to accomplish. And if she expected cooperation and honesty, she would have to give it in return.

As if his thoughts had been running in parallel to Judy's own, Nick suddenly cleared his throat and turned in the seat to glance back at Lionheart thoughtfully, lips pursed; he had changed into his street clothes while she was in the Pangolin Arms, the same ones she'd first met him in or ones nearly identical to them, so that the green of his untucked shirt made him far more visible against the night's shadows beyond the windshield, and his loosened tie twirled and flipped idly around one finger.

"So, your Majesty, now that we're on our way, would you mind telling us what you know? I mean, you made it sound like you had the inside scoop on what makes the Meadowlands not the grazers' paradise it appears...and whether we're talking the unsavory types Carrots here is bound to encounter shortly, or the specific miscreants who have made off with your friend, any way you can shed light on the heart of herbivorous darkness would be appreciated."

In spite of the situation, Lionheart snorted in amusement. "Now now, Mr. Wilde, I think we've all received a number of recent lessons in not painting mammals with the same generalizing brush, let alone dismissing an entire species or category thereof." He paused, then his expression turned both threatening and disgusted. "In this particular case, however, you may be more right than you know. While there are many perfectly likable, friendly, law-abiding sheep, there are others who, shall we say, are willing to get their hooves dirty if it will benefit them in some way. Perhaps it comes from being so downtrodden and rejected for so long, all the stereotypes of being weak-minded, gullible, timid...whatever the reason, there has always been a darker undercurrent within sheep society. Rams and ewes with as much ruthlessness, pragmatism, and determination as any big cat, plus the shrewdness and intellect for all manner of money-making schemes and investments."

Judy felt a return of the dark emotions that had risen within her back at Cliffside; at the time she hadn't wanted to believe what Lionheart had been implying, and it had been far too easy to brush it aside when there was the more pressing matter of figuring out their next move and continuing the search for the missing mammal. But now... "What are you saying, Leodore? That these sheep would actually...that they were willing to..."

The lion sighed and gazed out into the streets of the city where once again the neon lights had faded
into the distance, illumination was rare and weak, and only darkness welcomed them into one of the poorer and more run-down districts. "Yes, Miss Hopps. Now mind you, giving away parts of one's bodies is hardly illegal or immoral in and of itself. Whether shed tusks and antlers, shaved fur and wool, or other parts that are routinely lost, only for replacements to grow back, there is a whole cottage industry that has grown up around such things. Clothing and decorations, tools and weapons once upon a time, medicines and other remedies, even perfumes and other means of masking scents—there are so many uses it is difficult to keep track, though all of it carefully regulated of course." He coughed and looked deeply embarrassed. "There are even...substances and concoctions of a certain persuasion that some mammals are convinced aid in...performance."

Before the rabbit could do more than stare at him in mingled shock and bemusement (though she noticed Nick wore a world-weary expression of wryness that also had a definite tilt of naughtiness to his eyebrows, one that very much reminded her of the Mystic Oasis), Lionheart went on hurriedly. "And of course there are mammals who have chosen to donate their bodies after death, whether for transplants and other surgeries or for science to study. But the things I'm talking about...let's just say there are sheep who are literally willing to sell their friends and relatives down the river if it will mean more money for them, or to spare themselves the same fate. There are other species who will sadly do the same, but it seems to be particularly endemic among them...after all, the flock is so large already, surely a few more won't be missed?" He bit the last words off between his fangs, though she thought he looked as sad as he did infuriated.

She couldn't focus very much on that, though, as she was working with every fiber of her being not to lose her last meal over the insides of the car. How...how could they...?! She knew, of course, that many things which were now considered barbaric had been horribly common in the distant past—that even, for example, the old superstition regarding rabbits' feet as being lucky had led to lapines actually being slaughtered for them...or even, to her enraged disbelief, sold by their fellows as a punishment to criminals or, as Lionheart had described, to protect themselves. But she had thought such things were long gone, relics of savagery and primitivism which were now unequivocally outlawed. To find out even some of them might still be happening, behind the scenes and under the radar...

While Judy was thus preoccupied, the former mayor continued with bitter ferocity, and she could hear the sound of his paw clenching on the armrest of the back door (since she was still staring out through the glass and her own tortured reflection). "So you can see why the wool your partner found being the real thing did not necessarily fill me with either confidence or certainty. It is entirely possible that whoever took the...patient was wearing sheep costumes fashioned from the genuine article, and not necessarily wool that had been voluntarily shorn or donated after death. Even if we were not speaking of the Meadowlands' black rendering market, the mafia under Big and Corlione have sold, smuggled, and bartered the goods from such unscrupulous dealers as well and so could easily have obtained costumes for their minions to mislead pursuers." He paused, then let out a slightly startled grunt. "I just remembered—did you happen to get a whiff of the ropes they bound Honey Badger with?"

Although this seemed like an extraneous and irrelevant non-sequitur, Judy nevertheless was grateful for the distraction. As she thought back to that narrow storage closet, she frowned and said slowly,
"Now that you mention it, they did smell kind of funny. Are you thinking...?"

Lionheart nodded, and when she glanced at him she saw a light starting to shine in his eyes again, if only briefly, as he too was inspired by the unraveling of clues for this case. "Perhaps you aren't aware, I imagine this isn't true in a rural area like your Bunnyburrow, but there is a common element used when manufacturing ropes, something that is used to treat the fibers to make them stiffer and more unyielding."

Nick stirred beside her; he had been very quiet since the lion began explaining what he knew, and she didn't even have to look at his face to know how disturbed he too had been—every inch of him pressed against her had been frozen stiff, seized up by strong emotions she could not put a name to. Now, though, he seemed a bit more relaxed and animated. "You wouldn't, by any chance, be referring to lanolin, would you?" he asked incisively—then immediately caught himself with a scoff. "No, wait, that makes things softer, more pliant."

"Very good, Mr. Wilde," Lionheart marveled, and he did indeed sound impressed. "You're actually right, that does come from sheep's wool, and does exactly what you describe. But there's something which does the opposite—wood glue. And it's made from—"

"Gelatin," Judy breathed. "Hooves. Ungulate hooves." Her mind racing, she still managed to shoot a small smirk at the big feline. "They actually do use that where I come from, sir. We have horses in Bunnyburrow, bovines too. And they all give up plenty of hoof shavings for all kinds of manufacturing and rendering—though I didn't know sheep could do that too." She nodded to herself. "For ropes, that's right. Though honestly, as far as I know they give far more to make Jell-O with. It's so easy to make, and in such great quantity, that bunny mothers have sworn by it for decades."

A snort that sounded like a smothered laugh answered her, and then the erstwhile prisoner remarked, "True enough. For our purposes though, the important point here is one we keep coming back to—the use of sheep products like this means either they genuinely were involved in this kidnapping, or someone badly wants us to think they were. Because of Dawn, I imagine." He sighed softly.

"I don't think she'd have ever allied herself with organized crime...although she blew all my expectations and assumptions out of the water as soon as I realized what she'd been doing, so who knows, really...but even if she wouldn't, her confederates might have done so after she was imprisoned. For funding, if nothing else. But either way...your infiltration of the Cloven Hoof should still tell us what we need to know, whether these rams were working alone or not—or if one of Big's prey underlings was where he shouldn't have been."

For a long time after that, everyone was silent, digesting all of this and what it might mean while trying not to think of the darker impulses and uncivilized activities which had been exposed to their understanding. Then, just after the car hit a rather large pothole in the narrower street and Delgato
was forced to slow the vehicle considerably, Nick suddenly turned to face Lionheart again with a puzzled look. "There's one thing I don't get though. Carrots here I can understand, with her background and all. But how did you know about the uses and products made by and from a species as rural as sheep? And don't just say it's because you were the mayor, or because you had such a higher education than most of us."

"After enough very long, tedious, and overwhelmingly detailed meetings with the Chamber of Commerce, I made it my business to know. And if I ever forgot myself or worse deigned to dismiss such things, I had an Assistant Mayor back then who made certain I regretted it." Lionheart paused, rubbing his paw beneath his hoodie in a rather uncharacteristic gesture, and then he chuckled ruefully. "But if you want to know where I found the exact information...it was on Woolipedia. Fittingly ironic, eh?"

Judy exchanged a wondering look with Nick—and then they both burst out in a bout of rather hysterical laughter, one much needed to break the tension and distress that had been growing between them all for the past quarter hour or so.

By the time they had settled down again (even Lionheart had joined in the hilarity, although she noticed with some worry that Delgato had only managed a tight smile and a few weak chuckles), the rabbit felt surprisingly better. Not that it had changed one whit the disturbing nature of the truths she had learned, or given them all clear-cut answers to guide their investigation. But it did lend her a new resolve to ensure that if anything like what Lionheart had spoken of were involved in all this—she could think of several ways someone drugged with Night Howler and then tranqued into insensibility could be useful for such endeavors, none of them good—then she would put a stop to it.

Even if it wasn't, she had every intention now of pursuing this black market after the case was over, investigating it with every bit of ZPD resources and detective acumen she possessed until it was shut down for good and all those who perpetrated it were locked up where they belonged. And she now felt able to focus on what lay immediately ahead of her as well.

Just in time, too, for as Judy adjusted her jacket, squared her shoulders, and looked out at the city ahead of them, she realized from the architecture and overall appearance of the place that they must have nearly reached their destination.

Chapter End Notes

"I'm a doctor, not an X": The oldies never stop being the best! So, a number of different references this time around. While Banyan Street Station being the name of the closed station where Doug and his gang were cultivating the Night Howler is canon to the art book, the wiki, and the movie itself if you use the freeze-frame bonus, I'm sure some of you will recognize Van Horn Station (under a slightly different spelling) from
*Ghostbusters 2.* This is because, to anyone who knows their New York City history, while the backstory for Van Home Station was based off Beach's Pneumatic Railway, the *look* of it was heavily inspired by the closed but almost perfectly preserved City Hall IRT Station...and this same appearance was given to Banyan Street Station. (Seriously, take a good look at it as Nick and Judy sneak inside the gate and peer down at the abandoned train car; also the preproduction sketches in the art book emphasize even more the unusual rounded shape of the platform and the vaulted arch that leads to the steps up to street level. And as the final touch, the street entrance itself is an exact replica of the old NYC IRT street exits which have long since been removed, but one was recreated for *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,* since the climax of that movie takes place in the actual City Hall station.) Since the Natural History Museum station doesn't seem to canonically have a name, I used it for my shout-out since I love *Ghostbusters* and I think the City Hall station is an awesome piece of history that should not be forgotten.

Speaking of old movies, literary references, and things from the past: the phrase "disappearing into darkness and distance" used when they depart Cliffside is a partial quote of the very last line of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (appropriate, considering Cliffside's Gothic and mad scientist connotations), while the outfit Judy wears for going undercover is a shout-out to the one Sandy wears post-makeover at the end of *Grease* (with a few alterations and additions on my part). And the Cloven Hoof, to anyone who has the art book, is a cut place from the Meadowlands, meant to be employed when the original plot involved a sheep conspiracy but dropped when the plot was changed. Anyone who is familiar with my Kung Fu Panda fic should not be surprised at me once again mining lost places and characters. Expect a bit more of this in the future.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain which had come down intermittently throughout their journey to Cliffside and again to the Pangolin Arms had stopped for a short time, but now the windshield was starting to show small droplets once again. Judy rather hoped the precipitation wouldn't get any more intense, but somehow she had the feeling it would; it fit her previous mood, and the nature of their case. Turning her attention to the buildings, she marveled that they were in such shabby condition. Central Zootopia boasted some of the oldest buildings to be found, many well over a century old, but maintained to proper standards and truly showing off their historical heritage, as well as a large number of scintillating, modern skyscrapers, some of them very recent in construction. Despite the fact this neighborhood was overall younger, it looked far more tired and grimy.

Some blocks were partially empty, while others had buildings that were totally unoccupied, their windows shattered, ground-level doors and storefronts boarded up with ancient plywood covered in copious amounts of graffiti. Some of the abandoned commercial buildings still had residences on the upper floors, though in some cases it appeared only select units were still being lived in. Not many mammals were to be found outside. Some were obviously coming home from work, evidenced as they passed an entrance to the subway, the eyes of those they passed scanning quickly while their faces remained indifferent. Further down the block, which she noticed was far less well-lit, a homeless camp was set up in a small vacant lot that once likely held another commercial building from when this was a bustling street. Blue tarps and shopping carts were huddled close together around a makeshift fire pit dug between broken concrete slabs that used to serve as the foundation.
"Why are there so many buildings missing?" Judy asked out loud, soft and saddened. She knew this sort of urban blight was unfortunately common, she’d learned of the usual causes in books and movies, and of course she’d been given a rundown of Zootopia's layout, history, and culture when at the police academy. But something about this seemed...more deliberate. And far more despairing.

"Arson," came Delgato's somber but simple answer.

Nick, rousing himself from his own still posture and silent contemplation beside her, offered elaboration when Judy's eyes went wide. "A lot of landlords decided to set their own buildings on fire—or get someone to do it for them—so they could collect the insurance money and scram." He scoffed under his breath, directing a contemptuous and rather vicious sneer out at the rundown Meadowlands district before them. "Never proven, never convicted, of course. But everybody knows."

"That was a bad time, Officer Hopps," Lionheart said darkly from the back seat, explaining still further. "This whole section of town was abandoned almost wholesale due to political corruption, economic restructuring, and the building of the expressway. Many perpetrators were never apprehended, and a lot of money was made off these mammals' misery. Much still is." He sighed. "Every time I feel as though those who live here have crossed too many lines, hold too many grudges against other mammals, and are only bringing further punishment and distrust down on themselves, I remember this...the squalor they live in, what has been done to them and their livelihoods, the promise this area once held which has been stripped away from them...and I let it go."

She stared back at him a bit numbly, then turned back to gaze out through the pattering drizzle at the gloomy, deeply-shadowed street with its wraith-like inhabitants barely visible. She knew such things happened. She knew mammals like those slumlords existed. It was one of many reasons she'd wanted so badly to become a cop, to fight against their illegal and oppressive ways, to bring them to justice and help the mammals who were their poor victims. But it was one thing to know it, another to see it...and yet a third to know that to a great extent, the damage was already done and it might never be possible to give the help that was truly needed, to restore even a semblance of the prosperity and opportunity that should have been there.

With a world like this to live in...a life like this to face...is it any wonder some of them might not just turn to crime, but lash out? Be so filled with anger, hate, frustration, and bitterness that they would do anything, listen to anyone who told them what they wanted to hear...promised them whatever she had to to get them to aid her in her insane plans?

She shivered, and not from the cold seeping in from outside. Bogo was right about the world being broken. But the only way to fix it was one crime, one life, one victim at a time. And she couldn't do anything about things like this until she got rid of those who would continue to use these mammals for their own ends, redirecting and fanning it into something monstrous that let them gain power.
"Here's the bar," Delgato intoned softly; while she'd been lost in thought, Nick had indicated to the lion where to go, but as she looked up she saw it probably wasn't necessary at this point. At the next intersection, where a lone telephone pole leaned crazily toward an old building blackened by fire, she saw that the city had begun to fade and crumble into the empty countryside. In one direction, up past the expressway looming on its dirty, grunge-covered supports, she could see the distant buildings of a wealthier district, their lights shining unblinkingly through the fog and rain as if floating high above the city; a half-moon hung in the sky, visible now and then when the clouds scudded past so that its light trickled down into the narrow, cavernous street. In the other direction, though, cement gave way to dirt, every lot was lacking in construction and looked like it had for years—perhaps never built on at all—and beyond that there was only the whispering fields of grasses, a few twisted and stunted trees, and large piles of rocks and boulders. Closer to where their car now idled, some of these actually rose into large cliff-like prominences, and one of them had the bar built right into its bottom half.

A corrugated aluminum roof ran all the way around the two sides that were visible; parts of them seemed carved from the rock above, even showing an arched window or two, while others displayed chipped and dingy bricks, their once brilliant red faded almost to brown. In the bar's windows were numerous signs advertising the makers of the drinks and food sold within—Cud, Woolie Reitherman's, Old Hay. Another, quite faded, claimed live music could be found within, but she had to eye that with skepticism; on the telephone pole, a third sign indicated check cashing services, dart games, hay cans and corn for $5, and (as Nick had told them), a very large warning of "NO PREDS." Directly above the door, which stood partly open to let air in and out (along with, she could tell, cigarette smoke and she had to assume other unsavory smells), the brightest and only consistent light on the street came from a blazing red neon sign proclaiming the bar's name, 'Cloven' spelled out vertically and the rest horizontal.

Very slowly, Delgato put the car in gear again and finally brought them to a stop beneath the telephone pole where one ancient street light flickered, crackled, and zapped on a cross-arm. To one side of them was the rusted hulk of a car that, like several others she could see only dimly along the barely existent curb, had been stripped of everything worth stealing and selling; on the other side grass grew up through a sewer grate and an old tire lay forlorn and forgotten, gathering water inside. A full-to-overflowing Dumpster stood flush against the Cloven Hoof, but more garbage lay strewn along the narrow side street as well as the nearest alley; another shopping cart sat rusting alongside a battered bus bench the sign for which was so faded and peeling she doubted the route saw use anymore.

As they came to a halt and her leonine fellow officer shut off the engine, leaving them in silence save for the hiss of the rain upon the glass and the distant rumble of thunder, Judy happened to glance toward a breezeway between the bar and an old apartment building—only to spy a tall, lanky rabbit standing motionless with his head against the bricks, dribble stretching from his mouth. Only then did she notice a puddle of vomit at the rabbit's feet.

She suddenly thought of her father even though this rabbit did not resemble Stu in the slightest in coloring, age, or features, and she sent up a quick but fervent prayer of thanks that no one in her
family was in such a situation, or ever had been as far as she knew. Not for the last time did it strike
her that this mammal, like so many others in dire straits in the city, was someone's relation. Such an
idea used to merely outrage her, and while it still did, after becoming an officer of the law and seeing
it firsthand, it now also scared her deep in her core.

Judy suddenly felt Nick's paw gently touch her shoulder, and despite the tentativeness of the gesture
she flinched instinctively before relaxing again. Looking over her shoulder at him, she saw
something she'd rarely seen from the fox (although thankfully far more common these days): a look
of understanding and sympathy. Usually he didn't express that side of himself to her, not just because
he still refused to show his vulnerability unless he absolutely had to but because he trusted her by
now to know how he felt without such blatant signals. She "knew him better than he knew himself,
sometimes." So to see it now...gave her more comfort than she could say, or would for his sake.
(Though she might just tease him about it later, when this was all over. Or sooner, if he got a bit too
full of himself again.)

Although he still couldn't bring himself to look at her outfit for more than a moment without
blushing, something that filled her with much-needed amusement, Nick did look her right in the eye
—all teasing, sarcasm, and casualness gone, replaced by serious concern. Then he nodded to the
doors silently, indicating if she was ready. As I'll ever be.

Pulling herself together, Judy opened the door of the unmarked car; as she did so, she noticed the
rain was getting heavier. Sometimes she really hated being right. Sighing in resignation, she buttoned
up her jacket (though she left the top undone to show off her assets underneath) and waited for the
fox to exit the car so she could do the same. The sidewalks were quite old, of course and, like the
sewer grate, marred with weeds growing up between the segments and in the cracks.

"Watch out for needles, Carrots," Nick said softly as he climbed back in and shut the door behind
him. She wasn't surprised to hear the lock click.

That was not something Judy wanted to think about. If she was lucky, it would be the worst she'd
have to face in this locale, or even on this night at all...but somehow, she doubted it. Taking a deep
breath, she started to head toward the bar through the pelting rain. Behind her she could hear
Lionheart's bass rumble through the window, which was cracked open enough to allow some
ventilation into the stuffy car: "All right, I need something to take my mind off all...this. So tell me,
Mr. Wilde, as I have been burning with curiosity ever since Miss Hopps mentioned it—just what did
you do to get on Mr. Big's bad side...?"

Judy couldn't hear her partner's answer, but already had the feeling both lions would soon be lost in
hearty, uproarious laughter, and she had to smile herself; while at the time the possible danger to both
of them thanks to his swindle of the mafia boss had left her filled with only dread, looking back it
was definitely something to make her giggle. Not as much as she had while Nick was at the
academy, since the former mayor's revelation of the market for mammal parts had rather put a
damper on the humorous implications of anything even tangentially related. But the fox's reaction to Lionheart's words had told her (even beyond her trust for Nick) that he would never be a party to such a heinous and macabre activity, and so the…rug he had given Mr. Big must have been procured another, much more harmless way.

Which did make her wonder: how had that sly con artist gotten someone to literally part with the fur off their back…? If anyone could, he could, but the more she thought about it, the funnier it started to seem after all. She held onto those good feelings, channeling them into a strut in her step, an arch in her back, and a naughty smirk on her face as she reached the door of the bar, checked to make sure the wire that kept her connected to both Nick and Leodore was still running and in place beneath her jacket, then stepped inside.

Unsurprisingly, it took her eyes some time to adjust to the dim interior. Although most grazing prey had no better night vision than rabbits did, the nature of the establishment, the time of night, and the poor infrastructure of the neighborhood all conspired to keep the lights weak and diffuse save for a few bright patches here and there. The main room was fairly small, with a collection of battered, scarred tables and spindly chairs that looked as if they'd barely been rescued from the incinerator scattered across a floor grungy with dirt, drying puddles of spilled beer, and other fluids she didn't want to think about. In one corner, a pool table stood illuminated by a large stained-glass ceiling lamp that had been darkened by age to a brownish-yellow practically the color of tea, marked with the same logo that had been on the matchbook. Along the back wall, a row of smaller lights with fringed shades hung suspended over the bar itself, behind which were the usual shelves of bottles, glasses, mugs, and other paraphernalia of the bartending trade.

The ram who stood before them, idly polishing a set of shot glasses, had some of the thickest, shaggiest wool she'd ever seen, and it wasn't particularly clean, either. His horns, curled back and spiraled several times around his triangular head, were massive and rather awe-inspiring, clearly the kind meant for charging, smashing through, and battering whatever got in his way…and it looked as if they'd received plenty of use in his lifetime. For that matter, although he sported a gut that pushed out his plaid shirt and apron to the point the buttons were straining a bit, and there was definitely a sheath of fat around his arms and neck, he still had extremely broad shoulders and a barrel chest; she wouldn't want to face him if things turned violent and he acted (rightfully so) in defense of his business. Still, he didn't look exactly hostile either, merely bored and tired as he stared off into space.

Such was not the case for the few patrons there were occupying the bar at this hour. Gathered around the pool table, four or five rams paused their game, cue sticks positioned between their cloven hooves with a skill born of years of practice—some looked like the trucker sort, others were quite clearly bikers as Nick had warned by their own imitation leather jackets, scuffed jeans, and chipped hooves that had been worn into an odd downward-sloping angle by long hours of pressing the pedals on their machines. Most were bare-headed, though a few had caps that shaded their eyes. All of them were staring at her…in curiosity, suspicion, hostility. She swallowed, having forgotten how eerie and unsettling the strangely-shaped pupils of a sheep could be.

Elsewhere in the room, more rams leaned against the walls, sat at the tables, or stood along the bar—
mostly solitary, a pair here and there. Some played cards, though she noticed they used actual money rather than chips to bet and the piles were rather pitiful; others slowly nursed their drinks; a few stared dully at the pale, bluish-gray light of the television situated behind the bar. Some of them wore T-shirts and jackets with popular underclass slogans, or else the names and symbols of local gangs: The Herd, Born Feral, a horned ram's skull surmounted by a crown.

A single careworn ewe waitress moved among the tables, picking up empty glasses or setting down full, foaming ones, including in front of a moose who sat by himself at a back table—apparently his regular seat, judging by the deep gouges made in the ceiling by his antlers. One or two goats also frequented the Cloven Hoof this night, including one sitting right at the corner of the bar in front of the TV; like the bartender, he too was rather obese, stretching out his peach-colored shirt to its limits, and his extraordinarily red nose seemed to match his fur of earthen-clay hue, but otherwise nothing else but his species marked him out from the rest.

The TV muttered, low and indistinct; against the other wall, a jukebox that provided the only cheery light in the place was putting out what sounded like a honky-tonk song. Smoke filled the air from numerous cigarettes, forming a giant mass near the ceiling and hanging in clouds around and beneath each of the light fixtures. The place smelled of warm bodies and musk, stale pretzels and peanuts, and the bitter defeat of a downtrodden life. That was all, no more and no less.

Once she might have loved it, declared it the best thing she'd ever seen the same way she'd reacted to her new apartment, as it seemed to fit perfectly all the low, dismal dives she'd seen in movies and read about in books. But that idealistic bunny wasn't quite so naïve any more; all she saw here was hopelessness, emptiness…and an atmosphere of subtle, underlying threat, as everyone and everything in it resented her intrusion and would turn on her violently if even slightly provoked.

It was what Nick had prepared her for. And she would face it as she always did, refusing to back down or cower, standing her ground until it was the other side that flinched first. Hopefully that would be enough to earn her the right to stay and belong…at least long enough to learn what she came here for.

Privately hoping the bar patrons would assume her long pause in the doorway had been to show off her fashion choices and make an impression, not due to hesitation or fear, Judy finally strode forward in a slow saunter—making eye contact here and there, but otherwise running her gaze over different males as if sizing them up for her closet…or a different room. And she was quite proud of perfecting an expression that clearly denoted she found them all to be lacking, even though they were bigger than she. A surge of triumph ran through her as she saw one or two swallow, a few shuffle their hooves nervously or even sidle a step or two out of the way.

There were enough, though, who only smirked at her in disdain or even glowered belligerently, cracking their necks and lowering their heads to charge…the same way that crooked cop bullyboy of Bellwether's had done at the Natural History Museum. Darn. I was hoping that was just her
influence. Looks like some things really are species-wide. But she wasn't about to be run out of here when she'd just arrived—or at all. As a prey she had every right to be here, it didn't seem likely any of them recognized who she really was, and if she was new to the neighborhood as far as they knew, then what better place to get acquainted?

Ignoring the amusement and scorn, the contemptuous and dark looks, the rabbit threaded her way through the last of the tables, put one foot up on the bar rail, and smiled at the ram on the other side, who leaned against the wooden top to peer down at her. Eyeing the sign that hung above the racks of alcoholic beverages, she put on her best sultry accent. "Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes? How's about a shot of Suffolk whiskey to start me off? Just got into town and I'm dying to sample the local brews." She winked, running her eyes over the bartender's bare woolly arms to supply the right connotation for her double meaning.

The ram didn't take the bait, but he didn't order her out either or even act hostile at all; she supposed he'd heard it all before, and probably better. He simply shrugged a bit and turned away to prepare her drink. *Ah well, can't win 'em all. At least it's a good first step!* Pushing off from the rail, she hopped easily onto one of the rickety metal stools with cracked vinyl seats that lined the bar and settled herself in, footpaws crossed loosely in a rather enticing manner.

The room settled down again as the patrons returned to their billiard and poker games, conversing in low muttering tones, swallowing their drinks, or simply sitting in silence. Judy surveyed each mammal in turn, wondering whether any of them might be a part of this terrible plot she and the others were investigating, if any of them might know something about the ones who were, if they would tell her and how she could persuade them to do so. When the bartender returned with her drink and set it down with a solid *thunk*, she smiled at him again; this time there was a slight reaction, a widening of those unsettling horizontal pupils and a flush in his cheeks before he slipped back into grumpy surliness and stumped away. Watching him studiously polish the bar's far end (a task she privately thought was a lost cause at this point in its condition and history), the rabbit smiled to herself and took a drink.

Back in Bunnyburrow, when she'd snuck out to visit the local taverns without her parents' knowledge, first at Harley's side and then on her own, she'd been partial to Bourbon. This…was a fair bit stronger. Only by sheer force of will did she keep from either choking on the beverage or pounding the bar as she struggled to swallow it; instead she simply forced it down, even though she felt her face flush with its power, and her eyes watered a bit before she was able to breathe again. Trying to keep her gasps as soft and inaudible as possible, she delicately set the shot glass aside, very grateful she'd chosen only a small amount.

*Hoo boy…not trying that again any time soon. Either I can't hold my liquor like I used to, or sheep are way more hardcore than bunnies.* She knew what Nick would say, which only made her more embarrassed.
Nevertheless, as soon as she had recovered, she directed a winsome smile to the barkeep with what she hoped was a naughty twinkle in her eyes, then asked for another. This, she privately swore, was only for show and at best would be slightly sipped; she needed to convince those watching her that she was no one to be trifled with, and was enough like them that she could be confided in, but judging by the strength of this particular drink, even if she could manage larger quantities of it, she'd be getting roaring drunk in no time. And with my luck, I'll start calling out all the patrons who aren't paying their tabs or who are cheating at their games, then end up in the middle of a bar brawl or chased out by the tips of my ears and tail.

She'd just set down the mostly full shot glass and started to turn to examine the room again when the voice spoke near her—gruff, even hoarse, and somehow managing to be both dismissive and amused at the same time.

"You know you're not foolin' anyone, right, kid?"

Judy turned, words of indignant denial on her lips…and they died when she saw the goat at the end of the bar, whom she had sat right next to, looking at her knowingly. He had a much larger mug set before him, recently imbibed since there was foam still clinging to the bearded scruff of his chin, and she doubted it was his first—but his eyes were perfectly focused and aware as they rested on her. Too aware. Unlike some of his fellow patrons, he didn't seem to hold her in contempt, but he certainly was far too wry and good-humored toward her assumed identity.

Drawing herself up to her full height on the stool, she cocked her head to one side, rested a paw artfully on her hip, and drawled, again with that adopted bombshell accent. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, sugar. I'm the real thing, just out on the town and lookin' to find some action. Unless a daddy buck like you is willing to play? The night's still young, after all."

The caprine raised an eyebrow slowly, looking at her askance. "Riiiiight. And I'm a regular Dionysus, and if I take ya back to my place, I'll show ya a real bacchanalia where you can teach all the other maenads how to celebrate." He belched, and somehow even that sounded bored, phoned in. "Toots, do ya think I was born yesterday? You'se don't belong here, any more than I belong dancin' up onstage next to Gazelle."

Judy bristled furiously; in spite of herself, in spite of the fact she had no intention of seducing or being seduced by anyone (certainly not a sleazy goat like him), she found she wanted to make him think she did, or would. And while she might pretend it was professionalism, an insistence on doing the job right that would allow her to one day perform sting operations and undercover work flawlessly, even for months at a time, in truth she knew it was really about her pride. "Why you… well, don't you have a high opinion of yourself, Mr. Barfly!" she hissed under her breath. "Been here so long you think you know everything and everyone that walks through those doors. I wonder if it's because your butt's attached to that seat!"
For the first time the goat actually smiled—and it was broad and appreciative, not condescending in any way. "Ya got spunk, kid, I'll give ya that. Ya may be a greenhorn, but if that spirit doesn't get ground outta ya by your job and this city, ya might just live up to it." Before she could respond—and even she wasn't sure if it would have been with more fury and resentment, or disgruntled gratitude at the rather backhanded compliment—he went on. "For your information, yeah I do know just about everyone who comes in and outta here. Been livin' in this dump of a district for years, and this's the only place still worth comin' to for any kind of entertainment.

"But that ain't why I could suss ya out in a heartbeat. Newcomers may not be 'xactly known in these parts, but they ain't impossible neither. Ya got a good act, could probably fool most of the bozos here, actually. That get-up sure does help." He ran his eyes up and down her body, and despite his general attitude, she found herself squirming and getting rather hot under the collar; he knew what he was doing, and she could tell he could back it up if he truly wanted to. Even his eyes, which showed their unusual shape all the time rather than only when the whites were widened like the sheep, were somehow less disturbing—careworn, far too burdened by life, even sad.

"And sure, if I was about ten years younger—and let's be honest, if you were a few more older—I might've just taken ya up on your offer, shown ya what a real buck can do. But I've been around the block before dozens of times. So I know how to tell when someone else is just gettin' into gear, if ya know what I mean." He shook his horned head, took another long, lusty drink, and wiped his snout with the back of his hoof before shooting her a very direct look. "Besides, even if I'd wanted to get some tail tonight, I kinda think doin' it with an officer of the law ain't the brightest way of goin' about it."

For several moments those words seemed to echo like thunder in her ears (though the goat had spoken them rather softly). Then, as Judy fought against the rising feeling of panic building in her chest and throat and prepared to leap off the stool for the door, the perceptive barfly set his hoof on her paw unobtrusively and said, "Don't get your jammies in a twist. I'm not gonna blow your cover, such as it is."

She blinked, surprised at such generosity and, she had to admit, a bit suspicious; what did he want in return? "Why?" she asked guardedly.

"Because contrary to what Howlywood tells ya, not everybody who lives down in the dumps is ready to bring everyone else down with 'em. Some of us...a lot of us...still got a lotta respect for law and order, even if it usually makes life piss-poor for us more'n it don't. Cuz we know it's better to have a broken system than none at all, that there are good mammals still tryin' to help us out, and that tryin' to be civilized and follow the rules is better for everybody in the long run."

Judy was floored all over again. Once more, and to her chagrin, she realized she needed to rethink
her assumptions and attitudes, and not let bad first impressions, the prejudices of others, or the way the system was set up unfairly influence her thinking. After all, even Mr. Big (assuming he wasn't behind this current plot…) had seen the value of cooperating with the authorities once she explained to him about the Otterton case, and Bogo had also later explained that staying aboveboard and adhering to some fairly scrupulous standards was the only way (aside from bribery and a certain tit-for-tat) mammals like him managed to stay out of jail.

Looks like my little speech at Nick's graduation still applies to me, too. Just because I realized I was wrong about him doesn't mean I'm magically all-around enlightened now. There will always be more mistakes to correct, more limitations to get past, more of the mess that I have to see my way through if I'm going to try and change—myself or anybody else.

Managing to recover her poise, the lapine glanced around the room once more, then leaned toward the goat on one elbow as she continued to keep her voice low. "Well, thank you very much. But how did you know I was a cop? I mean, I could have just been some bored city girl slumming it to get a cheap thrill or give her parents a coronary."

He snorted, but in deep amusement, not disparagement. "Ya got a point there. But I know who ya are 'cuz I'm one of those who actually pays attention to the rest of the world." He nodded toward the wall-mounted TV. "In case ya forgot, yer picture was plastered all over the news when ya bagged Lionheart, at that press conference, and when ya finally exposed that little woolball for the thing she really was."

Part of her cringed yet again at being reminded of how near she'd come to completely tearing the city apart, to being the face of prejudice and division rather than the integrity and honor of the ZPD. But she was still heartened to hear someone from this side of society, who had every reason to distrust and hate those in power, understood what had really happened in the end and rejected it. Even as her ears stayed flattened back, she smiled a little, though she continued to avoid looking at anyone else in the bar. "Right. Of course. Well, that makes things easier, then. But what about everyone else here? Will they…?"

His snort this time sounded more like a disgusted bleat. "You kiddin' me? Those mashugana bums couldn't find their own asses with both hooves and a spotlight. Nah, nobody here knows ya 'cept me." The caprine yawned, scratched his potbelly, then eyed her curiously. "So if you're all done askin' me 'bout my life story and makin' sure that cottontail of yours is covered, mind if I ask you somethin' now?"

She returned his sideways glance, flicked her gaze briefly to the smoke-filled room behind her—one of the card players was watching her suspiciously while one of the pool players seemed to have his gaze fixed on her backside—and then said, "Sure, Mr…?"
"Call me Phil," the goat grunted, then pursed his lips. "And not to sound like a cliché, but what is a pretty little dame like you doing in a crummy joint like this?"

Well, she'd trusted him so far with the truth, and he seemed to be the only mammal here even willing to cooperate, let alone who might possess some useful information. Still, it didn't hurt to be careful; he didn't need to know everything, and at the very least knowing this involved Lionheart might make him clam up. "I'm looking for someone."

"Ya don't say," Phil deadpanned. "Well ya found him."

"A particular someone," the rabbit amended. "Or someones. They might be…dressed up as rams. With…very convincing, realistic costumes, if you get my meaning."

The barstool next to her was very quiet, and when he finally spoke again, the goat sounded madder than she and Lionheart had been put together. "I do. And there's been nobody in the Cloven Hoof like that…not tonight, and not ever. Of' Abe over there don't put up with that kind of twisted shit, and anybody he finds out takes part in it gets kicked out so hard their teeth can feel it." He nodded toward the bartender, and as Judy looked at him she not only believed every word of Phil's testimonial based on his physique, she found herself once more revising her opinion of the fellow upwards.

"You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. In that case then they would be real rams. Three or four of them, I think." Judy considered what the goat had told her about his viewing habits, then spoke obliquely. "They might have…some connection with Ewe-Know-Who, the one who caused so much trouble a few months back."

Phil shot her an incredulous look that practically shouted "Really?!" to which Judy only shrugged and gave an apologetic, and appropriately sheepish, smile. Then he frowned into his mug thoughtfully while drumming his hooves on the bar top. "Huh. Ya wouldn't happen to mean Doug Ramses and his gang, now would ya?"

Judy stiffened and leaned closer. "Yes, that's exactly who I mean! Have you seen them?"

The goat gave her an intent, appraising look. "Either you're the luckiest bunny in the city, or ya just proved how good a cop you are. Cuz if you'd asked me before tonight, I'd have said I hadn't seem 'em here for over three months. But they came in tonight all right, about…" He stopped to count. "…two or three hours ago. Played some pool, then sat right here at the bar for a while before they left."
She felt rather uncomfortable somehow, knowing she was sitting where they had been. "And...I don't suppose you happened to hear them say anything about what they were doing, where they might be going?"

He took another drink, cracked his neck, and instead of answering her asked another question. "What's this all about, eh? Those three are idiots, and they make me look like Little Lord Fauntleroy, but I think I deserve to know just what you think they've done before I get 'em in trouble."

Considering what he'd just said about them, and his earlier disparagement of Bellwether, Judy didn't think he actually cared whether the rams were innocent or not. Either he was afraid of what they might do to him if they found out he snitched, and so wanted to make sure it was worth it...or he already had a suspicion what it was, and wanted her to confirm it.

Thankfully, the truth—or part of it—would satisfy him either way, then. Nerving herself and taking another small sip of her whiskey, the rabbit replied, "Before I tell you that, answer me this: how did you, and the rest of the Hoof's usual crowd, take it when things started falling apart six months ago? How'd you all react to what was going on...and when you found out what was really going on?"

Phil narrowed his eyes at her, but despite how this made his pupils look more menacing, she thought she detected a gleam of respect in them. "You kinda answered my question already there, doll," he observed, though with more resignation than satisfaction, she thought.

"Judy," she reminded him levelly.

He nodded in acknowledgement. "All right then, Judy, here's your answer. I'd say about, oh, a quarter to a third of everyone here, everyone I know or met in those days, were as they say mad as hell and not gonna take it anymore. Believed everything that bitch in sheep's clothing told 'em to believe, were as sure that the preds had it in for us, were all about to go mad and shred us to pieces and eat us alive, as if some heavenly choir came down and told 'em. They armed themselves, started patrolling the streets, broke into the home of any pred who they thought looked suspicious...or who they already had it in for, and were just itchin' to point a hoof at...smashed up a lot of pred-owned stores too, looted 'em blind. It was like the whole world went mad."

His recitation was dull, listless, but still with a tinge of disbelief; she'd never have believed it a short time before, but the mammal who had seemed like just another lewd drunk looked and sounded almost as despairing as she had been the day she turned in her badge in the mayor's office.

"The rest of us? We was scared to death. Too afraid to even go out of our homes. Everything shut down. Everyone rationed their food, holed up together for safety, and waited for...whatever the end
was gonna be." He paused, and then both his voice and jaw hardened as he locked a piercing gaze on her. "Some of us though... we knew something wasn't right. Didn't add up, didn't make sense. Nothing like this had ever happened before, 'least not in livin' memory. And the way it didn't start gettin' worse till after Lionheart was outta the way, after everyone knew about why those mammals went missin', after youse made it sound like it was all about biology and savagery takin' over... it was just too pat, it escalated just a little too carefully, like clockwork."

The goat shook his head. "Even then, I still didn't guess who or what was to blame. And when I found out..." He spat on the floor, cracked his hooves, then downed the rest of his drink before slamming the mug down for a refill that Abe gave him without question. Judy didn't know if he'd heard the subject of their conversation or was just acting wisely based on Phil's expression and mood.

"That dame didn't have her head screwed on straight," he growled. "Oh, I'm sure she had some kinda 'trauma' we don't know about, some excuse for why she went loco." His cloven hooves formed air quotes with the word he'd uttered so sneeringly. "And sure, ask around enough and you'd find all kinds of stories 'bout what preds had done to us, how it was their fault we ended up here, how if we could just get rid of 'em, or at least put 'em in their place, then everything'd be comin' up roses for us. But you wanna know the truth?" He took a swig of his new drink, and although his eyes were a bit swollen and bloodshot, they remained as steady, fierce, and vindicated as ever. 

"None of that matters. Cuz as she was so fond of sayin', we outnumber the preds ten-to-one. We're ninety percent of Zootopia. You know what that means? If we wanted to do better, make somethin' of ourselves, cause some kinda revolution and make a change, we could. The only thing stoppin' us is ourselves. Sure, preds can talk down to us, lie to us, divide us, claim they've got our best interests at heart and we don't need to do nothin'. And so can the bigger prey too, yanno. Ever notice how much they get away with? Too big and dangerous for most preds to boss around, but because they're prey the rest of us little guys just look up to 'em and see every victory they get as one for our side... or at least we'd better, if we know what's good for us, eh? A lotta them on the police force too. Sometimes I wonder who's really keepin' who down..." As Judy started to object, he held up a hoof. "Forget it. Either I'm just a grumpy old goat who doesn't know what he's talkin' about, or if I'm right, ya ain't ready t' see it yet.

"Anyway... point is, when it comes down to it, we could still try and they can't stop us. Move somewhere else. Learn some new skills. Go to any of a million schools or agencies or charities that help out mammals like us, and get into a program that'll help us get out. Get educated. Catch up with the rest of the world, find out where the jobs are, where the future's headed—and fit in there. But we ain't. We sit on our duffs, blame everybody else for our problems. We pretend we're so much better than them, that we deserve all the breaks and rewards that they supposedly get handed to 'em. We don't see anything outside our own little world, and we like it that way. Makes it a helluva lot easier to see everything else as a threat, something to fear... and get rid of.

"We stay right where we are, never changin', never seein' we even need to change, killin' ourselves while we wait for some imaginary savior to come along and rescue us, someone who'll tell us we
was right all along—that the enemy is out there, instead of our own ignorance. And when they do, it's always like Bellwether. They say all the right things, they say they understand us, that they'll fight for us, that together we can show those preds who has the real power, who deserves to be on top. But they don't care about us. They don't give a damn about anything but themselves. She sure didn't.

Very slowly, Phil let out a long, shuddering breath and stared at his hooves. Judy stared right back at him, shoulders slumped. If it wouldn't have broken her cover, and if she weren't sure the goat would either punch her or shove her away, she'd have embraced him in an instant. As it was, it took her a very long time to moisten her dry mouth, even longer to finally muster up the voice to speak. "I'm sorry. For everything you've been through. What all of those mammals…what Bellwether and others like her did to you.

"For what it's worth…while I haven't experienced all those things you described, I've experienced enough to see the truth in it. Maybe…maybe there's a chance for us, though. A chance things can get better, if we just don't give up, if we keep hoping." She expected him to roll his eyes like Nick would, or snort; he only looked mournfully into his mug. "But there are still those who would try and stop us. Because like you said, they want to be the ones in charge and they'll do anything to get there. Or because they feel so mistreated by this world they think anything is justified to get revenge."

Now she did reach over, setting her paw on his forearm. "I won't let them, though. No mammal of good heart and soul will—and we do still exist. But to stop them, I need your help. I don't know what exactly these rams are up to, but I think you already know and that's why you asked me what I'm after them for. Yes, it does have something to do with what the Assistant Mayor was trying to do. Though it may go beyond that now. So I need to know whatever you saw, whatever you heard…so I can track them down and stop them before it's too late, and they maybe set off another crisis, this time one Zootopia can't recover from."

Another long silence. The TV droned on, barely audible even to her ears, while the jukebox played incongruously in the background. A dart hit the cork board; someone spoke, their tone bragging and smug, and she heard money hitting a table top. Then Phil looked at her at last, and there was something she never thought she'd see in his eyes: a watery film, and admiration.

"You really are something else, Miss Hopps. I salute ya." He raised his mug. "If there were more mammals like you, who owned up to their mistakes and then did miles better, we'd sure have a better chance." Reaching into the pocket of his pants, he pulled out something, something that glinted in the light and gave off the sound of clinking metal. He set it on the bar top and slid it along to her.

Judy looked at it, and it took a moment for her to register what it was. As soon as she did, she furrowed her brow in puzzlement and looked at the caprine. "Um…okay?"
He chuckled under his breath, a wheezy but pleasant sound, oddly enough. "You know you're cute when you don't got a clue, right?" Even as she bristled once more (it was less offensive hearing that from a fellow prey, but it still caused an instinctive twitch), he continued. "I got that from Doug. See, when he and his boys were here, I didn't want nothin' to do with 'em, so I pretended I was passed out on the counter." If the circumstances were otherwise, she'd have pointedly suggested there was likely no pretense involved, but to see and hear what he had and then relate it to her now, he had to have been awake and aware.

"Like usual, they ignored me, probably thought I was part of the furniture. So when I heard what they was talkin' about…what big plans they had tonight, and what they was gonna do once they had everythin' in place…I reached right over and snagged this out of his pocket. Probably won't stop 'em, if one of the others has a spare, but at least it might slow 'em down. And now that you're here…it'll let ya catch up to 'em."

Looking again at the object Phil had given her, Judy took a deep breath. She didn't want to ask…she was afraid she knew the answer already, or at least enough of it…but she had to be sure. "What did they say? What are they planning to do?"

Glancing back over his shoulder at the other patrons, then at Abe to be sure the ram stood between them and the nearest rowdy group near the pool table, the goat glowered. Then, in a voice barely audible beneath the sound of the rain hitting the rock and sheet metal outside, he told her.

Sighing heavily, Officer May Swinton rubbed at the small of her back—even though she was just starting her shift, and had been happily sleeping in her bed only an hour or so before that, the hard plastic seats at the Zootopian Correctional Facility were still murder on her spine—then took a drink from the cup of coffee she'd gotten from the prison break room. Strong, the way she liked it and would need it for the dull, monotonous hours ahead, but not too strong since she had mixed in just enough sweet cream to tint it a lighter brown in hue. *Mm. Nectar of the gods.*

A few more bracing sips, however, and she set the cup down at her station to begin her nightly rounds. As uneventful and often boring as her job usually was, she knew it was also very important. And even if she'd prefer being out on the beat or working a caseload back at the precinct, she also knew this task had to be done no matter who happened to be on the roster that night, or whose schedule put them here on rotation for the next several months. And of course, shifts where absolutely nothing happened—no medical emergencies, no fights or injuries between cellmates, no escape attempts, only peace and quiet—were the preferred norm and in fact what happened when the job was being done right.
Didn't make it any less dull, though.

Pulling her nightstick from her belt, the pig proceeded down one corridor of the jail after another, peering into cells, occasionally banging on a bar when she spied anything suspicious or unusual, checked to make sure all doors and gates were properly locked, and otherwise assessed the state of the place since the previous night. Most of the time there was nothing to find—once in a while a door hadn't quite latched, or a careless officer had forgotten to toss uneaten food or drink in the trash, even cases where a visitor had accidentally left something behind in the waiting room which would need to be placed in lost-and-found. But she still always checked, because it was part of the job and it made her feel better, more useful.

She could do much of this via the security cameras, but there were a few areas that lay in blind spots or were so out-of-the-way they'd never been properly monitored, and even for what she could view on tape, she preferred to see it with her own eyes, interact with the prisoners as needed. Some of them were such nasty pieces of work she never trusted them, always watched them like a hawk, and often approached their cells simply to keep them awake…to let them know they could never get complacent, someone would always be aware and would let no trickery or plotting get past them. Others…ones who were in for far lesser crimes, or showed true regret for their actions, who were well-behaved and polite under the circumstances, or who had few or even no visitors…they she checked on to make sure they were all right, and to provide that modicum of interaction and companionship needed to stave off the loneliness.

Swinton was just coming back toward her booth, and was passing down the outer corridor of the minimum security wing, when she heard a deep, rumbling sound coming from a cell somewhere ahead of her. For a moment she thought it was a growl or snarl, and gripped the handle of her nightstick tightly, until she realized it was only the very guttural sound of a very large, deep-voiced male snoring, and had to laugh at herself for her paranoia. And as soon as she pinpointed which cell it was coming from, the pig snorted derisively.

Hah. Cat-nap. Wonder if his Majesty fell asleep over his Fancy Cat magazine again? Sometimes, when she was feeling particularly naughty (and bored), she entertained herself wondering if it was some other sort of reading material Lionheart was…perusing, but all the times she had checked over and stamped his magazines for approval, they had always been completely innocuous. Funny though, she didn't recall the ex-mayor snoring before…

As she came abreast of Lionheart's cell, Swinton glanced inside. The massive feline lay on his back in his cot, as perfectly at ease as if slumbering in a vast feather bed, his blue prison uniform as meticulously pressed and fastened as ever. His expression, which usually was quite satisfied and beatific, if not smug, was this time furrowed with concern; she supposed he was having a bad dream, and couldn't stop herself from smirking. About time he starts getting haunted by what he did.

Suddenly he spoke, murmuring and muttering under his breath as he slept, and the pig froze in place. "Nephew, do you not think…you should stop working at the docks? Why do you not…focus on your nursing work…?"
Swinton's mind raced. As far as she knew, Lionheart had no nephew, let alone one who was a dockworker or a nurse, but she didn't know much about his family and didn't care to. For all she knew, he did. No, what concerned her was the fact the lion's voice in his sleep sounded *much* different than when he was awake. A different cadence and word order…and it definitely held an accent. *Italian? But*…

There was only one conclusion to be drawn, however improbable, and she drew it. The lion in the cell, no matter how much he looked like him, was not Leodore Lionheart. Which just left the compelling questions: who was he, how did he get there, where was the real Lionheart, why had this switch been made…and most importantly of all, who had accomplished it?

Rushing back to her station as quickly as she dared, the pig took a huge gulp of her coffee to fuel herself, then immediately tapped into the camera logs to check recordings since her last shift. There were a great number, of course, with such a large facility, so many cameras, and so many hours in a day, but she only had to focus on two: the corridor from Lionheart's cell and the waiting room where he was taken to meet visitors. And she had the serial numbers for those feeds memorized by now, as she had taken it upon herself to keep a close eye on the corrupt ex-mayor.

But as she logged in and began sifting through the videos, Swinton found herself increasingly irritated, confused, and disquieted…for after around forty-five minutes of searching, there was nothing. No visitors who seemed suspicious—none at all today, in fact. Other than when Lionheart had been to the cafeteria for his meals, when he was allowed out to the exercise yard, and the privileged visits he was accorded to the prison library, there was nothing. He had stayed in his cell, with no chance of a switch or any sort of funny business at all to take place. At least none she could see. She knew it had to have occurred somehow, there was no possible way she could have imagined this, or that it could mean anything other than a breakout had somehow happened.

Which in turn meant that, since she could find no evidence of it, the security cameras had been tampered with. Either the relevant tapes had been removed and replaced with fakes, or the cameras themselves had been tricked in some fashion, made to record false imagery or otherwise dummied out. It was the sort of thing found in a spy movie, but that didn't mean it was impossible in real life; there were all kinds of computer whizzes and specialized technology which could probably accomplish such a thing, including decidedly illegal, black market examples. She was sure if someone was determined enough, they could find a way.

What worried her more was that this implied there had been inside help. Because even if the camera trickery had been done with no one's knowledge, whoever had been on guard earlier in the evening would have to have been overpowered in some manner to get Lionheart out. But nothing had been out of place or shown any sign of a struggle when she had arrived…no discharged bullets, no blood, nothing broken or missing. Andersen had been quiet when he checked out, only tipping his hat at her as he left, but he was *always* quiet. Surely he couldn't be in on it too?
Swinton reined in her paranoia again; no, this had clearly been an expert job, carefully planned and executed, which meant the duty officer had been taken into account. Distracted or kept occupied in some benign way, but unaware of the switch. He should have checked the video logs himself, and thus caught the discrepancy—even his own movements were either absent entirely or severely clipped from the footage—but if all had seemed calm and normal, he wouldn't have thought anything of it. A lapse in judgment and protocol, something he'd be disciplined for since it had allowed this breach in security, but it didn't mean anything more than that. And it didn't tell her what had actually happened.

Tapping one hoof on the plastic counter top, she frowned…and then her expression cleared. They had been good, but they couldn't have thought of everything, been everywhere. And there was one key way of cross-checking, something that would have been quite difficult to fool or alter on top of all the rest—the front gate. And even if the nature of the switch had kept the guard there from being suspicious, the same number and species and appearance going in and out, the fact there had been anyone at all, when compared with the decided lack of visitors on the camera, should pinpoint the culprit. The fact that it was this late, after visiting hours were long over and only official business could be conducted, would help narrow the field even further.

Inhaling slowly, holding it, then letting out her breath to keep her voice level, bland, and no-nonsense, Swinton put the call through. After only a few moments, the phone at the other end picked up. "Gatehouse."

"Hi Barry, May here." In other circumstances she might have adopted a sweet, genteel, and persuasive tone—but that was so unlike her usual blunt directness that it would have raised flags right there. Besides, her regular manner almost always got results. "How's it been tonight so far? Anything to report?"

"'Fraid not," the zebra drawled. "The herd's been grazin' quietly." It had been a running joke between them, ever since they started being placed on shifts together, that a stampede was always just one moment of panic away. It was a bit of species-specific humor that was as refreshing and amusing as it was self-deprecating.

Swinton paused. "No visitors or anything, then?" She worked very hard to keep her tone disinterested and routine.

"Nope, it's been like a morgue here." The equine stopped, seeming to catch himself. "Oh, there was one drop-in from the precinct, but that was it."

"Oh?"
"Yeah. About a couple hours ago. They weren't here long, less than half an hour, said they had a quick deposition they had to do with Lionheart. Had another lion with them, guess he was a friend or relative, they never said. Maybe he needed his memory jogged?" The quip turned blasé again.
"Anyway, they left right after that, said they had all they needed."

The pig held her breath again, let it out. "Who was it?"

"Officer Hopps," her colleague replied with a definite hint of wryness. "That new fox partner of hers. Wilde, I think his name is? Oh, and Delgato was driving them."

Again Swinton thought furiously. On the one hoof, that pair had been in and out of the prison several times the last few days, including for a number of visits with Lionheart, which didn't really tell her anything. On the other hoof, what could prompt a sudden, secretive visit in the pre-midnight hours, in the company of another lion? And while she knew Judy was as by-the-book in her own ways as Bogo, that fox was another matter...as irreverent, cheeky, and clever as they came. While she hadn't caught him breaking any rules or regulations so far, and she was trying to keep from falling into stereotypes, it wouldn't surprise her in the least to find out he had been lax, cutting corners—or outright finding loopholes in the law to exploit.

And Hopps had proven capable of certain ends-justify-the-means methods herself during the Night Howler case, as undeniably right and effective as she had turned out to be. If she thought some great good could be accomplished, there was no telling what she might be willing to do.

She didn't see how even the rabbit could justify helping a booked and arraigned felon—one she'd helped arrest, no less—escape prison, let alone why. And Delgato's presence was even more troubling, as he was as strait-laced, dependable, and aboveboard as could be, one of the ZPD's most dedicated and trustworthy officers. (The others, at least in her view, were Fangmeyer and Grizzoli, amusingly enough.) Still, as the driver he may not have had any idea what was truly going on...and in any event, they had been the only visitors, while the presence of the other unknown lion clinched it. "All right, thanks for the info."

"No problem. See you on break. Trotter out."

Pressing her hooves together, the pig stared without seeing at the computer screen where the last unremarkable image sequence on the video continued to replay. Again, she could not believe Judy Hopps, even with Nick Wilde influencing her, would do something as blatantly illegal as this, jeopardizing her career yet again after she had worked so hard to achieve it and won accolades from all sides, even from the notoriously difficult-to-please Cape buffalo. And coming to the gate with such relative boldness, as confident and compliant as ever, in the company of the one she planned to
switch with the Barbary, wasn't the actions of someone who thought they were in the wrong, or
would even be caught.

She was missing something. She couldn't believe this could have been sanctioned by Bogo in any
way, unless whatever request Judy had made had neglected to mention the means that would be used
to carry it out. But either way, she needed to know more. Find out if there really was a cancer in the
heart of the ZPD, how far and deep this corruption might run, who she could trust, who would be
willing to back her up if she had to go to the DA's office, the City Council, or the media.

Something big was happening, she could sense it. Something that might once again threaten the city.
Whatever it was, she intended to get to the bottom of it, and would not rest until she knew what was
going on and why. And she especially swore that whatever was happening, she would find that
miserable criminal Lionheart and put him right back where he belonged.

Another phone call was quickly placed, one she made sure to couch in strong but reassuring terms.
Yes, an emergency had come up, one that required someone from City Center to cover her shift. No,
she did not need backup, and the chief didn't need to be bothered with it, at least not yet. It might be
nothing, and if it wasn't they needed to be as cautious and discreet as possible; after what had
happened six months ago, Zootopia didn't need any more threats to peace and stability.

She hung up, steepling her hooves before the lock of blond hair that fell down across her eyes. As
soon as her relief arrived, she would be heading back to the precinct to investigate. Whether Bogo
himself or someone else, Hopps and Wilde had had help in their law-breaking. She would find out
who, she would find out why, and she would find out exactly what assistance they had been
provided.

One way or another, she was busting this case wide open.

Chapter End Notes

The bit where Judy contemplates what she might do if she got drunk is a shout-out to
her VA Ginnifer Goodwin and how hilarious she was as drunk Snow White in an
episode of the sixth season of *Once Upon a Time*. The character of Phil is another
reference to my friend and fellow author 6wingdragon's "Neverwere Moments", this
time the character Phil Octaves (who in turn is a reference to Philoctetes from Disney’s
*Hercules*), while the dockworking nurse lion mentioned by Corlione is Lanny Wild
(though obviously I've altered things by making him his nephew); and the name I've
given to the zebra gate guard is from a very well-known Harry Potter parody—for some
reason Barry really seemed to fit him, and the reason for the last name should be
obvious. Of course the entire look of the Cloven Hoof comes from the drawings in *Art
of Zootopia*. 
I found it a lot of fun to take Swinton, who was already standing guard over the disgraced former mayor, and now make her learn of his escape and be absolutely determined he be found, brought back, and continue to pay for his crimes...since as I noted before, the original plot for the film involved Swinton as the mayor, and the one behind the pred/prey conspiracy. A complete reversal of her personality and role is interesting, I think...although the fact she intends to be an Inspector Javert to Lionheart suggests she still has some of the same less-admirable traits of the original, in this case a belief in her own rightness over anyone else's. Whether she will persist in this, contrary to whatever she may learn or be told, remains to be seen as the plot thickens...

Lastly, the other big thing here is Phil's speech about the prey, how they reacted to Bellwether's plot, and what he views as the right course going forward, which is a bit of an Author Tract on my part. Without naming names since I'd rather not draw in certain types to flame me, let's just say that because of the strong parallels between Bellwether and her tactics vs. a certain real-life politician, a lot of thoughts I've been having about those conned, misled, and manipulated by said politician made sense applied to the ewe's victims as well, so I felt compelled to include them. The original film was so topical and so important for these very reasons, so while some might accuse me of stirring the pot or being deliberately divisive, I think it is even more important that we acknowledge these points if we are writing in the Zootopia world. And only by being honest about the reasons for certain choices and views in the real world, what goals were being sought and what actually ended up happening instead, can we hope to find a solution and move forward together. I certainly don't claim to have the answer, or even an answer, but I think we have to ask the right questions before we can proceed anywhere, and maybe considering it through the lens of Zootopia can help with that.
Letting out a heavy sigh, the weight of his football gear pressing down on one shoulder while his equally heavy bookbag pulled down the other, Leodore Lionheart—star fullback, pride of ZSU, and one of the most prestigious pledges to Kappa Alpha in the last five years—paused outside the door of the fraternity study room, as he could quite clearly hear the sound of snoring coming from inside. Chuckling and shaking his maned head, he opened the door and peered in. "Hey, Buck…Bucky! Look alive in there."

As he’d expected, the deer was in his usual position: face-down on the table, books and papers spread around him in a veritable halo of activity, antlers propping him three or four inches above its wooden surface, while a puddle of drool formed under his muzzle. At the lion’s raised voice he flinched visibly, jerking up with a wild look in his still somnolent eyes. "Bwuh? Wh-what? Leo…?"

The big feline had to smother a laugh. "You did it again, Buck. How many times am I gonna find you passed out in here before I ask the president to just make up a cot for you permanently?"

Bucky wiped away his saliva with a grunt of distaste, groaned softly, and rubbed at his temples as he sat back in his chair with a creak. "Damn. Sorry, Leo. My professors have been slamming us harder than ever after the last midterms, and with finals coming up sooner than anyone would like, I've had
to pull a lot of all-nighters to keep up…"

Leodore frowned, his amusement fading; there was definitely a gaunt cast to the cervine's face, his bleary eyes had bags beneath them discernible even through the fur, and there was a slur in his voice he didn't like. "You don't need to remind me—I've been getting it from all sides too, the big game is coming up and Coach Kodiak is pushing us just as much as Professor Meyer is." He paused. "But, Buck…you can't keep punishing yourself like this. It's not healthy."

"Yes, Papa Lion," the deer retorted, but his needling tone was ruined by a large yawn.

In spite of himself, and his increasing worry, Lionheart smiled fondly at his friend. He understood, of course, Buckley had always been a diligent, conscientious student and this had only intensified in college. And considering he was majoring in pre-law, both the workload and its difficulty were to be expected. He was quite proud of how much the deer had accomplished, how determined he was to achieve his goals and help Zootopia fulfill its own potential. But he was harder on himself than anyone else, he always had been…and Leodore was very much afraid if he didn't dial it back soon, he'd have a breakdown…or just as bad, be in danger of the same sort of self-destructiveness and willful blindness as the lion had nearly fallen into over a year ago.

And who had rescued him then? If returning the favor now made him a father figure, so be it. It wasn't as if he lacked the look for it, after all.

Running a huge paw unconsciously through his rich, voluminous mane, he set down his bag, shrugged his shoulderpads and helmet onto the floor, and crossed over to the book-covered table to loom over his oldest and best friend, arms folded sternly across his massive chest. "All right, that's it. I'm staging an intervention."

Bucky blinked several times, though he thought it was as much due to sleepiness as startlement. "Wh-what? No, I'm fine. Just…fine." Drooping in his seat, the deer seemed to be struggling with his certainty as well as his consciousness.

"Uh-huh. Right." Shaking his head, Leo clapped his paw on the other's shoulder and stared down at him meaningfully. "I've been looking out for you for years. I've defended you, stood by you, and helped you however you needed it. Did you think I was gonna stop just because we're in college now? You taught me…sometimes when we think we're at our strongest and most independent, that's when we need help the most." He smirked. "Now are you going to let me help you up and get you to bed, or am I going to have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there?"

A very odd look passed over the deer's face, something he could have sworn was…approval?
Pleasure?...but it was gone so fast and lost in another yawn that he might have imagined it. "Fine. You know I...ngghh...can't stop you..." He actually could, if he were more awake and alert, or at least make a valiant effort at it, since he had begun joining Leodore in the gym in high school and only redoubled his efforts when they got to ZSU. Something else that bound them together.

Smirking, he snapped the nearest book closed, shuffled his friend's papers and folders as neatly as he could into a pile beneath the textbooks, and then offered his arm and shoulder to Bucky. "Don't worry. The work isn't going anywhere, and I'll make sure it's all on your desk in the morning."

A study in contrasts, the rather beefy deer—who yet still wore neatly-pressed slacks, a polo shirt with a pocket protector, and even a set of rimless glasses perched on the bridge of his long muzzle—gave him a look that hovered between annoyed sneer and loopy grin, then leaned against his side as they began making their way through the fraternity toward the room they shared together.

As they walked, Leodore contemplated just how his current actions only scratched the surface when it came to what he would have to do to repay Bucky. Without exaggeration, the deer had saved his college life and reputation...his future as well...when he had been the one to intervene in the lion's feckless, irresponsible lifestyle. He'd come to ZSU with the same sorts of honors and scholarships as his cervine friend, the high hopes of his family, the accolades and praise of high school administrators, local papers, the neighborhood organizations, and more. Everyone had expected nothing but the best from him...there had been a great deal of pressure to perform well.

Such a state of affairs could be claimed as the reason for his errors in judgment, that those expectations, projections, assumptions, and self-serving beliefs had been too much for his young shoulders to bear. And truthfully, it had been a lot to handle. But in the end that was only an excuse. In reality, it had simply been a combination of elitism, blithe disregard for a society he had believed would always look the other way and forgive any number of peccadilloes in return for the appearance of dignity and power, and an unfortunate tendency to enjoy entertainment above everything else.

He was rich; his family name and connections as well as generous donations had helped him not only earn his way into ZSU but also the prestigious Alpha Chi Alpha fraternity; and as he had begun, sadly, to believe, being a lion would grant him far too much leniency and privilege. Everyone expected a certain casual disregard for others' rules and standards of behavior from the maned cats, as well as a magnanimous reciprocity for those who were willing to accept their attitude and self-aggrandizement. Add in a 'boys will be boys' response to his jockish nature, and it wasn't surprising that he'd taken his status for granted...believed that any amount of misbehavior, acting out, and even rule-breaking would be tolerated thanks to the expectation that he would eventually settle down, shape up, and become a productive student and true citizen once he had 'gotten it out of his system.'

But that had been before he'd gone too far. Before the sheer amount of dissipation, the drinking, rough-housing, wild parties and late-night carousing that had consumed his days as he lost himself
in the darker side of fraternity lifestyle, had nearly crossed an irrevocable line. The hazing of the new pledges was bad enough, a case of pushing predator bias and prey discrimination that started off as simple jokes in poor taste but swiftly became too unsettling for him to continue; although he'd kept up his other Alpha Chi activities, he had quietly given some very stern words to his fellow frat members, even implied that if such mockery, bullying, and outright species-ist malice were not done away with, he would be bringing the full might and influence of the great Cornelius Lionheart's family down on them and the fraternity itself.

Worse than this, however, had been how shockingly, worryingly easy it had been to become a heavy drinker; his large body and the health of youth could handle far more alcohol than was wise, so that if it wasn't after-games celebration it was nightly beer binges and bar-trawling, whooping it up with teammates, fans, and fellow frat brothers alike. How long this might have gone on before his grades suffered, before his scholarship, his placement on the football team, and far more had been put in jeopardy, he had no idea. But one night, a betting game of drinking someone under the table had gotten out of paw...with the horrifying result that the poor leopard he'd challenged had ended up in the hospital, nearly dying from alcohol poisoning.

It had been a literally sobering experience, but that was nothing compared to what Bucky had said and done afterward. He'd never seen the deer so angry, but worse than this, so disappointed in him. It was so strange, but after how long they'd been friends, so fitting, that the buck's scorn and recriminations had hurt far worse than the very real possibility of his father Cornelius reading him the same riot act should the college not hush things up. If it wasn't berating him for the scandal he could have brought down on ZSU and his family, it was condemning him for failing to live up to the goodness, nobility, and honor which he had demonstrated as a cub, which he had always insisted was the true legacy of the lion.

He had reminded Leodore of how he had sworn to be there for him, to protect him, and eventually extended this to others, something that would be undercut and rendered worthless by such arrogant, thoughtless behavior. He had pointed out to him how many he'd be letting down if he didn't change his ways, how many he'd be proving right about lions and predators in general. He had stressed how they had both come to college to make something of themselves, to change the city and the world for the better, and how none of this could happen if he threw his academic career away with such petty, mindless 'fun'.

He had reminded him how many mammals looked up to him, would have their hopes dashed and old prejudices proven far too legitimate if they saw someone as well-regarded and supposedly concerned with the well-being of his 'lessers' as Leodore Lionheart as just another statistic...another lying, self-serving member of the upper class who would continue using and abusing others until he finally did something that threatened the reputation and power of others of his station, at which point he'd finally be used as an example, left hung out to dry. And the prey he'd once claimed to stand up for would be happy to jeer and tear him apart for it.

"Which are you?" Bucky had finally demanded, shouting in his face and jabbing the miserable, hungover, pathetic jock right in the chest until he'd backed him into a wall. "Are you the brave,
moral, determined lion you always said you were, ready to do anything and even give up your own position to shield others from a world that wants to chew them up and spit them out? Or are you just a pampered pretty boy, coasting by on your family name, using your money and your species and your education to get whatever you want, and the rest of us be damned? Was it all just words, a means to an end, something that sounded nice but which you only followed as long as there was something in it for you? Or are you ready to put your money where your muzzle is?"

The deer's eyes had flashed, displaying the strength of character and willpower that had been there that day behind Sahara Central, buried under timidity and uncertainty but now fanned from embers into roaring flames—ironically by Leodore himself over their years of friendship. "Are you a craven cat or a true king? Do you really have the heart of a lion?"

It had been the wakeup call he'd needed. He'd sworn off all drinking for the foreseeable future. He'd left Alpha Chi (since this chapter seemed far too geared toward pred superiority and supporting the rich—in retrospect the name really should have warned him) and joined Bucky's own fraternity; Kappa Alpha was even older and more prestigious, it had a literary history that secretly appealed to him, and it properly sublimated class and species right in its name. He'd established a fund in that leopard's name until all his hospital bills were paid and he was fully recovered; then he'd opened it to offer aid to any victim of drinking, reckless endangerment, or privilege in the college, protecting them and holding everyone accountable.

His grades had picked up, then soared; he'd resumed scoring well in his games, but had also begun insisting on intra-team parties afterward to show there were no hard feelings and encourage friendships across species lines. And just as his friend (and now roommate) was focusing on law as a means to improve society, the lion had begun taking all the political science courses he could handle, determined to take on corruption and graft, replace them with compassion, generosity, real solutions and cooperation without partisanship.

And all of this had been because of Bucky. He owed everything to him. Even aside from their long friendship and closeness, how could he not want to pay it forward after that? He smiled.

They reached their room, interrupting his thoughts, and Leodore chuckled a bit, shaking his head in bemusement as the groggy Bucky stumbled, leaned against him, and nearly collapsed. Readily and with only a small grunt of effort (because the deer was much heavier now than he used to be!), he scooped his friend up in both arms and carried him to his bed. Since it was rather warm for autumn, he took it upon himself to remove the other's shirt but otherwise kept him decently attired, of course. Stepping back from tucking him under the covers, he set Bucky's glasses on the bedside table, then turned to gaze down at him again...gently, warmly.

Even after all these years and a change in physique, the cervine still looked so vulnerable and insecure when asleep, awakening feelings and sensations in the lion he couldn't put a name to and wasn't sure how to address. It had been relatively simple when they were both in elementary school,
there were few expectations about friendships back then (aside from the predator/prey divide they were deliberately shunning) and everyone, no matter gender or species, had no real stigma regarding emotional investment, demonstrative gestures, or otherwise expressing themselves to their friends. With age and maturity it had become sadly far more prevalent to allow the masculine imperative to reign supreme, making him refrain from showing affection to most other males, and this had only grown stronger with his entering sports, student government, and the public eye. But with Bucky it had always been different...

As he bent toward the bed to smooth out the sheet, one of the deer's hooves suddenly moved, shifting over to grasp his paw and pull it down onto the other's bare chest. He flinched at the electric sensation of that brown fur's touch...then stared into Bucky's dark eyes as they slid open a crack. Smiling up at his maned countenance blocking out the light, the deer murmured, "Thanks, Leo. Don't know what I'd do without you. You'll always be your Majesty to me..."

Leodore swallowed hard. On the one paw, like so many lions he hated hearing that term of address, what it implied about a lion's ego and place in the world, his airs of superiority and what his true worth was—the same as skunks hated being reduced to their scent, bears hated having "The Bare Necessities" whistled at them, sheep hated being dismissed as a milling mob with no minds of their own, pigs hated everyone assuming they kept atrociously dirty homes, and so forth. On the other paw, he couldn't deny that when, after years of short, small cubhood, he had finally started gaining height and bulk by leaps and bounds, and his mane had grown in so thick, luxuriant, and heavy, it had been gratifying to be treated with respect, deference, and yes, a certain regality.

And then there was how it felt when Bucky personally called him that, in a tone no other used...

Licking his lips, the big cat felt his heart pounding faster as, almost without being aware of it, he placed his paw over the deer's hoof in turn, holding it to his massive chest. He exhaled slowly...mouth dry, breath ragged...and rumbled, low and earnest and rife with meaning. All those years together...laughing and playing, keeping him safe so he could grow into his own confidence and bravery, learning and making plans for the future, opening his home to the point that even his parents and siblings started seeing Bucky as much a part of the Lionheart household as they were...after all of this, he had come to care for the deer more than he could describe in words. Certainly more than usually lay between predator and prey, which he thought was a crying shame.

There was something special about him, about their relationship, he couldn't put a finger on. Part of him didn't want to, felt it didn't deserve cheapening and limiting by placing a label on it...was afraid of what it was, what it might mean, how deep it all ran. The rest of him thought it was actually critical to recognize the truth, bring it out into the light of day and stand by it, stand up for it as much as he had Bucky himself. Whatever his parents would likely say to the contrary, he thought it deserved defending, and above all he never wanted the deer and the feelings he brought him to leave his life. He had to figure it out, to understand what it was he truly felt and why. And once he did...
Leodore squeezed that hoof one more time, set it down with a soft pat of his huge paw, then rose and turned toward the door, heading back to the study hall to fetch his things. Looking back from the threshold, watching the deer's chest rise and fall in the rhythm of sleep, he squared his shoulders and set his jaw firmly.

Once he did, then it would be time to find out if Bucky felt the same. Then...let what come, what may.

By the time Nick had finished telling the story of the skunk-butt rug with all the usual smugness, slyness, and panache that were his stock-in-trade, and both Lionheart and Delgato had gone from incredulity to admiration with plenty of laughter in between, Judy had already disappeared inside the Cloven Hoof, and so the fox could do nothing but sit back in his seat, paws crossed behind his head, and gaze out into the slummy neighborhood and the increasingly glum weather that seemed to fit it so well. And while thinking of how cleverly he had convinced the mephit in question to participate in a waxing session for a very unmentionable place, then turned around and sold the furry results to Mr. Big, was good for his ego, even that couldn't last long before he was quiet and brooding once more.

It wasn't that he was worried about Judy (though he was) or that he thought she couldn't handle herself (he knew quite well that she could, although she did still suffer from a certain belief in her own invincibility that the young always seemed to clad themselves in). It was the darker recesses of Zootopia, of certain species inhabiting it, that were being alternately tossed about as theories to explain the facets of this case or finally revealed to exist when they had always been hotly denied or deeply buried before. It was the fact that even now, six months after that horrible press conference that had nearly torn civilized society apart, Bellwether's scheme and what came of it refused to die, lingering on in one form or another to haunt and incite them. It was not knowing what this last missing mammal was intended to do, why he was important, who had taken him. And it was, to be quite honest, being forced to work in close quarters with Leodore Lionheart.

Not that he had anything specifically against the Barbary cat; the fellow had always seemed amiable and well-intentioned enough in his various speeches and interviews, and while Nick and his cynicism were so closely wedded by now that he didn't even have to think for more than a moment before instinctively distrusting anyone's outer façade (especially a politician's), the lion had otherwise barely appeared on his radar. He honestly couldn't even recall if he'd ever voted for the feline (or at all, in recent years), in which case Lionheart wasn't his mayor at all, in any sense. So he had never felt represented by him, but neither had he been in a position to feel betrayed by him.

Really, when he and Judy had infiltrated Cliffside that first time, he'd have been more surprised if the mayor hadn't been the one to show up and out himself as the one secretly bankrolling the hospital
and ordering the kidnapping of its savage inmates. *Leodore turned out to be a sleazy politician after all? Let me call the 11 O’Clock News. They can run it right after ‘the sky is blue’ and before ‘water is wet’."

But in the end, the point was that he wasn’t altogether sure he could trust the big lion, any more than he could tell Judy couldn’t, because of the many unanswered questions there still remained about him, his goals, this Patient Zero, and the connection between them. Although in retrospect the delay had contributed greatly to the missing mammal's kidnapping, he couldn’t deny the wisdom Judy had shown in waiting to meet with the former mayor until the fox was out of police academy, so that he could accompany her to visit Lionheart in prison (and be privy to all the classified information and deal-making a civilian couldn’t); far better to have someone along who could see through most lies and obfuscations, than to face the felon alone. The jail and its keepers notwithstanding, the big cat could still be extremely intimidating, especially to one as small as the rabbit, and her idealism and trustful nature could easily be taken advantage of. It's great that she can still see the best in everyone, even after all that's happened, but it would have been way too likely for her to, ah, fall prey to his charms.

Then there was the unsettling and rather horrifying imagery summoned up by Lionheart's references to the Black Sheep Market—a term which would be a hell of a lot funnier if not for the context—which, completely aside from his apparent inability to put a stop to it while he was mayor, showed exactly the kind of criminals they might be dealing with here. And finally, there was the fact that accompanying Lionheart on this journey had forced him to once more step foot within the walls of Cliffside. A place he'd been disturbed by to begin with, to the point he felt compelled to hide behind Judy and let her take point during the exploration, while allowing her to think he was either being facetious about it all or that he felt the actual cop should be the one in charge.

But once he'd found out what was inside the abandoned facility, once he'd seen what lay among the rusted, ruined equipment and the brand-new, shiny examples used upon the savage mammals, he'd wanted to get as far away from there as possible. Lionheart's descriptions tonight of just what had gone on in Cliffside before its closure only cinched the deal.

It was the reason he'd acted nearly feral when they'd become trapped in that isolation ward. It was why he'd been twitchy, flighty, nervous and irritated almost the entire time, so willing to snap at the others or get into long-winded and at time ridiculous arguments and digressions. It was why he'd been so grateful to get out of there. And it was why he was determined on top of all the other very good reasons to do so that they would rescue this unknown mammal...because he might possibly have been fitted with one too.

It was that whenever he thought of Cliffside, of the things he'd seen there, he could feel the stiff leather biting into the flesh beneath his furred snout, the cold metal digging into his skull as it was wrenched and buckled into place...
"No, what did I do wrong? Please tell me, what did I do wrong? What did I do?"

"If you thought we'd ever trust a fox without a muzzle, you're even dumber than you look!"

"…Aww, is he gonna cry?"

He could still hear his heart pounding a mile a minute…hear their jeering laughter like something a pack of demented demons would create…see the silhouettes of their menacing forms looming over him, what would normally be clear as day to him with his night vision turned into featureless blobs thanks to the blinding brightness of the flashlight a few moments before…smell the sour scent of fear in the air, and the nasty eagerness of the prey he had thought were his friends, had finally accepted him…feel the painful blows of hands, feet, and hooves as they slammed into his muzzle, his sides, his stomach, until the pain was so great he thought he would vomit through his clenched teeth…or more likely, choke on it thanks to that infernal device locking his mouth closed…

Self-preservation had given him the speed and skill to evade them, to make it through their struggling forms and outside, down to the sidewalk where he could shelter in the cool shadows of the front stoop. Terror, loathing, and desperation had all mingled to aid him in ripping the thing from his face, tossing it away with a violence he hadn't thought himself capable of. He could swear he could feel it burning into him with its malevolence.

He couldn't help it; he had cried, piteously, a sound he'd never heard himself make, whimpering softly. And the whole time, he still couldn't help whining the same words he had in the basement, through the muzzle, because he knew somehow, bone-deep, that he had done something wrong, he was something wrong… "I'm sorry…whatever I did, I'm sorry…!"

"I'm sorry!"

It took Nick several moments to realize he had said it aloud, that the haunting memories of that long-ago traumatic night which had been triggered by his experiences at Cliffside had made him burst out with the same urgent apology. In the parked car, where the only sounds were the rain hissing and tapping outside and the occasional grunt or squeak of a seat as one of the big cats with him shifted in it, his words had sounded as loud as thunder to his ears. Certainly unexpected and out-of-place.

Slowly he turned and looked at Delgato. The young lion was staring at him, blinking, his expression both curious and puzzled, even wary. He raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"
He wasn't sure if his fellow cop were simply confused by his exclamation, or specifically dubious that Nick Wilde would ever apologize for anything. Swiftly drawing himself back together, the fox cleared his throat, leaned back in his seat, and let out a slow sigh. "Ah, I said I was sorry, Manny." He paused, flicked his gaze to the back of the car, then added, "That goes for you too, your Majesty. I know it's...quite a bit after the offense, but we have been rather preoccupied since then. Still, that's no excuse. I apologize, most humbly and deeply, for that crack about lions I made earlier. It was uncalled for and crossed a line." He shrugged a bit. "What can I say, when things get stressful, I get snarky."

"Er." The lion in the driver's seat regarded him knowingly, and though there was still a definite sullenness and resentment simmering in the back of his eyes, he looked much more relaxed and understanding than before. "Snarkier. It's like Judy said, that wit of yours never takes a break, you know?"

"Guilty as charged." Nick spread both paws amiably, even as inwardly he began to relax. No one seemed the wiser as to what had truly been the source of his distress, which was the way he wanted it; he might have let his walls down with the rabbit, but he otherwise still preferred to keep others at arms' length, and he certainly wasn't ready to talk about that particular memory with either of the big cats.

A deep chuff came from the back seat, and then Lionheart finally spoke up, his tone dry and slightly testy. "Yes, well, that is quite commendable of you, Mr. Wilde. However I notice you have not apologized for, or refrained from employing, that little 'your Majesty' honorific with me."

The fox was the one to blink now; after initially seeming nettled by the term of address, the former mayor had apparently been employing the reaction it was always best to use when dealing with such needling behavior—namely, none, by ignoring it. In fact the lack of his rising to the bait had been so well done, Nick had even forgotten he was still saying it. Had it simply taken this long to rile the Barbary's temper? Or was there some specific reason he had spoken up now rather than earlier?

"Well now, Leodore," Nick said in that breezily casual manner he knew annoyed so many (Lionheart included), "what's there to apologize for? As you yourself just said, such a title bespeaks great honor—"

"You know very well that isn't how you mean it at all," Lionheart growled darkly, and though he would never admit it, the fox was very grateful he wasn't looking in the back seat or gazing in the rearview mirror; the sight of those large feline eyes glowing in the shadows, and those immense fangs gleaming between drawn-back lips, would have been far too unnerving right about now. "It is mockery, plain and simple."

Pursing his lips, Nick continued, choosing his words carefully but still as light and airy as possible.
"And as I was saying, I thought most lions wanted other mammals to acknowledge their superiority and importance in the whole 'Circle of Life'." He flicked his gaze to the side to Delgato. "No offense intended to you, Manny. I know you're better than that."

For some reason, the other cop didn't look as pleased as he'd thought he would, though he did offer a tight smile and a quick nod. Most of his attention, though, seemed to be on Lionheart, and as Nick noticed how incredibly tense and knotted his shoulders were inside his uniform shirt, he started to regret deflecting his apology into something leonine-related; even dealing with his past experiences with prejudice would be better than what lay behind the look Delgato was giving the other lion.

Oblivious to this, however, Lionheart leaned forward in the seat, shooting an accusing look at Nick—but to the fox's surprise, there was also a genuine hurt in his eyes. "Nicholas, I do believe what Officer Delgato here said back at Cliffside, about how you treat your fellow mammals, is quite correct. While I cannot pretend to understand what may have happened in your life to make you this way, it is quite clear to me that you harbor your own prejudices…and are as blind to them, or to anything being wrong with them, as you rightfully call prey species to account for. Yes, we lions have been known as the King of the Beasts for a very long time. And yes, such a thing would seem on the surface to accord a definite respect.

"But have you ever considered that, just as the days of savagery and carnivorous predation are long behind us, so too are such outdated, feudal concepts? I am not a king, no lion is any more—and this is all for the good! That sort of authoritarianism, where absolute rule was decreed by God and only luck, whim, or a fair and well-rounded education lay between tyranny and benevolence, should be as extinct as our primitive ancestors and their hunting urges. If we lions inspire trust and respect now, it is by being true leaders who serve our constituents, not lording ourselves over others as holier-than-thou demagogues! We can lose dignity and power just as easily as anyone else…and we can also earn it, if we are given the chance."

He crossed his arms over his broad chest and leaned back again, glowering visibly. "So whenever you call me that, you are demeaning me and my species, the same as has been done to you and yours. How is it any better to return the same attitude and jingoism as you have been given all your life, to play up the 'conceited, pompous lion' stereotype just as so many have done with the 'sly, shifty fox' narrative?" Lionheart shook his great maned head, and for a wonder he didn't sound angry or insulted now, but disappointed. "Don't you want to be better than that, better than them?"

Nick stared at him, completely nonplussed. It wasn't that he necessarily disagreed with Lionheart's assessments, even of himself (although he thought such talk of trusted and respected lions, true leaders who could genuinely earn their positions in mammalian society, was a bit rich coming from him). It was that it had been incited by such a seemingly simple, innocent phrase. He was tempted to reject it as the typical oversensitivity of the privileged and elite, except he knew very well how one word or several, if said with the right tone, in the right circumstances, with the right history behind them, could be devastating. 'Real articulate fella', anyone?
Which only caused his heart to sink, as he began to understand he genuinely had offended the large feline, and in a way he could not deny or evade. Just as he'd realized, after the fact during those terrible three months of chaos in Zootopia, how his personal demons from his kithood experience had understandably but still unfairly caused a strong negative reaction at the press conference...one that had in turn made him lash out at Judy far worse than she deserved.

Yes, she had allowed her assumptions and prejudices to make her accept Dr. Honey Badger's theory as fact, and out of both fear and nervousness bungled the interview with the media, and she did need to overcome her instinctive distrust of foxes. But he had not helped her with that one iota, not when their first interaction had involved playing her into unwittingly aiding his con, followed by constantly belittling and making a fool of her (or as she'd quite accurately accused, and he'd honestly admitted, seeing her fail had made him feel better about his miserable life).

On top of that, he had done everything he could to ruin her investigation, costing her precious time with his trollish stunt at the DMV, and emotionally preyed upon her in various ways—because, he could admit to himself, her unflagging optimism and boundless idealism had reminded him far too agonizingly of himself, all those years ago...and he could not bear to remember that, not after believing such thinking was for those who were pathetically blind to the way the world really worked. Not when he would much rather show her the truth as he saw it, drag her down into cynicism and resentment with him, because to do otherwise was to open himself up to the pain and fear of hoping once again. And in the end all of this had culminated in him nearly compromising her case which, though he didn't realize it at the time, would have threatened all predators in the city with oppression, torture, death, or worse.

It didn't matter he hadn't known of this at the beginning, any more than he had known of her bet with Bogo. He had still allowed his own prejudices to influence his judgment with her, as she had done with him—though she had been fighting it, and doing a much more admirable job of it than he was. She'd saved his life several times, and how had he repaid her? Pounced on her unintentionally discriminatory comments and used them to retroactively justify his initial dismissal of her value. His feelings had been hurt by what she seemed to be thoughtlessly saying about predators, he'd been flashing back to the night of his trauma, and he'd deliberately provoked her into going for her fox repellent by physically threatening her, as if that proved anything when a cop was trained to react that way to a possible assailant...when anyone smaller and more vulnerable was confronted by someone bigger who could cause them real harm.

That was why, in the end, once he had calmed down, he had already forgiven Judy...why he would not have blamed her if she, in turn, never wanted to see him again. Why he had in fact hoped she would stay away so she wouldn't be caught up in the whirlwind of hatred, suspicion, and paranoia that was descending upon Zootopia, whether being forced into supporting it or targeted for elimination as standing in its way. And why, when she did show up beneath that bridge, he had merely waited to hear her admit her own flaws and failings in the matter, and have a last bit of fun at her expense, before accepting her back with open arms. Because he had realized that he was as much a product of his childhood as she was of hers.
So now...realizing he had done the same thing to Lionheart, fitted him into the neat little box of his preconceived notions of what lions 'naturally' were, applied the convenient excuse of his illegal doings and a certain noble bearing to write him off as only a typical politician and feline (no matter how much he had done to assist them this night, and how he seemed willing to do just about anything no matter how dangerous or demeaning to save this missing mammal)...realizing all this, Nick let his shoulders slump. As with Judy, he would have to swallow his pride...and yes, apologize to him as well. Whatever the lion had done wrong, he did not deserve this, and there was no way they could move forward from here if this hatchet were not buried.

The fox took a deep breath—but before he could say anything, he heard knuckles cracking on the steering wheel, and when he swiftly jerked his head to look, he just caught Delgato's chest heaving beneath his uniform shirt as he struggled with some powerful force inside him...and heard the words he muttered in response to Lionheart's speech. "Why shouldn't he...conceited and pompous, huh? Si te queda el saco, pónelo."

Quiet descended again, the rain drumming and pounding now on the metal roof...but it could not drown out the thudding of Nick's own heart as he flicked his gaze slowly from one lion to the other. He'd known, eventually, that something would have to come to a head between the two big cats, but he had hoped it wouldn't be too violent...and he had never thought it might come when they were confined in an enclosed space together. Or more to the point, when he was in it with them. Hell to the no. Not this, not now, nopenopenope!

A low rumbling in the back of a throat, a diffident but rather rough cough, and then Lionheart said, with a calmness and matter-of-fact tone that was as chilling as any enraged roar, "Do I detect a rebuke?"

Delgato rolled his eyes visibly. "They teach you that keen, cutting insight in rhetoric class? Man, if I'd known that was what an upper-class income and a ZSU education got you, I'd have stopped complaining about my limited options years ago." He shook his head and muttered again. "Pinche tonto."

Instantly the former mayor responded back, and to Nick's surprise it was in flawless Spanish—though really, the leader of a diverse city like Zootopia was as likely to know other languages as a streetwise, clever pleb such as himself, if not more so. "Agente Delgato, ¿tienes algo que quieres decirme?"

The feline cop, if anything, looked even more stunned than the fox was, his face flushing dark red with embarrassment, something Nick had often observed when a mammal spoke blithely in another language, unaware that someone else who understood it was within hearing, and were thus caught saying something impolite for mixed company. To have it be about the party in question was even worse. But after a few more moments of jaw hanging and a tied tongue, Delgato clenched his teeth and snapped back with deliberate emphasis, "You want to know what I think of you, your Majesty?"
"I think you've already made it perfectly clear that you don't have a high opinion of me," Lionheart said with sardonic aplomb. "What I don't understand is why. I mean, beyond the obvious...because while Officer Hopps and Officer Wilde have made their feelings known in one way or another, I get the feeling the problem you have with me is a bit different than theirs. So why don't we clear the air, get it all off our chests and out of the way now, before it festers any further and before this night gets any more perilous than it already has? I have no more idea what lies ahead of us than you two do, but if we're going to end up having to depend on each other for protection and support, that's going to require a certain level of trust."

Nick had to admit, the former mayor made a number of very astute and telling points, though it helped that they were ones the fox had already concluded himself. He knew Delgato could see it as well from the way his face twisted between disbelief, frustration, and ire. All he said though, when he could manage to speak through his disgust and incredulity, was, "You wanna know what my problem is, you old windbag? Fine. I'll tell you, but just remember: you asked for it." Letting go of the steering wheel, he twisted about to glare into the back seat, one finger raised to jab at him accusingly, and then he started talking...slowly at first, but gradually picking up speed, intensity, and loudness as his emotions started getting the better of him.

"My problem is who you are, and who I am. Who you were supposed to be, but who you really were. Who I always wanted to be, and how much harder it's gonna be to get there, if I even can now. It's about all the strikes I've had against me, and how I was hoping more than anything else in my life that things would turn around for me...but they didn't, and it's because of you." Delgato shook his head, one fist clenching and relaxing, and he snorted as he dropped his gaze briefly. "I'm a token minority, Leo. And not just any token, a three-fer. A pred, a lion, and Hispanic." He held up three fingers, then lowered them.

"Funny, the last one is the easiest to deal with these days, you know? Lots of different cultures and languages in Zootopia, nobody really cares where you come from or what you speak, as long as you're able to communicate and fit in. And it's not like the exotic isn't on display for everyone to see up on the ad screens, with Gazelle." Snorting again, he went on with greater passion...and anguish.

"No, it's the rest of who I am that's a problem. I get all the distrust, all the scorn, all the contempt a pred gets...but I also get it because I'm a lion. Forget being called 'kitty' all my life, I had all the other kids shouting 'I Just Can't Wait to Be King' at the top of their lungs every day on the playground, the mock-bows, pretending to kiss my paws and feet, asking me if I lost my crown or my robes were in the wash...you name it, if it had something to do with being royal, they found a way to use it. While all their parents were deathly afraid I was gonna rip their little ones to shreds.

"And it didn't end when I got older, you know. It just took a new form. Why weren't my grades top-notch, was I gonna have to renounce my throne if I didn't shape up, why didn't I leave and go be Prince of Sahara Square full-time?" He snarled, cracking his knuckles again with how tightly he clenched his fists this time, and Nick wasn't surprised when he opened them to see all his claws
unsheathed. Unobtrusively he began to slide away, closer to the car door. "They all expected me to run for Student Council—no, to run it—to be homecoming king, the works. Everyone thought I should be a businessmammal, the editor of a newspaper, even a priest...anything but what I actually wanted to be. A cop."

For a brief moment pride stood out, bright and blazing, on his face. Then it faded, like the sun slipping behind a cloud. "Not 'cause I wanted to change the world, make it a better place, fight for justice and keep everyone safe—I mean, I did want those kinds of things, but I wasn't a real crusader like Judy." Fondness crept into his voice as he spoke of the rabbit, a warmth that made the fox's own heart swell a bit, but it was quickly dashed by the dejection and self-loathing on Delgado's face.

"No, I wanted it because I thought it was the only thing I could be. I was big enough for the physical side of it, and could work out at the academy; I was a predator, so I'd fit right in with the majority and everyone who feared me would just make my job easier; but I could also get that respectability I didn't have. Showing everyone I could protect them instead of hurt them...serving the public instead of trying to rule and control it...and being a guardian of law and order. It all made so much sense."

The young lion sighed, looking out into the grimy, rain-soaked street. "Except when it didn't. The guys accepted me with open arms, of course. So did the chief, once he saw I could handle the load and his attitude the same way—competently and without complaint. But the public...nobody likes law enforcers no matter how much they know they're necessary, because they always seem to make life hard for them. So I got to add accusations of corruption, unfair quotas, and brutality to my laundry list of failings and deficiencies." He paused, then finally looked squarely at Lionheart again. "That all changed, though, when you got elected mayor."

Lionheart started to speak, but Delgado held up his paw to silence him, looking pained. "Let me finish. See, it wasn't just that we were the same species and you were so visibly in the public eye all the time. It was the kind of politician you were, the kind of lion you were. It really made everybody look at things differently—at leaders, at predators, and at lions specifically. You weren't like the mayors or city councilmammals we'd had before. You meant what you said, you kept your campaign promises. You cleaned up so much of the city, refurbished its image, brought in tons of new investors and jobs. You changed so much, made everything better, you getting re-elected by a landslide wasn't even a surprise. And your Mammal Inclusion Initiative—I don't care what Buffalo-butt thought, I thought it was the best thing anyone had ever done for Zootopia! You really showed you cared about everybody, wanted everyone to succeed. You made that pipe dream about the city a reality.

"And suddenly, I wasn't hated or rejected any more. When mammals looked at me then, they didn't see a meat-eating pred, or an arrogant lion who thought his species gave him the right to order them around and control their lives. They saw me as an extension of you. That if the Mayor of Zootopia had proven to be a noble, trustworthy sort who would make things safe, prosperous, and respectable, and keep them that way, then maybe other lions could be trusted too. That maybe instead of being an elitist prick, I'd chosen to be a cop to truly serve and protect, a humble way to give back to the community, you know? That they could trust their kids to me, could know I'd keep the streets safe.
for everyone, pred and prey, and that if I had to follow rules that sometimes penalized them, my heart was still in the right place.

"So thanks to that...I idolized you, Leodore. I hero-worshiped you! When you ran for re-election, a whole herd of rhinoceroses couldn't have kept me from the voting booth! You'd done everything right, you'd finally made our kind trusted and accepted. I was so proud of you, proud of myself, proud to be a lion for the first time in a very long time."

His voice shook, and Nick wasn't at all surprised to see tears standing in his eyes; he stared in shock, as the more Delgato revealed, the more the cat reminded him of himself, all those years ago, when he was so certain he'd been accepted, that he could finally have the chance to prove to everyone that foxes weren't the sly, thieving scoundrels everyone believed them to be... Until all of that had been dashed in one cruel, horrific moment, convinced him things would never change, the world would always be miserable and unfair to him and his species...and so he would do better to act exactly as they expected. To not get his hopes up any longer, so they could not be shattered and his heart crushed, to instead take advantage of what everyone believed so he could at least get some smug satisfaction out of it. And some pretty lucrative windfalls, by the by. It sounded like the same had happened to his fellow cop. He'd had no idea...

Suddenly Delgato looked up, a fire blazing in his eyes the fox had never seen there before, and then he lunged toward the back seat—claws digging so deeply into the front seat's upholstery Nick suspected it would take quite the repair job to restore, fangs bared and glistening with saliva, the ugliest and darkest of growling snarls the vulpine had ever heard escaping his throat. It reminded him uncomfortably of how Manchas had sounded that night in the Rainforest District, except here there was no Night Howler to justify it.

Even his body language was different—his mane puffed and frizzed out to make him look much larger than he was, his shoulders and chest tensed and flexed until it almost seemed they would hulk out of his uniform shirt, the way he angled and thrust himself toward Lionheart looking more like a mammal that was about to go on all fours. Even his scent had changed, filled with the rank sourness of rage and aggression, the wary distrust of one defending his territory, and the bloodthirstiness of the hunting predator he was.

Swallowing very slowly against a throat as dry and parched as the sands of Sahara Square, as if he stood dangerously near to the great heat exchangers themselves, Nick pressed himself even farther back against the door; if it came to it, he'd take his chances on the neighborhood, the weather, and the local ordinances about his kind and unlock it to jump out into the rain—assuming he could do so without drawing attention to himself. But he was also afraid of what might happen if he left these two alone together; not that he could do anything to stop them if it came down to a fight for dominance, like he'd read lions used to have back when primitive prides roamed the savanna, but perhaps his mere presence might discourage them, remind them of bigger issues and civilized mores.
Either way, though, he was absolutely convinced of one thing: *The part of Nick Wilde will now be played by an oddly quiet and unassuming fox hiding in the corner of the car seat.*

He nearly jumped, though, when Delgato finally spoke again, snapping his words between his teeth almost in a roar, and definitely filling the tightness of the enclosed space, rather like the thunder outside. "But you *had* to go and ruin it all, didn't you, you *stupid*, self-serving bastard? You just couldn't leave well enough alone. You had to have a scandal, and not just a little one, hell no! One that rocked the whole damn city. One that completely undid all the progress you made for preds, for yourself, for all us lions. Fine, you were facing something like none of us had ever seen before. You were scared for yourself, for preds, for all of Zootopia if the truth came out before we knew what was happening or why.

"But you had *so* many other options for what you could've done. You know you could've come to Bogo, right? He'd have believed you, he'd have understood exactly what you were afraid of happening. Goddamnit, Leo, half the police force are preds, did you really think he wouldn't sympathize, or worry what the public would think, or try to help keep a lid on things till we had more intel? And even if you didn't trust him, what about some of those officers? Hell, you could've come to *me* and I would've been glad to help, the right way, the legal way!"

"No, you *had* to go and go behind all our backs, break as many laws as you had to to keep this whole thing hushed up. You had to use whatever methods you felt were necessary, because you were *so* sure the alternative was worse and the ends justified the means. Who the fuck cares about due process, or obstruction of justice, or misallocating government resources, or violating a mammal's right to freedom and self-cognizance, or plotting a conspiracy? You'd do whatever illegal thing you had to to get your way. A 'true leader'? You don't know the first thing about being that!"

By now Delgato genuinely was roaring, and despite being the smaller lion it was still an incredibly frightening thing to witness so up close. "How *could* you?! I *trusted* you! I *believed* in you! Instead you ruined everything, for yourself, for me, for all of us! After what you did, I can barely show my face on the streets any more. It's twice as bad for me as it was before...I couldn't even help keep the peace at the rallies, let alone try and protect any prey from all the attacks that were happening. Hell, some even thought I was in on it with you, or that I'd look the other way so you could get off with a slap on the wrist. Fear and hate were everywhere, and there was *nothing* I could do about it. I just made it worse wherever I went. Because of *you*. *Pinche pendejo!*" He was crying openly now too, the tears brimming over and running down his cheeks to darkly streak his fur.

For several long moments the car was silent after that, the drumming of the rain on the roof a startling and uneasy counterpoint. Nick stayed absolutely still, looking from one lion to the other. To his surprise, Lionheart still seemed mostly in control of himself after that rant—he had to assume, to his renewed (and slightly guilty) understanding, because the former mayor realized how right Delgato was, how justified in his anger. He certainly had that sorrowful, overwhelming regret on his face which Nick well remembered from the prison. Still, when he finally spoke again, there was a tenseness and undercurrent of fierce bitterness in his voice.
"I'm sorry," he said, stiffly, softly. "I truly had no idea what I had done to you...and to so many others who believed and felt as you did. And you are quite right to call me out on all my mistakes. I was frightened—for myself, for predators, for the city—but that did not justify my actions. And I broke many laws I should not have in my desperation. However, don't think you are telling me anything I have not heard before...that I have not been telling myself since my arrest, and even for some time before."

"As if that makes it any better!" Delgato snapped.

Lionheart growled. "I know the last thing you want from me is an apology...and that you will never believe or accept it in any case...but at least have the decency to let me answer you. I gave you your day in court, so to speak. Let me have mine." When the cop fumed but otherwise stayed quiet, the Barbary continued, and now it was his voice that became impassioned—though Nick thought it was with urgency to provide context, to explain his side and display his remorse, not from fury and condemnation as it had been for Delgato.

"You spoke of my errors in judgment in not coming to you or Bogo, in not involving the law at all. You are right, of course. But how was I supposed to know you would truly help? Bogo is so by-the-book that any amount of predator solidarity with his men or understanding of what this plague would do to the city if it came out too soon might well not have mattered to him in the end. And counting on you or the other officers to actually go against your superior for the sake of your species is exactly the kind of thinking that Bellwether and so many in Zootopia were guilty of. I couldn't assume anything. The less mammals who knew, the better. If there had been more time, I might have been willing to risk it eventually, one at a time...but there wasn't.

"If there had been any other recourse, I absolutely would have gone through the right channels when it came to the savage mammals. I knew I was doing wrong in confining them, even if they were in no condition to agree to it for their own good. But how could I do so without giving everything away, exposing the crisis to the public before we had a solution? Forget asking their families for permission—the only other means of incarcerating them would have been to go before a judge. Even if I had requested a gag order so that what was taking place would have been sealed to the public and the media, that would have taken extra time, time we did not have, time during which the cause of this calamity could have spread...or, as it turned out, acted more openly and directly since it had a mastermind guiding it.

"And what if even then, no agreement could be made? The mammals would have been placed in a regular hospital...and if their condition was due to a disease as it first appeared, even the best quarantine procedures might not have been enough to prevent its spread." He paused, then clenched his jaw as he uttered his own sarcastic retort. "Besides, I was actually working behind-the-scenes on all the legal paperwork, I'll have you know. Gag order, writ of involuntary confinement, even all the tax forms necessary to lawfully redirect the funds needed for Cliffside. However, it was taking too long, and someone was too smart for her own good and caught me before I could get it all
Delgato clenched both fists and lunged toward Lionheart again. "You aren't honestly trying to blame Judy for this—?!

The bigger lion lunged right back, a sight that was even more impressive with his gigantic bulk filling the back seat, the way his shoulders pressed into the roof of the car, and how even his mane was three or four times larger and heavier than the cop's; Nick wondered if he was about to witness that legendary fight for leonine dominance after all. "Of course not! You dare think I'd have anything against someone as smart, brave, and kind-hearted as Miss Hopps?!!" His knuckles cracked, and Nick knew he saw the seams straining on his hoodie jacket. "I'm just saying that her timing left something to be desired, and that although I didn't succeed, I actually was trying to make things right, do it the legal way, even if only after-the-fact and retroactively."

"Could've, should've, didn't," Delgato snarled. "Fat lot of good it does us now, huh?"

"Cállate la boca, cachorro," Lionheart snapped. "Do you have any idea what I went through? Or when it comes to the possible repercussions for our species, and how deplorable my actions were, is the only lion whose feelings you care about on the subject you?" His mane bristled larger still, his musk growing to overpower the other cat's, lightning flickering outside casting lurid brightness and stark shadows over his face.

"I hated myself, and everything I was doing, the whole time I did it, as much as you hated me if not more! You're right, I betrayed everything I am, everything I'd done, the future I wanted to bring about. I've lost everything, and I deserve it."

"But I'm still trying to make things right!" the former mayor roared back. "I can't do that, though, if you don't work with me on this. Or did you forget there's still a missing mammal out there, and we don't know who has him, or why, or what sinister thing they're going to do with him?"

"I said I was going to help on this case, and I will. Even if it means working with a coward like you. Bellwether's goons, or whoever's behind this, have to be brought to justice. And you sure as hell need to do something to make up for what you've done." The cop's expression and voice turned uglier than ever, the latter dropping to a dark hiss. "But after that...you're going right back to prison. And I hope you stay in there and rot."
Lionheart sneered. "Oh, I'm sure that's the case. By the time the DA's office gets through with me, it'll be years before I ever see the light of day again, even with the deal Bogo is making. I may not even get out before Bellwether does." He actually dared to reach out and grasp the front of Delgato's uniform, pulling him closer until their faces nearly touched.

"But I don't care. None of that matters to me anymore. All that matters is finding this mammal, doing something right again, and making sure Zootopia and its citizens don't have to suffer any more for my mistakes—whether those I made at Cliffside or at City Hall." The rage and resentment faded, despair and self-loathing once more twisting that once-handsome, now-haggard visage.

"I won't let you or anyone else stop me from doing that. But I also need your help to make it happen. So please, Officer Delgato, please stop fighting me on this. After we're done, you can hate me all you like, you're absolutely right to after what I've done to you. I'm sorry I was such a horrible role model for you. I'm sorry I let you and every other lion down. I'm sorry...sorry for everything!"

Now Leodore was the one who was crying. "That's why you have to let me do this. I have to find this mammal, save him from this whole Night Howler nightmare. It's not just the least I can do, or the only thing I can do now...it's all I want to do. You want to see me suffer after that, you'll get your chance. But please...please...you have to let me...I need to..."

As the former mayor started breaking down, unable to find the emotional fortitude to utter words any more, Delgato's unforgiving facade finally started to crack. Staring at him in disbelief, his growls fading into silence, his fangs disappearing back behind his lips, the cop shook his head slowly, leaning back as Lionheart released his shirt with a wooden listlessness. "Why?" he whispered. "I don't get it. Why this, why him, why now?"

"Do you really find...my remorse...that difficult to believe?" Lionheart choked out.

For a moment the smaller lion hesitated, then said awkwardly, "Uh...no, I guess not. But I don't understand, seems like there's something more here, you know—"

"It's because he's my friend!" the Barbary burst out without warning. "It's because he's Bucky!"

Both police officers stared at him, stunned into speechlessness, and Lionheart was so lost in his pain and sorrow that he didn't even seem aware for some time what secret he had divulged. Nick had no idea what Delgato was thinking on the matter, but for him it finally made sense, scary sense, so many pieces falling into place. There was only one mammal close to Leodore with that nickname...and
while he didn't understand how or why he would have been targeted by Bellwether to begin with, it was completely understandable now why Big and Corlione would want him gone or under their control. And he also understood why Lionheart had kept this so under wraps, the reason for the open-ended deal, the desperation, the need for swiftness and caution and not getting the law involved openly any more than they had to.

*I'll be damned. That was no sabbatical the ZPD was told he was on. That insane little sheep actually dared...she drove the District Attorney himself savage, and now he's been kidnapped.*

As his mind was still whirling with this revelation and everything it represented, all the possible fallout it could have—but also wondered, with distracted irrelevance, how exactly the former mayor had intended to get Buckley out of Cliffside as the original plan had been set without them identifying him (*What, saw his antlers off and throw a blanket over him?*)—Delgato found his voice. "B-buckley...? Mr. Stagmire? He's the one...?"

Lionheart wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his paw, and although there was a certain fear in his gaze, a way he flinched as the other lion said the name as if he were still convinced speaking of this was a dangerous prospect, Nick otherwise thought he looked relieved to have the hiding and caginess and duplicity over and done with at last. His shoulders slumped. "Yes. Now you know. Now, I hope, you can understand why this is so important, and why we need to do everything we can to get him back, before it's too late for him...and Zootopia. As I said...hate me all you want. Just help me do this, and I'll never trouble you again, I promise."

Delgato stared at him, long and hard, and while there was no sign of forgiveness in his eyes, there was a very faint softening—and a determined acceptance. He reached out and, after nerving himself for a moment, placed his paw on Lionheart's. "Okay. You're right. I don't have to like you, or anything else. We just need to find Stagmire, ASAP. If you can help with that in any way, you will have my gratitude...enough for me to lay off you, anyway. That's all I can promise for now."

"That's more than enough. As always, you are a fine addition to your department." The Barbary smiled, weakly and in a rather watery fashion, and leaned back again in his seat.

Very slowly, the tension began to fade in the car. Muscles unclenched; manes flattened; musk dissipated. And as a strong sense of embarrassment and regret settled over them instead, while the rain drumming on the roof remained the only sound for minute after minute, Nick let out the breath he'd been holding and finally couldn't take it anymore. Sitting up without any sudden movements (though he still kept one paw on the door lock behind him), the fox carefully cleared his throat—and, just to show them he had been able to follow all parts of the argument too (and, admittedly, to show off), spoke in Spanish. "Muchachos, saben que estoy sentado justo aquí, ¿verdad?"

The comical look on both lions' faces as they turned and stared at him, poleaxed, was almost worth
the wait, and definitely went far toward restoring some manner of equilibrium between them all. The uncomfortable but gradually more genuine laughter that followed was even better.

Yet before anyone else could say anything, or do more than let out a few more uncertain chuckles, there suddenly came a loud and insistent pounding on the door behind Nick. Fighting back the urge to clap his paw to his heart which was still racing a mile a minute—*That was definitely one of those things I'm better for experiencing that I never want to go through again!*—the fox quickly popped the lock and opened the door.

Of course it was Judy, who only stood there for a split second before leaping inside out of the pouring rain. "Gosh, guys, I've been calling you over the wire off and on for the last ten minutes! I was starting to think something had happened to you..." As the door clicked shut behind her, she narrowed her violet eyes, gazing with penetrating understanding at each of them in turn. "Aaaand it looks like it did, just not what I thought. Anyone want to spill voluntarily, or am I gonna have to bust my interrogator chops again?"

Nick waved it aside. "We'll tell you in a minute. What'd you find out, Carrots?" He stared down at her intently; he knew she'd learned something or else she'd have returned with ears drooping and that light he loved gone out of her eyes, but he couldn't quite parse out what it was. There was too much distress and worry on her face along with the flush of success, and that worried him—it took a lot to get this bunny down, let alone unsettled...

"Well, we were right, sort of. It is Doug and his gang. Though they aren't working alone. Someone they call 'the Boss' is doing all the planning for them. My...informant has no idea who that is, though." Judy paused, then bit her lip. "He didn't hear everything they intend to do, but a big part of it seems to be...carrying out Bellwether's last request, if things ever went wrong and her scheme fell apart."

Not exactly unexpected, but not something to inspire hope, either. "And that is...?"

She sighed, her eyes huge in the darkness. "Chaos. If she couldn't have her way, make prey ascendant and oppress predators as much as she wanted, then she wanted to make sure Zootopia wouldn't get to stay peaceful and safe for everyone. She told them to 'find the loose end' and release him somewhere in public, use him to cause a real riot. Break down society, tear the city apart and make everyone live in fear for as long as they could. If she couldn't have what she wanted, she didn't want anyone else to, either. And this Boss wants to use the same plan."

Delgato stared at her in horror. "*Madre de Dios.* So soon after what just happened...it wouldn't be hard to push everyone over the edge for good."
Despite the argument there had just been between them, Lionheart was united in the same fear, his face ashen grey. "Especially with who the missing mammal is, and what he is."

Nick knew he was absolutely right; seeing another prominent city official ruined in such an open and undeniable fashion, one who had always been respected and well-loved (except by the criminal underworld, of course) and never involved in any scandals or corruption, would be a total PR disaster. Having it be a prey this time would completely open Panda-ora's Box, justifying any and all actions to try and stop the atrocities and take control of the chaos. When coupled with the previous Pred Scare, it might even embolden the more odious 'Pred First' organizations, suggest they were right all along in believing themselves superior. It could completely unravel the fabric of civilization, if its effects spread far enough.

The fox blew air out of his cheeks. "And guess who'd profit most from that? The criminal element that could step right in and take over. Claim their kind of leadership—bold, direct, eye-for-an-eye, powerful and forceful—was the only thing that could save everyone. Or just take advantage of the anarchy to establish a kleptocracy, so they and their cronies could rob everyone blind, keeping everyone in line with all their smuggled weapons arsenals. Or the Night Howler; pretty easy to make someone do what you say when you can threaten to make anyone around them turn into a rampaging beast with a single dart."

Everyone looked at each other for a very long time, and he knew they were thinking of Big and Corlione as much as he was. Then, finally, Delgato turned back to Judy and bent toward her, eyes intent. "Do you know where they're going to do this, or when? Or where they've taken the mammal?"

Again, she sighed. "No to the first two, though I expect it'll be soon, especially if they know we're on their trail. But I do think I know where they took him." She reached into her pocket, pulled out something that clinked, and held it up in the flickering rays of both street light and lightning.

Hanging from her fingers was a key chain, one that must belong to a hotel or other place to rent a room since it held a brown metal disc cast in the shape of a coconut that bore a number on its side. The rest of the ring had a colorful insignia dangling from it, polished brass inset with numerous pieces of amber as well as beveled green glass trimmed with malachite...all in the shape of a glitzy, glamorous, stylized palm tree.

Chapter End Notes

Not many references this time. The bit where Nick was hinting he'd used an anal waxing scam to procure the skunk-butt rug, and where he was contemplating how he'd treated Judy unfairly at the press conference and already forgiven her by the time she found him, are a hilariously horrible and sadly insightful theory, respectively, from TV
Tropes. The first was too funny to pass up, and the second just made too much sense to me and became my head-canon. The name of Leodore's father, meanwhile, is a reference to Cornelius Vanderbilt, to continue the theme of Lionheart's heritage being one of fame, prestige, and exceptional pedigree (as well as, as you'll see in time, a connection to the other well-known, rich family from which he and his other relatives take their names).

Amusing side-note: while I didn't even think about it at the time I was writing it, in retrospect I had to laugh at how well it fit—remember how I said Buckley, since he is based on Bambi's father the Great Prince of the Forest, would be voiced by Patrick Stewart due to his voicing him in the midquel? Well, take another look at that powerful call-out he did of Lionheart in the flashback, and I'm sure you'll agree its eloquence and insight very much reflect the typical Patrick Stewart Speech he perfected as Jean-Luc Picard, hah!

Finally, an author friend of mine named Kenneth Beltan helped me out with the proper Spanish for Delgato, Lionheart, and Nick's conversation. For those not familiar, or who don't feel like using/trusting Google Translate: Si te queda el saco, pónelo — "If the jacket fits you, wear it." Pinche tonto — "Fucking fool." Agente Delgato, ¿tienes algo que quieres decirme? — "Is there something you'd like to say to me, Officer Delgato?" Pinche pendejo — "Fucking asshole." Cállate la boca, cachorro — "Shut your mouth, cub!" Muchachos, saben que estoy sentado justo aquí, ¿verdad? — "Guys, you know I'm sitting right here, right?" Just one of the extra touches to add realism to the story.
Once again, the unmarked police car was speeding through the night, the nearly-deserted, early-morning streets of Savanna Central a welcome change from the slums of the Meadowlands even if they were no more populated. And once more, Judy and her companions were compelled into action by the newest clue, and the interpretation and strategizing which had followed her discoveries at the Cloven Hoof.

Needless to say, it had been easy to identify the room key as belonging to the Palm Hotel and Casino—the same glittering, eye-catching, Vegas-style spectacle which she had stared at in sheer wonder during her first train trip to Zootopia, the elite and wildly popular showpiece that was as much the center of Sahara Square as City Hall was for Savanna Central. A place that could not be more of a contrast to the poverty-stricken region they had just dared to enter; one where fortunes were made and lost in a single night, where anyone and everyone among the higher classes of society mingled to see and be seen; and where the sheer amount of greed, corruption, and decadence could only be matched by the true glamour and pomp of such an influential, vibrant locale and those who frequented it.

That their search should lead them here was as mind-boggling and even puzzling as it was slightly intimidating; even setting aside the number of powerful mammals who could cause a great deal of trouble if they and their dealings were disturbed or investigated—or they even thought they would be—the place was large and complex, sprawling out across the square as much as it rose upward in its botanical-themed tower.
Thankfully, because Delgado lived in Sahara Square and had often been called upon by Bogo to pursue various suspects, informants, and evidence in the rather venal landmark, he was familiar enough with the Palm Hotel as to not only know what wing to seek out, but to observe that this particular kind of key—old-fashioned and ostentatious, hearkening back to a gilded age rather than being the typical modern key card used for the rest of the guest rooms—could only unlock a door in the disgracefully expensive VIP suites. While this narrowed down their search and told them quite a bit about their quarry, it also raised troubling questions…and once again led all of them, but especially Nick and Lionheart, back to the mafia. Or at least, Vinny Corlione.

While the fox had merely opined, with his usual lazy confidence, that Sahara Square was obviously associated with African mammals including lions, which indicated Corlione could still be involved, the former mayor had been the one to pinpoint precisely how. "I remember now," he had intoned with a heavy, sepulchral sigh. "Why he seemed familiar to me beyond his resemblance to myself. As I am sure you are well aware, when she is not performing or otherwise making public appearances, Gazelle lives in the Palm Hotel. Since she is the goodwill ambassador for Zootopia, I was the one who had to grant her visa for residency there. In the process of doing so, I naturally was given access to the hotel and casino records—specifically, who the owners and shareholders are. I am a shareholder myself…and so is Mr. Corlione." He had shaken his head sadly. "It appears more and more as if he is these rams' Boss. I can only assume he directed them to keep Bucky under guard on the premises until whatever life-threatening crisis they intend to arrange can take place."

On that distressing note, the car had fallen silent, allowing them all to stew in their private thoughts…for while Corlione's current confinement meant he could not be a direct threat to them, and their badges should theoretically grant them access and cooperation from the hotel staff and security, Delgado had advised caution and Judy had uncomfortably agreed. Phil's testimony, the evidence of the key, and Lionheart's further corroboration provided probable cause so that a search warrant was not necessary, but the evidence against Corlione specifically was all circumstantial.

Beyond that, the fact this establishment was owned and run by the mafia meant that as much as it was a legitimate business, those in charge had much to hide and would be prone to belligerence, suspicion, and hostility first, reasonability and cooperation later. They would do better to draw no attention to themselves for as long as possible, to protect Buckley and ensure they could capture his kidnappers as well as prevent some sort of major firefight with the criminal underworld. Which meant they still could not call in Bogo and the rest of the ZPD, not until they had more evidence, had Buckley and the rams in custody.

The rabbit gazed out the window at the sandstone dwellings beginning to appear outside, looming like carved cliffs above them or even forming arches directly over the streets, and shook her head. Buckley Stagmire. She still couldn't believe it. Not that she knew much about the deer personally, but he was as famous as any other public figure in Zootopia, and even if she'd never seen speeches he'd given when he was the Assistant Mayor and then later as the District Attorney, his name was certainly all over a number of recent policies and laws she'd had to study at police academy. That alone would have prompted her curiosity.
When she did look into his background, she’d found an admirable, principled, and good-hearted mammal who appealed innately to her sense of justice and idealism, one any law-abiding citizen would look up to and one who displayed a genuine caring and compassion for everyone, no matter their species or station in life. She could completely understand why Lionheart would be concerned for his welfare and why harm coming to him…or him being released as a savage in public…would be a cause for such alarm.

She’d also learned, though, just how intertwined his life had been with the former mayor’s. It was extremely clear the lion had not just been a running mate to him, but a dear friend, and while she didn’t know exactly how long the two had known each other, their association at least went back to their college days. In retrospect, his identity as Patient Zero should have been obvious, if not for the fact he was prey. Above all, if she hadn’t already been sympathetic to the desperate Barbary, her heart would have gone out to him even more now.

*It doesn't justify what he did…and he agrees! But it does explain so much…* She realized that once Nick and Delgato had explained what Lionheart had confessed to them, her motivations had shifted somewhat. She wasn't just doing this to save the city again, or to bring in criminals and put an end to the last of Bellwether's mad scheme. She genuinely did want to help Leodore Lionheart.

What surprised her was that apparently the same was true of her companions. Delgato still seemed wary and distrustful—Nick had given her only vague generalities about the 'discussion' the two lions had had while she was in the Cloven Hoof, stating it was a deeply personal matter and up to them if they wanted to share the details, but he had at least said the smaller cat had a bone to pick with the larger and they had finally cleared the air between them. But at least the cop was willing to still work with the ex-mayor for the greater good.

As for the vulpine, the friendliness and kindness he was showing toward Leodore now was rather astonishing really, what little banter there remained between them being genuinely amusing and light-hearted. *Whatever happened while I was gone must have been pretty intense…and enlightening.*

But there was no time for that now. Even as she was glad things were resolved to the point they could act as a cohesive group at last, Judy realized they were arriving at their destination. The rain had slowed to a drizzle as they were traveling and now finally petered out, leaving only the scudding clouds to block out the moon and stars above. The night still remained fairly dark, especially among the narrow residential streets where awnings, tarps, and wooden slat bridges overhead screened away the light; the passages where mammals walked and shopped at the vendors of the open-air bazaars were thus left in such cavernous shadow as to resemble actual tunnel warrens, though here and there she could see lanterns burning, pools of light flickering and swaying in the darkness as the wind set them to swinging.
Ahead, as the buildings fell away and the streets expanded into the enormous plaza that gave the
district its name, the rabbit could see other sandstone formations, weirdly shaped and banded in
startling, exotic hues, standing like megaliths at the edge of the great circular park, kept ever-green by
the constant irrigation from the river. And there, in the center of it all, on an island in the cool,
sparkling, smoothly-glimmering oasis, great spotlights aimed to either sweep across it at timed
intervals or constantly fixed upon it—despite the fact that even at this hour, countless lights still
blazed in windows from ground floor to several hundred feet up—stood the Palm Hotel.

Judy squared her shoulders as Delgato brought the car to a stop and parked it in the property's vast
lot. Somewhere inside this immense skyscraping novelty was the cultured, intelligent deer who had
fought so hard for Zootopia's equality—for the very thing she had always believed and dreamed the
city to be—but now driven into madness and feral rage. Somewhere inside, presumably in the same
place she hoped, also lay the answers they were seeking as to who was behind this.

She was determined that nothing would stop them from finding both, not Corlione's bullyboys, not
the hotel staff, not Doug and his rams, not even the lateness of the hour; far from being tired, she was
on hyper-alert now. She would not, of course, break the law to achieve her ends…but she would
bend it as much as she had to, if it came down to it. Too much was at stake not to.

As she hopped out of the car, she glanced at her companions in turn. Lionheart, unsurprisingly, was
dead serious, more focused than she had seen him all evening—Cliffside was supposed to have been
an easy in-and-out, and the Cloven Hoof had been her turf, but this was most assuredly the place
where his friend was being kept prisoner (both physically and within his own mind!). Delgato, by
contrast, seemed worried and wary, probably because his being native to Sahara Square and the
knowledge he had of the Palm Hotel and its clientele had the younger lion on edge over what might
go wrong.

Still, he appeared otherwise ready and able to do whatever was necessary; knowing exactly whom
they were rescuing had incited a greater resolve and evaporated whatever misgivings and distrust he
had harbored, though she still suspected whatever conversation had taken place while she was inside
the bar had contributed too.

And Nick? He was not only back to his usual devil-may-care, insouciant self, he actually seemed
excited, even eager, to infiltrate this particular establishment. She sincerely hoped it was for the same
reasons as the rest of them, with the added benefit of getting to demonstrate precisely how skilled he
was at stealth and sneaking…and not because he had a yearning for taking a gander at the casino's
various gaming tables. Work first, pleasure later, Slick.

They paused on the flagstone entranceway, just beyond the turnaround drive that led back out to the
isthmus across the lake. Nick's casual wear and her…unique outfit would both fit in surprisingly well
here, as outside of the high-rollers and other elites, anyone and everyone came to the casino or stayed
at the hotel, from everyday mammals getting a much-needed vacation to dedicated partygoers whose
looks ranged from faux-glam sleaziness to elegant coiffeur. Lionheart's street garb would stand out more, but they planned to keep him as much out of sight as was possible at his massive size, as much because of his resemblance to a major shareholder (and mafia figure) as the chance someone might recognize him as the former mayor who would conspicuously not be residing in the jail cell where he was supposed to be. And Delgato, the only one still in uniform, would provide the necessary gravitas and authority for their mission, without drawing excess attention or causing a panic the way a whole police troop would.

Nodding to each of them in turn, Judy rose to her full height, somehow found a way to blend her usual confident gait with the brassy strut she'd adopted at the Cloven Hoof, and led the way through the beveled glass doors of the lobby.

Even after all she'd already seen in Zootopia since her moving there a little over six months ago, Judy still felt her breath flee as she took in the Palm Hotel's sheer extravagance. The central foyer of the lobby, one vast round and domed room, was surrounded by a stone wall through which elegant tracery and decorative cURLices had been carved to let the light shine through as a screen, putting her in mind of pictures she'd seen of the Alhambra in Granada. But even more impressive than this was the fact the circular reception desk surrounded a gigantic, living tree that towered a full story above their heads, watered by a spring that was drawn up by hidden pumps to form a constantly splashing waterfall.

The flooring was a vast expanse of cool marble under her pawpads; the walls were beautifully-carved wood the hue of sand, with the patterns designed into it and the shape of the floor's slope further suggesting rippling desert dunes. More plants grew everywhere, whether in planters, trailing in long fronds down the walls, or covering carefully-irrigated niches, displays, and miniature parks. Wooden steps, cobbled pathways, and sloping ramps wound around, among, and in between the greenery. Some led to the side entrances where flashing lights, sirens, and the endless sound of cheering and slot machines indicated the casino proper lay beyond; others directed the feet of guests, bellhops, and other hotel staff toward the large bank of elevators or the many salons, dining rooms, ballrooms, and conference rooms in the rear.

Above, a huge balcony almost the entire height of the great tree above their heads bulged out in a semicircle, supported along the wall by cantilevers of carved wood or stone. Beyond that came still more arabesques, bas-reliefs, quatrefoils, and other rich, elaborately ornamental sculpturing (which she thought might be in the churriguero style). And arching still higher overhead was the glass ceiling that let in the sunlight during the day and cut them off from the palm tree "trunk" of the central tower, where tier upon tier of rooms had their inner private balconies.

The opulence of the place was so over-the-top, especially for a country-dweller from Bunnyburrow like her, that Judy didn't even notice the four of them were not alone until the distinct sound of a clearing throat drew her attention. The concierge, a giraffe whose long neck and limbs made him rather blend in as well as being perfectly scaled to the size of the place, frowned down at them from over his glasses; although he didn't move behind the desk and kept his hooves over his computer keyboard, she rather got the impression he intended to leap for whatever concealed security alarm
had been provided for his protection. She also got the impression he didn't think much of her manner of dress. "Yes? May I help you?"

She took a deep breath, something she knew accentuated her assets once again, and strode to the desk, peering up past the shining wooden countertop toward the face staring down at her. Forgoing her rather trampy attitude from the Cloven Hoof, she instead acted bright and vivacious, just like any tourist or casino groupie—or, considering her attire and who owned the place, a moll. "Yes, hi, hello there! Sorry to bother you so very late, sir, but I'm afraid there's something very important that needs seeing to inside your beautiful establishment, so if you'd just see your way toward letting us past, we can get this taken care of quickly and quietly."

Judy paused, and before the suspicious and admittedly rather threatening look on the giraffe's face could become any more hostile, she added, "This should explain everything, I believe." And from the inside pocket of her jacket, she displayed her badge.

If the ungulate had been skeptical of her before, he became even more so now, although acting more out of uncertainty and even trepidation than disgust. Clearing his throat several times and tugging at the collar of his suit jacket, the giraffe frowned, and even as he was speaking she knew for certain now that he was trying to unobtrusively reach for a hidden button under the counter with the hoof he thought was out of view.

"Er...I see, uh, Officer, but...it's been a very quiet evening here since most of the stores closed, well, for the Palm Hotel anyway...nothing which should need checking out or investigating, certainly nothing illegal, though of course we thank you for your concern. And I'm afraid without a warrant or other order, we can't simply let you troop about and disturb our guests—"

He suddenly cut off, his voice turned to a strangled grunt, as Delgato came up on her left side, leaned casually on the counter—and even as the angle caused the interior lights to gleam off his own pectoral badge, aimed his gun at the giraffe from under the concealment of his elbow. The sound of the safety clicking off was very loud in the quiet lobby. "Keep your hooves where we can see them," he said, conversationally but with a hint of soft menace Judy had never known he could possess.

"And that won't be necessary. We have reason to believe—that there are criminals on the premises. Ones who have nothing to do with the hotel, its owners, or any of its activities, but who do mean harm to the city and must be stopped at all costs. Ergo, we have probable cause to investigate."

"Which means," Nick interjected from her other side, as he leaned casually on the metal runner encircling the front of the desk, "any assistance you can render us will be deeply appreciated, but any interference or obstruction would be...inadvisable."
Of course, she knew both of them were being fast and loose with the truth, if not outright lying by omission—Phil's testimony, even if it came from directly listening to the rams' conversation, still counted as only hearsay until they had actual evidence of Bellwether's men being in residence and having Stagmire imprisoned in their presence; the key connected them to the Palm Hotel but was still only circumstantial. And not only would it be breaking all manner of rules, laws, and regulations for any of them to arrest, detain, or otherwise restrain a civilian who was only doing his job—let alone dare to shoot him without provocation—but charging him with obstructing an officer could only be done after the fact, if it could be proven his actions had genuinely prevented a criminal from being apprehended.

But the giraffe didn't know any of this, and while intimidation was frowned upon even when it wasn't outright unethical or illegal, the circumstances were dire enough to warrant it, they had agreed. And in a place such as this, one which everyone knew (even if they couldn't or wouldn't be allowed to prove it) was run by a major organized crime syndicate, it might actually be questionable that such tactics were inappropriate or that anyone who attempted to stop them was truly an innocent.

The concierge seemed unable to take his eyes off of Delgato's gun, and his hooves indeed had shot up and stayed frozen by his sides. "O-okay...f-fine, fine. I don't want any trouble, gentlemen. Ma'am," he added when he flicked his gaze briefly to Judy. A certain determination seemed to strengthen his voice a bit. "But you and I both know who runs the Palm. Even if whoever you're looking for really does have nothing to do with them, they won't appreciate the law charging in and —"

"Except," Judy interrupted this time, though she tried to maintain her sweet, light tone, "we actually have the permission of the owner to be here." Which wasn't exactly true either, since even if he weren't this mysterious Boss, Corlione had had no idea they might have to come here and had never said anything one way or the other about granting them carte blanche on his property. Though come to think of it, he probably would have, had he known the need. Within reason.

"Also," Nick drawled as he grasped his lapels and offered the giraffe a knowing, suggestive smile, "I can guarantee you that your employer would not want to become entangled with the particular case we are investigating. It is of a very delicate nature, and the less who know about it until we are able to make any arrests, the better. So again, if you made the ever-so-wise decision not to contact him or the rest of his...pride, and let us go about our business, that'd be peachy, mmkay?"

For several moments the poor flabbergasted concierge seemed unsure who to stare and blink at more, herself or the fox. Then, as he finally managed to notice Lionheart where he'd been standing back in the shadows of a pillar, his jaw dropped. "Mr. Corlione? Sir? Are these officers here with you?" He sounded understandably dubious of this. "Why didn't you just say so, then...?"
The ex-mayor took a small step back, rather looking as if had been caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi-trailer, but then he squared his shoulders and strode forward into the light. Coming here, they had known there was a good chance he would be mistaken for the leonine crime boss unless they left him in the car—something none of the cops would allow, even if they did trust him more now than they had initially, since there was no use taking chances and it was entirely possible they might need his knowledge or even extra muscle power.

And while he obviously didn't have enough information to pass himself off as Corlione for a lengthy period, or to flunkies and associates who would be far more aware of mannerisms and intimate details of his life and business, a brief impression might be enough to get them through a tight spot or past some security bottleneck. So they had planned on it in advance, just in case, and Lionheart knew what to do.

"Yes, yes, they are indeed with me," the big lion snapped irritably, and while not completely flawless, his imitation of Corlione's Italian accent was still uncanny. But then he had just met the fellow tonight, had known of him before, and Nick had informed her of Lionheart's knowledge of Spanish, which was in the same language family. "I had been hoping to keep a low profile tonight, that is why I have this strange attire. Please, trust me when I say utmost discretion is needed, as much as I ever have asked of you before." He gestured expansively at Nick and Judy, then Delgato.

"They are...a bit overzealous in their work, but their hearts are as they say in the right place. And they tell you truly, something terrible is going on. Give them whatever assistance they require, I promise nothing they intend to do will...endanger anything that is none of their business."

For a long moment all of them held their breaths while the concierge studied the Barbary with a narrowed gaze; Judy didn't dare look at the others, only plastering a disarming and hopefully trustworthy smile on her face, though she did notice Delgato had put his gun away and Lionheart's body language was poised, deliberate, and betraying none of the nervousness and distress he had to be feeling. Finally the giraffe muttered under his breath. "For a moment there I thought you were...ugh, these graveyard shifts are really starting to get to me." Raising his voice, he sighed. "All right, you can come in, but make it quick. What exactly do you need?"

Clamping down on the mingled sense of excited triumph and uncertain worry that surged through her as one wave of tension washed away only to be replaced by another, Judy smiled wider. "Not much, sir. Just for you to tell no one else we're here, and give us directions to the VIP suites."

Although showing him the key would be quicker, they had all rather fervently agreed that doing so would give away far too much; even if Corlione were innocent, somebody in the hotel had to have greased some palms (no pun intended), accepted a bribe themselves, or otherwise looked the other way to allow Doug and his goons to stay in such a rich and sumptuous wing reserved only for the highest-paying and most exclusive clientele. No matter what promises were given, the concierge could easily warn whoever it was that they were on their way up, allowing them time to escape...or
just as badly, set a trap or ambush.

On top of that, help (and silence) would have been required to bring a drugged, feral mammal in on a gurney as well. And if Stagmire had been recognized...

As if he'd been reading her mind, Nick stepped forward again, nodding graciously in acceptance as the giraffe gestured somewhat perfunctorily toward a particular bank of elevators set off to the side by themselves, richly paneled and inlaid with palm trees fashioned of the same materials as those on the key chain's insignia. "Thank you, yes, sir. Though we were also wondering, is there a...back entrance which leads to those same suites? Or at least opens near them? The, ah, fugitives we're pursuing would not, I think, have done anything as foolhardy and attention-getting as openly using the front door."

Crossing his arms over his slender chest, the concierge gave the vulpine a sour look. "Service entrance is in the back, we get deliveries there. There's a freight elevator near there that goes right up to the back of the executive wing; everything the tenants and guests need is taken up that way, so it can be ready for them without them having to see it set up, or the workers."

That sounded exactly like the perfect means to sneak a tranquilized deer in with no one the wiser. It also meant there were two ways in and out of the VIP wing (not counting stairwells or emergency exits). If they wanted to be sure their quarry wouldn't get away, both would have to be guarded...but it would also allow them to come at their enemy from both sides. Again, perfect.

Each of them nodded in gratitude as they passed, but just as they were nearing the expensively-detailed elevators (and Judy was heading past them in search of the corridor back to the delivery area described), the concierge called out to Lionheart, who was last in the line. "Mr. Corlione, sir? Aren't you forgetting something?" All of them, even Nick, froze instinctively. When the former mayor turned back with an artfully puzzled look that belied the stiffness of his posture, however, the giraffe only added, "The key card, sir. The VIP elevators won't operate without it."

"Ah yes, of course. I do not know where my mind is tonight." Moving back to take the item from the extended hoof, Leodore tried to look as dignified as he could in his current outfit. "Grazie, Bartholomew." She hadn't even seen his eyes flicker, but he must have observed the name from the fellow’s tag.

It certainly seemed to dispel any lingering doubts about the lion's identity, as the concierge relaxed at last. Still, as Lionheart turned back and unhesitatingly slipped the key card to Nick, Judy's sharp ears caught a few final words: "Good thing you remembered my name, no one else ever does. I was gonna say you sure do look an awful lot like Lionheart, more than usual even..."
She wasn't the only one who heard. "Yes, I get that a lot..." the Barbary muttered grumpily.

Once they had moved around a bend in the cobbled path, and they were hidden from the front desk by both the towering plant life and a sweeping curve of the sand-hued wall, Lionheart slumped in relief—and he wasn't the only one. "That was too close. I don't think we should risk any further encounters, the next one might be with someone I can't fool, who knows too much about Corlione but doesn't know about Mr. Big directing him to switch places with me."

Privately Judy reflected she'd had no intention of taking the former mayor any farther into the hotel with her; even though she was almost one hundred percent certain now that he could be trusted, there was still that niggling sliver of doubt her instincts wouldn't let her dispel, and in any event, one as large and noticeable as the big lion could never infiltrate the place undetected. (Although she had observed several times he was otherwise quiet enough to do so when he wanted to be.)

"Good idea, sir. We're going to need someone to stand guard down here anyway, to make sure they don't get past us and get away, to keep anyone else in the hotel from interfering or getting caught in the crossfire, and in case we need a quick getaway. Delgato, you okay with staying here with Leodore?" When the other feline nodded, she turned back to Nick. "Considering how we're dressed, and the fact you're far more accustomed to entering and fitting in in places like this—"

"You mean," the fox cut in smoothly, "I have that air of suaveness and sophistication that lets me blend in anywhere? No, no, you're quite right, I won't deny it." If the situation hadn't been so tense and their mission so fraught with importance, Judy didn't know if she would have laughed at the bald-faced lie in his innocent tone or smacked that smug smile right off his self-satisfied muzzle. *Maybe both.* "All right, Sneaking and Surveillance 101: the first rule for whenever you're somewhere you shouldn't be, always act as if you do belong."

The rabbit rolled her eyes, even though she knew he was absolutely right. Or because she did. "Wow, I'm pretty sure they taught us that back at the academy, but thanks for the refresher. Anyway, since you're so good at that, I thought you should go up in the VIP elevator, while I slip up through the freight. I don't think anybody would believe I had a right to that card, or belonged in one of these suites, no matter how I acted. Not the way I look right now."

Lionheart pursed his lips. "Not alone, at any rate. If you were accompanying Corlione or one of his close associates, no one would bat an eye."

Judy curled her lip, fighting back a wave of nausea. "But that's not happening. So instead, I'll sneak in the back way, find the room the key matches, and see what's up—who's there, what they're doing, if there's any more evidence of what they're planning or linking them to Cliffside. If Mr. Stagmire is there, or I run into any trouble, I'll signal you on the wire, Nick. Otherwise, if we're lucky, and anything I find is suitably incriminating, you and I will be in the right position to catch them between
Nick frowned a bit, but although he looked uneasy he couldn't seem to find any flaws in her reasoning or planning. "Sounds about right to me, Carrots. But if you do get into trouble, you'd better holler like I have to hear you over all two hundred and seventy-five of your brothers and sisters."

Obviously he was suggesting that the size of the place and the distance between them might require such a thing, especially if she needed help quickly. Just as obviously, he was worried about her, again. As always, it both exasperated her at the implicit dismissal of her own abilities even as it also warmed her heart. And she couldn't deny that as forthright, determined, and resourceful as she was, her impetuousness did often get her into trouble she couldn't handle alone. It was why all beat cops had partners, and most detectives too.

Smiling at his reference to her family, Judy nodded in acceptance. "Will do. All right then, here goes nothing…" And as Delgato moved back out into the center of the broad path leading to the desk and the front entrance, there to stand sentry with both gun and radio at paw; as Lionheart instead slipped behind the concealing foliage of the largest bushes surrounding the palms, there to patrol the walkway between the ponds and the balcony nearly two stories above; and as Nick casually strode over to the elite elevator to wand the keycard over the access panel, then stand with his paws in his pockets, whistling nonchalantly as he waited; Judy darted out of sight, down the corridor beyond, into the darker, slightly shabbier delivery area where the freight elevator waited for her.

To judge by the number on the key chain (and confirmed by Delgato), the room where Doug and his rams were residing was not exactly a penthouse suite, but it was still more than two-thirds of the way up the palm tower. When Judy braced herself for leverage and sent the freight elevator's door rolling upward with a soft grunt of effort, she found herself in a curving hallway, with a bank of windows in front of her that afforded a jaw-dropping view of the city's southern districts. Stepping out softly and soundlessly onto a rich crimson carpet with golden trim that was so plush she sank into it almost to the tops of her feet, she saw that naturally the windows continued all around the circumference of the building, broken up only by pillars and other supports for the ceiling.

The other side of the hall was a line of doors—not as many as would be expected in a typical hotel since the suites were lavishly large, but the size of the place meant there were still somewhere between twenty-five and fifty. By coincidence or perhaps design, the coconut marker on the key she held clapsed tightly in her paw indicated her target was halfway between her current location and the VIP elevator.

Taking a deep breath, the rabbit crept forward, constantly fighting the urge to leap and bound down the corridor, but also resisting the temptation to move at a molasses crawl; even aside from Nick's advice on fitting in (her outfit notwithstanding) which would entail moving at a normal pace, the urgency of her mission made her determined to lose no more time than was necessary. And it wasn't as if there was anyone to see her—in the early morning hours, the place was deserted, with all the
mammals either asleep within their rooms or downstairs, gambling in the casino or living it up at one of the many bars.

The silence, aside from the occasional buzz of an electrical circuit or the distant rumble of machinery, was almost deafening and deeply unnerving. Before she had even made it a fourth of the way, her ears were constantly pricked, her heart was pounding almost as hard as it had in the Rainforest District or the Natural History Museum, and every muscle was as taut as a bowstring.

She wasn't afraid—and that wasn't her lying to herself or applying a false reassurance, she could feel her nose wasn't twitching—but she was on tenterhooks and knew that if anything went wrong, if she heard an out-of-place noise, encountered someone who didn't belong, or even met anyone at all, her reaction would likely be a mad dash fast enough to win an Owlympic sprint. Or else…

Judy came around the next curve in the hallway—and at the same time she heard a squeak and a faint rumble, she spied movement ahead. Instantly she dodged to the side, pressing herself up against a giant bronze urn where a small palm was potted, and peered around its gleaming side, her gun in paw and ready to fire. When she saw who it was, she almost sagged with relief and didn't know whether to furiously berate herself or start giggling hysterically.

Farther down the corridor, a large wheeled cart—the source of the squeaking and rumbling—was being pushed by an unseen mammal, unseen because it was piled with buckets, mops, brooms, numerous packages of toilet paper and paper towels, bottles of bleach and disinfectant, trash bags, towels and rags, and more cleaning implements. After another few moments, as the cart drew closer, she could finally see the one pushing it, an older, rather motherly-appearing hyena with steel gray streaking her black mane, where it could be seen poking out from under the starched white cap which matched the apron she wore over a neatly-pressed black dress.

After the maid had passed and she had gotten her pulse and breath back under control, Judy took a few moments to be grateful she was not trigger-happy like several of her classmates at the academy—and a far too high number among actual cops. Then she emerged from behind the urn and moved on.

Following that encounter, she ceased sneaking and took Nick's very astute and accurate advice, moving openly if not boldly down the middle of the hall—and indeed, no other hotel staff, whether maids or otherwise, tried to question or stop her, though she did notice one or two raised eyebrows, an admiring gaze, even a blush at her attire. The only times she had to dodge were when tenants or guests appeared, since she was absolutely certain mammals of such class and privilege would immediately assume her to be a guttersnipe who was far out of her depth, attempting to pilfer from their rich possessions and bankrolls, and so would summon security on her…or worse, believe her to be a gun moll or hooker and act accordingly. In those cases, she either once more hid behind various pieces of furniture and artistic décor or, when there was no other option, slipped through narrow doors which turned out to lead to broom closets.
In one of these, however, she found a small footstool and carried it off with her, for she had already observed the doorknobs were just enough above her own height that she wouldn't be able to insert the key without leaping and dangling rather pathetically, and with nothing to brace against so as to open the door. So when she reached the one with the number she sought, she set the stool down against the wall beside it and smiled a bit smugly, stepping back to admire her handiwork. As if it was meant to go there.

Judy paused and looked both directions down the corridor; no one in sight. Pressing the send button on her Bluefang, she whispered through the wire. "Nick? You in position?"

A pause of only a second or two, then her partner's voice murmured back, a slight edge to it she didn't think anyone else could detect, but otherwise as relaxed and steady as ever. "You betcha, Carrots. No one's even given me a second glance. I'm stationed near the veep elevator, gazing out the windows at the city's desert district below, surveying the fox's rightful domain."

She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing, and couldn't stop the snort. "Okay. I'm going in then. Cover me."

As she climbed up on the stool…inserted the key in the lock…and carefully turned it with such minute slowness that the metal parts barely made any sound as they were shifted and tripped, she heard one last word through the mike, so soft she didn't think she'd been meant to catch it: "Always."

Then the door moved under her paws, and with a swift brace against the stool to push it open just far enough, she was slipping through the resultant gap into the room, letting the panel close behind her.

The first thing she noticed, even before her eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting beyond, was how soft and plush the floor beneath her paws was; glancing down, she realized to her delight that it was covered with faux moss. At least she assumed it was, since otherwise the hotel staff would have to be continually watering and replacing it, though she wouldn't put it past an expensive place with exclusive suites like this. In any event, this meant it would be even easier for her to sneak around than she had supposed…

In one curve of the oblong, vaguely elliptical room was a private elevator concealed between a pair of pillars carved to resemble tree trunks—though again, they might well have been the real thing. Nearest to her was a round canopied bed with towering posts that divided the rich velvet curtains surrounding the plush mattress and feather pillows. A fruit basket stood nearby and, to her bemusement, a salt lick stick in place of the usual complimentary chocolates.
Farther out, more details filled in: on the left, vast floor-to-ceiling frosted glass doors led out onto the balcony that overlooked the central well of the hotel's palm tower, with a pool just visible encircled by various trees and shrubbery; on the right, toward the far side of the room, a bathtub divided into three scales of size for the various species which might make use of it languished alongside an indoor pond, with countless palms and rich verdant grass growing around them all as well as extending out to cover a large portion of the room.

Finally, she noticed tucked in another curve flanking the bathtub was an upright fur dryer with rotating rollers, something she viewed with fascination; while she'd seen such things in movies, her police salary obviously didn't afford her such accommodations in Zootopia, nor had her casework led her to such a place before, and in a rural town like Bunnyburrow, even a home for over two hundred rabbit children employed a far less decadent, more practical means of drying fur after bathing or showering (specifically, large vents in ceiling or floor which connected to the warren's central heating furnace, far below the living tunnels).

Letting out a slow, soft breath, Judy crept forward once she had memorized the layout; there was no sign of Stagmire, but she thought there might be another door on the far side of the room, between the bathtub and the elevator, which could lead to an adjoining suite. What had her main focus was two things. Standing alongside the bed was a polished wooden dresser table with slender legs, and she could see a number of items on its surface—including what looked like folded paper and a set of plastic-enclosed cards, as well as something that sparkled and glittered in the light of a Tiffany lamp cast in the spiraling shape of an ibex horn. Beyond that was the other thing that drew her attention—lounging about, either in the medium-sized level of the tub or on the terraced steps outside it, were three very familiar rams.

The bed itself blocked most of her view (and thus also, their view of her, since otherwise they had only to look over to glimpse her), so she slipped toward it…continuing to keep her breathing steady and nearly silent, paws cushioned by the moss, until she could see her quarry better but still remained partly hidden behind one of the bedposts. There she came to a stop, gripping the polished wood, and leaned closer…eyes narrowed, ears pricked attentively. It didn't take more than a moment for her to pick up the languid voices; it sounded as if most of them were still under the effects of whatever brew they'd imbibed at the Cloven Hoof.

"Ahhh…this's the life. Damn sight better than that dusty old train station."

"Yeah. The Boss sure gave ya a better set-up for your little garden, eh, Jesse?"

"Well there isn't much point in hiding now, is there? Besides, what he's planning means we need a lot more of that stupid plant, and he sure can afford a larger place and all the supplies and equipment for it than Bellwether ever could."
The first voice, which she recognized now from that critical phone call as the sniper Doug's, suddenly sharpened, sounding far more alert—and angry. "Shut up. You know Dawn couldn't risk someone catching her skimming off City Hall funds to pay for all that crap, after that pitiful salary of hers wasn't enough...ugh, I hate Lionheart... And she had to keep what we were doing on the down-low, until she had enough power it wouldn't matter." A sinister chuckle accompanied a drop in pitch as the ram growled, "No more of that though, huh? As soon as this city finishes tearing itself apart, nobody's gonna care who we are or what we're doing."

Water swished and splashed, and the second sheep spoke up again, a sneer quite audible in his tone. "Quit your bragging, Doug. We're all in this together, we're being paid well for it, and you're no more in charge of the plan than you were the first time." Something about his voice sounded maddeningly familiar...

Jesse, meanwhile, took a drink from a tumbler of golden liquid before setting it down on the tub edge; she could just see the silhouette of the Palm Hotel logo on its side, and the scattered shadow it cast on the marble. "Calm down, Woolter. I know you've been agitated ever since Cliffside, but everything'll be fine. Nobody has a clue where we are or what we've done, let alone what we intend to do. Relax...take the time to enjoy the finer things in life, hmm?"

Even as Judy was grinning quite smugly to herself at how wrong the ram was in his assessment, Doug wasn't letting up on his companion. "Jesse's right. There's nothing to worry about, and we've got plenty of good reason to celebrate. That is, as long as you followed my instructions to the letter. You dose the Great Prince the way I told you?" He uttered the title with stilted sarcasm.

The rabbit stiffened and perked her ears up to their highest extent; that had to be a reference to Stagmire! She was listening so closely, in fact, that when Woolter responded—even more harshly and dismissively than before—she could hear every shift in intonation, the bleat that underlay his words, the faint Meadowlands accent... "Of course I did, idiot. You really think I'm gonna risk him waking up, maybe breaking his bonds, before we're ready for him to do his act?" The coldness in his tone turned to satisfaction, and he waved a hoof toward the other door she had noticed only a few moments earlier. "He's out like a light, probably dreamin' of goring the competition so he can rut. I'll give him another dose in a few hours, when we're on our way."

He started to say something else, but Judy had tuned him out as suddenly, she remembered where she had heard his voice before—slightly nasal and filled with a blunt flatness that made it clear he was bored with the world and everyone in it. She recognized it, and it filled her with fury. The ill-fated press conference...her foolish mistake in parroting Dr. Honey Badger's theory as fact because it dovetailed with her own private beliefs about predators and their savage past...and the reporter who had prompted it all, with his question zeroing in on the missing mammals all being predators.

It was him, he was the one who had been there that day. She didn't know if he'd had forged press credentials courtesy of the Assistant Mayor or if he was a genuine (but crooked) reporter who had
been recruited to Bellwether's cause. Either way, though, she had clearly coached him in exactly what to say and when. The whole thing had been orchestrated even more carefully than she knew, and she felt like even more of a blind fool because of it.

As she was thinking furiously and berating herself yet again for how easily she had been led by the nose, Judy was snapped back to her present surroundings by a shadow looming toward her, forcing her to hurriedly duck beneath the edge of the bedside table. Peering out by only the thinnest of slivers, she watched as Jesse, a towel wrapped around his waist and his wool damp and dripping, scooped up something that was buzzing on the tabletop—a cellphone, she realized. "Yello?"

The voice on the other end, though muffled, sounded both worried and enraged, but she couldn't focus on that. Across the table she could see something she hadn't noticed before, because she hadn't bothered to look closely—on the bed lay a carrying case like the one she and Nick had liberated from the train car at Banyan Station, with another gun inside and the glass ampoules filled with the familiar bright blue of Night Howler extract; next to it was another firearm, this one easily recognizable as a tranq gun.

If that wasn't evidence enough, much closer at hand she could see the items lying on the table…the name at the head of the folded paper, the name on each of the three plastic badges…and in front of them, what had been glittering in the light. She reached for the latter, which was close enough she thought her paw could snag it without being seen by any of the rams…

"C'mon, Boss, there's nothing to worry about," Jesse was saying as he turned back toward the tub. "Everything went off like a hitch at Cliffside—well, other than that stupid badger fighting us...she bit Doug pretty good, and gave me a groin kick I'm gonna be feeling for days... But anyway, the door code and that recording you gave us of Lionheart worked like a charm, and we're at the Palm now. We've got everything you left here for us, and now we've got plenty of time to rest up and get ready before tomorrow night. Stagmire's dead to the world, but when we need him to, he'll…really let the animalia out."

The smirk was evident in his voice at the joke he'd made with that emphasized word—but she didn't have to guess its meaning, the items on the table made it clear...horribly clear, nauseatingly clear. Between that, the case on the bed, the conversation from beforehand, and one of them finally calling the DA by name, she had all the evidence she needed. She dearly wished she could get to the deer, but even if the rams hadn't been between her and the bedroom door, there was no way she could move a heavy, tranquilized mammal like that all by herself, even if the gurney were still in the room. All she could do was get out of here as rapidly as possible, summon Nick, and…

She had backed away from the table, still clutching the item she'd taken from it, ducked so low to the moss-covered floor she was practically slinking on all fours, feverishly wishing that she'd at least ditched the black-and-red jacket that made her stand out like a neon sign even in the shadows. But Jesse was between her and the others, he still had his back to her, and any sounds she might be
making in her progress toward the door were masked by the splashing and bubbling of the pond's fountain. Only a little more…

Suddenly the ram stood erect and alert, any lingering effects of the booze seemingly banished. "What? You can't be serious…" A very long, unsettling pause, during which Judy froze in place and pressed up against the darkened base of the bedstead. Then he said, with a surprisingly quiet menace, "Damnit. I knew something was up when we couldn't find one of our room keys…fine. We'll get moving right away."

Clicking his phone closed, Jesse turned to the others. "Looks like the timetable's been moved up a bit. Get dressed, both of you."

"You forgetting who's in charge here?" Doug snapped.

"Nope. It's the Boss. And he just told me we need to stash the antlered stiff somewhere else. He spotted one of ZPD's finest down in the lobby, along with either Corlione or Lionheart. They're onto us, and they've probably got partners already here and backup coming. He's on his way up here now to cover our tracks."

As the other rams hurriedly leaped out of the tub, grabbed towels of their own, and either rushed to the fur dryer or headed into the bedroom to prepare Buckley for a quick getaway, Judy's mind raced. So Corlione isn't their boss, then? Then who is it? And the others were seen? Great hopping horny toads!

With the rams bustling about, they were certain to catch sight of her soon enough if she stayed pinned where she was, but by the same token their current state of activity meant they might miss her for just a few moments longer… Throwing caution to the winds, she shoved the evidence in an inner pocket of her jacket, then scuttled backwards the rest of the way until she bumped up against the outer door. Glancing about with her heart in her throat, she almost let out a sob of relief when she spied a shelf on the wall not far from the jamb—for keys, wallets, and other items a mammal might have in his pocket, she guessed. What mattered was it was positioned just right, and just large enough…

Gathering all the power in her muscular haunches, Judy sprang upward. Her feet hit the shelf, her paws reached to hit the handle, her momentum carried her off the shelf and pulled the handle along, opening the door…

Just as she heard a shout behind her, she was through the gap. Instinctively she sprang again as she fell, landing on the stool she'd used to clamber up what seemed like hours earlier, then kicking to
send it toppling back across the carpeted threshold. She knew it would only slow any pursuit by the rams by just a few moments, but at this point (and at her speed) every second counted. Landing on the hallway floor, she burst into a run, back toward the freight elevator, and even as she went she was calling out desperately through the mike. "Nick! Delgato's been spotted, and so have I! Warn him, then get to me as fast as you can, their boss said he's on his way up!"

Not even waiting to hear the fox's reply, Judy picked up more and more speed, barreling around the curve of the hall. Ahead of her, she could hear the door of the freight elevator rumbling as it slid upward, and it took her mind several moments to catch up with her feet before she stumbled to a halt, tripping and almost falling flat on her face. Surely this boss, whoever he was, would be coming up through the VIP elevator, wouldn't he? (Not that she'd warned Nick of this…) To have the kind of clout needed to hide Doug and his gang, plus Buckley, in that particular suite, unnoticed, and with the items she'd seen on the table, he had to be of high position and stature, both in society and the hotel staff…

A figure came into view from around the curve—clearly masculine, thick with bulk that was as much muscle as it was fat or fur, an ominous shape to its head which was ducked toward her thanks to its hunched shoulders. "You there! What do you think you're doing up here, this area is restricted to tenants and Elite-level guests only!"

Noticing her accoster's security name tag, she swiftly pulled out her own badge. "ZPD! Undercover officer on a case here, I have reason to believe a citizen of extremely high value and well known to the public eye is being held prisoner in a suite here, by terrorist fugitives from the law with outstanding warrants. If you would kindly assist me in—"

Her voice died in her throat as she recognized the security guard's species when he came into the light…and when she read not just the full rank on his badge, but the name along with it. **Run. Now!**

Wheeling about on one paw, she fled back the way she'd come.

Somehow the hall behind her wasn't filled by Doug and his cohorts—had they assumed she'd gotten away with her head start, or were they focused only on getting away themselves with Buckley?—so she was able to sprint onward toward the VIP elevator, praying fervently that Nick would appear to help, and that the elevator would run without the key card. But the fox was nowhere to be seen…had he gone the other way, or had the rams…?

No!

Don't think of that!

She reached the amber and malachite inlaid panels and leaped upward, frantically stabbing at the 'down' button before landing on the floor again. She could hear her pursuer lumbering down the hall, building up steam—he was slow, but large, which meant he'd keep coming inexorably and that once he'd reached his top speed he could not be easily stopped.
“Nick! Nick, where are you?! I think I found their boss, you won't believe who it is, but he's almost —”

The elevator chimed, a soft pleasant sound that seemed to echo like thunder in her ears, and the door slid silently open. Desperately she flung herself through, punched the button for the lobby…

Nothing. The panel was dead, silent and unlit. It did need the key card to go down as well. And the fox who carried it was nowhere to be found.

Maybe if she was still fast enough, ran and circled the other way to reach the freight elevator again before he caught up or could change directions. Or she could find the emergency exit door to the stairs, she hadn't seen it on her way to the rams' room so it must be in the other arc of the hall. Or maybe one of the other tenants might let her in when she flashed her badge, let her use their private elevator…

Judy flung herself back out the door—and slammed right into the security guard's broad, heaving chest, sending her flying into the elevator car again. She felt her shoulder connect with the brass handrail with bruising force but bit back her cry of pain. Her paw went for her sidearm—

"Don't even think about it," the mammal growled, letting out a puffing snort of hot, steamy breath. As he strode through the open door to loom menacingly above her, she saw the gun in his own grip…held steady and sure, pointed right at her heart.

"You and I are taking a little trip, Miss Hopps. And whether you cooperate determines if you get there the slow way…or much faster."

Despite it being the early morning hours, Officer Swinton knew that the mammal she sought—the one who had always been excellent at recordkeeping and other clerical work, even before his love of sweets and surprisingly sedentary lifestyle had confined him solely to his desk—would be on-duty. He was the only member of the ZPD (at least at City Center) who enjoyed paperwork, and his skills were generally so impeccable that Bogo depended on him solely for such tasks in addition to being the usual receptionist. Being a feline, he also often took night and graveyard shifts. So even if he weren't the unofficial head of the Records Department, he was very likely to have been the one Hopps and Wilde had reported to before heading off on their rule-breaking escapade.
And, though it pained her to admit it, she knew Benjamin Clawhauser was so naïve, trusting, and good-natured it would be embarrassingly easy to persuade or otherwise finesse him into giving her the needed information. But whatever was going on was too important, and possibly too illegal, to allow hurt feelings or her own fondness for the overweight cheetah to interfere with what she had to do.

Striding up to the front desk at the precinct, the pig discovered she was right; there he was, as incurably adorable, amusing, and playful as ever despite the hour. (If it wasn't the huge amount of sugar he ingested on a daily basis, it would have to be the caffeine from either coffee or soda.) Tonight he was passing the time by playing a video game on his computer—she wasn't very familiar with the genre, but thanks to her piglets she thought it might be one of the multiple Meowrio Party titles—though she also noticed a Gazelle video was streaming on his phone where it lay on the desk, and that he still wore the headset for answering dispatch calls. She shook her head, but not in disapproval, for she knew that somehow, Clawhauser was capable of incredible multitasking skill most of the time.

"Grr…darnit, I don't care how good she is, I'm gonna beat Princess Daisy at the dancing minigame if it's the last thing I do!" Noticing her approach (by the wave of her hoof), the spotted cat smiled boyishly and paused the game. "Not just yet, though…. Well hey, wasn't expecting to see you tonight, Officer May! What can I do ya for?"

Having worked out already what to say, she didn't even hesitate. "Hi, Benny. Sorry to bother you so late. I was just wondering if you could check the status for a case of mine? There's some evidence still being processed I want to make sure is getting expedited, and I needed to fact-check a couple things from the file too."

She knew if she asked about any other officer's caseload, particularly if there were anything classified or not aboveboard about the proceedings, that he would refuse her—as kindly and regretfully as possible, but he still took his gatekeeper duties seriously, as well he should. But if she asked about one of her own, he wouldn't think anything of it…and it wouldn't stop her from checking out any new files there might be for Hopps and Wilde, or at least sneak a look at the requisition sheet for the evening.

Indeed, Clawhauser didn't even blink, though as he switched screens on his desktop and logged back into the records software, he did chuckle a bit. "Always burnin' the midnight oil, aren't ya? Or did ya have one of those late-night brainstormz?"

"Something like that," she smiled in spite of herself.
"I get 'em myself, yanno," the cheetah confided, somewhere between modesty and a proud glee that left him pink-cheeked and squirming in his chair. "Must be all that excess energy I get. I always knew those ads weren't lyin' when they said Lucky Chomps give yer brain a boost! I was just tellin' McHorn the other day—"

"I'm sure you were," Swinton said patiently. At any other time she actually would have listened, if for no other reason than that there was usually a good laugh at the end of his stories, but she was rather on a timetable here. "My case?"

"Oh!" Clawhauser flushed in embarrassment, instantly turning apologetic while his paws looked for papers to shuffle nervously on the desktop. "Ma always says my mind races as fast as my legs would, if not for, you know." His paws went to the keyboard. "Name?"

"Dr. Clea," she enunciated carefully. "The pred therapy case."

For a moment she spied something she hadn't seen in his sweet, dark-hued eyes since the Pred Scare, and something she'd never seen there at all—fear and shame, and a dark, ugly resentment. "Yeah, I heard about that," he said, very quietly, his voice tight with an emotion that contrasted sharply with how bubbly and playful he had just been. "Awful stuff. I sure hope you're dottin' all your 'i's and crossin' all your 't's, Officer May. 'Cause she needs to be shut down and locked up in a cell next to Bellwether's, tout de suite."

Swinton blinked a bit, swallowed slowly. It wasn't that she blamed him, the case in question involved some of the most blatantly species-ist attitudes and the most cruel, unfair treatment of mammals she'd seen since, well, the Night Howler; the fact it had come to light around the same time had made many including herself wonder if there were a connection. But it seemed the twisted psychological practices being used to break predators down and ultimately force them into terrified submission had their origin quite a number of years ago, operating under the radar until a brave young cub—oddly, she recalled now that it had been a lion—had dared to step forward and expose the hare running the outfit.

Dr. Clea, who had always employed gentility and sweet charm, acting as if predators were merely naughty children she could wean out of misbehavior with a few chiding words and a ruler to the back of the paw, had turned out to be wearing a mask that hid unfathomable depravity. It would not surprise the pig to find out Bellwether had secretly been funding her efforts, or had at least looked the other way for years.

What upset her was the realization that even someone as carefree and fun-loving as Clawhauser could be affected by such a thing. She didn't know if it was simply the idea of the horrible things done under the guise of therapy, the close proximity of this to the former Assistant Mayor's scheme, or if he or someone he knew had personal reasons to react so strongly. What she did know was guilt
at even bringing it up. But if there was any chance that whatever Hopps and Wilde were up to with Lionheart had something to do with the Pred Scare, Clawhauser might well thank her for getting involved.

And in any event, she had every intention of pursuing Dr. Clea with relentless determination until she was discredited, her methods torn apart for the heinous crimes against mammal rights that they were, and she herself behind bars where she belonged. So checking up on this actually didn't hurt at all.

Trying to find the right words, Swinton finally said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to let you or any other predators down, Benny. If Judy and Nick can do their part to keep Zootopia safe and fair for everyone, so can I. Clea's going to pay—we just have to make sure we do everything right, by the book, so she can't get away with this." Forcing a somewhat grim smile, the pig went on, "Just let me know the status, and where the file is in the records room, and I'll take care of it from there."

"Gladly," Clawhauser breathed fervently, his paws already flying across the keyboard. Even as his eyes stayed fixed on the screen (when they weren't quickly blinking away tears), he was still speaking. "Huh. Funny you should mention Nick and Judy, though. They were in here earlier tonight."

"Oh?" She worked harder than she ever had to keep her tone light, casual, as if merely making conversation. "What for?"

He chuckled, even if it sounded a bit forced, and his tone turned into a sly stage whisper while he puffed his plush chest out in pride. "Now now, Officer May, you know I can't give away details from other officers' cases. But I can tell you it was something pretty important, that I know you're gonna be hearing about it in a day or two, that I did my part to make sure they had what they needed, and that Chief Bogo himself stressed how important it was they close this case quickly and quietly… ah, here we are!"

As he scanned the lines on the screen, his smile became much more genuine, as did the pleasure in his voice; there was certainly a rather smug satisfaction in his reply. "Looks like everything's been signed off. We're just waiting to hear back from the DA's office on the warrant, and you can start making arrests. You still want the requisition number for Records?"

It took her several moments for this to register, as her mind was still racing at his previous revelation. \textit{So Bogo did} give them the go-ahead? \textit{How is that even possible? Why would they want to break Lionheart out for anything that was legal, honest, and just? And how in the hell could he sanction such a thing?} It didn't make any sense.
Even if something in the lion's deposition had provided critical information that justified a plea bargain of some sort, that wouldn't explain why the Cape buffalo would allow such...unorthodox methods, or why they would need to spring the ex-mayor in the first place. And even if something was happening behind the scenes with a judge, the whole thing still seemed too strange, too secretive. Could there be some new threat to the city? If there was though, how did Lionheart know of it, why was he only now telling them about it, and even if it were genuine, why was his presence necessary to address it?

Realizing she'd been staring blankly into space while Clawhauser looked back at her, patient and a bit puzzled, she jerked and knocked on the desktop with both hooves. "Oh! Oh yes, please, Benny. That's great news, but before I can find out what the hold-up is over in legal, there's something I need to look at in the file."

The cheetah nodded amiably, then rattled off a string of numbers and letters to identify the file, as well as what section of the records room it was in. "I'll buzz ya in then. Good luck, and let me know if you need anything else." He chuckled a bit ruefully as he rubbed at the back of his neck. "Though try not to take too long; I'm going off shift soon. Gotta get plenty of sleep if I expect to make it to Gazelle's concert tomorrow night, you know!" His large, round cheeks glowed with their usual fanboy flush.

Crossing over to the locked door that stood behind and to the left of the circular reception desk, Swinton placed her hoof on the handle, looked back over her shoulder with what she hoped was a reassuring smile, and nodded. As the buzz sounded and she depressed the metal lever, letting her pass into the restricted hall beyond, she murmured, "I've got everything I need down here, but if I hit a dead end, you'll be the first to know..."

Down a flight of flagstone steps, along the cold, fluorescent-lit basement hall, she passed swiftly until she reached the door to the record chamber itself. Softly repeating the numbers and letters to herself that Clawhauser had given her, she moved down the many rows of steel shelves until she found the section where the Clea file was housed. The reason she had chosen this one, aside from the possibly-related subject matter, was because it was a recent, incomplete case—which meant any other cases of the same status should be in the same area.

The file in question was right where it should be, and despite her sense of urgency she paused to look it over, briskly but carefully...she did, after all, want to be ready to lock the poisonous little lapine up as soon as possible, preferably to be followed by a very public and scandalous trial where her shameful, wicked practices would be exposed to the proper scorn and vitriol. After the examination, however, she set the file back in place and scanned the others on the same shelf. Nothing caught her eye—until she spied one with "Wilde/Hopps" on the label. She took it down with a swift inhalation...and frowned as she peered inside.

After several more tense minutes, she put the file back and muttered a few choice oaths. Whatever
this secret mission was, it was apparently so hush-hush, so possibly explosive in nature, that the rabbit and fox had included barely any details in the paperwork, and neither had Bogo—though he had indeed signed off on it. Which rather neatly undercut most of her objections and suspicions about this whole situation, and cast it in a different light altogether.

Still, all the sparse notes confirmed for her was that it was indeed part of some sort of plea bargain, and that Lionheart's release from jail was intended to be only temporary. The reason for it, what the case concerned, or the need for all the clandestine plotting and need-to-know clearance, was as unknown as ever.

Swinton growled again. The only way to discover the truth, short of catching Nick and Judy in the act and confronting them about it, was to ask Bogo. But not only was she painfully aware that disturbing the chief at home at this time of night was taking her life into her hooves, there was no guarantee he wouldn't give her the same maddening non-answers, insisting it was none of her business or jurisdiction, and that it was all being taken care of regardless.

She couldn't shake the feeling though that something was wrong. That even if neither the fox nor the bunny were doing anything illegal or reckless, and Bogo had deemed their actions necessary and their plan sound, Judy's impulsiveness and Nick's willingness to push the envelope would get them into deep trouble. Whatever was going on, whatever Lionheart was offering, could hardly be enough to justify such lawless actions—and that was even assuming he was dealing in good faith, wasn't planning to make a break for it or lead them into a trap or frame an innocent for his crimes.

And even if he was sincere, he'd already displayed poor judgment before as to what lines to cross, what extreme measures were worth taking to achieve his goals and prevent whatever danger he foresaw. What if he was so desperate again that he overlooked something, something that would put her fellow cops, and Zootopia, in yet more peril?

The only way to find out, and to step in to save them from their own folly if it came down to it, was to find them. And she had one last place she could check to help her do that.

Moving back through the file room, Swinton headed past the evidence lockers toward the requisitions area—where weaponry, ammo, and body armor were stored along with whatever other equipment the police might need on any given patrol, raid, or stakeout. Right alongside this inner doorway hung the clipboard where all officers had to sign in and out for items. Even though it had just been earlier this evening, if she knew Clawhauser he'd have insisted on filling everything out properly, and then returned the right form to its hook...yes.

There was, incredibly, a trail on the stone floor leading right to the clipboard: crumbs, bits of frosting, and what looked like the sort of rainbow sprinkles often put on glazed doughnuts. In spite of herself, she had to laugh and shake her head with a wry smile. Benny's going to be in trouble if he doesn't get
this cleaned up pronto.

After glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was still alone—the records room gave her the creeps even when it wasn't the early morning hours, with row upon row of shelves receding into the gloom-shadowed distance, but of course there was no one there—the pig quickly scanned the lines on the sheet before her...and there it was. Other than two other entries, both for extra cartridges for Pennington and Stevens' sidearms, the last one on the page was Judy's, countersigned by both Wilde and Delgato. The usual weapons and ammo, wires and mikes, an unmarked car—quite natural, if there was going to be any stealth work, undercover ops, or unraveling of conspiracies going on—and...a tracer.

_I just hope Benny also doesn't get in trouble for what I'm about to do._

She pressed her lips together tightly and made note of the equipment's serial number and passcode on her smartphone. Then she strode to the central storage locker and pulled out one of the master signal receivers. _That's the nice thing about having multicircuit, cross-compatible technology. It all works with itself, if you have the right ID and code._ Although each individual tracker had its own paired receiver, the latter could be lost or broken, or the quarry could travel out of range. In any of these cases, it always paid to have one of the master receivers that could be keyed in to pick up where the other had left off.

Feeling a thrill of excitement and confidence surge through her, Swinton slipped the receiver into her pants pocket and turned to head back for the stairs up to the main entrance. Although her conscience nagged at her, she brushed Clawhauser's innocent trust in her and any negative consequences to him aside; whatever justification there was for it, Hopps and Wilde had still broken the law. Lionheart was still an arrested felon and fugitive, with his eventual conviction a foregone conclusion as far as she was concerned, delayed only by outside circumstances and bureaucracy. And if there really was something to this case, something as big as she feared, then her help might be needed...one way or another.

With the receiver, she'd be able to lock the tracker in, home in on their signal, and follow Judy and the others wherever they went, provided it wasn't too far away. As to what happened next...well, it would depend on what she found when she got there, now wouldn't it...

Chapter End Notes

So, most of the action in this chapter and the next revolves around the Palm Hotel and Casino, a place we got to see from the outside in the movie but never actually visited. The art book explains that the plot did eventually take Nick and Judy there, but like so much else, this was changed and eventually dropped as the writing evolved. While I think the story they gave us is great as-is, it is a shame IMO that we didn't get to see the
place (or for that matter, Sahara Square itself), as the pre-production artwork is amazing. It likely will be in any sequels Disney makes, but for now I wanted to give you my take on it, using descriptions based on the artwork of course. I also still wove in the original "sheep conspiracy" plot via Doug and his cohorts staying at the hotel.

The bit with Woolter being the same ram as the reporter at the press conference who asked that critical question of Judy is semi-canon; the ram in question has the same essential design as a ram named Woolly who was originally a confidante and yes-man to Mayor Swinton (as well as a biological document-shredder), so the implication is that the reporter was more than what he seemed; while the directors haven't confirmed it, there have been suggestions that the character in question might actually have been Doug. I changed it to Woolter (and made it official) just to give one of the others more to do, and as an echo of the original character's name.

The reference to Dr. Clea is another shout-out to my friend and fellow author 6wingdragon's fic "The Neverwere Moments"—first revealed at the very end of "Trustworthy" and now being delved into in more detail in "Brave", although in my universe she is apparently not related to Judy or else Swinton would have noticed the name and remarked on it. I've only scratched the surface with how horrific she and her practice is; you'll have to read more of his story as he posts it to truly understand... And the bit with Judy and the maid cart was a shout-out to the first Ghostbusters movie—of course I wasn’t going to have her shoot at the poor maid, the way the Ghostbusters used their proton packs, so I just hinted at it instead.
Chapter 9

Pacing back and forth along one of the cobbled paths which wound through the grass, brush, and palms beneath the glass dome and its balcony high above, his tail lashing back and forth in agitated worry, Leodore Lionheart struggled harder than ever with the impulse that had been building within him ever since discovering the empty hospital room at Cliffside—to go dashing inside, heedless of security, mafia underlings, guests, and whatever enemies might be arrayed against him, if it would just let him get to Bucky and rescue him. To know the deer was here, somewhere in this building, and that he could do nothing but stay carefully hidden, patiently waiting, until Nick and Judy gave the go-ahead, until they had the backup of the rest of the ZPD...it was maddening.

He understood why, of course. Judy and Nick had explained it all to him multiple times (though it was no different than his own rationalizations on the matter), to the point he had it memorized and could hear it pounding in his skull if he even briefly contemplated departing from the plan. But it didn't make him like it, didn't make it any easier for him to handle it. What he had told the rabbit just a few nights ago when he'd made this deal for her assistance was as true now as it was then—if he lost Bucky for good, whether to death, imprisonment, permanent savagery, or a mind collapsed into a pitiful, broken morass...he truly did not think he would survive.

After all, he had nothing left now. He'd thrown it all away by his desperate acts to protect, conceal,
and treat the deer. His career, his accomplishments, the respect and prestige he had earned, the admiration of the public, the love of his own family—gone, all gone. (He was sure his parents still loved him, of course, but the anger, contempt, and disgust in Cornelius had only been outdone by the anguish, sorrow, and disappointment in Martha. And he believed his brothers truly did hate him and want nothing to do with him now.)

All he had was his riches—or what would be left after court fees, reparations to the families of the savage mammals, and damages collected by the city were all assessed—and he didn't care about that any more, if he ever truly had beyond being a means to an end. No love in his life, no legacy, no dreams fulfilled, no one who cared if he lived or died, thought him anything but a worthless, corrupt lion...

That was why he had fought so hard to protect Bucky, to find a cure for him, had been willing to break any and every law to do so. Just as Bellwether had known, had counted on. Although you would think, if she understood that, she would have guessed what it all meant, would have realized the very thing she thought was impossible, even an abomination, was right there under her nose the entire time. Would that have been enough to change things, or would it have hardened her heart and cemented her hatred even more? If she had figured out the real reason for the closeness, just how much Buckley Stagmire meant to the mayor and what manner of deep emotion lay—

Lionheart wrenched his thoughts out of that painful, familiar course. No. Don't even think about it. What mattered now, all that mattered, was that he get Bucky back and stop this last mad scheme of Bellwether's. It was the only way he would have anything now, he knew...and at the same time, everything.

Yet he also knew another compelling reason he wished to be active, doing something, changing his fate and that of the deer, was because of Officer Delgado.

Glancing back over his shoulder in the direction of the other lion—the central location he'd chosen that let him keep an eye on the front door, the casino entrance, the elevators, and the desk all at once—he sighed and slumped his shoulders. It wasn't that he had any particular feelings regarding the young officer, had even known anything of him beyond his name and a vague understanding of his commendations and citations at ZPD. It was that, though he hadn't known it until tonight, that brave young feline had been another mammal counting on him, depending on him, respecting and admiring and needing him. And that thanks to his actions, he'd lost Delgado's devotion and loyalty just as he had his family, the public, and everything else in his life.

The Barbary squeezed his eyes shut, felt tears well up once more and leak from beneath the lids as he wrapped his arms around himself and shuddered. He'd held it together; he'd been cogent, reasonable, sardonic, and fierce by turns as he'd defended himself; he'd managed to make a small chink in Delgado's armor, he'd acquitted himself well. He'd even, unless he missed his guess, earned Wilde's respect and understanding along with his fellow feline's agreement to cease the hostilities until this
case was over. But none of that changed the fact that behind his facade, he’d been horrified...ravaged anew by what he had done, the ramifications of his actions he had not seen or foreseen...writhing inwardly at the awful truths Delgato had flung at him.

On top of that, so many of the things the cop had said to him—whether tossed out as bitter retorts, roared with flecks of enraged foam, or muttered with dead, empty hollowness—had matched so shockingly well with the things Bucky had said to him during that college intervention of nearly two decades ago that it had been like being that miserable sophomore all over again. Like having a hangover pounding at his aching head, a heart racing so fast he swore it would burst right out of his chest, a throat so tight and twisted by remorse and self-loathing he couldn't manage to form any words, only suffer under the blandishments he knew deep down to his bones he deserved. Right there at the end, when he'd broken down and admitted Bucky's identity (although still not all of the truth...), he'd felt the same, lost control of his voice in the same manner.

Scandal. Dishonoring his name, family, and species. Letting down everyone who counted on him, looked up to him, needed his example. Using his name, class, and education to get what he wanted at the expense of everyone else. Acting out of arrogance and recklessness instead of nobility, humility, and courage. Betraying everything he stood for, abandoning all he had striven to attain because he hadn't been seeing the bigger picture. Yes, it had all been the same, even if the situation itself and the specific motivations had been entirely different. Without knowing it, Delgato had put his pawfinger on the same thing Bucky had, had seen to the truth of Lionheart's flaws and weaknesses.

What did it matter he'd been acting to save the life of someone who mattered more to him than anyone else? That this had outweighed his political career and even the true attempts he had been making to protect Zootopia and its citizens from the panic and division that would inevitably ensue? He'd still done the deeds, still done the wrong thing. And it had harmed everyone, more than he could possibly have known, but also ones he should have known it could.

It had proven what kind of a cat he was after all...and so even more than when Nick had said it, when Delgato had uttered that scathing 'your Majesty'—the thing he himself had been taunted with like so many other lions, the thing which always mockingly skewered leonine pretentiousness, the thing Bucky had instead always said with reverence, honor, and even deeper emotions—when Lionheart had heard that, it had nearly crushed him. It had been as if Bucky himself had joined in on the rejection and scorn he had earned.

Was it any wonder this had prompted him to lose control, to not only explain himself (desperately, though he'd worked with extreme determination not to let it manifest) but also confess what lay behind his choices and actions? He'd ruined himself more than he had thought possible, been hurt deeper and more distressingly than he thought he could be any more, become the awful stereotype he'd railed against all his life though it had been the last thing he ever intended. He'd become that cub from Sahara Central, beaten and battered and bloodied, but not from defending the weak and helpless from their tormenting bullies—from curling up in a ball under the onslaught he had only brought upon himself.
As if it had been Bucky himself uttering that epithet with such nastiness and spite, his eyes blazing with hate and fury, his dearest friend telling him how Leodore had personally made his life hell, the former mayor had been compelled to defend himself the only way he knew how...that if he used enough complex reasoning and prolific words, but also piled it on top of the heap of retribution which already buried him, he could finally shut those things out. Would not have to believe he'd failed Bucky too, could silence the cervine's voice that now echoed Delgato's caustic vituperations in his haunted mind...

Yes, Lionheart thought sadly, wretchedly, as he forcefully wiped his tears away. I have to do it for him. Not just for Bucky, but for Manuel. More than even earning Judy's respect and approval back, he wanted, needed to show Delgato he'd been wrong about him too. Or at least prove he'd learned his lesson and could make up for his many mistakes. It was the only way he could even approach restitution for what he'd done to the young cop, let alone become worthy of Bucky again. Could display what was truly in his heart.

But how, how could he do any of that, or protect Zootopia in the bargain, if he kept being forced to stay on the sidelines like this, a prisoner still despite no bars or shackles holding him? What could he do to make amends? How, and when, would he ever be able to act and make a difference...?

A sound suddenly cut through the silence of the lobby, breaking past his morose thoughts, and Lionheart peered in the direction of the reception desk; it had sounded like a bit of static from the Bluefang that kept Delgato in touch with his fellow officers, followed by a muffled voice speaking over the line. Then, after another pause pregnant with meaning, he suddenly heard feet pounding across the marble, crunching along the pathway toward him. He tensed.

Delgato appeared, and not only was his gun in his paw again, his expression was deeply distressed. "Leodore!" he hissed. "We're in trouble!" He ran toward him.

"What is it?" The former mayor fought the urge to panic; there were so many things that could possibly have gone wrong, but surely if it were something as awful as he feared (like, for example, Bucky awake and loose on a savage rampage in the casino, or one of the others injured or worse), the younger lion would have led off with more detail, would have been even more terrified and urgent.

Glancing back over his shoulder briefly, Delgato clenched his paw tighter around his sidearm, and clenched his jaw as well. "That was Nick. Judy let him know someone spotted us down here. Whoever it is is on their way, the rams are getting ready to escape—and they saw Judy too and are after her."
Lionheart stared, feeling his stomach turning over and his throat growing tight and dry. "No," he breathed. If only he could have gone with the rabbit, he could have protected her! "But what about—did she find—?"

Before he could get the fateful words out, the question he was afraid to ask regarding Bucky, the headphone in the other lion's ear crackled, and then the fox's voice came over the line, so loud it nearly made him jump. "I don't know what all she found, Leodore, but she's in danger...and for a bit there, so was I."

Delgato interrupted, speaking so rapidly his accent was much stronger and harder to decipher. "What are you talking about, Wilde?"

Nick let out what sounded like a growl or grunt; clearly he was rather vexed with himself, to put it lightly. "When she called me, I was hiding in the other hallway. A couple security guards spotted me, and didn't accept any excuses for why I was there or how our dear Bartholomew gave us permission to be here, so I had to make a run for it. I got Carrots' message while I was in the emergency stairwell, and by the time I got back to her, she'd already been caught and taken down the veep elevator." He paused, then spoke bleakly. "It was the Head of Security who had her, guys. I don't think we're gonna be able to talk our way out of this unless we give the whole game away. And even then, he might not believe us without Corlione's say-so."

The leonine cop started swearing vociferously in Spanish, but Lionheart only felt himself go cold. He knew whoever Corlione and Big had placed in such an important position in the hotel would be utterly ruthless and without compassion, definitely the sort to shoot first and ask questions later. As much as he would be scrupulously polite to the crime boss's favored guests as well as the regular paying clients, he would also accept no interference, troublemaking, or trespassing from anyone, but most especially members of law enforcement. There was no telling what he might do to Judy if they couldn't get to her in time. Even if he did believe them, it might be too late by then. Certainly too late to stop the rams and rescue Bucky.

And if their earlier theories were correct, and Corlione was actually involved in all this, the Head of Security would likely know about it and want to silence them. He might even be behind it himself...

Forcing his thoughts back to the present situation, he cut off another curse from Delgato. "Where are you now then, Nick? Is there any way you can catch up with them? Should we head up the freight elevator and meet you somewhere?" He knew there was no point in going to the front desk for help, considering who their adversary was, and even if Delgato called the ZPD, there was no way reinforcements would get there in time.

"No, I'm in the elevator, coming down," the vulpine replied hurriedly. "I couldn't follow them directly, even if there was time to wait for their elevator to come back up; he probably plans to lock it
on whatever floor they get off. Plus, I ran into Doug and his boys, blocking the way, and had to beat it. They've got tranqs...and it looks like Night Howler again."

Delgato snarled softly. "All right, well get down here as fast as you can. We'll try and cut them off."

As the connection was severed, Lionheart shook himself and half-turned to point toward the VIP elevator door. "Manuel, we might not have to do that, if we can shut it down at the source. Every elevator has an emergency stop switch for the firefighters. We can trap this mafia lackey inside, then summon Bogo and his backup so they'll be right there to arrest him when we turn it on again." And this would also give Nick time to go after the rams, once he found out Judy was safe and soon to be rescued, assuming the Head of Security couldn't be forced to reveal where they and Bucky had gone.

The other lion stared at him in disbelief. "What the hell are you on, Lionheart? He'd be trapped in there with Judy! What's to stop him from shooting her once he knows he's gonna be taken in as soon as the door opens? Or just keeping her as a hostage until we let him go past?"

Staring back at him in desperation, the Barbary felt his panic returning; he hadn't thought of that, but would the rabbit's captor really do such a thing? Surely someone who worked for a major crime syndicate would know better than to cross certain lines once the law got involved openly; so long as he didn't harm Judy, he'd have a far better time of making it through unscathed, even if he did try to appeal to whatever immunity Corlione and Big's bribery and assets within the system might bring him. Then again, someone in such a position of importance would surely not allow himself to become so easily trapped, either...

Finally he managed to splutter, "Well, do you have any better ideas?!"

Before Delgato could answer him (though from the stricken look on his face, he didn't think the cop had any), the chime of the VIP elevator sounded—but when Lionheart whirled about toward the door, he saw it was not opening. The sound had been farther away, though still within hearing distance. At the same time he saw what number above the door was still steadily lit, he realized there was only one other place where the bell could be heard within the domed lobby, and backpedaled rapidly, gazing upward with one paw lifted to block out the chandelier light above...

There. Just past the beautifully carved balustrade a story up, he could see someone emerging from the open elevator—a large, hulking form, one forced to move slowly and awkwardly due to the smaller body held imprisoned under one arm but who was struggling so mightily for freedom he was constantly in danger of dropping her. He could hear Judy's grunts and furious cries, and her captor's equally belligerent and nasty growls. He could also see the light glinting from something metal, held with skill and practice in his free hoof.
Quickly he nudged Delgato, and when the other lion followed his gaze, he instantly had his gun raised, the safety off and hammer cocked as the barrel was trained on the shoulders of the dark suit jacket the form above them wore. "Freeze! Police! You make one move to harm her, and you'll regret it!"

The mammal turned toward the edge of the balcony and stared down at them, and Lionheart saw now that he was a ram, and no slouch when it came to muscle power or masculine size (but then for one in his position, he couldn't be)—not only was his torso a massive barrel with a broad, powerful chest that seemed barely held in check by straining shirt and jacket buttons, but his shoulders were the type to easily slam open bolted doors or piledrive a violent casino-goer into the floor. Even his neck was hugely swollen with bulk, though that might also be to support his blocky head and heavy, absolutely enormous curled horns.

Sneering, the sheep jerked Judy up beneath his arm like a furry package, and instantly the barrel of his pistol was pressed hard against her temple. "And here I thought I'd need to call you over, or have the cottontail do it over her wire. Saved me the trouble of coming down there. You see, I don't think you understand exactly the trouble you've all gotten yourselves in. You shoot me, I shoot her—or I drop her over the edge. I don't think you want to see bunny brains all over the floor, do you?"

He laughed, cold and harsh, matching his words. "Why you thought you'd get better treatment when you came to the Palm without a warrant, I haven't got a clue. Mr. Corlione doesn't want any mammal poking their nose in where it isn't wanted, and there's a great deal I'd do to enforce his wishes."

Very slowly, even though he had no weapons to speak of, Lionheart raised his paws where the bighorn sheep could see them. Beside him, Delgato hesitated in an agony of indecision before letting out a snarl of disgust and lowering his gun back to its holster.

"Much better, gentlemen. Always good to know we can be reasonable mammals about such matters, isn't it?" The jovial, mannerly tone was so clearly forced he was surprised the ram could even utter the words; from the fact his muzzle remained twisted halfway between a smile and a nasty smirk, there was apparently only so far he could go toward affecting such faux amiability. Although he didn't loosen his grip around Judy by a millimeter, he did step closer to the balcony railing, leaning out slightly over it so he could better see the lobby and their stiffened forms below. "Now then, you have two minutes to convince me I should release her, and allow you to leave the premises unmolested, before I call the rest of my security force and we throw you out."

Lionheart flicked his gaze to the side, and was not reassured to see Delgato looked as distressed and at a loss for words as he was. If this fellow were in on the conspiracy, there was no point in attempting to persuade him to let them off lightly, and they certainly didn't want to reveal just how much they knew about what he and the other rams were up to; if he wasn't, he also clearly knew nothing about the switch with Corlione, and while that might not say anything one way or the other about the mafia lion's trust in his subordinate, it would certainly make it harder to explain why they
were here. Even if he was sympathetic because of the recent Pred Scare (since he did serve one himself), would he even believe them? Not to mention how unconcerned he'd be about the fate of Buckley Stagmire...

However, there was one thing this would do, no matter this mammal’s allegiance and awareness—it would buy them time.

Without moving his paws, the Barbary nodded toward Delgato, urging him to speak with a grunt, a flick of his ear, and a very insistent look. The cop eyed him in helpless confusion, until he mouthed the words 'Stall him'; then understanding dawned. Clearing his throat, the younger lion glanced about—as yet no attention had been drawn from guests or other staff, though it was only a matter of time until that changed—before calling up to their accuser. "Look, sir. We know this looks bad, but if you can just see it from our side...this has nothing to do with you or your boss's line of work. In fact he and his...bigger associate were actually helping us out with our case. If they knew we were here, and needed to investigate, they'd be happy to give permission."

The ram rolled his green eyes theatrically, moved a step closer, and tilted Judy farther out over the balustrade, though he otherwise kept her tightly squeezed between thick, suit-clad bulges of his biceps and forearm. "Mr. Corlione tells me everything, and he didn't mention this at all, or even where he was going tonight. As for the associate you speak of, he has no more power here than he's allowed, and none over intruders. They both cooperate with the law as needed, and when it won't undermine their...business practices, but not to that extent. Try again."

Delgato clenched his jaw and growled in frustration. "This is very sensitive work! Not the sort of thing the public should know about until after it's all safely dealt with. The less mammals who know, the better. We're in pursuit of criminals who have nothing to do with the Palm, and it'd actually be in your best interests to let us get them out of here before they do cause more trouble here."

Actually, even if Corlione or Big weren't the secret Boss, they'd already concluded there was still some connection or else the rams would not have chosen to hide out here—even if it was only taking advantage of the mafia's usual illegal dealings to procure quarters with no questions asked. But aside from the fact that anything which kept the justice system from looking too closely at the Palm's financial records would be a positive to Corlione, claiming this was an unrelated issue was probably the best way to get this bullyboy to back off.

Hot breath snorted out of the ovine's flared nostrils, and his horned head lowered another marginal inch toward Judy; it was difficult to tell, with her suspended inverted beneath his arm, out over the cold, hard floor far below, but Lionheart thought she looked as angry and frustrated (with herself and the situation) as she did frightened. Good girl. Don't let him paralyze you. "And do you happen to have any proof of these alleged criminals, or their crimes? Let me guess, you left it out in your squad car."
The cop exchanged another look with him; he doubted Judy had had time to grab the key from the door before fleeing, but even if she had, it proved nothing about who they were pursuing or why. Not to mention that, again, revealing just where Doug and his gang had been staying might give away far too much. The former mayor cursed under his breath.

"Some is," Delgato admitted, and Lionheart realized he must be thinking of the ropes from Cliffside, the wool, and the Cloven Hoof matchbook. Which, again, didn't link up with the Palm in any way. "It's mostly testimony, oral and eyewitness. But tell me, if we were here after your boss, or to try and shut down the Palm or any part of his organization, don't you think there'd be a lot more of us? And we'd have far more, and better, evidence to go on?"

That was a very good point, and he could see it had scored, since the ram was frowning now, even looking doubtful, less sure of himself. While the fellow was occupied, Lionheart tried to peer past him, his night vision letting him see far better in the darkened interior. But there was no other movement in the shadows, and he hadn't heard the freight elevator; where was Wilde?

Glancing back toward Delgato, he felt his heart sink from his chest as he spied motion beyond him—the stand-off had finally started gathering onlookers. The giraffe from the front desk now stood at the bend in the ramp that led toward the front doors, and from the way he attempted to stand firm, rigid, and watchful, he rather suspected the fellow had finally summoned the authorities. Farther across the lobby, guests had emerged from either the casino or the dining area of the hotel—a bathrobe-clad elephant returning from the sauna...a cow in a loud flower-print dress with an oversized purse...a smarmy-looking ibex in a leisure suit, idly tucking his winnings into an inner pocket of his jacket...a fennec bellhop dragging a luggage cart much larger than himself while a silk-clad moose minced with surprising daintiness ahead of him, pulling up the faux-mink collar around her haughty face... If they didn't take care of this swiftly, there would be far more in danger here than just Judy.

The click of the gun's hammer jerked Lionheart's attention back up to the balcony, and his throat went dry. The ram had moved again, turning at an angle so he could hold the rabbit partly above the railing, partly over the long drop to the marble tiles, and his gun was now aimed straight and true toward Judy's head where it dangled downward. Her arms were now free, but there was obviously no way she could make any sort of move before he had pulled the trigger.

"Normally, I'd agree with you," he drawled, and something in the dark look in his eyes, coupled with the vague amusement in his tone, had alarm bells going off in the Barbary's head. "There's just two things wrong with that scenario. First of all, in my experience, and all the dealings Mr. Corlione has had with your department, the ZPD...or some of its members, anyway...is actually idiotic enough to try and invade our turf with only a few officers, no backup, no warrant, and hardly a shred of evidence. Or perhaps we're just that much better than you at this game, that we can run circles around you and leave you with so little scraps to work with?"
Although his gun didn't waver, the ram rolled his head about, sneered anew, and let out a sadistic, dismissive chuckle. As he was doing so, Lionheart noticed Judy had taken advantage of the brief lapse in his attention to move one paw—now concealed against her body, it was slowly but surely working its way up her side, toward her belt. He held his breath, jerked his own gaze back so the security guard wouldn't notice. When he did, he tensed for a whole new reason—the ram was looking straight at him, glaring down with something he'd never seen before...utter contempt and loathing.

"The second thing? The fact you have Leodore Lionheart with you." The way he said the name was so scathing, so choked with viciousness, that the former mayor actually swallowed hard. There was something about that voice now, that expression, and he knew without having to be told that this fellow was speaking from somewhere very personal, with intimate knowledge of who he was and what he had done. That he had been feigning ignorance, had never had any intention of letting Judy or any of them go...that instead the ram had only been toying with them until the moment when revealing the truth would have its most chilling and nastiest effect. And his next words confirmed it.

"I know exactly why you're here, your Majesty...and you're too late. By now my boys have already made it out the back with your precious Buckley, and there's nothing you can do to stop us, or to follow us where we're going." He laughed, low and cruel. "I wonder when you'll find out what's going on...on the news I suppose, when you're back in your prison cell where you belong. Or maybe you'll never truly know...just left to wonder, while this city falls apart around you, and you never see your Great Prince again."

Only the fact Judy was still in mortal danger, the weapon that could easily be trained on him, and that he very much feared Bucky had indeed been spirited away again, kept him from bursting into motion in that moment, dashing wildly through the hotel in a desperate attempt to find the kidnapped deer...or trying to get to the ram so he could bash the teeth from that smirking muzzle, get his paws on that miserable asshole's neck...

That, and something else he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that overrode the surge of hatred he was feeling, turned it into a rush of hope.

"Time's up," the ram pronounced with smug satisfaction. But as he took aim and started to pull the trigger, something moved above the balcony, on one of the intricately carved pillars which rose to support the glass dome over their heads, and the motion made him twist his head to look.

Instantly Judy bent upward, as if doing a sit-up, lunging for something at her belt and then jabbing with it at the ram's arm. Suddenly a crackle of electricity filled the air, and bolts of blue and white skittered, flowed, and danced all over the Head of Security's body as the bunny employed the department-issued taser she'd been carrying all night but which Lionheart had forgotten was even there.
He was comforted by the fact the ZPD's ability to carry such a thing was all due to a city ordinance that he himself had placed before the City Council and gotten passed.

Screaming in mingled rage and agony, the ram staggered to the side, then started to topple backward, the electrical jolts still weaving and darting all over him, an eerie glow bathing his face and even making his skull briefly visible beneath the horns. Dimly, off to the side, Lionheart could hear the other mammals in the lobby shrieking, yelling, and crying out as they started leaping and running away in their panic.

All he could focus on, though, was the fact the motion on the pillar had resolved itself into the supremely-agile, rapidly-moving form of Nick Wilde—apparently having gotten off the elevator on a higher floor and climbed down the rest of the way in a more feral fashion, to get into close position without making a sound. The fox leaped down to the balcony, whipping about in the same action to slam one foot in a flawless roundhouse kick that knocked the gun from the ram's slack grip.

But there was just one problem. When he fell backwards onto the floor, and let go of Judy's legs, the ram had still been holding her partly over the railing. Without him for support, the rabbit was falling, and she had no claws to speak of with which to hold on. Though she had righted herself, she was slipping without stopping down the side of the cantilever below the balcony.

"Nick!" Lionheart roared, the sound loud enough to resonate all the way up into the latticed glasswork, even over the crackle of the taser and the shouts still filling the lobby behind him.

Even before the echoes had faded, the vulpine was there, leaping halfway over the railing and bracing himself as he extended something down for Judy to grab onto—of all things, his unbound tie. Her paws caught around it, the taser falling away to splash into one of the ponds below her scrabbling feet, and there she hung for dear life. He couldn't see her face, but he could see Nick's, and the fox looked more terrified and anguished than he'd ever imagined he could. And he also saw why—Wilde's paws were slipping on the slick fabric of the tie, while Judy's weight was pulling him even farther over the balustrade, his rump and its huge fluffy tail practically pointing toward the ceiling.

"Carrots...Judy...!"

Beside him came the sound of a gun cocking again, and when he dared to whip his head to the side and look, Delgato was aiming it up at the balcony again, at the shadows beyond the railing. When the cop saw him looking, he cried out with a fierce roar of his own. "Leodore, he's not down! We've gotta get up there—"
There was no time, however. When he craned his neck upward again, he saw what Delgato was
talking about—despite the searing pain the taser had to have caused, and the weird, jerky way his
muscles were still twitching and spasming in response, the ram had staggered back to his hooves.
And as he spied the precarious position of the pair dangling out over space, he let out a deep bleat of
outrage and barreled toward them, horns lowered and aimed straight and true.

Even as Lionheart tried to call out a warning, it was too late. The ram's head slammed into Nick, and
the fox was sent flying forward, turning a cartwheel in mid-air—arching slowly downward but
picking up terrible speed as gravity pulled him toward the marble floor. With nothing holding the
other end of the tie, Judy once again was left scrabbling futilely at the slick, smooth stone of the
balcony...and then even that small purchase was lost to her as the ram, lurching against the railing,
thrust a hoof down to grasp around both of her ears.

There was a brief pause, as she stared up into the livid, infuriated face with its still-smoldering wool
above her; her paw lashed out, though whether to grab something or try to pull herself back up,
Lionheart couldn't tell. Then the ram tossed her away from him contemptuously.

With a strangled scream, Judy followed Nick, plummeting without anything to halt her fall except the
stone floor of the lobby, a story and a half below.

It seemed like forever that she was falling, as much because of how small she was compared to the
height as how high the balcony actually was, and the entire way down, Judy Hopps was so
overcome by her fear that she couldn't even twitch her nose or anything else. It was like being dead
inside, she'd gone so cold and numb with the realization. There was nothing to stop her from landing
head-first on the hard marble floor...if she somehow managed to right herself and land the other way,
she'd likely break both of her legs...and even if she landed on soil or in water, the impact would still
leave her badly bruised and probably broken in a number of ways. Certainly out of commission.

And even if she survived relatively unscathed, what about Nick...?

Closing her eyes, the bunny tried to make peace with herself over what was happening...believing
that Delgato and Lionheart would continue the case without them, the former would call in Bogo and
the rest of the ZPD, Doug and his cronies along with their Boss would be rounded up, Buckley
rescued, the city saved. She just wouldn't be there to see it...

Right as she was saying good-bye mentally, while tears stood in her violet eyes, to her parents and
her closest siblings, she suddenly felt something solid smack against her—but it wasn't the floor or any other surface that could badly injure her, though the impact did still knock the wind out of her. No, it was something softly-furred, warm, musky, strong. Something covered by cloth. A torso, a pair of arms?

Judy opened her eyes.

At first all she could see was the fabric in front of her, but as soon as she realized it was someone clad in a hoodie, she let out a pained, ragged breath and managed to shudder with relief as she fell forward in those cradling arms, clinging in a tight hug to the mammal who had saved her as more tears filled her eyes. It was, of course, Leodore Lionheart who had leapt forward, charging across the lobby and falling to his knees to catch her as she fell. And he also held Nick in his arms beside her! Even if the fox was a slightly larger armful.

Fighting to breathe properly again, to calm herself and get her heart under control, and overall recover from that terrifying swan dive, she finally succeeded in choking out a few words. "Leodore? H-how...how did you...?"

The lion didn't look in much better condition than she, as far as the panic still brimming inside his widened eyes, or the way his entire frame was quivering with both fear and adrenaline rush. But he sounded better when he spoke, even if his voice was still shaky. "It's a good thing I still remember how to leap and catch a football. Judy...my God...are you all right?"

Before she could do more than nod and let out an uneven laugh, Nick was there, wrapping his own trembling, slender arms around her and squeezing her as close as he dared. "Judy...you...I...how could you...why would you..." The fox pulled back, looking more frazzled and distressed than she'd seen him in a long time, and then he burst out, "Don't you ever do that again!"

Laughing more openly now (though she had to admit it was more than a little hysterical), the rabbit hugged him again even as she said softly, "You know I can't make such a promise...but I certainly don't want to go through anything like that more than once. So I'll see what I can do, okay?" As it was, despite the fact her imitation leather jacket had mostly insulated her body from the taser beam, she did still feel some of her muscles twitching and spasming a bit, and she suspected her fur would remain frizzed for some time. Thankfully the contact hadn't lasted long before she was dropped, and it was worth it to get free of the ram's grip as well as try to bring down a perp, but... Doing that again is definitely not high on any list for me.

When both of them had calmed down more, she finally dared to look around. Most of the guests had fled, but others had taken their place and a few had returned once all the noise had died down, and they all milled about a bit uncertainly at the edges of the lobby, chattering nervously. The concierge hadn't moved, though it was clear from how he kept rubber-necking toward the door (and with his
species, that was quite a sight) that he was expecting the authorities any time now.

As for Delgato, as soon as the other lion saw that both of them were all right, he grasped his gun in both paws and, with a grim expression, went running toward the back of the hotel—presumably to see if he could still catch any of the rams, or locate the missing deer before they escaped with him yet again.

As his footfalls faded and she turned back to Lionheart, she was struck immediately by the look on his face—despair and anguish, sorrow and loss, and something deeper, stronger, like she'd never seen there before. Reaching out in sympathy, she laid her paw on his much larger one and spoke softly. "I'm sorry, Leo. There was a private elevator in the suite. Doug and his boys were getting ready to take Mr. Stagmire down it...after that little stand-off we just had, I'm sure they already had time to get away. Buckley's gone, again."

The way his body seized up under hers, and the soft whimper under his breath, made Judy instinctively embrace the ex-mayor again, trying to give him as much comfort as she could...and as she felt him shake against her and begin to sob quietly, she began to realize, finally, not only how much the deer meant to Leodore, but in exactly what way. This rush of emotion could mean nothing else. And when he drew back to wipe his eyes, and gazed into her very knowing ones, she knew he was aware of her new understanding.

Instead of saying anything about it, though, he only sniffled, rubbed the back of his paw against his nose, and glanced at Nick—who for once seemed to be the one who was confused and out of the loop. Then he spoke again...sounding very tired, lost, and uncertain. "Why? I don't understand...the way he was talking about me up there on that balcony...he hated me. Me personally. I don't understand why he's doing this to me, to Bucky. It is him, right? He's the one behind all this? He's their Boss?" When she nodded gently (he had confessed as much, quite smugly, in the elevator on the way down), he went on, "Where is he taking him, then? Please, Judy...tell me you know, or can find out."

She did, or at least had a very strong suspicion, but before she told him that, she rather thought his initial set of questions was more critical and needed answering first. So with a sigh, she lifted her other paw and held up the thing she had grabbed, just before the Head of Security had tossed her over the edge. "He's taking him somewhere where he can do the most harm, like Phil told us. And it's a place we don't need to track, where we can find them pretty easily, I think. As to why he's doing this, why he hates you..."

Judy trailed off, and she felt Nick stiffen beside her at the same time Lionheart did in front of her, the big cat hulking inside his clothing and his mane puffing wildly as he took in the information and let out a low, furious, absolutely vicious growl.
It was his ID tag she held up, of course. And on it, above the words spelling out his role on the Palm's staff, was his name: C. Bellwether.

Chapter End Notes

So as you can see, I've further explored the original sheep conspiracy by now having the Head of Security, and secret boss of Doug and his crew, be a ram (while his actual role at the hotel isn't made clear, said ram is depicted in the art book as well). The scene which follows, while I altered some of how it plays out and obviously both the lead-up and fallout had to be invented by me, is actually storyboarded in the book too (i.e. him ramming Nick and Judy and making them fall/throwing them over a balcony). From the artwork it appears this was intended to happen on an outside balcony rather than in the lobby (in one panel the nighttime city skyline can be seen behind Nick and Judy), but I'm sure you can see why I altered that. As for the ram's actual identity...you'll have to wait to find out more! Though I can tell you this much: after doing some more delving into behind-the-scenes details, I discovered that originally Disney had been in talks with Tone Loc to voice an antagonist for Zootopia. That being the case, I've decided he would make the perfect VA for this ram character...which will only become more appropriate as you learn more about him and see what role he's going to play.

Lastly, revealing Lionheart's mother's name might possibly give you the next clue you need to figuring out which famous prominent family I've based his on. It'll be made more explicit in the next chapter, but for those who aren't buffs on historical American families, I'll spell it out in my next note.
Cracking his back to get out the kinks that came from sitting in his office chair too long, Mayor Leodore Lionheart yawned, worked his jaw, and sighed as he gazed at his computer screen. Numbers swam across it, budget figures and revenue, donations and federal funding, requests from the city's various organizations and departments for further support for their programs, all carefully
entered into the spreadsheet, but they simply hovered hazily before his eyes, as he was too tired to focus. It had been a very long day.

A solid knock came on the doorframe of his office. "Does our glorious leader have time to come down off his mountaintop and see how the rest of us live?" a beloved, deep voice drawled.

Even before he had fully turned away from the machine and was rising out of his desk chair, the lion was smiling wryly. "I don't know, what could possibly be more important than making the countless decisions that decide every facet of the little mammals' lives?" Laughing, he crossed the vast office and opened his arms to Buckley, embracing the deer firmly.

When he pulled back, the cervine regarded him critically, a searching look in those dark brown eyes that had always drawn him in, even as a cub. "You really do overwork yourself. You know that, right?"

Lionheart snorted. "Have to combat that lazy lion stereotype somehow, now don't I?"

"True, but there's such a thing as going too far." Stagmire frowned. "I seem to recall similar warnings from you, when I was pulling far too many all-nighters at ZSU…"

"Yes, Mother," the Barbary teased snidely.

"That's hardly what you were calling me the other night…" Buckley murmured. Despite how many years they had known each other, how close they had become, how comfortably they had fallen into such adult talk even as they remained carefully private and discreet, and the specific fact there was no video or recording equipment to speak of in the Mayor's Office (he'd made it a point to have a sweep performed, after the last mayor had turned out to be both corrupt and highly paranoid, spying on everyone who met with him, keeping all manner of blackmail material while ensuring nothing he himself said or did were preserved to incriminate him)...despite all of this, Lionheart couldn't help flushing profusely and hushing the deer.

"I still forget sometimes how provincial you can be. It's rather adorable really." Even as the lion laid his ears back and glared at him resentfully, to another merry chuckle, Buckley continued more seriously and kindly. "I mean it though, Leo…you've done so much for this city already, and I know you have even more to give, but please…don't deprive us of all the good you have to offer just because you're too stubborn to know when to relax once in a while."
Sighing slowly, Leodore let the tension, worry, and pressure flow out of him with the exhaled breath, then responded with a sheepish smile. "Sorry, Bucky. Force of habit, I suppose. There's always so much more to do though, and if I don't, who will? I can't leave it all for those who aren't as conscientious, productive, or civic-minded as I am. Not when you aren't here to help me anymore. The DA office's gain was City Hall's loss." Even though the deer's change in political career had been at his insistence, it didn't make it sting any less...especially with the reason he'd felt compelled to advise it.

Buckley took his paws in both hooves, shaking his antlered head slowly as he regarded him with both bemused fondness and chiding disbelief. "Sometimes...very often, actually...you still amaze me. Don't ever change." Grinning, he leaned in closer until their faces were nearly touching. "As for your yearning for my assistance, you know you only have to call, and I'll be at your side in a heartbeat." Another meaningful pause. "For anything."

And since he could never resist the deer except by a supreme act of will, in moments Lionheart and Buckley were sharing a warm, tender kiss.

There had always been something between them, he guessed. A bond stronger and deeper than friendship, but he had not begun to have an inkling what it was until high school. At that point peer pressure, the manliness of his sports vocation, and the typical attitudes he found everywhere in society had demanded he resist it, repress it, though he would never go so far as to belittle, insult, or demonize it as others did. Neither of their families was powerfully religious (though the Lionhearts were more devoted in the beliefs they had than the Stagmires), but Leodore had always been afraid of what their reaction would be, should they ever admit the truth about themselves, let alone their interest in each other.

While he didn't think his parents would reject him outright (and even the concern of there being heirs to carry on the family name was well taken care of through his older brother Elliott and his younger brothers James and Franklin), he was too afraid to find out otherwise. (There was a reason one of his family's mottos had been "Roar softly and carry a big stick." ) And up until his death, the elder Mr. Stagmire had intimidated Leodore as much as he had his son with his sternness, his rather narrow view of what a real male should be and do, and his rather nasty temper. After the accident, Bucky's mother had always seemed so fragile to the lion, and neither of them had wanted to risk a shock her heart might not be able to withstand.

College had been different, however, in a number of ways. Not only was sex much more on many males' minds there, especially in the fraternities, and there existed a much more open, liberal atmosphere where sexuality could be explored and accepted in all its myriad expressions, but there was the fact the two of them had become roommates following Leodore's binge episode and the intervention that had turned his life around. Aside from the extreme gratitude he felt for his oldest friend, the feline had found that simply having the same accommodations with Bucky, being around him constantly rather than just seeing him at school, while hanging out in the city, or spending time at each other's homes, getting to see him in various states of undress right down to the altogether... well, it had had an effect on a hot-blooded jock.
And on the deer, too, from the blushing, stammering, and heated looks whenever Bucky had gotten an eyeful of the football player's physique in turn. After that night when he'd brought his friend back from passing out over his books, Lionheart had finally gotten up the courage to admit how he felt, the desires that had been burning stronger and deeper within him over the past several years...and to his explosive relief and joy, Bucky had admitted he felt exactly the same way.

Needless to say, they'd both lost their virginity to each other not long after that. (In fact they'd practically ripped each other's clothes off, so great was the need to act on their long-pent up desires...) After that however...despite the fact they'd pushed the beds together to share, didn't care any more how much they saw of each other's bodies, and that for every night they'd needed to let off steam thanks to the pressure of their coursework, there'd been just as many where they had simply held each other close, faces resting on each other's warm chests for comfort and reassurance... despite all this, they had still kept the true nature of their relationship a secret from their other friends and especially their families. Not just out of fear of a horrible scene, negative repercussions, and the strong possibility of being forbidden to see each other ever again, but because of their plans for the future. Namely, that both of them intended to do work that would place them very squarely in the public eye.

Whether as part of the political or business worlds, Lionheart had been well aware that there would be little chance of keeping either their sexuality or their relationship a secret...and while it would not necessarily interfere with their determination to change the world for the better, since shareholders, customers, donors, and constituents had different levels of conservatism depending on where you looked, the chance their careers would be ruined was one he did not want to take. And there was also the simple fact that obviously, neither of them was objective when it came to the other, their connection was too strong, too at odds with what they might have to do in their respective lines of work.

To put it simply, even if no one was bothered by their gayness itself, they would be absolutely right in being suspicious of collusion, conflicts of interest, and nepotism. It would be next to impossible to achieve many of their goals if everyone could honestly doubt their ability to act for the needs of the many over each other's personal benefits. There could not be anything other than a professional respect and courtesy between them, and that was that.

So although Bucky had been crushed (and Leodore had to admit it had broken his heart as well), they had agreed their relationship would not only be secret, it would end upon graduation. After one final, tearful embrace in ZSU's auditorium, a gentle kiss once they were out of sight of anyone, and a last desperate lovemaking at their fraternity bedroom, they had gone their separate ways into the adult world. The deer had gone into business law, eventually ending up at Hexward, while Leodore had become a dedicated philotherian and politician—the Zootopian Civil Liberties Union, Zoamnesty International, the City Council, and more.

If twinges of heartache and other desires resurfaced from time to time, he bore them with great
fortitude as the price he paid for his service and the positive difference he was making. If he ever thought about the possibility of encountering Bucky again, he had assumed it would be on a strictly platonic basis, acquaintances who might mingle briefly at key elite social gatherings, nothing more, with their once-carnal ways relegated to the past—a youthful indulgence brought on by the heat of the moment and the stresses of their surroundings, but which had only been a passing desire.

To his surprise, and extreme pleasure, when they had met again at a City Hall Christmas party, it had been as if no time had passed between them...their friendship and insight into one another as strong as ever, their passion for justice and equality undimmed, their hope for the future and their earnest need to make it possible together undiminished. And after they had decided to leave their current pursuits and make a run for the Mayor's Office, they had also discovered their more personal needs for each other had not been quenched either—merely ripened, a more mature and committed love that, even as it still had a very healthy sexual side, had proven by the test of time that it was real, something that could be built upon and counted on.

Yet Leodore had still been afraid—not so much of familial disapproval these days, but of the public's reaction. For something as important to Zootopia's well-being as the positions at the top of its political food chain, in his mind any hint of anything improper, too much closeness and influence between them, would relegate City Hall back to the mires of corruption and graft, where favoritism and personal allegiances mattered more than the common good. Never mind that the two of them were as united as could be when it came to policy, and what differences they had in how and when to implement it (or even whether it could be) were easily debated and resolved without much fuss and next to no recrimination. It would still look horribly wrong to anyone who knew.

And so, he had insisted their renewed dedication to one another remain a secret, to ensure that no hint of scandal could taint their administration—and when the opportunity came for Buckley to do more direct good for the city by making use of his legal expertise once more, to have the deer run for District Attorney while he chose another running mate when seeking re-election. This placed further distance between them, dismissed even further any thoughts of being compromised or untrustworthy, but at the same time justified more frequent visits from Stagmire for various judicial pretexts. As long as they continued to be careful, their assignations could continue...and Leodore Lionheart had every intention that they would. Now that he had Bucky back, he was never letting him go...

Breaking the kiss, the deer let out a deep sigh and a soft, amorous groan before seating himself partially on the desk's edge, resting his hoof on Lionheart's shoulder and squeezing firmly. "You've still got it, Leo. We may have started this back when we were both young bucks—" He quirked a brow and chuckled. "—but I think we've proven things only get better with age." Winking, he glanced down at the desktop, then frowned. "All right, what have you done with my mug?"

Lionheart, who had been puffing out his chest and lifting his chin in pride at the compliment, suddenly had to cough behind his paw and avert his gaze slightly. "Ah, yes. About that. I...may have given it to Dawn."
Buckley stared at him incredulously behind his glasses. "Why ever for?"

Elevating his eyes to the ceiling now, the mayor adopted a lofty tone. "I, ah, may have altered the message on it a tad. It now reads 'World's Greatest Assistant Mayor'."

The stag snorted a laugh, then shook his antlered head slowly. "Really, Leo? I know she can be a bit high-strung, far too desperate to please, and a chatterbox, but what do you have against poor Miss Bellwether?"

Frowning, Leodore shot him an odd look; it had been a bit tasteless, he admitted privately, but surely it hadn't been truly insulting? "Don't you think you're overreacting a bit?" he said delicately. "It was nothing against you or your gift, but the change I made genuinely reflects how I feel about her. Well, aside from you, of course, but you're unfortunately no longer in the candidate pool, so…"

He shrugged, then noticed Buckley staring at him again—this time in distinct disapproval. Flinching, he again became shifty-eyed. "All right, I admit it was unplanned—I'd forgotten it was her birthday, so I had to quickly come up with something and the mug was the first thing at paw. But really, Bucky, I don't know why you're so offended on her behalf. Surely you don't think I'm being species-ist—"

Buckley's frown grew deeper, and he crossed his arms over his chest as he let out a sullen grunt. "One word, Leodore: Smellwether."

The lion's face grew deep red with shame in seconds, the blood rush making him feel rather faint. "I…didn't realize you'd heard about that."

His friend and lover's face grew pained. "Leo, in case you've forgotten, when you bellow, everyone can hear it."

"Ah…yes. Well. About…that." His shoulders slumped and his ears drooped. "I'm sorry, Bucky. It started off as just a lame joke—you know, sheep wool smells absolutely awful when it's wet?—and then I lapsed into it whenever I lost my temper. And…that's been happening more lately."

Despite his disappointment, the cervine eyed him with pointed suggestiveness. "And I believe this is where we circle back to where I came in. You, working too hard, over-stressing yourself?"
Lionheart sighed and nodded. "You’re right, of course. Absolutely right. In my defense, however, it isn’t just about me snapping whenever I lose my patience. Dawn Bellwether may not be you, but she’s still an incredible Assistant Mayor. She’s smart, insightful, able to get right to the heart of a matter, and extremely capable when it comes to all the bureaucratic red tape I just can’t handle. Paperwork, scheduling, accounting, filing, note-taking—you name it, she can do it with flying colors, and still have time to meet the press and the constituents, sit on various councils, fund-raise, and more. I would be completely lost without her.

"So when she is not so stellar, when she fails to give me her best and does not meet the high standards she herself sets let alone mine, I notice, it frustrates me, and…I say things I shouldn’t say. But she is **indispensable**, and so I mean every word on that mug."

Buckley regarded him candidly. "That’s wonderful, Leo. Commendable even. But have you told her this?"

He paused…and guilt washed over him. "Not in so many words," he admitted quietly. "I guess I thought it must be obvious, that she should already know. I mean, I wouldn't have picked her as my new running mate if I didn't think she could do the job and do it well."

"You mean it wasn't just to get the sheep vote?" the deer asked wryly.

"Certainly not!" A beat. "Well, if it did help bring in more prey votes, that could only be a good thing. And you have to admit, the whole 'lion and the lamb' imagery was just too good a PR coup to pass up. But no…I chose her because I like her, Bucky. I think she's adorable and sweet, though I would never say so because I know how condescending sheep take that sort of thing." His stiff posture and tone both softened.

"I can't deny that despite the fact you're prey too, having someone as small and vulnerable-looking as she is next to my huge, intimidating self was a far better way to convince the undecideds that I am serious about species equality. And we both agreed you could do far more for Zootopia—not to mention actually use that Master's degree of yours!—as the DA. But even if such cynical calculations were my only reasons for picking the next Assistant Mayor, there were plenty of candidates to choose from. I selected her for the reasons I've just named, but **also** because I like her, a very great deal."

The deer rubbed his chin, lost in thought, and although he still looked troubled, much of his suspicion and anger had faded. "Then what's with the basement cubbyhole?"

Trying for a joke to ease the tension, Lionheart responded instantly, "Well, she’s small. She doesn’t
need that much space, does she?"

Buckley looked at him, expressionless and stone-faced—then scooped up the afternoon newspaper from the desk, rolled it up tightly, and without hesitation bopped him on the nose. "No. Bad kitty." With that, he buried his face in his hoof.

"Okay, okay, I get it, now's not the time and my humor needs work." Cringing a bit, the mayor clasped his paws together, fingers working nervously. "The truth is, I didn't think it'd be safe giving her the old adjoining office you used to have. If she was right here, instead of down in the subterranean passages of City Hall, she'd be able to see everything that goes on here. Including all of your comings and goings. More than there really should be for the DA. I didn't want her to think you were really still my second-in-command, the real Assistant Mayor while she was just a figurehead, or that there really was some of corruption going on. And..."

He stopped, turned to look out the windows at the city far below, and he couldn't stop the pain from welling up, or the fear. "I thought she might figure out the truth. About you and me. She's almost dangerously intelligent sometimes. If she did...well, sheep are very provincial creatures, those from the Meadowlands more than most. What we are to each other...it might very well disgust her. You know I'm right."

Indeed, Buckley was the one who now looked uncomfortable and ashamed, his hoof lowering woodenly before tossing the newspaper carelessly back on the desk. Generalizations were often exaggerated and selective in the biases they expressed, when they weren't outright false, but paradoxically that was true about this very statement about generalizations—because sometimes they were right, or at least had some grounding in reality.

When he had let enough time pass for his point to sink in, Lionheart relented. "It's things like that I'm still afraid of, it's why I still think we need to keep what we have together very quiet. And if putting Dawn in a broom closet so she doesn't get even the whiff of the inkling of a suspicion is the only way we can keep a scandal from sullying this office...and ruining our lives...then it's what has to be done. But." Emphasizing his final word, he waited until Bucky lifted his now glum, distressed face to look him in the eye once more, then spoke apologetically, with warmth and understanding.

"That doesn't change the fact you're right, I need to let her know more often, and more directly, how I really feel about her." Recalling now the look she had worn when he had given her the mug—perplexity and uncertainty turning to depression and resentment before quickly being hidden behind a mask of perky cheer—he swore privately to himself he'd do right by her. "So I'll try to be more encouraging, okay?"

Slowly Buckley let out the breath he'd been holding, but when he looked up, the stag had that fond
twinkle in his dark eyes he knew and loved so well, the smile on his face that he felt was meant ever and only for him. His heart skipped a beat and his chest tightened. "All right, Leo. Fair enough. Just please don't let it go too long...you know as well as I do how much even one more day of loneliness and rejection can do to a mammal, especially a prey receiving lowly treatment."

Lionheart nodded solemnly; he knew, and remembered. Moving back to the other side of the desk, he swiftly made sure his work was saved, then shut the computer down. "And you're also right that I need to find a way to relax more often. Unfortunately I can't afford a vacation right now, but... something has to give."

The cervine regarded him wistfully. "Starting to regret leaving your volunteer work at Doctors Without Species?"

"Bite your tongue," he chided. "I mean yes, the work was eminently rewarding, giving back to the community is always a noble thing, and there's nothing quite like seeing a look of despair turn to one of hope when someone receives the concern and dignity every mammal deserves." And, though he didn't want to admit it for fear of how his lover might react, there had been something intensely beautiful, even holy, about holding a cub in his arms, taking care of such a new and unprotected life, feeling it nestle into his mane and provoke a rumbling purr...

"But in case you've forgotten in your time away from Hexward, the health industry is just as stressful and overwhelming as politics, when it doesn't manage to be that as well! I don't think I could handle it any better."

"Touché," Buckley replied rather fervently, with a certain wildness in his eyes Leodore knew all too well.

"No, what I need is a little R&R now and then, that's all," the mayor said decisively.

"Well..." The deer reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and produced two squares of stiff, glossy paper, decorated with musical notes, sparkles, and vibrant colors. "I had hoped, when I came in here to begin with, to invite you to Animalia with me tonight. Gazelle's putting on her biggest, most spectacular show yet, and I've managed to snag two front-row tickets." Buckley paused, and when he spoke again his voice was as coy and filled with implications as his half-lidded expression. "You have always said you'd very much enjoy discovering just how alluring and irresistible those tiger dancers of hers are, up close..."

That was all he needed to hear. Snapping his laptop closed, Lionheart strode back around the desk, offered his arm to Stagmire, and gave him a rakish grin in return. "That, good sir, is more like it!"
Let's get to that concert...we haven't a moment to lose if we don't wish to fight everyone there to get to our seats.

As they departed the mayor's office and hurried toward the elevator as quickly as they dared, the deer remarked with a casualness that was completely disingenuous, "You know, those glittery shorts of theirs really are quite popular. Seems like anyone and everyone has a set. I do believe they're the most successful merchandising ploy in Zootopia's history...whoever decided to sell them to the fans was a marketing genius."

Lionheart smirked, broadly and more naughtily than ever. "You're only saying that because you want to wear one."

"Hardly," Buckley shot back. "You know very well it is merely fanservice, nothing more nor less. Utterly tawdry and shameless from beginning to end."

"Of course," Leodore ventured with dubious aplomb.

"Quite." The deer's cheeks were the ones that were quite red now, however, as he nervously adjusted his jacket and shirt collar. "Besides...I'd only want that if you did."

The big feline pounced, figuratively speaking (although his tail was lashing at the thought of doing so for real, once they were alone at the stag's humble residence). "You're wearing a pair right now, aren't you?"

"Hush, you!"

The bell chimed as the elevator reached their floor, and Lionheart could only grin smugly at the now-perpetual blush the DA was sporting. Whether or not his guess was true (or might be, in the future), he knew one thing for sure: as soon as possible, he was getting the deer to join him at the Mystic Oasis. There was a particular tiger masseur there Bucky wouldn't believe until he saw him with his own eyes...

By the time Manuel Delgato had returned from the back of the Palm Hotel and Casino, walking
much more slowly and heavily than he had when he'd left the lobby, it took all of his legendary restraint, patience, and calm to keep from stalking forward with a lashing tail, clenched paws, and a constant growl. Obviously he'd been unable to reconnoiter, let alone attempt to catch the perps in question, until after that hostage situation had been resolved, but even aside from how critical it was that Doug and his rams be stopped, and Buckley Stagmire in particular be rescued, he hated being outsmarted or outmaneuvered by a criminal. It reminded him far too much of how he'd always been third-best or worse in life, how so much about his background had been against him from the start, and he simply prided himself on his exemplary record and ensuring those who broke the law were brought to proper justice.

However, there was nothing for it; when he'd raced through the drab, more dingy and dark corridors of the hotel's delivery and maintenance areas, he'd reached the back door and tumbled out onto the loading dock just in time to see a car squealing away from the lot, and only his supreme night vision had let him pick out the license plate number before it had disappeared into the early morning shadows of Sahara Square's back streets. The latter would be helpful, once they could get back to the police database and run a quick search, but somehow he suspected the vehicle in question was registered to some innocuous and squeaky clean individual, and that regardless who the owner was, they wouldn't find the car at said mammal's place of residence. No, unless Judy had found something not only incriminating but very revealing about their opposition's location and plans, he was very afraid they had lost their final lead and would be unable to stop the coming chaos.

Cursing under his breath, the Hispanic lion holstered his gun and stepped warily around the last corner, past the pillar that separated the elevators from the lobby—and couldn't help but be startled by what he saw. Not only were Nick and Judy still kneeling on the marble floor by Lionheart's side, but both the fox and the Barbary were staring in absolute disgust and contempt at something the rabbit was holding up in her paw…and the bigger lion also appeared to be simmering in a growing rage.

His paw instantly went back to his weapon as he approached; as much resentment, suspicion, and righteous anger as he held toward the former mayor for his recent behavior, he didn't think Leodore would ever genuinely wish to harm anyone, at least not without real provocation. And considering the situation, he had a feeling whatever Hopps had shown him justified the reaction. Still…

"Guys?" he said softly, carefully, not wanting to startle any of them but thinking coming up to them without speaking was just as unwise. "Is everything okay? I mean, under the circumstances and all."

Lionheart visibly regained control of himself, muscles flexing and tensing all through his massive body before he rocked back against a palm trunk and forced his paws to unclench. But when he spoke it was in a very tight, strained voice, and his expression still hovered somewhere between fury and open distress. "Why don't you look at what Miss Hopps has for us, and decide for yourself, Officer Delgato."
Dreading what he would see, the young lion looked at the plastic badge the rabbit held up mutely, and the instant he saw the name on it he felt his hackles rise. Something cold and dark seemed to settle in the pit of his stomach, even as a fiery heat started building in his breast. Forcing his paw away from his gun (as he didn't trust that his fingers wouldn't jerk and accidentally pull the trigger), he spoke quietly, uneasily. "Okay then. A lot of things are making way more sense now. But…who is this guy? Bellwether's father…her husband?"

"Brother," the former mayor growled. "Cyrus Bellwether. And before you say anything, no I hadn't the slightest idea he worked here, let alone for Vinny Corlione. Dawn was not in the habit of speaking often of her family, but the one time she did mention her elder sibling, it was to say he was her favorite brother and that he worked in the security field. I can't imagine she knew, or approved of his being affiliated with organized crime…but then it is entirely possible she didn't know of Corlione's true nature, or assumed her brother was one of the many entirely innocent, perfectly legal employees serving on his properties. She certainly wouldn't have been running for a public office if she knew such open corruption could be linked with her, and I certainly wouldn't have chosen her as a running mate had I known." His mouth pressed into a grim line, and Delgato didn't even have to guess what he was thinking. "Anyway, he's the only one she ever spoke of. It's possible there could be others, but the initial fits."

"Huh." Nick seemed to have recovered his usual equanimity, though his fur rippled several times and he still sounded a bit unsettled—as well he might, considering the ewe had tried to drive him savage so that he would then kill Judy for her. The thought made Delgato's blood boil, and he was usually the more mild-mannered sort. "Well then, we've got our motive. I suppose we could quibble over whether it's mere revenge over his sister's fate or if he also wants to finish what she started, but considering you've already been disgraced, Leo, and put in prison in the bargain, I don't know what more punishment or recompense he could expect. And from what that garrulous old goat at the Cloven Hoof said, I think it's pretty safe to say that even if it didn't start out that way, Cyrus has certainly thrown himself wholeheartedly into this Night Howler terrorist plot by now."

Delgato frowned a bit, his mind racing; it was a welcome distraction, but he also was intensely aware of the need to do all he could to keep this unorthodox case on the rails, to provide all the legal justifications for their actions, and to put all the pieces and clues together to form a coherent whole—both for the reports they'd need to put on Bogo's desk when this was all over, and for any trial proceedings which would hopefully follow for all involved. "It might just go beyond that, Wilde," he said slowly. When everyone looked at him expectantly, he continued.

"You're probably right why he's doing all this. But a mafia criminal is very good at finding more than one reason for doing things, or satisfying multiple needs and illegal dealings at once. I mean, we originally thought Big or Corlione might be using the missing mammal to take over Zootopia, rob everyone during the chaos, get everyone looking to them for protection as society broke down, set themselves up as the ones in charge. But what about a lesser underling who's got just enough power to be hungry for more?"

"We thought Corlione might be trying to double-cross Big…but what if it's this guy who's the real
mastermind? He could have gotten Doug and his boys the room here, he could have done all the stuff behind the scenes we were thinking about...and when Corlione goes out tonight to switch with Lionheart, bam! He sees his chance to pull the hostile takeover on both of them."

Everyone looked at each other, and while there was definitely some worry and concern going about, he couldn't help feeling a sense of pride as they also seemed to be marveling at his insights. *That's right, amigos. Not just muscles, a pretty face, and a chip on my shoulder for Lionheart. Still got the smarts!*

Then Judy spoke up, and while she too replied slowly, it didn't seem to be from trying to puzzle something out—since it sounded as if she'd already reached her conclusions up in the VIP suite—but from the gravity of what she had to impart. "Good job, Manny. That matches several things I learned up there...and from Cyrus himself. We wondered how Doug and his rams could afford an expensive suite, or how they got in with Buckley without anyone seeing them. The Head of Security, and Corlione's right-hand mammal, could accomplish that easily. The particular suite they were in wouldn't have been available without pulling some strings—same explanation. The place they're taking Mr. Stagmire, there's no way they could slip in without anyone being the wiser, let alone release him to tear into innocent mammals...except for the kind of security and credentials Cyrus could give them himself or obtain for them."

She paused, then shot a pained look at Lionheart. "And remember how we wondered how anyone could get a recording that would fool the voiceprint at Cliffside? Well obviously, the Head of Security here would have the money and equipment to make what was needed, but he didn't even have to go that far, really. He already had a perfect recording of you to use, sir."

Lionheart stiffened, and while the look in his eyes was disbelieving and ready to instinctively reject what she was about to say, there was something else there too...suggesting he might already suspect where this was going. Despite everything, Delgato felt a twinge of sympathy. "What? How? Did he get it from his boss...?"

"No." The rabbit shook her head. "It probably would have been too hard to get a recording from Corlione without him getting wind of what it would be used for. Cyrus told me exactly how he got it, in the elevator ride down." She paused, her face a bit ashen under the fur. "I don't know if he was just that proud of what he'd done, if he thought no one would believe me, if it was because it'd be my word against his what he'd confessed...or because he planned to silence me, so I couldn't tell anyone else."

Instantly Delgato moved toward her—even though the danger was past, the very likely threat to Judy's life urged him to intervene on her behalf; while the various officers at City Central had responded in many ways to the rookie bunny placed among them just over six months ago, he had been one of those to want to take her under his protective wing. No matter how independent, brave, strong, and resourceful she had proven to be, his feelings in that regard hadn't changed one bit. And
from the look on his face as he also moved toward her, Nick seemed to feel the same way. If matters had been less serious, Delgato would have had a huge, sly grin to cover with his paw. You two aren't fooling anyone, you know.

Shooting a somewhat exasperated look at the fox, Judy went on in the meantime. "Anyway, he had it right there with him, played it for me and everything. He got it from Dawn—or at least, from her desk at City Hall. Same place where he got the code for the door at Cliffside, which she also stole from you. She told him during visiting hours right where to find them."

This time, Lionheart looked vaguely ill. "No. Don't tell me…"

Judy gazed at him sadly. "I'm afraid so. It came from one of your meetings with her—apparently she had the habit of recording almost everything. It…was one of the times you used your…pet name for her."

For a few seconds the ex-mayor stared at her, ears flattened to his skull, cheeks burning with shame. Then he twisted aside and started slamming his fists against the palm trunk until leaves showered down from above. "Idiot! Idiot! I never should have…" His words dissolved into inarticulate growls.

Delgato realized after a moment what was being referred to—although it hadn't really been relevant (other than as a possible motive for the sheep to frame Lionheart), Judy had included every detail in her meticulous report of the Night Howler case, including what the former Assistant Mayor had told her and Nick about her interactions with the lion. It had been ridiculous at the time, something infantile like might be heard on a school playground…but knowing something like this had been the Barbary's downfall, that it had been his voice bellowing "Smellwether!" that had been used to open the way to Stagmire's room…it was karmic, in its way, but also deeply humiliating.

And this time, much stronger than a few moments ago, Manuel Delgato felt his heart go out to Lionheart.

It helped that, as much as he'd been berating himself inwardly the entire time he was ranting at the bigger lion in the car, furious at losing his cool, acting like an immature cub, and probably losing any respect either Lionheart or Wilde had had for him, getting it all out like that had been… extraordinarily cleansing. He'd had all that anger and resentment, that disgust and disappointment, bottled up inside him for six months. Loosing it had taken such a huge burden from his young shoulders, even apart from knowing his words had hit their mark, that Lionheart had finally understood what he had done and its full consequences.

Afterward, especially once the former mayor had given such an eloquent testimonial in his own
defense, had shown true remorse, and especially once he had confessed just whom they were trying to rescue, Delgato had felt an equally strong sense of guilt wash over him. He had consoled himself by repeating that Lionheart himself had understood, had admitted he was right in everything he said, and seemed determined to make up for his many mistakes.

He'd also reminded himself that, as bad as his words and attitude had been, it would have been far worse had Officer Johnson been the one Judy had chosen—he knew for a fact the other lion, far more belligerent than he (he was the one, after all, who always wanted to arm-wrestle in the bullpen, and even after losing was right at it again with the biggest members of the force) would have launched himself at Lionheart, clawed his belly open, ripped his throat out.

Yet as much as he was still angry at the other lion for all he had done, in some strange way he felt he understood him better now. Not enough to forgive him, at least not yet...but enough to give him the chance to redeem himself. Of course it helped having seen the Barbary dive so desperately across the lobby to save Nick and Judy before they were dashed against the unforgiving marble floor...such a valiant and heroic rescue showed what noble impulses still lay inside him, under that self-centeredness and pride which had so led him astray.

By the same token, in a way he was glad he hadn't been placed on a team with Lionheart while he still thought the sun rose and set in his mane—the cubbish enthusiasm and eagerness to please as he hung on the former mayor's every word would have been embarrassing in the extreme, but understandable considering how much Lionheart reminded him in some ways of his own amiable, hard-working, loving Papi. Instead, he felt he had approached the bigger lion with a fair balance of the two extremes, a hard-eyed gaze without rosy spectacles to blind him to Lionheart's flaws, but also an open-minded willingness to believe when the fellow showed himself capable of change, demonstrated his better qualities and aspirations.

None of that changed the fact, though, that right now, in this moment...Lionheart was suffering. And Delgato, for once, did not think he deserved it. Not for this.

Slowly, warily, waiting to make sure the other had calmed enough from his relentless battering that he wouldn't instantly turn on him with those giant fists, he approached the kneeling lion. Then, gently, he reached out and placed a paw on that heaving shoulder. "Hey...Leodore. It's okay. We all make mistakes...right?" He tried for an awkward smile. "We know now how the bad guys carried out their plan. What's important now is finding out where they went, what they're going to do, so they don't get away with it."

When the miserable lion looked up at last, the gratitude welling up in his brimming eyes was so strong, Delgato almost felt weak-kneed himself. Pull it together, Manuel. There'll be plenty of time later to break down from all this shit we've been through, when it's over.
As the two of them continued to stare at one another, an unspoken understanding passing between them, Nick, who had been watching everything play out with a shrewd gaze but oddly no commentary (witty or otherwise), finally inserted himself back into the conversation. "That's right. Didn't you say something about learning something up there, Carrots? About just which suite they were staying in and what you found there?" He looked at Judy meaningfully.

The rabbit, who had been watching the two lions with much greater tenderness and concern, blinked briefly and then jolted back to the present. "Right! Yes. Well, there was a lot I heard up there, and several things I found that puts it all in perspective—though unfortunately I couldn't bring most of it with me. I did find one big thing, though, that I think should cover it." And so saying, she reached into an inner pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out something which she displayed for all of them to see.

The objects sat there on her palmpad, winking and sparkling in the bright lobby lights. He didn't know if the others somehow weren't aware of what they were looking at, or the truth was so obvious it had everyone stunned into silence. But Delgato knew, and if he was uneasy and worried before, he was downright horrified now. **Mierda! Carajo! No, no, **no, this can't be happening!

Forcing himself to stay calm, the lion pointed at the very familiar purple sequins glittering in Judy's paw. "You all realize what this means, don't you?" The rabbit nodded solemnly, Lionheart slumped his shoulders, and Nick looked entirely too knowing (not that that was different from his usual expression), but none of them said a word, only waiting expectantly. "Those are from a pair of those *pinche* tiger shorts everyone's so *loco* about!"

His words echoed in the lobby—he hadn't intended to raise his voice, but his agitation and distress had made his control slip again. A number of the milling guests stared at him—some looking offended at his language, most confused, but a few seemed to realize what he was talking about and, making the connection between that and his tone, started babbling and gossiping about the danger. **Damnit. Not what I wanted...we don't need those terrorists getting wind of this, knowing we're onto them. If they change their plans, so we don't know where they're headed or what they'll do...**

After several more startled moments, Wilde spoke up at last—and to Delgato's surprise and annoyance, his tone was decidedly neutral, even skeptical. "You sure about that, Manny?"

"Sure, I'm sure!" he burst out in frustration. "You think I wouldn't know those things when I see them?"

"Well, that's just it, my friend," Nick said breezily. "Everyone and his *mijo* is a fan of Gazelle's these days, and knows who her—that are they calling them on the Net these days? The Stripers—are. But if you see them everywhere, in commercials and music videos, up on billboards, it's easy to start seeing them places they aren't. Can you prove they're the real deal?"
Delgato stared at him in disbelief, then planted his fists on his hips. "This some sort of fox thing? You doubting *my* powers of observation now?"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes," Nick said bluntly.

Remembering how he had questioned the vulpine's abilities back at Cliffside, the lion groaned under his breath. *Really? We're gonna play this game now?* Taking a deep breath, he gave his fellow cop the onceover, from head to toe, eartip to tailtip, then rattled off matter-of-factly, "You've got a monthly membership at the Mystic Oasis, your dad's a tailor, and your favorite food is blueberries."

For several moments Nick was actually too flabbergasted to speak, something that had Delgato feeling inordinately smug. Then he managed to say, "Well that last one hardly counts, all you had to do was ask Carrots here…"

"Could've, but didn't," the lion mused. "You brush pretty well, Wilde, but that telltale blue stain on your teeth is juuuuuust noticeable enough." As the fox lowered his ears and Judy giggled in the background, he warmed up to his subject, crossing his arms slowly over his chest. "The rest? The slipknot on your tie is one only tailors use; I suppose you could have a brother or something, but being taught how to put on a tie is a thing fathers do with their sons. And that naturalist club? There’ve been plenty of times you’ve come into the locker room at work smelling like sandalwood, amber, and nag champa—all incenses used at the Mystic Oasis."

There was a pause; then Lionheart actually began to slowly clap, while Judy grinned at him openly. "Well done, Manny, well done! So now that we’ve established what I already knew, that you do know what you’re talking about when it comes to police work, how’d you identify these sequins?"

Her violet eyes twinkled winsomely, and as the fear, worry, and distress faded from her face, he realized what she was doing—after her and Nick's brush with death, all of them needed some quick levity to recover their wits and refocus, something that helped them bond a bit. And considering the rams were already long gone, and he’d seen Cyrus make a run for it even before his victims had landed in the Barbary's outstretched arms, it wasn't as if there were a rush to depart. They could pause long enough for something like this. *We won't be any good to Mr. Stagmire, Gazelle, or anyone else if we don't stop to get ourselves in order and think carefully.*

Letting out his breath to settle his nerves, Delgato smirked lopsidedly at the bunny. "I suppose if I tell you I recognize them from Clawhauser's Gazelle app, and all the memorabilia he's got on his desk, that wouldn't be convincing enough?" When Judy chuckled but shook her head, he rolled his eyes and admitted, "All right, fine. I know them because I once got a real close look at a pair of those shorts. Jackson's got one."
Judy blinked, then let out a whoop and turned to thrust her paw out at Nick. "Hah! I knew it. Pay up!"

The fox, who had finally recovered from being shown up at his own pastime, smirked and started digging out his wallet, but even as he did so he observed, "Fine, but I must take note we still don't know why he has them; that has been as hotly debated as whether he owns them at all." He glanced questioningly at Delgato, green eyes bright and curious.

Before the lion could even attempt to answer (not that he thought it was the business of anyone at the precinct, let alone the rookies), Judy cut in again. "Does it matter? Besides, it's obviously a gift from his girlfriend." A beat, then she chuckled. "Or boyfriend."

"Really? I thought he dances in them on ZooTube."

"Seriously, Slick? If you're going to be that memetic about it, you might as well say he's secretly one of the Stripers in his off-hours. Or a brother to one."

"Actually my next suggestion was that he cosplays."

As the two dissolved into good-natured bickering, tossing out one outlandish possibility after another, Delgato sighed and ran his paw uncomfortably over his maned neck. He knew exactly why his fellow cop had the shorts, and not only were neither of them anywhere close to the mark, it was something rather private he didn't think should be bruited about so casually…that everyone at the ZPD was so convinced Jackson secretly owned a pair of glitter shorts, he had finally thrown up his paws and bought one just to shut everybody up.

"Do I resent the fact that apparently no one can tell me apart from Gazelle's dancers because 'all tigers look alike'? Yeah. I'm not even from India, like they are!" the other cat had retorted with a pained look and nettled tone. Then he'd shifted to bemusement, grinning wryly. "Do I also find the fact all of Zootopia is fascinated with them funny when I sit down and think about it? Hell yeah. But I figured, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Let them think what they want. Call it satire, call it performance art, call it tweaking their collective noses for getting so caught up in pop-culture theories. At least I can have some fun with it all, yanno?" As he'd turned away, Jackson had lashed his tail and flashed a gleaming smile. "Besides…they are pretty flattering on me."

Laughing at the memory, the lion could only shake his head again with a rueful smile…and carefully file away some of the more creative and hilarious explanations Nick and Judy were offering. Jackson
would get a big kick out of them, he knew…and right now, they could all use more to laugh at.

Stepping forward again as there was a lull in Judy and Nick's debate, Delgato cleared his throat. "Okay. Have we got that all out of our systems now? Because we do still need to finish putting the evidence together, and plan our next move." He flicked his gaze to the hotel guests, as well as the concierge still standing nearby; while he seemed rather pale after the confrontation and the open threat to police officers on the property, there was still disapproval in the giraffe's overall mien.

"I think so," the rabbit drawled. "Unless you have any last words, Nick?"

The vulpine shrugged eloquently, paws thrust in his pockets. "Just that it's kind of a shame…I was hoping it would turn out you were aware of those shorts from personal knowledge, Manny."

Delgato scoffed. "How do you figure that one, Wilde? What makes you think I'd ever be caught dead in those things?" When Gazelle's music had first started exploding over the air waves, the lion had been a bit critical, mostly because of her tendency to lapse into Spanish during some of her concerts or including random words and phrases in her songs; the whole thing had felt a bit gratuitous to him, a pandering to the exotic to gain popularity. Over time his annoyance had faded, and he had to admit a lot of her music was extremely good, and catchy. But that didn't mean he intended to join Clawhauser's fan club or anything similarly over-the-top.

"Really?" Nick pursed his lips. "I've seen you with your earphones in, when you don't think anyone's looking." The fox rolled his fists and stepped side-to-side with a swish of his tail, smirking openly. "And you've got a set of hips on you, don't deny it."

The lion stared at him, jaw working soundlessly as his mind went utterly blank. Even as he felt his cheeks blazing with heat, his mouth got ahead of his brain…and, naturally enough, could only produce flustered Spanish.

Laughing at this, but with a fondness that showed she wasn't mocking him in any way whatsoever, Judy finally put the sequins back in her jacket pocket. "Anyway, as much fun as this has been, there's another reason I asked you for your expertise, Manny. As we all know, this case has been rather unusual from the start…if we expect any judge or lawyer to look at all this and not throw the whole thing out of court, we're going to need not just hard evidence, but clear, intelligent analysis. That we can offer identifying testimony that isn't just based on hearsay or common knowledge will go far to establishing our credentials. Also," and she gestured up toward the hotel towering above them, "the rest of what I learned and saw backs you up.

"That suite Doug and his cronies were holed up in? It belongs to Gazelle, most of the time; usually
one of her dancers uses it. I know because I saw some stationery on the bedside table. From what I saw, somebody—I'm guessing Cyrus—asked to borrow the room for the night, since her entourage is out preparing for their next concert. I also saw three backstage passes. Child's play for the Head of Security here to get hold of, especially as a personal favor from one of the hotel's biggest tenants.”

Lionheart flexed and clenched his paws visibly, his brief good humor fading back into anxiety and anger. "So that's their plan, then? Go behind the scenes at one of her concerts, and unleash Bucky there? Do they actually intend to have him attack her?!"

Judy looked stricken. "I don't know. Maybe? Maybe they just want to cause a panic and riot in the crowd? But if they really want to tear the city apart, I can't think of a better way than by having someone as beloved and popular as Gazelle get mauled by a savage mammal live in public. Having it be another prey would just make it even more confusing and easier for everyone to turn on each other…and if her dancers have to defend her from Buckley, that certainly won't look good either." She sighed. "Either way, it's sure to cause chaos. End result, a lot of innocent mammals will get hurt. But it's what they're planning, all right. I heard one of the rams bragging about it to Cyrus. He even made a horrible pun on the Animalia outdoor stadium."

"Well then what are we waiting for?" The former mayor leaped to his feet, and it was a toss-up whether it was his suddenly looming figure or the roar in his voice that made nearby hotel guests scatter. "If we know where they're going, let's get over there at once! If we're quick enough, we can find them, save Bucky, and arrest the lot of them before the concert even starts."

"Hold it!" Nick cut him off sharply, and for a change his narrow features were pinched with deadly seriousness. "I think you're forgetting a number of things, Leo. For starters, the place is huge. It's going to take far too long to search the whole backstage area for that flock of felons, there's way too many places to hide and lie low. Now, I know a guy who works there—"

"Of course you do," Judy said with a smile.

"—but even that's not going to be enough, I don't think. Especially if we want to do this without alerting the press or the public and causing a meltdown ourselves. We're going to need a lot more bodies to do this."

As Nick paused significantly, Delgato realized what he was implying. Gathering together the last of his frazzled nerves, he drew himself up to his full height and nodded. "Nick's right. It's time to radio for backup."

The rabbit looked at them uncertainly. "Are you sure? I don't want Bogo thinking we're not able to
handle things on our own, or—"

"Judy." Delgato kept his voice mild, but firm. "We all know this case has been getting out of control ever since Cliffside. We really can’t handle it on our own, especially not now. The only reason we’ve waited as long as we have was because we needed concrete evidence of what was happening and who was involved. Well now we have it. Even if they took the key, we’ve got the evidence in the car, the sequins, everything you saw and heard in the suite, and we all can testify to Cyrus being the ringleader."

He shook his head a bit; all that time chasing specters, jumping to conclusions about Corlione and Big because the mafia made such an easy target and the evidence—some of it contrived, some of it surely planted and arranged by the bighorn, and the rest their own imaginings—had seemed to indicate as such, when the answer turned out to be so very simple. Still, in a strange and roundabout way, part of their theory might well be true in the end, and there had been no other way to find out what was really going on.

"Now we’ve got all the probable cause we need," the lion finished. "We can call on the ZPD, get all the officers and equipment we’ll need to keep everyone at the concert safe, arrest these terrorists, and rescue Mr. Stagmire too."

Lionheart, understandably, looked no more sanguine—less because he didn’t want the law involved this time, Delgato supposed, and more because he hated any further delays. He understood, but there really wasn’t any other choice. "Are you absolutely certain? And what exactly are we supposed to do until then?"

"Well," Nick interjected, drawing the word out, "I’m guessing you aren’t exactly up on the Angel with Horns’ schedule, but the next concert isn’t until tomorrow night anyway. We’ve got no idea where these bozos went, but we do know where they’re going to be, and when. If we lie low until then, that’ll give Bogo and the rest time to get things set up, and our quarry may just think we’ve given up on them, start relaxing and getting sloppy…"

"It is pretty late," the rabbit admitted, gazing up at the sky outside the hotel windows—mostly dark, but just beginning to show traces of graying light to the east as a hint of the coming dawn made its presence known. "Or early, whichever. It’d be good to get some rest, a change of clothes, some good meals…we’re going to need all our energy and wits about us." She paused. "But where can we stay? My place is way too small, Nick’s isn’t much better, and we certainly can’t take Leodore back to prison…"

Once more Delgato stepped in. "You can crash at my place," he said easily, without hesitation. "If you don’t mind a bachelor pad. It’s practically right around the corner from here."
Judy laughed. "If I can handle a crowded warren and the barracks at police academy, I think I can deal with that."

"I practically invented the bachelor pad," the fox smirked.

"I was a frat boy in college," Lionheart deadpanned. "I trust that covers it."

"So we've all been in the same boat," the rabbit concluded. "Just as well...I have a few things I want to look into, if you don't mind me bumming off your Net connection for a bit, Manny." After he nodded, she flicked her gaze to the murmuring watchers in the lobby who were still agitated with uncertainty and fear, then to the silent giraffe. "Uh...I'll radio Bogo, then. Manny, Nick, if you'd do a little crowd control here? Make sure everything's kosher when the authorities get here, ours or theirs."

As she turned back toward the nearby pond—to fish out her ruined taser, he assumed—Hopps paused once, glanced at Lionheart where he stood morose and at a loss what to do, then spoke deliberately, with feeling. "Don't worry, Leo. You haven't failed him. We'll get him back. And once we do...he'll be your Bucky again. I promise."

Delgato stared after her as she moved across the sloping floor, her paw already moving to the Bluefang controls, then looked back to the former mayor. From the bigger lion's startled expression...swiftly turning to one of such yearning and hope, so filled with devotion and need...he was not only confirming Judy's implied surmise, he made it so undeniable it was a wonder the truth hadn't been plain to see before. 'His Bucky? No, it couldn't be...could it? But...it would explain so much."

And if that were true... The lion officer felt his breath catch in his throat, his heart pounding, his chest growing tight. If that were true, it would change so much. Maybe everything...

Mind racing as he considered this new information, wondered how he or any of them might be able to confirm its accuracy without Lionheart clamping up and refusing (perhaps not without cause) to trust them with something so private and possibly inflammatory, Delgato felt his body go on autopilot. Moving across the marble floor toward the hotel and casino guests, he was already lifting his paws to offer reassuring gestures, voice rising with firm authority but also projecting calm and compassion, even as he carefully maneuvered himself to keep them away from the other lion and any intrusive questions he could not or should not answer.
Across the way, he could see Nick doing the same thing, though despite the fox's innate confidence and air of competence, he still had to flash his badge before anyone believed him to be more than the frumpily informal fellow he appeared. And Judy, he saw, had approached the giraffe and was speaking to him earnestly—probably letting him know they would be no more trouble and the law was on the way, he hoped—before a crackle of sound and a deep, accented voice he knew all too well came over the line and made her turn away with a wince, finger to her earpiece.

What a crew, he marveled to himself. But at least they knew what they were up against now. They had a plan…they'd have backup coming in…and there was a good chance this could all still work out. He had to believe that.

Sighing, he once more turned to face the nearest pair of citizens, one in a bathrobe and the other decked out in riches so gaudy it seemed they would outshine all the lights and glitz of the casino itself. He barely even glanced at Lionheart this time.

And that was why he didn't register, on the Barbary's ankle where it lay hidden between his pants cuff and the thick, draping underbrush he stood among, the yellow light that blinked and pulsed in steady rhythm.

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Hitting the 'Next' button in the laptop's browser window, Judy leaned back in the chair (the back of which she naturally had had to lower to fit her dimensions), stretched, and took another sip of the wine cooler Delgato had given her from his mini-fridge. Smiling to herself, she couldn't help looking once more around the cool, dim interior of the sandstone dwelling that housed the lion's modest apartment. The place was cozy, no question of that, the thick rock walls beneath their shadowy overhang retaining cool temperatures for a blessedly long portion of the baking days—aided by naturally-shaped windows that guided breezes into the right channels (but which could be sheltered or even blocked altogether by brightly-colored awnings that doubled as shutters when the weather turned to harsh sandstorms or the downpours of Sahara Square's carefully-regulated monsoon season). He had assured her the building also retained the day's heat late into the night when it turned relatively frigid out, but by the time they'd made it to his home, the sun had already risen and it was beginning to warm up rapidly.

What truly pleased her about the place, however, was the personal touches. While it was slightly disorganized and messy, it nowhere near merited the embarrassment Delgato had displayed when they'd entered, as much of the clutter consisted of books and magazines, solar-powered chargers for the various appliances and computer accessories, candles and bowls of incense, countless precious objects and small pieces of art, and plenty of photographs and plaques. She'd spied awards and commendations the feline had received over the years—rather heartwarmingly going as far back as grade school, it looked like, and extending right up to ZPD badges of service and special honors.
Pictures of Manuel as an absolutely adorable cub—kicking around a soccer ball with gleeful gusto, trying to consume a multiple-scoop ice cream cone nearly as tall as himself, racing on all fours through an expanse of verdant grass—gave way to ones of him as a gangly adolescent and finally filled out as a well-muscled adult. A rather sheepish shot of him as his mane was first growing in, a much more proud and dignified image of him in his high school graduation robes, and a family portrait...his mother was a rather matronly lioness whose warm, kind eyes and welcoming smile reminded her so much of her own mother Bonnie that it made her heart ache, while his father was the spitting image of Manuel save for the thicker, softer physique, the significant bands of gray in his mane, and the beard and glasses that changed the cast of his features.

And then, of course, there was the artwork. Aside from richly-hued blankets, glazed ceramic bowls, small statues with gems and crystals, and beautifully-painted skulls from Dia de Muertos, there were a number of the lion's own paintings adorning the walls. To Judy's delight, there were also some gorgeous pastel reproductions of images, backgrounds, and designs from *The Lion King*. While Delgato had been defensive about it, noting he'd been strongly impressed by the amount of faithfulness to ethnic and cultural artistry in the movie's production art and the vivid colors to be found there, the bunny simply was proud to meet another adult who didn't think animation was 'just for kids'; she herself was still a fan of *The Re-squeakers* and *The Great Mouse Detective* and didn't care who knew it.

All in all, Delgato's home was a wonderful, charming place to get some respite from the stresses and demands of the case, and she didn't think she was the only one who had adapted to it with alacrity. Glancing over her shoulder, she had to smile softly at the sight which greeted her. On the far side of the darkened living room, Nick lay sprawled out in the open bottom drawer of a dresser, snuggled into a set of folded blankets; one of the couches in the room was actually a foldout sofa-bed, and currently held the large, snoring form of Leodore Lionheart; and finally Delgato himself had fitted his smaller self on an actual couch, paws clasped behind his head and maned chest rising and falling in the rhythm of sleep.

Judy smiled wider, and couldn't help the warmth that suffused her cheeks as she contemplated the company she was keeping. She recalled with both amusement and a greater flush what had happened when they'd first gathered here to retire for the day—namely, that with the place being rather cramped to begin with and now occupied by two very large mammals, plus having only one rather small bathroom to change in, there was next to no privacy. It didn't bother Judy of course, as she was used to the ZPD locker room, and Nick so often seemed on the verge of shucking his clothing that she rather suspected he'd had more than one reason for knowing Emmitt Otterton; his utter comfort with the naturalists at the Oasis certainly implied as much, and Delgato's deduction of his having a membership there which the fox had not denied confirmed it. Although Leodore had been rather reluctant to change in front of them back at the prison, he'd had no problem removing the hoodie here; the sheer amount of shaggy mane he possessed certainly meant he wouldn't be getting cold, and justified removing extra outer layers.

And Manuel? The younger lion had been practically tongue-tied and beet red at first...but once he'd nerved himself, stripped down to his boxers, and put on a pair of baggy sweats, he'd seemed to relax
a great deal more. The bunny had no idea why he was so worried—while he was no powerhouse of muscle like the former mayor, she didn't see an ounce of fat on him, and the way his golden-brown mane spread across his chest to perfectly cover and frame his well-developed pectorals, as well as running down his chiseled abs to disappear below his waistline, was the reason for Judy's pink cheeks.

It's a good thing I've got plenty of extremely important things to distract me. A girl could do far worse for teammates, and get herself in a lot of trouble when surrounded by such prime examples of masculinity. Well, Leodore was way too old for her, and much more of a father-figure if anything, but for her fellow officers, much closer to her age…ahem.

Tearing her eyes away from Delgato's well-shaped, thickly-bulging biceps, Judy glanced back at the computer screen and sighed…as she realized she had in fact been doing the reverse, allowing the eyecandy to distract her from what she'd been reading in her research. Because as critical as it was in giving her a window into her enemy's mindset, it was still deeply unsettling, disturbing…and saddening.

When things had finally settled down back at the Palm, with most of the hotel's guests and tenants departing for their rooms or other pursuits, leaving the four of them alone with Bartholomew, Judy had at last been able to ask Delgato what he'd discovered when he'd raced to the back lot. The lion's memory was excellent, and he'd recited the license plate of the fleeing car for her to carefully write down. It hadn't been long after that that Chief Bogo and their reinforcements had arrived, the squad cars swiftly forming a semicircle around the building's glass doors but not employing their sirens since the danger was past and the criminals had fled the scene.

The rabbit had been afraid the Cape buffalo would immediately launch into yet another blistering diatribe, particularly now that matters had grown calm; the initial explanation she had given over the wire had admittedly been rather breathless and breakneck in its recitation, and the amount of developments she'd had to report, what precisely the true nature of the case had turned out to be, and the revelation of the enemy and his plans had been understandably overwhelming and hard to process. But she'd expected that by the time Bogo had driven over, he'd have had time to get over his original befuddlement and deep concern, to instead have built up quite the head of steam as he realized what all she and Nick had done, what they had kept from him, and for how long (even if the situation had made it so they couldn't call in until this juncture).

Yet instead, after reassuring the concierge that there would be no further disturbances, no charges filed, and his officers would all be departing shortly, the police chief had regarded her candidly…and if there had been something of his usual stern glower in those hard, dark eyes, he'd also gauged all of them with careful, grave consideration before at last noting that while he would have preferred this all have been discovered and handled much more discreetly and safely, he couldn't fault them for their actions. He even admitted (though it seemed to grate on him a bit) that Judy had called the ZPD in at just the right time, and as soon as had been truly feasible. And lastly, he had acknowledged that the truths they'd learned about the missing mammal, what had happened to him, and the new plot revolving around him, certainly did merit both Lionheart's initial secrecy and this unusual mission to
address it.

Even as Judy was staring up at him in disbelief (and noticing out of the corner of her eye both Nick's highly-raised eyebrows and Delgato's long, slow sigh of relief), Bogo had noted the judge had come through for him on the paperwork, sanctioning all of their activities as part of necessary undercover work to keep the public safe from a clear and present danger that had to be apprehended at all costs. Then, with a slow nod of acceptance—no more and no less than merited under the circumstances—he had thanked Lionheart for his information and aid, then agreed they would pool all their resources to try and track down Cyrus Bellwether…and barring that, would move in with enough mammals and equipment to ensure Gazelle, her concert, and all those attending would be protected until such time as Buckley Stagmire was rescued and cured.

However, after he had given them leave to rest up for the day at Delgato's apartment (and Judy had begun very much to wonder who had clandestinely replaced their superior—or when he might later explode on them with no warning), there had been as little information forthcoming to aid the investigation as she had feared. The detectives Bogo had brought with him had gone over the VIP suite with a fine-toothed comb, and by the time they had arrived at the sandstone dwelling, the report had come in over their radios.

Amazingly, the key had been left in the lock, but both the fingerprints on it (aside from hers) and elsewhere in the room had been of little use, since apparently none of the sheep had a criminal record. (Doug's sniper abilities, it seemed, had been acquired and developed quite legally at the local firing range—though Judy wondered about that in retrospect, considering his skill level as displayed in the original Night Howler case had been far above what he should have been able to learn that way. Had a friend or relative of his who joined him there been in the military? Was the mammal who ran the place a former soldier himself? If so, that sort of training was itself illegal... Regardless, what weapons were known to be in his possession were all properly licensed and registered.)

The weapons case had been taken, so there was no evidence this time linking the group to the Night Howler extract (nor any indication where they were growing it). As she had surmised, both the use of Gazelle's suite and the obtaining of backstage passes (as noted in hotel records) had been done through proper, unremarkable channels. And while there was definitely evidence of the patient they'd been keeping prisoner—disturbed bedding with traces of deer fur among the sheets, the wheel tracks of a hospital gurney in the deep-pile rugs, and leftover syringes and bottles indicating the tranquilizers used to keep him heavily sedated—there was no clue as to where Buckley was now.

A quick log-in to ZPD's database from Delgato's laptop to run the license plate number (thank goodness she'd been given access to all police systems three months ago, so it wouldn't be necessary to go to the DMV and encounter Flash again!) had determined the car he'd seen departing was indeed registered to Cyrus. But since none of them believed the ram would have the DA taken to his own home or that of one of his bullyboys, and there were no other addresses on record for any of them, the ovines had for all intents and purposes vanished off the map. Whether they had another secret hideaway, found some seedy motel to stash the stag, or what, they had all come to the painful conclusion that they would not be able to locate their quarry…not until the rams put in an appearance.
at Animalia itself.

Which had left Bogo to gather together all the officers that might be needed to either subdue Buckley, arrest his captors, or perform crowd control to keep the concertgoers and performers alike safe (and hopefully none the wiser to what was going on backstage); obtain the warrants and other necessary paperwork; and bring all the needed weaponry, including plenty of tranquilizer guns. And that in turn meant while the others ate, showered, and collapsed into their various states of somnolence, Judy had been left with nothing to do…except, after getting some much-needed food and sleep herself, try to understand the underpinnings of this case, why it had happened, what had truly been the impetus and cause of one sheep family’s descent into hatred, prejudice, megalomania, and madness.

What she’d found, though, when she began poring through records—whether City Hall files, information the ZPD had obtained over the years regarding the many known elements of the mafia and their underlings (including a few things which had been sealed as part of the corruption cases against Captain Hemion), other police cases over the years, and articles from the back issues of the *Zootopia Times* and the *Meadowlands Grazette*—what she’d found had bewildered her, made her stomach sink, and divided her heart between deep sympathy and sullen, frustrated anger.

She hadn’t been certain what she would find, really. Part of her had feared the beliefs and attitudes both Dawn and her brother had espoused, and the actions they’d taken based on them, had been something they’d been raised to consider right and justified, passed to them over the dinner table and encouraged throughout their lives the same as the lessons and support they had received at school. *After all, “They must be carefully taught.”*

Not that she had anything against sheep—far from it! Two of her best friends growing up in Bunnyburrow, Gareth and Sharla, had been lambs. But it had been hard for her to believe Dawn and Cyrus could have come to the worldviews they had, and committed such horrible atrocities, if it hadn't been something they learned at home; at the very least, unless they were very good at hiding it, she had wondered how they could have gotten away with such views if their parents did not agree with them.

At the same time, the commentary Lionheart had made on the way to the Cloven Hoof, regarding the black sheep market, had also made her wonder if perhaps there was something, deep inside sheep society, that could have produced such beliefs, given them more widespread influence than she wanted to accept. Could there really have been far worse things in their species' history than for other prey? Could they have been hunted and slain in more traumatizing ways, or mistreated more harshly and cruelly by predators, once upon a time?

Or by contrast, could there be a grain of truth to some species generalizations—in this case, a combination of the timidity and self-effacing shyness that seemed endemic to the ovines and other mammals' belief in their simple-minded, follow-the-leader herd mentality? That their inherent fear of
bigger, more powerful, meat-eating mammals had led them to see persecution and oppression that wasn't there, to always believe the worst of predators (something she knew, with both shame and sorrow, had been true for so very long of rabbits toward foxes, and sadly still was to some degree—despite the fact that any vulpine actions which may once have justified such views were now long in the past). And that this fear had then been passed almost virally among the rest of the species, accepted unquestioningly even by mammals who had never experienced such treatment…and might even have had examples in their own lives which testified to the opposite attitude.

Or…could there even have been some actions taken by sheep themselves, long forgotten and perhaps even deliberately wiped from the history books, which had explained (though never justified) some sort of response from predators, turning the whole thing into a vicious cycle of retaliation and vengeance?

None of these were questions she had answers to…and in the case of the deeper, darker, more underlying ones, unless she did some major digging and was willing to face both concerted opposition and the scanty, incomplete records which might be the only way to find the truth, some of the questions would likely never be answered. But in the end, when she had researched the Bellwether family itself, she had found what she sought was both extraordinarily simple—perhaps too much so—yet also sadly, completely understandable.

The headline blared on the screen from twenty-five years ago, slightly grainy thanks to the scan of the newspaper that had created this microfiche record, something that even digital clean-up couldn't completely erase: _RESPECTED TEACHER SLAIN BY SERIAL KILLER WOLF._

The story was terse, grisly, and ugly. Kale Bellwether, beloved history teacher at Meadowlands Middle School, had been found dead in the living room of his well-appointed home, where quiet side streets, picket fences, and the whispering boughs of shade trees could not conceal the horror within. The ram's wife, local seamstress Thea Bellwether of the quaintly charming Sunshine Sotique, had returned home in the evening to find a horrifying scene: for her husband had not merely been murdered, but eviscerated to the point that not only were the carpets soaked with his blood (and his wool had become a lurid crimson), but it rather appeared as if his killer had attempted to dismember him in the manner savage predators had done with their prey centuries ago. Searching the rest of the house but finding no trace of the couple's children, Thea had fled shrieking into the night until collapsing in tears in the arms of her nearest neighbor, who had called the police…all she could conclude being that the creature who had done this had also done away with the rest of her family—kidnapping them, killing them, even consuming every trace of them.

When the authorities had arrived, however, they had discovered little Cyrus and Dawn tucked safely in a wood closet alongside the fireplace, clearly placed there to protect them from the deplorable murderer who had invaded their home. The little ewe girl had been nearly as traumatized as her mother, left speechless, wide-eyed, and tear-soaked, certainly unable to tell the investigators of anything that had taken place, even had she witnessed it. Her brother, however, had been consumed only by fury and hate, quite aware of his surroundings, and had gladly told the police everything he had seen.
This, coupled with the evidence in the living room, was enough to crack the case—for the previous four or five months, there had been other unexplained deaths in the district, but in almost every case the victim had simply vanished, with nothing left behind to indicate who had accosted them or what their fate had been. Mr. Bellwether, however, had put up a terrific struggle despite having been caught by surprise—likely because he knew his children were nearby and in grave danger—and as a result, his body had been left behind to provide clues as to the killer's identity and methods. Little Cyrus's testimony, as well as blood from the scene and several hanks of fur his father had managed to rip from the murderer's pelt, had allowed the police to track down and capture the one responsible.

A local wolf by the name of Peter Mallupe had turned out to be the culprit…and when the police had located him and raided his home for his arrest, they had discovered just how unbalanced and disturbed his insane mind was, as the place was filled with the evidence of all his previous crimes. As would have occurred at the Bellwethers', if he had not been delayed and then forced to flee, each of his victims had not only been torn to pieces but actually cut up into…the proper size and shape for cold storage, the better to be consumed at his leisure.

In fact it was likely he had been at this for long enough that short of finding all the bones, there would be no way of telling how many he had killed, since he had long ago eaten the evidence. Not that this would stop the police from digging all around the properties owned by him and his family, to leave no disappearance in the area of the last two decades unsolved if they could help it…

The scrape of feet on the sand-scoured stone floor behind her was her only warning, and then a paw rested gently on her shoulder. "Mmm…good afternoon, Carrots. Any luck? Inquiring minds want to know."

Stilling her racing heart back to a manageable level, Judy glanced back at Nick where he leaned on the back of her chair—still shirtless, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, but otherwise his usual laidback, easygoing self. If she had lost him at the Palm, she didn't know what she would have done. And since he was still here, having him refuse to change his wry and breezy ways made him oddly comforting amidst all the darkness and fear this case was unearthing.

Sighing, she pointed at the screen before her, trying to fight back the churning in her stomach; the story had thankfully included only family photos of the deceased and pictures taken of the home from outside, but she could imagine it all too well on her own. "See for yourself, Slick. It's…pretty awful, actually." She'd been trained at the academy to deal with death, blood, and violence, had been told by her forensics instructors of all the terrible things one mammal could do to another that she would most certainly encounter at some point in her career. But hearing about it and seeing it were two different things…and in some ways this went beyond anything she'd studied before.

Behind her she heard the chair creak…and then after a few seemingly endless moments of silence,
she heard the fox's breath rasp in his throat. Apparently it was beyond anything Nick had seen either. "What? Good God, no…no…"

"I'm afraid so." Judy bit her lip, clicked the 'Next' button, and gestured somewhat helplessly at the images now on the screen. "Look at that…" Two little lambs, one male and one female, stood hidden behind their mother's skirts; with only vestigial horns and lacking his size and bulk, Cyrus was barely recognizable, but there was no mistaking the huge, teary eyes and tremulous chin of the former Assistant Mayor.

She waited silently as Nick read over her shoulder, only responding when he asked her to turn a page back or forward or to explain something from one of the other records she'd read. When he was through, her partner ran his paw back over his head and groaned softly. "Oh, damn. This…this changes a lot, doesn't it?" She glanced back in time to see him squeeze his green eyes shut, then shake his head slowly. "Please tell me they threw the book at the sicko who did this."

Judy crossed her arms, wondering if he could tell the action was meant as much to clasp herself protectively as anything else. "Depends how you define that. But I'll give you three guesses where he ended up, and the first two don't count."

A beat, then the vulpine replied with a tone she hadn't heard before, though it had shades of the way he'd spoken to her after that fateful press conference—dark, threatening, but also tinged with a cruel satisfaction. "Cliffside." When she nodded in acknowledgement, he added, "I think I might take back some of the things I said about the place, then…so what happened to the Bellwether family after that?"

Turning back several webpages to the civic records she'd accessed first, the rabbit pointed—a photo here, a subheading there. "Well, Thea recovered, eventually, though she was never really the same. The kids? Looks like they took different paths, the exact opposite in fact."

Nick peered at the same things Judy had read, Bellwether's various awards, honors, and public commendations throughout the years, ranging from roles at her high school newspaper and student council to work as a legal secretary, city councilmammal, and legislator. "A real go-getter, our Dawn was. Did everything right and by the book, all about propriety and order, everything to do with the law and seeking justice. This is starting to make too much sense."

"Yeah. And look at her brother." Now she called up the sealed records from the ZPD's files on Corlione's operations, the ones that showed Cyrus's careful, methodical, but still rather meteoric rise through Sahara Square's mafia until becoming the lion's right-paw mammal. "He went the other way. From what I read, he was something of a juvenile delinquent as he grew up, petty theft, extortion, intimidating shakedowns, that kind of thing. High-school dropout, but it was out of contempt and a vicious temper that got him suspended half the time, not from lack of smarts; he got good grades
when he put his mind to it. And after he reached adulthood…”

The fox scanned the lines on the screen, one ear flicking idly in a mannerism she'd come to learn meant discomfort and worry. "Armed robbery, racketeering, money laundering…well he didn't think small, now did he…” He paused, frowning. "How did you get all this, Carrots? There's some really sensitive stuff in here, and most of this never made it to the mainstream media."

Judy managed a real, if small, smile. "Ah, I got that part of the ZPD Records Department unsealed by special permission. I wheedled it out of Clawhauser with a promise of heaping boxes of homemade pastries, courtesy of good ol' Gideon Grey."

In spite of the situation Nick snorted in good humor; he knew enough by now about her past to appreciate what it meant that a fox, Gideon in particular, could be a good friend to her and her family now. "Ah Benny, never change…heh, at this rate you're going to have to start keeping Gid on retainer, or at least including him as an expense when you write up your reports for Bogo. That's how many cases now he's helped you on, whether he knew it or not?"

Ignoring him—as far as she was concerned, now that she knew what Gideon had made of himself, she had no intention of him falling out of contact again if she could help it—she said, "Anyway, I think the pertinent bit about our adversary is right here."

Nick looked at the ZPD file she'd brought up, looked again, and then whistled, low and slowly. "The thing that really put him on the map, and made Corlione trust him. Well I gotta hand it to old Cyrus, it takes quite the cojones to get all the members of your boss's biggest rival family in one place, gas them, and mow down the stragglers with tommy-gun fire." He paused as he read the last paragraph, something the police officer in charge had somehow considered only an afterthought. "Of course. The target of the Loupcchesi Massacre? A family of wolves."

"But I'm afraid Dawn doesn't get off completely scot-free in comparison." Judy tapped one foot restlessly on the opposite shin. "I made it a point to look again at the list of our original fourteen missing mammals in the Night Howler case. The very first one to disappear was a wolf in the Canyonlands, right between Savanna Central, Sahara Square, and Tundratown. And his name was Mack Mallupe."

The fox cursed softly under his breath. "You don't mean…"

"Yup," she replied, softly. "Peter was his uncle. Whatever was wrong with him, it didn't afflict his nephew, thank goodness. But that didn't matter to Bellwether."
There was a very long pause, during which the apartment was silent with the only sounds being one of the lions rumbling or growling in his sleep behind them or a vehicle out on the winding warren of streets. Then Nick said, just as soft but quite firm, "I see. So you're not letting all this get to you, second-guessing yourself and such. I was going to say…"

"No. Maybe? I don't know." Miserable, Judy looked up at him and couldn't fight back the tears completely. "Nothing can excuse what they've done, what they've become. They let one night—a night that admittedly ruined their childhoods, maybe their whole lives—change how they looked at everyone around them. They decided one crazy wolf meant every other predator out there had the same sickness, the same bloodthirsty love of carnage and savagery, inside them. And they let it push them into things they were absolutely convinced were right, things that absolutely had to be done to protect all prey in Zootopia, until they became monsters, too."

She trailed off, then spoke thickly. "But that doesn't change how horrible the things they went through were. If…if only I'd known…if I could have talked to Dawn about all this, let her know that just because one predator went on a killing rampage doesn't mean she should…that it would be all right for her to…"

Suddenly Nick's arms were around her, holding her close, and she found herself sobbing in his shoulder. "There, there…forget what I said before. Let it all out. It's okay."

She hiccupped, not even knowing if the sound she was making was crying or laughing. On the one paw, she hadn't let one experience with a fox taint her view of the entire species or of all predators—though she'd come close, falling into fear-driven instincts with Nick and blinding herself to other possibilities after hearing Dr. Honey Badger's theories (and she was a predator herself, shouldn't that have made her realize there might be more going on than simple primitive regression?). On the other paw, what if she had let it influence her into full-on prejudice? Or what if Nick, instead of simply becoming what everyone believed him to be and choosing to take advantage of others for his own gain, had actually come to hate and reject all prey species like the ones in his kithood ranger troop?

After her tears had passed and she had wiped her nose (not in Nick's fur, thankfully, but with a nearby stray washcloth), Judy sat back and looked at her partner soberly. She knew his mind was running along the same course as hers when she saw the shine fading in his eyes, and his ears folding partially back. "It's not okay, though. What I found…it explains so much. It doesn't excuse it, it doesn't justify it. But it does mean something else…in one way or another, there's something wrong, something broken, in Bellwether's family. Because of it, she came up with that mad Night Howler scheme. And because of it, the failsafe she came up with is now being carried out by her brother. That's what we're up against. We've gotta find some way to put a stop to it. But…"

Nick rubbed at the back of his neck, stared at the floor briefly, then looked back at her uncertainly.
"But you don't know if that's even the half of it, do you? Because we don't know...we really don't know...if that's the extent of the plan. Or just what Cyrus might be willing to do, if we drive him to it by putting a stop to what he's doing with Buckley."

Yes, that was where her worries and uncertainties had led her, why she'd been sitting alone in the darkened living room for hours, as she thought about the carrying case with the Night Howler ampoules on the bed in Gazelle's suite. And as she looked at the fox, she saw that just as she had no answers for what might lie ahead or how they could prevent the worst from happening...neither did he. The glib, loquacious Nick Wilde was at a loss for words.

They stayed like that, embracing each other for support, for a long, silent time until Delgato and Lionheart awoke and it was time to make their final preparations.

Chapter End Notes

So, as promised, I've finally made the reveal of just what prominent rich family Lionheart's is based on. Though really, his given name should have hinted at it long ago. Although for obvious reasons Teddy Roosevelt has always been associated with bears, personally I think his physical appearance was as much leonine as any other animal's. There's also the fact I believe Leodore was a very progressive mayor, while Teddy pretty much invented the party; Teddy was a big game hunter, while Leodore himself actually is a predator, and Teddy's conservation efforts parallel Leo's Mammal Inclusion Initiative; both of them are/were extremely charismatic. And "speak softly and carry a big stick" (altered to fit the Zootopia world) applies to Leodore too, I think. I certainly could picture Leodore getting shot in the middle of giving a speech and going on with it without missing a beat! At the same time he has more than a little of FDR in him, too, considering his determination to help out prey rather than just predators is a parallel to FDR being a "traitor to his class" for wanting to help the poor. I can totally see him as saying "I welcome their hatred" to fellow predators who may have spoken out against his candidacy! (In fact he does say something similar a bit later, as you will see.) So aside from the famous saying, there's his relatives: Cornelius was Theodore's grandfather (his father was also named Theodore, making him a Junior, but I didn't want to do that with Leodore's father), his mother was Martha, his brother was Elliott, and two of his cousins were James and, of course, Franklin.

Lots of references to the movie, and also to plenty of amusing fanon notions. Bucky's comment about everyone owning a pair of the glitter shorts is a sly nod to the fact that so many fans love to draw as many characters as possible wearing them. "The Stripers" is a fandom nickname for Gazelle's dancers, and of course the idea of one of the ZPD cops being one of the dancers (Jackson, since Fangmeyer might well be female) is another popular fandom belief based on the fact all the tigers in the movie have the same character model. (Hence "all tigers look alike"!) I should also note there being another lookalike tiger as a masseur at the Mystic Oasis is canon, although I didn't notice said character in the background until it was pointed out to me. They're everywhere! ^_^ As for the art book, both Nick's dad having been a tailor and the original idea for Gazelle's Animalia stadium are shout-outs.
More names: I've gone with an ironic theme naming on the Bellwether family, to go along with Dawn: Cyrus means "sun", Thea was the Greek goddess of light (mother of Helios, Selene, and Eos), and Kale is the name of one of Jupiter's moons (but also means pure and fair). The story of Mr. Bellwether's murder is very loosely based on the backstory for the haunting in the YA novel *The Dollhouse Murders*. While Peter Mallupe is a character of my own invention, his nephew Mack is another character (though so far off-screen) in my friend 6wingdragon's "Brave". Having him be one of the original missing mammals, of course, is made possible by most of them remaining unnamed characters in canon. And speaking of my friend and his fic, the bit in the flashback where Lionheart is thinking of caring for cubs at the hospital is, like Nurse Lanny Wild, a nod to the medieval notion that lion fathers were extremely protective and attentive to their offspring, to the point of actually breathing life into them (after three days, natch) due to being born dead. Expect this to be touched on again later. The name of the rival family of the Corliones which Cyrus wiped out, by the way, is a nod to the Lucchesis of *The Godfather*, of course (although the manner of their deaths is partly a shout-out to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre). Sorry for dragging things out so long before finally revealing who my Big Bad is, but do trust that Corlione has a reason for being in the story than just being a red herring. And while I am not precisely attempting to redeem Dawn here, I did feel it necessary to do some backstory to explain how and why she became what she did. This will come up again later as well.

Finally, on a personal note, the bit about Delgato having pastel drawings of scenes from *The Lion King* is...a shout-out to myself! While I don't really consider myself an artist, I do have a little talent, and I was of course very inspired by the movie when it first came out. I even included the pictures in a show of my art my senior year in high school. Sadly there's obviously no way to scan such things, but I do still have them and am proud of them even today. The fact Manny had such artwork, after having been teased and mocked with *The Lion King* as a cub, should tell you a few things about his resiliency and refusal to let bullies ruin entertainment for him.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nightfall.

As their unmarked car pulled into a parking space in the back lot of Animalia, where only the security team, performers, and backstage workers were usually allowed to park (both Bogo calling ahead and the assistance of Nick’s friend had given them special dispensation for this), Judy gazed up at the stadium looming into the indigo sky with its twinkling stars above them. She wished she could truly appreciate the sight. The structure, the proper name of which was the Water Hole (Animalia merely being the district where it was located, as well as the subway line that served it), was as unique and awe-inspiring as any other in Zootopia, fashioned as it was to resemble a drop striking the surface of water, caught in an eternally-frozen splash upward; its walls, some sort of translucent blue stone, gave off a constant shimmering glow as they both caught the spotlights shining without and radiated the sparkling array of lights suspended high over both seats and stage. The whole thing formed quite the spectacle out on its circular pier, a blazing beacon with one road linking it to the mainland, the loop of the train tracks extending out around its other side, and plenty of boats cruising across the waters to reach the docks which extended out like many long fingers all around its circumference.

But the rabbit, who would normally have been awed by such vast modern architecture so unlike the
humble dwellings of her home, or excited at the prospect of getting to see Gazelle once more, could only consider that such a large building would have an equally vast backstage to cordon off and search, something which might well be beyond even the entire force of Precinct One…and that the crowd packing the stadium, which was only growing larger with each passing minute, was the target of Cyrus's diabolical plan.

A number of public places had been the site of 'savage regressions' during the Pred Scare—though thankfully not the peaceful protests in Sahara Square and Savanna Central—and a large number of mammals had been in danger there, at least theoretically before the raging predators were taken into custody by the ZPD. This was on a different scale altogether…many more mammals, and concentrated together in a relatively enclosed space where it would be far easier for multiple victims to be attacked at once. And the ensuing panic would surely cause a stampede toward the exits; Judy knew all too well what occurred at large events without proper exits and packed beyond the legal fire code capacity.

Hopefully it wouldn't come to that, if they could locate the rams in time, tranq Buckley, and bring the criminals to justice. But there were so many things that could go wrong, and as Nick had voiced earlier, there was no telling what Cyrus might do if his plan was thwarted, what other backups he might have to still bring about his revenge. All she could do was hope the four of them, and the team Bogo had brought to back them up, would be enough to handle whatever might happen next.

At least, though, there were no more secrets between them. Well…she hadn't chosen to inform Lionheart or Delgato about what they'd discovered on the Net; the information wasn't necessary for their mission, and might well distract the big cats, make them hesitate or even refuse to act at all at a key moment. It was bad enough that she and Nick were somewhat ambivalent now about just whom they were facing, and how much force was justified to bring against them. They didn't need the lions being similarly uncertain, possibly paralyzed by a moral dilemma…

But aside from this, the truth was fully out among them at last, for after all of them had eaten, gotten changed, and begun the drive to the concert, Judy had finally confronted—gently, but with determined resolve—the former mayor with the realization she'd come to back at the Palm, about him and Stagmire. And amazingly, he had admitted to it.

Once she'd understood what was really going on, what lay hidden behind all of Lionheart's odd phrases, the catches in his voice, the looks on his face, what he had told and what he hadn't, his actions past and present—well, it had all made such perfect sense to her she wanted to kick herself. But in her defense, it wasn't as if a country bunny like her had a lot of experience with same-sex relationships. She'd known they existed…among very large families like the ones in and around Bunnyburrow, the odds were in favor of a significant number of mammals with such attractions.

And considering how prolifically rabbits reproduced, with one pair making so many offspring, hardly any had seemed to care anyway if not every member of their species went on to do the same.
Really, from that point of view, I bet that takes off a lotta pressure! To be perfectly honest, one as kind-hearted, open-minded, and idealistic as she had always been—always willing to see and believe in the best in others—had not been fazed in the least to learn of such a thing, and her parents had been swift to tell her there was nothing whatsoever wrong about it; it was just one more thing which made mammals different and unique from each other.

To be sure there had been some families and individuals who seemed to find the idea disgusting, or at least unsettling, enough that she understood fairly quickly (even beyond such a thing being private and nobody else's business) why mammals didn't advertise it if they could help it. And while some species were known, or at least rumored, to be prone or even predisposed to it, this was often considered a thing of the past, something else to be left behind with mammals' primitive ways when they achieved sentience and civilization. Not to mention species with much smaller litters or even just a single offspring per mating would have very different expectations... But for the most part it had been something kept quiet, yet tacitly allowed.

So while intellectually she could understand there might be reasons for Lionheart and Buckley to keep their feelings for each other a secret—even aside from both of them working in politics together, and despite their larger size giving them a much greater advantage against those who might wish to subject them to hatred or even harm—it was still something that had never crossed her mind. And it was something she'd not gotten to witness up close so as to recognize it when she saw it.

(The Oryx-Antlersons didn't exactly count, since she hardly considered them friends, or good role models of a relationship either. She supposed there must be something they saw in each other that kept them together, but as far as she could tell, they were the perfect example of what her mother had told her, when she'd first asked why two males or two females would want to get married: "Oh, they just want to be able to suffer like the rest of us, dear.")

Now that she had? She actually found it one of the most amazing and adorable things she'd ever encountered. If matters weren't so dire, if she weren't so worried about what would happen in the next few hours and whether they'd be able to save Buckley let alone protect the concertgoers and performers, Judy was fairly certain she'd be giggling gleefully at the prospect of getting the cured deer and the lion in the same room together, just to watch the magic happen. For certain she couldn't deny the fact the two handsome mammals absolutely made a good couple.

And she also couldn't deny that while what he had done was still illegal and had caused a great deal of distress and chaos to the city, she understood at last exactly why Lionheart had been so desperate to effect this rescue, and to keep what had happened to Buckley a secret until a cure could be found. It's actually pretty romantic, when you think about it. Knowing what she did now, she actually found herself not only rooting for them, but as determined to rescue the stag as Leodore was...and see the lion forgiven for his crimes so they could be together again.

Not that that was up to her, in the end. But if all went well, she'd absolutely be putting in a good
word for him, and doing all she could to make sure everything was placed in perspective before a sentence was passed; it was the least she could do at this point. And after he'd told them all just how long he'd been in love with Stagmire…and of their first meeting where he had defended the young fawn from bullies, so similar to her own defense of her childhood friends from Gideon Grey…her heart had melted. She absolutely agreed that the reason Lionheart had given for why he'd come after Buckley ("To fulfill a promise") deserved to be upheld.

She wasn't quite as certain why what had occurred had made the former mayor fear the true nature of their relationship might come out, if he were completely open about it—which he had confessed was indeed a big part of the reason for all the secrecy and hidden scheming—but perhaps it was simply the repercussions of the District Attorney being a victim too he'd been afraid of, and the rest was simply understandable (if overcompensating) protectiveness toward one he loved so deeply.

Judy had been a bit concerned as to whether Nick and Manny would be as sanguine about it as she was; for a lot of unfortunate reasons, it seemed to be males who had a problem with such things the most. She needn't have worried; the fox had more than anything looked nettled and disgusted with **himself** for not figuring it out sooner (something that mollified the rabbit's own disgruntlement—even if it had only been a short time earlier, she'd still managed to outfox the con man, again!). And immediately after that, Nick had offered Leodore a warm smile and a congratulatory paw to shake…followed by the blandly nonchalant observation that he was 'sure the kids would be beautiful.'

The rabbit had been torn between scandalized hissing at him to keep his muzzle shut and bursting out laughing…the latter had won out when, after a deep blush, Lionheart himself had thrown back his maned head and laughed, rich and hearty as could be. ("We'll see," he'd replied cryptically when he had recovered his poise again.)

As for Delgato, she had worried about him even more due to his background (not to mention the earlier resentment there had been between the cats). But after staring off into space for some time, seeming to focus only on navigating Sahara Square's streets on their trip to the most southern of the city's districts, the young lion had turned away from the wheel, given the Barbary a long, surprisingly heartfelt look, and then apologized for the way he'd acted before…because he understood exactly how Leodore felt, and might have been just as tempted to break the law, if it had been necessary to save Manchas, the mammal he loved.

The car had been silent again for several long moments after that, and then Nick had rather smugly turned her words from the Palm back on her, insisting she pay up. Grumbling, she had done so; she had been of the opinion that it was entirely possible their fellow officer only saw the poor traumatized black jaguar as a good friend, nothing more, and even annoyed at the implication there **had** to be more to their relationship.

But the vulpine had simply made a smug reference to Florence Nightingoat, and also that he'd picked up Manchas's scent on Delgato's fur a number of times, something which implied **quite** the closeness
between the cats, and left it at that. (That his heightened sense of smell gave Nick an unfair advantage in this bet was somehow not remarked on.)

Once he'd gotten over his embarrassment, which took surprisingly little time—really, such betting as to who was dating/bedding whom was so common in the precinct it shouldn't have been unexpected at all—Manny had noted that knowing it was more than the DA they were trying to rescue, but also Lionheart's beloved, the former mayor could count on him to be in his corner for the rest of the case. The only objection he made, slightly peevishly, was to wonder why the bigger lion hadn't made things easier on them by simply posting bail so he could move about the city with them far more uninhibited.

At that point Leodore had reminded him, tightly but with careful control, that his family had disowned him and therefore he was cut off from his personal fortune, and of course the salary he received from City Hall was off-limits in Zootopia's Treasury. Judy had chimed in she'd thought of the same thing, back when planning this whole expedition, and needless to say the bail had been set so high there was no way any of them, even if they'd pooled their salaries, could have paid it, not even Chief Bogo had he been convinced to aid them.

And of course, since whoever posted bail was noted in the records, having a member of the ZPD, or several, or the Chief of Police himself, be responsible would have looked quite suspicious indeed—perhaps indicating police corruption all over again. Delgato had looked pained, but acknowledged this ruefully before reiterating his commitment to the cause. And the look on Lionheart's face had been so emotional that Judy had to look away, so greatly did she feel she was intruding on something sacred and private…

Her thoughts were interrupted when the young lion spoke up, breaking the long silence in the car. "Well, sitting here's not changing what we have to do, or getting us any closer to where we need to be. And the chief's waiting on us by now too, I bet." He popped the driver's door and stepped out into the cool evening shadows of the lot.

Neither she nor Nick liked the prospect of keeping Bogo's heels cooling any longer either, and of course Lionheart was like a coiled spring when it came to finally finding and saving Buckley, so in swift order they were all out of the car and gathered in a tight group—close enough together they could each defend and protect one another should it be needed, but far enough apart to appear as a group of stagehands running late to anyone who didn't look any closer.

While the fox wore his usual outfit again, and Lionheart of course still only had the same clothes they'd bought for him what seemed a lifetime ago, Judy had changed back to her usual street clothes—the biker chick/gun moll look probably wouldn't draw too many eyes here, but she didn't want to take any chances, and in any event the pink plaid shirt and denim pants reminded her of home, something she was rather in need of for grounding just at the moment.
Manny, too, was wearing faded blue jeans along with a nondescript jacket over a rather tight tank top. Whether he was just trying to fit in with the kind of mammals who labored backstage or felt more at ease around them after the day at his apartment, she didn't know, but she certainly wasn't complaining as to how it showed off his musculature quite well. *Stop it. Focus, Judy.*

As they strolled across the pavement—somehow managing to move swiftly while still appearing casual—she caught motion from the corner of her eye and turned to look. They were approaching the nearest stage door to the stadium, a thick-cut, heavy steel door bolted and barred into the wall that clearly only a larger mammal could open unaided, but just past it, at the nearest curve of water-like stone, a familiar bulky silhouette was striding through the unnaturally-bright cone cast by the nearest arc light. Behind him were other large forms, some clad in uniform as well, others in street clothes like they were, but all with sidearms at the ready or holstered but still in view. "Chief! You made it."

From the surly, disgruntled look on the Cape buffalo's face, not only did he resent her for having the temerity to suggest he would not have made it, but if it had been up to him he'd have been here hours ago even if he had to run the entire way by himself. But after exhaling a hot, heavy breath that steamed in the cool, salty air of the waterfront night, all he grumbled was, "'Course I did, Hopps. I'd have been here sooner if it hadn't taken so long to get all the men and equipment together, and if I hadn't had to wait for the damn judge to be arsed enough to do his job in a timely manner."

Left unspoken was the fact that, just as they needed to be careful and circumspect at the concert so as not to generate panic, so too would it have required caution, slowness, and staggered waves of cars to get all the officers and equipment here while not drawing attention to themselves.

After a moment's pause, during which his judgmental gaze swept briefly over each of the others (Nick remained as unflappable as ever, but both Delgato and Lionheart vacillated, the former in nervousness, the latter in tense anticipation), Bogo managed a small, grim smile. "It's done, however. I've got an arrest warrant here with Cyrus Bellwether's name on it, and three others for Doug Ramses and his men." At her questioning look, he added, "I've left the parts we don't know blank for once we capture these rams. Once we know who they are, we'll be looking into their records, believe you me."

Glancing behind him to where four of the biggest officers flanked him, and beyond them to the shapes of at least three other police cars appearing ghostly in the rising sea fog, he said, "We've got enough here to take them all in, I think, and to help maintain order at the concert, so long as we can keep things quiet and nothing gets out of hand."

Judy couldn't help noticing the pointed look he gave her as he said this last, and drew herself up to her full height as she took a deep breath. "Now, Chief, I explained everything this morning when I radioed you, and you said you understood then. I don't think it's very fair if since then you—"
Bogo cut her off with a snort and a slice of his hoof in the air, but when he spoke his tone, though crisp and no-nonsense as always, remained hushed and conciliatory; she wondered though if this was more due to their location and not wanting to tip anyone off as to their presence.

"Nothing has changed since then, Hopps. While I cannot say I am happy with how matters have developed, you and your team have made the right decisions and the best choices from those available to you at the time. We wouldn't know who was behind this, what they planned, or any other details about where they were and how we could apprehend them if not for you. And the moment things did seem to be too much for you, and you needed backup to handle it, that's when you called us and got things back under control."

Gesturing behind him to wave forward Trumpet and Simmers, who were carrying the necessary tranq guns and their ammunition, he raised an eyebrow rather sardonically at her. "Now that we've joined the party, though, let's try and keep it that way, hmm?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth, Chief," Nick inserted smoothly, blithely accepting a gun from the bear and strapping it to his hip opposite his regular sidearm. The effect with his untucked shirt and loose slacks was disconcerting, but the way he gripped his belt as well as his stance showed how truly professional he was when the chips were down. For some odd reason, she felt extremely proud of him. "The last thing we need is more citizens in danger, and it's way too important that this thug gets locked up before he can do what he intends to do." The fox's suddenly serious demeanor, even a certain darkness in his features and voice, was startling, but after all they'd learned, she didn't blame him one bit.

Grunting in acknowledgement but otherwise not saying a word—she doubted the buffalo would ever fully approve of his most unorthodox and audacious officer, especially one who was as likely to flout his authority and call him on his decisions as to be fun and wisecracking in the bullpen—Bogo snapped his hoof at the others. It was Fangmeyer who strode up to hand a tranq gun to Judy, having to kneel down to do so but not seeming to mind.

For a moment the tigress's eyes met hers, and she felt a flash of unity and connectedness—two females, two mammals, predator and prey, both determined to keep everyone at this event safe and ensure the city they both loved would not fall apart again as it had six months ago. They shared a smile, an approving nod, and then moved on.

Once Krumpansky, the last cop Bogo had brought over with him, had given Delgato his new weaponry, Nick turned toward the back door they'd originally been aiming for. "Okay then...with your permission, Chief, I already called ahead, and the friend of mine who works here should be waiting to let us in."
The buffalo nodded peremptorily, but paused one last time to rest a cool, considering gaze on Lionheart. "You've done a very good thing in alerting us to this threat, and guiding the course of this investigation. I also thank you for saving the lives of two of my officers. But I hope you can understand why I don't feel comfortable arming you as well. If you can help us any further, all well and good, but I'd appreciate it if you stayed out of the way as much as possible during this sting. Don't forget you're still a target too."

Judy watched the former mayor closely, and marked quite clearly when his shoulders slumped and his pensive look turned disappointed and saddened—not because he specifically wanted a gun, she suspected, but because of the lack of trust which went along with the denial of it. She understood too, and couldn't blame Bogo—all else being equal, until the Barbary went to trial he was still an arrested felon; despite being a model prisoner, giving him a weapon simply wasn't done. But once again, she felt her heart going out to Leodore. Just a bit longer, sir. We'll save Buckley for you, save Zootopia…and then I'll get you out of this somehow, as much as I can anyway.

For a few more moments everyone—but especially the four backup officers—watched Lionheart, as if expecting him to object, or even attempt to escape. When nothing of the sort occurred, Bogo nodded for a second time and gestured them all together. Warily but with determination, ZPD's finest crossed the rest of the pavement…the wind whining around the strange shapes of the structure before them, the water lapping loudly against the dock pilings behind them…as the fox led them on with his usual relaxed stride. But Judy could sense the tension even in him, and swallowed hard as she kept her violet gaze fixed squarely on the steel door.

When at last they achieved the door, Nick paused at the threshold, then knocked in a definite pattern. Time passed with what seemed agonizing slowness as each of them kept their paws near one gun or the other, watchful eyes observing everything around them for any sign of a disturbance, any strange characters about, anything at all that seemed out of place. Then Judy's sensitive ears picked up the lumbering weight of a large mammal approaching, making the floor on the other side shudder. The sound of a bolt and locks tripping filled the air, and with a low groan the door swung open—first a crack, allowing them the sight of an ice-blue eye peering out guardedly, then wider as the mammal's gaze fell on Nick and recognition appeared.

Standing inside the darkened backstage was a massive silhouette blocking out the cold light, tall and broad enough to fill the entire doorway, blocky of countenance and solidly thick of build. As her vision slowly adjusted, she somehow wasn't surprised to see it was a tiger—Gazelle certainly seemed to have a thing for them—although this one was an absolutely pure white in his base coat which shone almost blindingly bright in the night. He was larger even than Jackson (and, she suspected, the singer's backup dancers), of a size with Bogo and Leodore, although there was a thickness to both limbs and torso which suggested some fat and fur was involved.

A powerlifter, rather than a bodybuilder. Perfect for his line of work, since she got the distinct impression from looking at his hard, stern face and the way he glared daggers at each of them in turn before noticing the police uniforms that he was in charge of security here, not just helping move and set up heavy equipment. Currently he was clad in tight blue jeans and a plaid shirt, the sleeves of
which were rolled up to expose his rather colossal forearms, crossed over his barrel chest as he stared out into the shadows of the parking lot.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Nick intoned with a smooth, pleasant lilt as he spread his arms invitingly. "Xander, my man, my main man, my cooool cat."

Somehow the big tiger managed to look both nervous and a bit distraught, leaning back away from the fox and eyeing him with accusing suspicion; if she'd had any doubts the fellow knew Nick (and knew him well), they'd have been dispelled now. "Oh no you don't, Wilde. I'm not getting involved in another of your schemes, and I know a damn sight better than to let you butter me up again. The last time I did that, I ended up booking it for home with a bare backside and not a stitch of clothing to my name!"

Silence reigned for several long moments. Someone coughed; Judy heard a low chuckle, a clearing throat, even a quickly stifled giggle. Glancing at the others, she found their backups were all shooting her partner the same broad grins and knowing looks (although Fangmeyer seemed fixed on her fellow striped cat instead, a very appraising gaze running over his frame). Delgato seemed to be trying hardest not to laugh; Lionheart had both eyebrows raised, though she otherwise thought he seemed as determined and focused on the mission as ever.

She glanced at Nick, who for once seemed to be fighting the contrary urges to clasp his paws behind his head in lazy satisfaction and shrink back with a sheepish, cracked smile. Do I want to know the story behind this one, Slick?

Glowering darkly, Bogo rolled his eyes and stepped forward. "Yes, quite fascinating, I'm sure. Now if you're through, perhaps we could get on with more important matters?"

His words seemed to finally startle the vulpine out of his stunned uncertainty. Rubbing at the back of his neck, Nick said, "Ah…yes. Everyone, this is Alexander Pounceski. A very good friend of mine, we go back for years. He's also been with Gazelle's team as a bouncer and stagehand for some time. Xander, this is my partner Judy Hopps, and I trust you recognize Chief Bogo…"

Even as the tiger was nodding, his expression shifting from surliness to unhappiness, the buffalo interrupted. "No need for elaborate introductions, Wilde. Mr. Pounceski, I trust your…friend has apprised you of the situation?"

Xander nodded slowly, and although he kept flicking his eyes to Nick suspiciously, as if expecting a con to strike at any moment, his face softened somewhat; apparently the intimidating demeanor was something of an act to keep away interlopers and crazed fans. "Not in so many words, I understand
you're on a real hush-hush case and knowing too much could cause a lot of mammals to get hurt. But I know there's some danger here, and that it's targeting Gazelle." A haunted, frightened look appeared briefly in his eyes, which now looked more the hue of a troubled sea.

Then he clenched his jaw and let out a deep snarl; the motion drew attention to something Judy hadn't noticed before, a series of harsh scars under the fur of his cheeks and muzzle. "I don't know who could have gotten in here without my knowing about it…but Nick said something about backstage passes, and there are a lot of places to hide behind the Water Hole."

Approaching the feline's knee, just even with her face, Judy peered up past his shelf of a chest, waited until he looked down at her expectantly, and then said, "So you'll help us then? Let us in, show us around so we can do a proper search and set up a perimeter?"

The tiger regarded her carefully, seeming to take in every detail, and then nodded, stepping aside while holding the door open for them. "If it were just Nick asking, hell no…he is a good friend, but one I don't trust half as far as I could throw him." Beside her, the vulpine shrugged apologetically, a 'what-can-you-do' gesture that denied nothing because there was no point. "But I always cooperate with the law…I'd sooner die than let anything happen to Miss Gazelle. And I would do anything to help a hero like you, Miss Hopps." He bowed deeply, if a bit stiffly from lack of familiarity.

Judy smiled warmly; doing the right and just thing was important and needed in and of itself, but it was certainly nice to be acknowledged and respected for it, or to have it ease matters with future cases. The gift that keeps paying it forward. She only hoped Pounceski's faith in her, in all of them, was well-placed.

As Nick came up beside her, Lionheart and Delgato pressed close, and all the other cops followed behind, Bogo nodded firmly. She wasn't sure, but she thought even he looked slightly relieved not to have to bust their way into Animalia. Pulling his gun and rechecking to ensure it was loaded and the safety off, the buffalo grunted. "All right then. The night isn't getting any younger. Let's get to it, shall we?"

While the group filed one by one through the open stage door, slipped into the darkened interior of the stadium, and waited for their new guide to show them the way, Bogo fought down the urge to begin barking orders. Not just because this was his usual way of establishing authority and ensuring everything was done quickly and to his exacting standards, but because despite what he'd told Judy outside, he was still rather miffed about this whole situation.

Even though he completely understood that there'd been no point in informing him until they had
more information as to just what was going on, that didn't mean he had to like it. Frankly, if he'd been the one to discover the missing mammal had been kept at Cliffside after all (albeit in a secret, secure wing), and then that someone else had gotten to him first, 'testy' would have been far too mild a word to describe his likely reaction. He had to allow, though, that the events which had transpired afterward, as the rabbit had narrated to him that morning, would not have gone any better had he been informed of them sooner.

Lionheart likely would not have confessed to him any more easily than he had the others (less so, truth be told), and the side trip to the Cloven Hoof, while one he technically could have handled as a herbivore himself, would have been less than useless—as Chief of Police he was far too recognizable, no matter how he dressed or comported himself. The only place he might possibly have been of more use would have been against this Cyrus...but again, his high-profile identity in law enforcement would have worked against him at the front desk of the Palm, nor could he have easily reconnoitered the suite the way Judy had.

No, he had to face the fact that as much as he detested the vigilantism he'd previously forbidden before giving his permission for the rabbit's plan (and which had so infuriated him after the scurry she'd caused in Little Rodentia six months ago), it had been both necessary and effective in what Judy and the others had accomplished the previous night. He soothed himself with the knowledge that Hopps clearly understood this wasn't to be the typical means of handling cases, and that she had striven her best to remain within both law and procedure, whether in the Meadowlands or Sahara Square. There was something about this case that made everyone connected with it, not just the poor mammal victims, go wild and off the rails.

If we can capture these damn terrorists and put an end to Bellwether's plans once and for all, maybe things can finally settle down and the city get back to normal.

He also had to admit, though he would never do so aloud, that Judy's daring infiltration of the suite, as well as Wilde's rescue during the hostage situation afterward, had both drawn his admiration. Of course the latter would have been better if it hadn't required Lionheart to intervene, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He just hoped the damned fool cat listened to him for once; combing the vast backstage of the stadium, finding the villains of the piece, and bringing them to justice without disrupting the show and causing a panic would be hard enough, he didn't want to have to be looking over his shoulder to keep the former mayor on a leash too. But Delgato and his two smaller partners seemed to have achieved some sort of understanding with the Barbary that allowed them to work together fairly seamlessly, so he trusted they would take care of that part of the operation.

The only thing he found he could truly fault anyone for was the fact the missing mammal had turned out to be Buckley Stagmire. Not that he denied revealing such a prominent public figure had fallen prey to the Night Howler would be a reckless and foolhardy mistake, or that he did not understand why any of them, but Lionheart in particular, would want to make sure the deer was rescued. What irritated him exceedingly was the fact it was once again something Leodore had kept hidden from him—specifically, with that carefully worded lie about the DA having gone on vacation right around the time the mammals first started disappearing. Again, he understood it...but he had every intention
As the door finally closed behind Xander, the backstage fell into cavernous shadow, and Bogo let out a resentful grunt. His eyesight wasn't anything to write home about in the best of times; here he could barely see his own hoof before his glasses. Luckily there were a number of lights in the dim passages, whether dangling on long chains from the ceiling, screwed into walls and joists, or atop free-standing poles, and while each existed in a lone pool of often wan illumination, they were enough to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. Also luckily, not only were three of Judy's party blessed with night vision, one of his backup was as well, so hopefully anything he failed to see would still be spotted in time.

Once all was quiet and everyone was able to make their way around the somewhat cluttered backstage area, the white tiger gathered them all close so he could speak quietly and still be heard. "Okay. Like I said, there's a lot of area to cover back here. Even with how lavish and over-the-top Gazelle's shows can get, not every part of this place gets used, and there are some dressing rooms I don't think have been opened in months or longer. Before she took it over, this place was called Zootennial Stadium, they used to use it for huge celebrations for the anniversary of the city's founding. So anything you can imagine, it's here—fireworks, animatronics and puppets, jetpacks and cannons, the works. Lots of dangerous stuff, and lots of places to hide."

Bogo already knew what the stagehand was telling them, but he knew not all his officers did, and anyway it bore repeating. Peering down one aisle where decorations were piled high above his horns and costumes were stuffed onto numerous racks, he growled to himself; far too many places to hide. "Good thing we know who and what we're looking for then, hmm? What we really need to know, though, is the entrances and exits to the stage itself."

Xander gave him a penetrating look. "You weren't kidding when you said Gazelle might be in danger, were you..." After a sad, slow shake of the head from Judy, the tiger slumped his shoulders, then pointed in two directions—one straight ahead and to the left, the other at an almost perpendicular angle to the right. "There are really only two ways on and off the stage, then. It's open from above, of course, but there's nothing there but scaffolding and gantries; no way anybody could get up there safely without inside help, and from what Nick told me, at least one of them would be actively fighting the others, if not just lashing out madly at everything around them."

"There are also some trapdoors, but they're accessed from locked stunt rooms and are pretty damn small, too; nobody big enough to do any damage is getting in that way. The side exits though?" He gestured with both paws somewhat helplessly. "Wide open, and they both lead to passages that curve back out of sight of the audience. They're meant to keep anyone from seeing performers till they go out in the spotlights...but it also means anybody else who doesn't want to be seen can get way too close for comfort."

"Then that's our targets," Delgato spoke up softly but with conviction. "We can search along the
way…check as many hidden crannies, dressing rooms, and hallways as we can, maybe find the bad
guys before they get close enough. But if we can't find them, we can guard those two ways onto the
stage, so it won't matter where they are or where they come from—they'll have to get past us, and
we'll make sure they don't." He paused, then glanced at Bogo somewhat sheepishly. "Uh…that
sound okay with you, Chief?"

Although his temper was such he couldn't help rankling a bit at the young lion usurping his authority,
Delgato was proving the intellect and insight that made him trust the officer as much as Judy did.
And his analysis matched what the buffalo would have said anyway. "Good job, Delgato. That's
exactly what we'll do. I've already given orders for the rest of our backup to infiltrate the crowd. One
or two in uniform, if anyone asks they're there for extra security; the rest are in plainclothes, but
they'll be ready to act the minute anything out-of-the-ordinary happens."

He paused and looked at the fox and rabbit. "I think it's better if your group stays as it is; you've
made a good team so far, you trust each other and know how to work together, and I don't want to
introduce any more unknown variables than we've already got. Agreed?"

For a moment Judy looked like she wanted to argue—he didn't think she had any problems with
Lionheart, after all this time with him, but he doubted even one as self-reliant and confident as she
was would mind a little extra muscle on her side. But then she nodded and reached up to rest a finger
on her Bluefang. "Got it. We've still got our wires, so we can stay in touch with you and vice versa."

As the former mayor moved somewhat diffidently beyond her (but glancing down with a look so
warm and grateful he had to do a double-take to be sure he saw it) and Delgato stepped up to her
side, Nick glanced at Pounceski. "You should probably get back to whatever you'd normally be
doing, pal. We don't want to clue them in that we're here by having any change in the routines…and
we don't want you where you could get mistaken by us for one of them…or become one of their
extra targets."

The tiger swallowed slowly, rubbed at the back of his neck, then started to turn away. "I'd ask ya to
explain more of what this is all about later, when you've got time…but I get the feeling I don't wanna
know. And I'd be better off not knowing, too." After one last look at Bogo, he headed off into the
darkness toward an area where the dim shapes of ropes, pulleys, and backdrops could be vaguely
discerned; the police chief hoped Wilde was right, and going back to his job would keep him out of
the line of fire. The last thing they needed when they were trying to stop another Night Howler
rampage was to have a tiger as huge and aggressive as he apparently could be lost to the same feral
bloodlust…

With a wave of her gun, Hopps headed toward the angling passage to the right that the striped feline
had indicated, and after only a few seconds each, Delgato, Lionheart, and the fox followed. The
latter's eyes shone in the dark almost as much as the two lions' did, all of them alternately anxious,
watchful, and tense. Judy, on the other hand, looked…not frightened, never that. But upset for sure,
and also worried. She had a right to be of course, but as he watched her twitching ears, alternately
perked up and flattened to her head, as they vanished into the shadows, he had to frown. It took a lot
to worry that rabbit. He just hoped it didn't make her freeze up when it counted.

Peering back to the rhino and bear, elephant and tiger who accompanied him, he nodded toward the
left-hand passage leading straight ahead. In that direction he could both hear and feel the steady,
thrumming pounding of a bass backbeat as the music of Gazelle's opening number shook the stage
and the rest of the stadium too; there was also the distant roar of the audience cheering, rhythmic
clapping, and the antelope's voice, clear and strong and amplified by the microphone so that even
faint, at this distance, he could still hear the words.

'Cause it's an animal city
It's a cannibal world
So be obedient, don't argue
Some are ready to bite you

It's an animal city
It's a cannibal world
So be obedient, don't argue
Some are ready to bite you right off

Bogo winced; while he supposed Gazelle might have chosen the song to be deliberately brazen, to
flagrantly throw her strength and pride in the face of the prejudice, bigotry, and violence that had
nearly claimed Zootopia, it was also possible she simply hadn't considered the other ramifications of
the words, or that the audience had requested it (it was a couple years old, though he would sooner
lose at precinct strip poker than admit that he knew this to anyone but Clawhauser). That thought
made him shake his head and bite his lip; he wished he'd been able to persuade the cheetah not to
attend this evening's show, but there'd been no way to do so without revealing the full details of this
case.

Either way, he hoped all the more now that those lyrics wouldn't become dangerously prophetic…

Together he and his posse moved off down the corridor, glancing into every darkened corner and
opening every door they passed.

As she approached the main entrance to Animalia's Water Hole stadium, Officer May Swinton
paused to surreptitiously check whether her sidearms were readily available in the inner pockets of
her jacket…and after discovering that of course they were, nothing had changed since she had placed
them there before the drive over, she let out a slow exhale and gazed up at the looming walls of
glowing blue stone. Contrary to what some at the precinct might think, she did know how to relax
and have fun, and had been here numerous times before, including for other Gazelle concerts.

But she never would have guessed she'd be attending this particular night, for such a worrisome reason…and if she wasn't careful and paying attention to the proper things, rather than helping to save the day she might just end up abetting corruption and crime—or witness a terrible disaster she could well have prevented.

She'd certainly had plenty of time to think about it, about everything she had learned, guessed, and theorized, and what she could and should do about it. It had been during the early hours of the morning, following her encounter with Clawhauser, that she had followed the tracking device, only to find her receiver zeroing in on the Palm Hotel and Casino of all places. Why Lionheart and the others would be there, she'd had no idea, but if she'd had any reason to doubt either the signal itself or her patrol car's GPS that let her identify where the beeping marker had settled, it was dispelled by her own eyes.

For when she had driven cautiously into the vast parking lot of the Sahara Square landmark, she had chanced to be passing by as another vehicle was departing—and she'd easily recognized Officer Delgato behind the wheel, as well as Hopps' ears and a flash of red fur in the passenger seat. She hadn't been certain the former mayor was hidden in the shadows of the back seat, but the way the receiver signal had nearly blared in her ears, then receded before the direction indicator had swung to point back the way she'd come, was enough proof for her.

Of course her first instinct had been to wheel about and immediately pursue them. But aside from the fact that she couldn't do so without drawing attention to herself, and that she didn't think she could handle all four together should she catch up to them and provoke a confrontation, there was the fact she had no idea why they had been here or what had occurred within the hotel. From the lack of screaming, noise, and lights she assumed nothing too disruptive or illegal had taken place, but there did seem to be a fair amount of activity, both the figures of mammals on the front sidewalk and still more milling about in the lighted interior of the glass-plated lobby.

Something had happened, and she wanted to know what it was. There was no rush; the others had not seemed in a hurry themselves, so whatever their mission it must not be operating on a short timetable. And unless one of them noticed the tracker had been turned on and removed it (unlikely, since Lionheart still needed to be locatable by Hopps and Wilde), she could use the receiver again to track them down at her relative leisure. There was enough time to find out what had brought them here, and she had a feeling that doing so would not only shed light on why Bogo had apparently given permission and what Lionheart's rationale for being released from his cell had been, but also on just what the rabbit and her partner were hoping to accomplish.

When she'd parked the car and gone inside, there had been a brief dispute with the concierge, a giraffe who already seemed quite agitated and had tried to order her out in the name of a major owner and stockholder, Vinny Corlione—because, he insisted rather peevishly, the other officers
who had already left (after causing an altercation right in the lobby) had promised that no further law enforcement would be appearing; and if she wanted Chief Bogo, she had just missed him and could go straight back to police headquarters for whatever she wanted. But after she had managed to convince the giraffe, with as much calm and tact as she could muster, that she was only following up on the others’ activities and would be gone as soon as she had finished her report, he had been quick to give her an earful.

Swinton had, to be perfectly honest, been even more confused by the ungulate’s testimony. She had not the faintest idea why Lionheart would be posing as this Corlione (though in retrospect it gave her a rather grim satisfaction since it surely identified just who had been placed in Leodore’s prison cell). She could not fathom what criminals they could have been pursuing, what led them here, or what any of this might have to do with a plea bargain. She certainly had no clue what this great danger to the city was that they were trying to prevent.

But after examining the scene where the others had, according to the giraffe Bartholomew, become enmeshed in a conflict with the Head of Security, the pig had been approached by a few of the guests and tourists who were still nearby and in need of reassurance for their frazzled nerves. In the process of giving them the concern and understanding they were seeking, she was able to gently interrogate them…and while they didn’t know much, there was just enough to make Swinton’s own private fears grow.

The fact both Hopps and Wilde had nearly been killed by this security chief was enough cause for alarm (and the revelation that Lionheart had saved their lives had both startled and troubled her). But at least one witness had heard some of the argument and debate between the officers and the hostage-taker, enough to tell her there really was something to this case, whatever it was her fellow officers were investigating. And several others had caught snatches of the conversation which had taken place between the group afterward, particularly when voices had been raised as worry and panic had started to set in. What mattered most to Swinton had been the mention of two names—one of them Bellwether—and the chilling phrase "Night Howler".

Hearing that, she had thanked the patrons and hurried out…pausing only long enough to check with Bartholomew as to the identity of the Head of Security…and made it clear of the hotel lot before the authorities the concierge had summoned arrived. And after driving back across the isthmus and determining the signal was now leading her into the heart of Sahara Square’s residential district—where she knew Delgato lived—Swinton had instead turned aside and headed back to her own place, to wait out the day until events would unfold that evening.

Because she’d had her own research to do, and a few last details she’d learned at the Palm had made it all come together for her in growing horror. One of the guests had mentioned the "strapping young lion officer" having a pair of glitter shorts in his paw, and both Gazelle and Animalia had been mentioned. Adding this to the name Bellwether and Night Howler being involved, and it was all becoming disturbingly clear.
Looking up at the stadium shining in the spotlights, the pig had to shake her head. *And to think, if I hadn't stopped in at the precinct and talked to Benny, I wouldn't even have known about the concert tonight, so I could put it all together.*

After resting up for the day, she too had tapped into the ZPD database to check up on what she suspected. She hadn't been able to learn everything she wanted to know, as some of it lay beyond her clearance level, but there had been enough. She'd certainly learned more than she cared to know about the Bellwether family…and while it had taken a number of hours painstakingly scanning webpages and the back issues of the *Zootopia Times* from around the days of Lionheart's first election, she had finally discovered the connection she wanted, the explanation for what a cow in a flower-print dress had mentioned in passing to her: the "Great Prince."

It had all come together for her. She still didn't know the full picture, there were a number of unanswered questions, but the only way to find those answers would be to go to the concert. There had been no calls from Bogo—unsurprising, as she was supposed to be off-duty—but she knew the others would have called in back-up for something as big and potentially far-reaching as this would be. She hadn't been tapped for a sting, but she hadn't been forbidden from getting involved, either.

She knew now, she thought, why Lionheart had inserted himself into the proceedings…but it still didn't let him completely off the hook. And either way…she'd been right. This was something that threatened all of Zootopia. If she didn't do anything to help…and if staying out of it proved to deprive the others of assistance at a key moment…she'd never forgive herself.

Maybe she'd be lucky. Maybe nothing would happen at all. Or maybe the others would find this Cyrus Bellwether and his lackeys, stop his mad scheme, and bring the criminals in without anyone being in grave danger. If so, she'd be able to breathe easier, and get to attend a free concert in the bargain. But if not…if things spiraled out of control even more than they already had…

Swinton stepped up to the door and, as the doorman/security guard attempted to stop her, she flashed her badge discreetly; instantly the puma turned apologetic, and though he looked a trifle nervous and unsettled now, he let her pass and even waved to the ticket-taker that she didn't need checking. Hurrying across the mostly-deserted vestibule (there were a few late stragglers, but most everyone was already inside), she passed through the nearest entrance tunnel and came out at the top of the shallow bowl that formed the stadium's main auditorium. Steps led down toward the stage, though the surging crowd in the stands made some of it impassable.

Ahead she could see the spectacle that was the show already in progress—thousands of lights hanging overhead; fireworks crackling and sparkling to vie with the stars; flower petals and confetti bursting from unseen apertures; a giant tiger puppet looming to one side which seemed to be equipped with jets that let it breathe fire at timed intervals to emphasize the performance; bulls and impalas playing taiko drums on another side stage burning with orange-red, volcanic lights; and of course Gazelle herself front and center, surrounded by her backup dancers. The antelope was
wearing blue tonight, a skintight, spaghetti-strap number that left little to the imagination, and as usual seemed to be having the time of her life, throwing herself into her singing even as she shot looks out into the crowd to connect personally with whichever fan her eyes happened to meet.

Gazing at this, Swinton squared her shoulders and set her jaw before beginning to descend into the roar of the cheering arena. If things did not go well with Bogo, Judy, and the others…then she would be front and center when it happened, ready to do her part.

~Noise. So much noise.~

~Lights. Bright, painful, searing lights.~


~Smoke, heat, fire, ash.~

~The noise!~

~He shook his head…groaned…grunted. Everything was so hazy. Heavy. Couldn't remember. Could not…think…~

How long has it been…?

RUN!!

~Could not move. Something evil, biting into his snout, his face…hard cold metal, twisted lengths of leather…digging in, gripping, crushing, slicing. Something around him, more metal, holding him in…metal above and below, metal like long thin trees arranged to screen out the vast, open, brightly-lit space before him…~
Mouth…dry…

WATER!!!

~Others nearby, but he could not see, could not hear…only smell. Angry, hateful, malicious. They had put him here, done this to him. But how…how could he…? He struggled, writhed in what bound him, strange material that wrapped around his body though it hung in ripped tatters like strips of flesh, and something else, something that bit into his arms and legs just as tightly as the thing on his face. He jerked and wrenched at it, even more desperate to get free.~

Can't…move…

RUN!!!!!

~Something in front of him. Couldn't see…hard to focus…vision so blurry and weak… Movement. Four large figures, heavy with muscle, thick with fur, musky with exertion and determination… Predators. Terror filled him. Had to get away. Had to escape. Could feel the fangs already descending, digging in, tearing and slashing, stripping the meat from his bones…~

~But they were circling something. Someone. Circling, always circling, teeth flashing in the lights, heads bobbing and swaying, limbs shifting and moving. Ritual. Surrounding. Ancient as dust and sun. Hunting. Moving in for the kill. Something they had trapped and pinned.~

~Bloodshot eyes narrowed, peering past their striped fur…something so familiar…to what lay in the center of the circle. Slim. Slender. Tall and shapely. Horned. A scent, so maddening…so like his own, and yet so different. Couldn't focus. Couldn't understand. But somehow, he knew. She was like him. She was the only thing in this frightening place that was like him.~


RUNRUNRUN!!!!!

~She was not scared. She smelled excited, joyful, eager. She didn't know. Didn't understand. Didn't see the danger. Stayed right where she was…as they circled, circled, closing in…prey. Soon to be prey. Buried under those massive, powerful bodies. Torn apart. Blood. So much blood…~
Lights flickered and flashed, so many colors and patterns it only made his mind shut down even further. Other scents, so many he could not identify. Pink, hooved beasts…rodents…flying through the air, high above the space? No sense. No…sense… He shook his head, hard, wild, groaned a guttural, empty, meaningless sound.

Sounds washed over him, from every direction—cries and roars, pounding, slamming feet, and other strange noises he could not understand, filling the air, shaking the stone beneath his hooves. He knew he should know them, but all they told him was he did not belong here. Not home. Had to flee. Had to run.

Had to grab her, save his herd from the forest hunters, the killers.

Everything…hurts. Can't…breathe. Can't…get out…

RUNRUNRUNRUNRUN!!!!!!

Something moved behind him, at his side. Something brushed his fur. Another movement. A loud snap. Something slashing, cutting. And suddenly, he was free. Almost. The metal still lay above and below, before and behind, only letting him see out. But he could move again. Could feel. Could run.

Letting out a furious, bellowing cry, one that was half-challenge of rage, half-scream of heart-pounding fear, he lunged forward. Again, and again, and again. The sounds were lost in the sounds around him, the ones that filled the open, bright space before him and the even larger dark space beyond, but he kept moving. Slamming. Digging his sharp, deadly antlers into the metal above until it shrieked and scraped and whined. Driving his massive body forward, every muscle focused on breaking through, breaking free. Battering…wrenching…bending. Over, and over, and over.

RUNRUNRUNRUNRUNRUNRUN-FIGHT-FLEE-PROTECT-HERD-HERD-MINEMINEMINEMINE-KEEP-THEM-OUT-HUNTERS-KILLERS-NONONONO-DEATH-BLOOD-FIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHTFIGHT…!!!!!!!

Chapter End Notes

Bonnie's comment about why gays want to marry which Judy recalls is based on a joke that's been around for some time and has a number of sources, but I first heard it from
the inestimable Dolly Parton.

Not much to say, with the main climax beginning. I know some people have disputed whether the Oryx-Antlersons are actually a gay couple (either because they don't want to accept such a thing or because there's no in-story evidence other than their hyphenated last name, which could also mean they are stepbrothers whose parents took each other's name when they got married). But on details like this, I always accept what Word of God says, and the directors have called them a gay couple, so there you go. Contrarily, there's still a lot of confusion and contradictory evidence about Officer Fangmeyer's gender. The character does seem to have eyeshadow on, but on the other hand I think at least one of the backup dancers (who some believe are gay simply by virtue of some of their movements and the fact there are so many gay men in show business) also has makeup like that. And it's worth noting Fangmeyer has the same large build as the dancers while there's another more obviously female tiger in the movie, a reporter, with very different size and proportions. Of course there are different species of tiger, some individuals might be bigger or smaller, and more or less muscled, than others just like men and women in real life, and a woman who goes through police academy training is far more likely to be big and bulky. On this one the makers have been silent and not given a canonical gender so...who knows? I went with female though just because it's fun to buck expectations, and because the cast needs a lot more women in it. Not to mention female police officers don't get the notice and praise they should.

Speaking of tigers, Alexander Pounceski is another character from my friend 6wingdragon's "Neverwere Moments" universe, although again I've very much changed his backstory, profession, and nature, and also given him a much happier fate. In case you're wondering, I chose to do this because a) the tiger association with Gazelle b) being horrified by what Dr. Clea did to him (which even if he was a criminal, he absolutely did not deserve that fate) and c) I loved his name. Lastly, of course the lyrics I've quoted are from a Shakira song...and aside from being far too apropos, I have to say "Animal City" is far too upbeat and fun for some of its lyrics, as Bogo himself reflects on.
Only once before in his life that he could recall had Leodore Lionheart felt such a twisted and roiling mix of conflicting emotions—creeping terror, growing desperation, simmering anger, and above all, unreasoning fear—all of it making his stomach sink and writhe with nausea. And as he peered from one side of the darkened corridor to the other, his night vision letting him see deep into the cloaking shadows of the stadium's backstage, flicking his gaze from one piece of costuming, pyrotechnics, mechanical contrivance, and colorful decoration to another…as he did so, the feline reflected that it was only fitting. For that time in his life had revolved around the same thing as this moment in time did: the undeniable and deeply upsetting danger to the life of his beloved Bucky.

Sighing heavily, he shook his head, still torn between incredulity and relief. After how long he had kept Bucky's condition and location a secret, trusting to Dr. Honey Badger to keep him safe and well until a cure was developed; and how carefully he had hidden his identity and the nature of their relationship, once the opportunity to save him had finally presented itself; after this, it was startling and frankly amazing how easy it had been to confirm Judy's suspicions…and how good it had felt to let it all out.

Secrecy regarding their love affair had become second nature to him by that point, so continuing to keep it concealed throughout the Pred Scare had been simple logic and common sense; he was, after all, being given the best care and treatment medical science could offer at Cliffside, so what good would revealing the depth of their connection do, or just how and why Bucky had fallen prey to
savagery, and Lionheart had been on hand to take him into custody…? And it wasn't as if knowing his fate would have helped anyone figure out a cure, then or later.

By the time the rabbit and the fox had infiltrated the abandoned hospital, Honey Badger had concluded that Bucky's succumbing to the same thing as fifteen predators was a fluke and aberration, hence her decision to focus only on predator biology as the causal link. (As good a researcher, pathologist, and immunologist as she was, Madge had had no way of knowing of something which had its origin in the rural countryside or that it was able to affect all mammals equally, and botanical analysis was not exactly her forte either.) So there had been no need to tell anyone where Bucky was or what had happened to him, not until a cure could be found, after which point he would put into motion a plan to bring it to Honey Badger and restore the deer with no one the wiser.

But after that, once they had found him kidnapped? He could argue that it was because of the unknown nature of their enemy, who they were or what they wanted him for…that until they learned this and could move in to stop them, knowing the truth about Bucky was not only unnecessary, but dangerous. Revealing to the public at large that Night Howler could afflict prey as well? Letting them know their own beloved, mild-mannered, deeply respected District Attorney had also been a target? It would have caused yet another panic, not to mention given the various criminal elements in the city free rein to act as brazenly and decisively as they liked.

Yet he knew the truth. While all of this reasoning was accurate, valid, and irrefutable, the real reason—or at least the most compelling—had been the same as it was all along. Fear. Fear of what the truth would do if it came out that two public figures, two strong and intelligent and trusted mammals, were involved romantically with one another. Even he wasn't sure which had worried and distressed him more…that the fact two males were involved would engender hatred, prejudice, and condemnation among those who believed it unnatural and immoral whatever biology said otherwise—and that this could genuinely endanger their lives and those of their families—or that it was two highly-ranked members of city politics. The first would ruin their personal lives, the second their professional; the first might ensure they could never be happy together again, while the second could destroy everything they had worked so hard to build and ruin Zootopia's prosperity as well.

Despite these very real dangers, looking back now he wasn't certain it was really worth it. If he had kept Bucky with the others, what would have happened? Considering all that she'd had on her plate as Mayor, and that the continued predator "attacks" had kept the citizens so terrified and desperate for someone to protect them at any cost that they wouldn't have cared about anything else, would Bellwether really have bothered with exposing the stag and Lionheart, no matter how much she might be disgusted by it or want personal revenge?

And once she was removed from power and a cure was found, wouldn't everyone have been so grateful to have peace and order restored that they would just have been pleased to have their District Attorney back? There might have been some fallout still, particularly for the Barbary, their families might still have been upset…but at least he would already have been saved. At least he wouldn't now be in the hands of depraved monsters ready to unleash yet more horror and evil upon the city, just to get the power and satisfaction they craved.
He couldn't have known though. He couldn't have known of Dawn's final plan, or of her brother and his willingness to carry it out—whether as payback, family loyalty, or desire for advancement in the mafia. If it hadn't been for this, the delay would not have mattered...once he had realized, to his growing horror, that Bucky had not been released and taken into custody with the other mammals to there be given the cure, and he had then begun putting plans in motion to rectify the matter...all still would have been safe.

Even though Judy had continually put off coming to visit him in jail—he suspected, now, because she had wanted to wait until she had Nick at her side for extra protection and to parse his story for deception and subterfuge—even though this wait had been so long he had become frantic in his worry, had been on the verge of simply confessing all to the warden, sending the authorities to Madge at Cliffside with the cure and some other means of getting past the security lock, and letting the chips fall where they may regarding himself and Bucky...even though all of this was true, if no more had occurred once the rescue operation had begun, all still would have been safe.

He had to keep telling himself this, even as a voice growing louder and more insistent in his mind told him these were lies, or at least false reassurances he gave to himself to excuse his own folly and failures.

Ahead, echoing through the cathedral-like heights of the stadium's nearly pitch-black backstage, he could hear Gazelle's voice coming to him, intoning into her microphone the words of a different song than the one she'd been performing when they entered…and the lyrics made him flinch as if they were lashes striking his bare back, since they were from the pointed and rather pensive piece, "Spotlight."

If there is a price to pay now, the game is on
Cause in the end you know I won

Here is my life in the spotlight, spotlight
And it's hurting my eyes
'Cause it's so bright, so bright
But you are the thing I was missing and I couldn't find
And I wouldn't give you up even if I ended blind

And every camera flash my way
And every word of every page
Well they can say whatever they want to
Cause what we got is just so real
That they can't change the way I feel
'Cause I would do it all again for you
The chorus of the song, that was what everyone thought about him—the limelight, prestige, notoriety, fame and fortune—that he wanted it, needed it, would do anything to secure it and keep it. And while such things had been good for his ego, and also aided him in making reality the various plans he'd had for the betterment of the city and everyone who lived in it, he had to admit privately that perhaps he hadn't been able to handle the spotlight after all… Even more aptly, the bridge matched perfectly what lay in his heart. Everything he'd had to go through to become mayor, and then weather once he'd achieved the office—Bucky had made it worth it.

Bucky was what he was missing, and what he needed. He would die before he gave him up…and despite everything, even though he knew it was rash, irresponsible, illegal, and wrong, even though it had left him wide open to a frame-up and public disgrace, even though it had put Bellwether in power and nearly toppled the city and society itself…if he had it all to do over again, he would. For Bucky.

_I should never have been let close to the levers of power. I am such a fool!

More so, he reflected with wry bitterness, because in the end it really had all been unnecessary, even pointless. He'd been so determined to save the city, protect the predators, prevent a riot and chaos, and instead he'd helped make it come to pass. He'd wanted to find the cure…and the only way he could be said to have done so was because one single police officer who had benefited from his Mammal Inclusion Initiative—plus a con artist fox she'd happened to encounter along the way—had had the insight and bravery, the determination and stubbornness, and the right information at the right time, to both discover the cause of the "outbreak" and bring down the one responsible.

And he'd kept anyone from knowing Buckley Stagmire had been a victim too, and was his mate in every sense of the word he could be, to keep the criminal underworld under control and his life free of bigotry and rejection. But now Cyrus might be well on his way to wrestling leadership away from both Corlione and Big while the Department of Justice was in limbo…and while he couldn't be sure yet of anyone else, the three who been willing to help him this past day and night knew now about him and Bucky—and had all given him their unconditional support, acceptance, and approval.

And that felt better, filled him with more joy and gratitude, than he could ever put into words…or had a right to.

Lionheart let out his breath slowly. Judy hadn't really been a surprise in the end, her idealistic and kind-hearted nature made it next to impossible she would reject someone for whom they loved—if anything, she'd be more likely to react with scorn and anger at how someone did or did not show their love to another. Nick had been far less likely to embrace the stag and lion's private dedication to each other, he'd believed…but whether the argument he'd witnessed between the former mayor and Delgato had encouraged him to see things more from Leodore’s perspective or for some other reason, the vulpine had seemed amused more than anything by it all, nor did he seem bothered by the idea of such a relationship existing in the halls of power.
As for the leonine officer himself…it was an open question which was more startling and heartening, that Lionheart's confession had gotten Manuel almost fully on his side at last, or that the reason for this turned out to be the younger lion's own same-sex relationship.

The Barbary managed a small smile in Delgato's direction, though the other feline was so focused on the cloaking shadows around them he didn't even notice. It was certainly a fortuitous coincidence, and while he'd like to think the revelation all of this had come about for the sake of love and devotion would have swayed the cop no matter whom it had involved, he couldn't deny that both lions having such desires and life-partners in common had definitely made it easier in the end. What he did know was, seeing that harsh distrust and resentment crack, hearing those words of solidarity and dedication, receiving sympathy and understanding from Delgato rather than the negativity and cold dismissal he'd thought would never leave…it had been overwhelming.

He knew why the young lion felt as he did, and believed he had every right to do so; knowing this might now be a thing of the past, that this knowledge had allowed Manuel to let down his guard and give him a chance, so there was a real possibility now of truly making amends…well, it was no surprise he'd had to turn away and gaze out the car window to keep the others from seeing the tears flowing through his cheek fur.

So he had plenty of reason, even apart from his enduring love and faithfulness, to have his thoughts ever and always returning to Bucky. While Bogo and the other ZPD backup were mostly here to protect Gazelle, her dancers, and the public, as well as to finally bring in the last remnants of Bellwether's plot, the three with Lionheart were genuinely ready and willing to aid in rescuing the deer for his own sake. And after the circumstances of Bucky's original succumbing to the Night Howler, and the situation where his kidnapping had now placed him, the former mayor couldn't drive the cervine from his mind even if he wanted to.

All of them were focused on finding him, all of their thoughts were bent upon him, but while having such loyal companions at his side was crucial and something he had never dared to hope for, Lionheart knew that at this point, nothing would hold him back. Everything else was secondary. Others would concern themselves with the rest of their objectives, and while he would aid them if he could—he'd certainly take the chance to…remove Cyrus from the picture one way or another if it presented itself—only keeping that promise and saving Bucky mattered to him now…

Time passed. Minute after minute slipped past as the four of them in turn crept through the darkness, every sense focused on detecting anything unusual about their surroundings, and hopefully pursuing such anomalies to the criminals they were seeking. The near-constant beating of drums and the enthusiastic strumming of guitars and other instruments, as well as the antelope's singing and the crowd's cheering, were growing louder as they moved through the building, to the point that he wasn't certain any of them could hear each other even if they shouted. In a strange way, the thick wall of sound was growing so heavy and oppressive that it was almost the same as a blanket of silence.
It certainly didn't change the eeriness of the place as they continued to carefully yet tensely explore it. In one direction, he could see the strange, ambiguous silhouettes of costumes and animatronics rising up toward the ceiling, and he had to keep doing double-takes, narrowing his eyes, and staring for long minutes at a time to be sure they weren't moving, that there weren't living figures hidden amongst and behind them, shadows which did not belong. In another direction loomed what looked like pieces of amusement park rides and other novelties that had either been actually part of stage shows past or else set up in the stadium's parking lot for further entertainment, for children and adults alike.

Streamers and ribbons hung in great lengths from hooks high above, stirred in ghostly undulations by the wind which had come through the back door or the breath of their passing. Piles of masks and lights, speakers and old instrument cases, music stands and canvas backdrop flats, ladders and pulleys and various machines for either moving equipment around or actually operating the various sets Gazelle (and performers before her) required. Doors appeared, opening into other corridors, stairwells and ramps to other levels, and empty dressing and prop rooms. Some were dusty and dark, while others showed recent usage and held things like giant fans and harnesses with lamps for the flying squirrels act, confetti grinders, rocket boots, black lights and the ultraviolet paint to go with them, makeup kits, and more.

Finally, when they had passed (and peeked into) the clean, freshly-painted, and sparklingly-polished dressing room nearest the stage, which bore a star on its door marked "The Asmita Brothers" (and yes, the interior had numerous bowls and buckets of glitter as well as several pairs of purple, sequined shorts lying about), they came down the last curve of the hallway and found themselves on a wedge-shaped platform, one that was concealed from the arena floor and hemmed in by both a towering half-circle of wall and several gantries and scaffolds extending out above their heads. The latter had spotlights affixed, their wires woven about the metal like ink-black serpents, but the ones that were lit were all aimed toward the stage and so left this area still in darkness. An identical side wing was dimly visible across the way.

But between them was the stage itself, and just as it had the attention and adoration of the cheering, screaming, clapping fans in the stands and on the stadium floor, so too could Lionheart not tear his eyes away. For somehow, despite everything, the singer and her troupe were still as entrancing and exciting as ever.

The song was building up to its climax—accompanied, naturally enough, by twin spotlights shining down to make the antelope's dress sparkle and shine all the more brilliantly—and Gazelle was milking it for all she was worth. Strutting…twisting…long limbs flashing, horned head tossing to make her hair flip and bounce over her eyes, hoof sliding up and down her body to accentuate every curve and clinging bit of cloth. She was beautiful, a true and natural performer, and if his interests lay in that direction he would most certainly be salivating…but since they did not, he found himself simply charmed and in awe of her skills, clearly a technical master of dance and choreography but also with the heart and soul to give them life and meaning.
And all around her, her four backup tigers were moving in perfectly synced harmony—posing, flexing, arching their backs to act as sculpted statues, glancing over their shoulders to gaze sultrily into the crowd, shifting to press back-to-back with Gazelle before moving on as if on an endless carousel. Both their shorts and fur glittered and winked in the light, and they remained the same supple, talented, and frankly arousing sight they had always been…and every one of them not only clearly enjoyed being the center of attention, but also performing with she who had launched them to stardom.

Lionheart let out a long, slow, shuddering breath; the emotions they engendered were such a contrast to what still churned inside him as he desperately sought out Bucky, and fought to keep from charging back into the shadows to find his odious kidnappers, that he had to place a paw on the stage wall to keep himself from swaying. Past and present met and eclipsed; there was so much here to protect, so many innocents, yet at the same time the one who mattered most to him was still nowhere to be seen. Where? Where is he? And where is Cyrus?

Something shifted in the shadows of the far side stage, and then he heard a faint crackle behind him as Judy's Bluefang picked up a signal. The rabbit pushed the button, listened, nodded, then spoke into her mike. "We're in position, Chief. We can see you too. But we didn't find them either."

There was a long pause, as all of them stayed pressed back in the darkness, peering about…staring back the way they'd come, out into the crowd, onto the stage…waiting for any sign that the rams might be appearing, about to make their move, and otherwise staying tensely on guard. Beside the rabbit, Nick stood against the pole of a stage arc light, giant tail swishing and twitching nervously, even as his gun was aimed steadily and unwaveringly into the silent darkness; against Lionheart's shoulder, he felt the warmth of Officer Delgato, heard the click of one of his sidearms as he too held it ready and waiting for whatever might threaten.

And just as Gazelle's song was winding down to its final bars, one last chorus belted out as the music shifted into the driving, somewhat jerky backbeat that had begun the piece…just as she and the tigers were coming together for a twisting, gyrating, passionate dance that kept them all moving under the main spotlight…there came another sound behind him. A faint clanking of machinery, the rattling movement of wood and metal, a sense of something quite heavy shifting in some manner. He heard a low, rough snort that became a deep, ominous grunt. He heard Judy gasp softly.

Carefully, making no sudden movements, the lion turned and looked behind him.

~Something was different. Something had changed.~
~After all that wild battering, all his desperate, savage attempts to get out, get away, the metal holding him had retreated. Something had dragged it back, away from the light and sound, and then something had lowered before him, some sort of length of wood. Blocking his sight. Trapping him once more, keeping him away from his freedom. Away from the terrifying hunters, but also away from the one he had to save. It had been enough to make him collapse, moaning, against the thin metal trees he had managed to dent and bend, yet not snap apart. There he had stayed, leaning, chest heaving, his musk cloying as it soaked his body and hung in the air.~

~Listening. Waiting. Panting and gasping and growling. But always listening. There had been something, something that made those who had put him here go into hiding, and pull him with them. Footsteps?~

~And now…~

~He jerked his head up, staring blearily into the darkness as he heard something. More sounds, something he knew he should know. A…voice? And there was something else. A scent. A very, very familiar scent. One that made him want to sob and grunt, one that caused a stirring below as another desire briefly made itself known, the desire to rut. But it was swiftly squashed. There was too much fear. Too much anger. Too much hate.~

~Only one thing mattered. And as the wood blocking his view was suddenly lifted again…slowly but surely, creaking upward as it was raised by something he could neither see nor understand…he saw it again. Her. Their.~

~They had stopped moving, stopped circling, but they stood all around her. Pressed close, so very close. He could smell them, smell how they wanted her, how they viewed her as theirs. And she was still blind to it all, standing there unprotected, weak, easy prey.~

~He had to save her. Stop them. Kill them, if he could. Nothing else.~

~But as he once more rose to his hooves and knees, tossed his antlered head, and prepared to slam and smash and batter until he could finally break out to fulfill those irresistible urges, he couldn't help but sense the other animals nearby. Scents he didn't know, though all of them smelled as afraid yet determined as he was. And one…one other scent. An important scent. One burned into his brain forever. One that made him let out another low, keening grunt as he peered up toward the massive figure looming above him.~
Leodore Lionheart stared…mouth hanging open, throat dry, eyes so wide they felt as if they'd stay permanently bulging out of their sockets…the sinking feeling from before growing stronger, heavier, more and more unsettling as his stomach twisted and rolled, while his heart pounded painfully in his chest. One of the walls behind them had not been a true and proper wall at all, only another piece of wooden scenery painted to resemble the bluish stone of the stadium—to better disguise a hidden performer from the audience until they could emerge and join the show, he supposed. And as a pulley and rope system raised it upward, revealing the shadowed niche that it had concealed, he saw something that made his blood run cold.

A cage.

He didn't know why it was there—it must have been a prop from a previous concert, perhaps one where the Stripers had pretended to be wild beasts before Gazelle 'released' them, or some such roleplay?—but its reality was undeniable. It must have been left there and forgotten, unless it had been dragged and shoved into place by Cyrus and his rams…yes, he could see it now, as he flicked his eyes wildly to the floor and back again, scrape marks in the stone that none of them had even noticed. After all, that hadn't at all been what they'd been looking for…he started cursing to himself, and he wasn't the only one.

Because in the cage, of course, down on all fours, was Bucky.

So many emotions rushed through him, fought against each other in wild, violent conflict, that he didn't think he could move or act even if he hadn't been paralyzed. Rage. Relief. Horror. Worry. Aching longing. Sorrow. Confusion. Guilt, most of all guilt. Because what he beheld was so upsetting, so infuriating, that his voice was lost in an inarticulate growl.

The deer was much as he looked the last time Lionheart had seen him, at least the last time his lover had been conscious. His glasses were gone, likely smashed. He was still wearing a few remnants of the clothes he'd had on that fateful night, though they were much more soiled now and even more shredded after the violent struggle the Night Howler had driven him into. Parts of his slacks were still there; having ripped along the seams of both legs, they were mostly in tatters, while the main portion
of the garment was now only the waistband, since Honey Badger had needed him free and unencumbered so that he could properly relieve himself...which meant he was nearly naked from the waist down.

His shirt was also nearly gone, only the collar and cuffs left encircling his bullish neck and wrists...although, oddly, his tie remained in place, tossed back over his shoulder but clearly visible in the stage lights—a rather atrocious shade of paisley, one he'd given Bucky as a birthday gag but which the deer had always treasured. This meant, of course, that the stag's thick torso, powerful arms, and broad chest were also quite on display, their brown-furred muscles something that in other circumstances would have had the lion thinking much more pleasant thoughts.

But now? All he could see was the sheer strength in them, and how each one was tense, bulging, and swollen...ready to unleash the beast within as he gave in to those inflamed instincts. This perfectly matched the heat in those reddened, maddened eyes...yes, the dark eyes he had known and loved for so long showed nothing in them still. No intellect, no thought, no personality...nothing but a flat darkness along with that bright glint of crimson whenever the lights hit the retinas just right.

Worst of all, however, was that he was strapped tightly, painfully, into a muzzle until it dug deeply into his flesh. Between the strips of leather, he could see the deer's teeth shining disconcertingly, bared and gleaming white. Saliva dripped from lips and straps, foam dried in the fur around his mouth and lined the metal fastenings...the grunts and growls that came from between them were ones of rage and hate, most certainly, but also pain, and there was fear in those wild eyes, too. As much as the sight of his oldest friend still locked in a hallucinogenic haze of primitive savagery had Lionheart rather terrified, he also couldn't fight back the wave of despair and grief.

"Oh Bucky...Bucky..."

For a moment—a brief moment of flickering hope—something shifted in those eyes, his choked voice seemed to bring about a tiny sense of recognition. The red faded, the brown became predominant again...the tapered head lifted toward him, and tears began to flow, running slowly through his matted cheek fur... But then with another sobbing grunt, it was gone, and he had sunk back into the morass of feral instinct his mind had become, wary distrust vying with fierce hostility on his maddened face. His antlered head lifted warningly.

"That's quite close enough," a familiar voice growled, with an undertone of a bleat, and Lionheart realized two things—without even realizing it, he had approached to within only a few paces of the cage, and there were figures surrounding it, emerging from the alcove alongside and behind. Three of them were rams he had never seen before, but the one in the front was Cyrus Bellwether. The mafia sheep strolled forward as if on an afternoon promenade, and when he stopped his suited form stood loose and casual, but the way his jaw clenched and his eyes gleamed in the darkness very much belied this. As did the gun he held trained on the former mayor's chest.
Very slowly, Leodore raised his paws and backed a few steps away again. Beside and behind him, he heard a whimper and a soft cry of indignant fury from Judy, followed by twin growls—but when he dared to glance at his companions he was shocked to see that while Delgato's tense shoulders and bulging arms looked ready to rip the seams of his jacket, and his gun was pointed right back at Cyrus, it was Nick who was making the deepest, ugliest, most vicious growl of the two.

Oddly, his green eyes which almost seemed to blaze in the shadows were fixed unerringly not on the ram's weapon, but on the cage—or more specifically, the muzzle its occupant was wearing. Teeth bared, lips writhered back, ears stiff and pricked high, every muscle taut and frozen, the fox was so changed from his usual amiable, relaxed self that if Lionheart had not spent the previous day and night with him, he would never have recognized him. What...what in the world...?

Another grunt from Bucky. A faint scraping of metal as Manuel's finger slowly depressed the trigger another inch, and the spring of his gun creaked. The incredibly incongruous sound of cheering and applause from the audience as the song ended and Gazelle, still blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding backstage, took her bows and thanked her fans in both English and Spanish.

Then Cyrus said, with quiet menace, "I don't know how you figured out where we would be, or how you got here in time, but it matters not. You're still too late. We arrived in plenty of time to hide our special patient's gurney in all those mounds of junk, once our passes got us inside. It's ever so helpful when VIPs are allowed to go anywhere, without anyone accompanying or checking up on them. And now that we have Mr. Stagmire in position, all we have to do is take off that muzzle and open that cage door. He's already otherwise loose and eager to...perform." He nodded toward the floor of the cage, and Lionheart saw several lengths of severed rope as well as an undone pair of shackles.

Silence. Behind them, another song began—a light, lonely bit of piano work—and Gazelle began to sing again, soft and gentle, a yearning ballad that only added to the surreality of the situation. Then, just as softly, Judy spoke. "You really think we're going to let you get away with this?"

"Or that we're the only ones here?" Delgato said, his voice silken and menacing. "Everyone's onto you, Bellwether. We've got Bogo and a bunch more backup right here with us. If you know what's good for you, you'll surrender and come quietly. While you've still got the chance."

The ram paused, then lifted his chin imperiously; his gun never twitched. "So? They're not in evidence at the moment. By the time they make their way to us, this will have been decided, one way or the other. And unless my ability to count is less than yours, it is four against four here."

"Three of us have you in our sights," the rabbit said firmly, tightly; and indeed, at some point when he hadn't noticed, she too had drawn her gun and was part of the threatening tableau.
"And so do three on my side," Cyrus observed smugly. Besides himself, one of the rams held a military-issue sniper rifle with laser sight, and held it with competence and steady calm; another of the ovines also held a weapon, though what kind Lionheart couldn't see. As if the mafia thug had read his mind, he continued, "One of us carries tranqs, for emergencies, one of us has real bullets, and one of us bears a gun loaded with Night Howler. That's only one chance in three that you'll make it out of this alive and in full possession of your civilized faculties. Would you really care to test those odds?"

Judy bristled visibly. "Well, we're all crack shots, you have to be to pass police academy. I'm sure at least one of us will hit our target."

"Possibly. But my men will still get their shots off, too…and even if they don't, there's just as much chance Mr. Stagmire will make it out onto that stage during the struggle. I genuinely have no idea what he'll do, wild instincts are hardly my forte, but I'm very curious to find out, aren't you?" The sheep smiled coldly, a wicked glint of eagerness in his eyes.

"Whether he tries to take on those striped buffoons, makes a grab for Miss Gazelle, or simply charges out into the crowd—someone is getting hurt, no one will be safe anymore, and everyone will panic. If you leave here quietly, head out into the arena, you might be able to save some lives, establish some semblance of order…what little good it will do you. But if you stay here, I guarantee you won't even manage that much."

The antelope's voice rose loud and clear over the stage, throbbing with emotion and lifting effortlessly into the higher registers. Lionheart dearly wished he could appreciate it, but all his attention could only fix upon their adversary…and Bucky, still crouched inside his cage, his expression shifting rapidly between fear and fury, one moment cringing back, the next lunging forward with lowered antlers and snorting breath.

No one moved. Then at last Nick spoke, and while he clearly seemed to be trying for an insinuating, snide tone, the rather strangled and harsh way his voice sounded told Leodore the fox was still as unbalanced as he had been since seeing the cage, extremely on edge and ready to burst into action. "You really don't care about anyone, do you, woolly? Well maybe you'll care about this: your boss. Remember him? Big poofy mane, wall of muscle, looks a lot like my friend here?" He nodded toward Lionheart without taking his eyes off Cyrus.

"Yeah. We were telling the truth about him, back at the Palm. He's been helping us. He knows we're here. And just what do you think's going to happen when he finds out just what you've been doing behind his back, what your twisted little plan is?" A pause. "He knows, muttonchops. Did you think we were just twiddling our thumbs all day? He knows everything. If you come quietly, we can protect you from him, in a nice cozy jail cell. But if you don't?" Wilde bared his sharp canine teeth in
a wide, nasty smile. "I rather think you'll find out if a pred can go savage on your furry ass without one of those blue pellets of yours. I wonder how you taste…?"

For the first time, Bellwether looked worried...perhaps, if it wasn't wishful thinking, even scared. His weapon still didn't move, nor did he, but several of his rams shuffled, shifted, and rather looked as if they wished they could sidle into the shadows and make a run for it. Hearing this, the huge ram stomped a hoof on the stone authoritatively, letting out a snort of hot breath, then snapped, "If any of you even thinks of running, I'll shoot you myself!" As the two rams without the sniper rifle froze, Cyrus jerked his gimlet gaze back to Nick. "You're bluffing." Which he was, as far as Leodore knew, but...

Nick's smile didn't waver, or lose an ounce of its predatory cruelty. "But you can't be sure, can you? Besides...I never bluff."

Several more very long moments passed, and dimly Lionheart became aware of the words Gazelle was singing behind them. He didn't know whether to laugh in disjointed hysteria, or square his shoulders with pride and determination...because they were not only so very appropriate, they were from a song he had always privately considered his song, his and Bucky's.

_I'll stand by you_
_I'll stand by you_
_Won't let nobody hurt you_
_I'll stand by you_
_Take me in, into your darkest hour_
_And I'll never desert you_
_I'll stand by you_

As tears stood in his eyes, the former mayor gazed down at the trapped form of the deer, and he knew without even having to think about it how true those words were, now more than ever before. As he had known from the beginning of this desperate quest, he would do anything, absolutely anything, to save and protect the mammal he had given his heart to. No matter what it took. No matter what Cyrus said or did. Hopefully it would allow Nick, or Judy, or Delgato to do something decisive, something that would turn the tables and bring this nightmare to an end for Zootopia. But regardless...he would do it anyway. He had to.

_Are you a craven cat or a true king? Do you really have the heart of a lion?_

Bellwether broke into his thoughts with a nasty, furious bleat. "It doesn't matter! None of that matters. If everything goes according to plan, he'll be one of the first to fall—whether a mammal I've darted rips him apart or I just plain shoot him dead myself. And even if it doesn't...as long as this city goes down, I won't care what he does or what happens to me." Again that maddened fire burned in
his eyes. "Both of you are finished here, you and that insufferable little Miss Hopps! After what you
did to my sister, I'll make certain of that. If it weren't for you, she'd still be Mayor...we'd both be
ruling Zootopia between us. Order and chaos. Justice and vengeance. Law of the state and law of the
jungle. Two sides of the same coin, as it was meant to be."

At his shoulder, Delgato let out a sound between a snarl and a choke of disgust. "You're crazy.
Absolutely nuts, you know that?"

"Am I?" Cyrus growled, then let out an unhinged laugh. "I'm just trying to put things back the way
they should be! We never should have left the wild! At least there, all the death and killing made sense, it was the way the world worked. No more of this pretense, just instinct and hunger, survival
of the fittest, every mammal for itself. Purer. Simpler. No more comforting lies. That is where we
belong!" He snapped his free hoof at the ram without a gun, and with a look that somehow mingled
rebelliousness and trepidation, he reached into the cage from behind Bucky's line of vision and
swiftly undid the buckles and straps holding the muzzle in place.

As the deer shook his head, pawed at his face, and finally tossed the offensive restraint aside,
Lionheart felt his heart leap; even though he knew what this meant, what Cyrus intended to happen
next, it was such a joy to finally see that terrible thing off of him... But then he noticed Judy—
although she was shooting a look of righteous anger at the ram, there was something about her
stance, her features...something oddly satisfied. She smiled, slowly. "Well, if that's your final word
on the matter...you get all that, Chief?"

There was a crackle over the Bluefang, and then Bogo's voice came over the line, more harsh and
deadly serious than he had ever heard it. "Every last word, Hopps. I'm quite sure there are any
number of mammals...judges, reporters, city councilors, even his compatriots in the mob...who
would love to hear it, too. I'll be right over to make sure he gets the chance to repeat them."

As the truth sank in that the wire had been active the entire time, Lionheart started to grin slowly—
and Bellwether's face turned a deep, nasty scarlet beneath the wool. "Not if I have anything to say
about it!" His free hoof grasped at a lever along the side of the cage, pulling it down with a sudden
jerk—and with a creak of gears and chains, the bent and battered front of the cage lifted upward...
leaving a wide, empty opening for Bucky to come through.

For several seemingly endless seconds, everyone was poised as they were, staring at each other, at
the cage, or at the rams. Then everything seemed to happen at once.

Hurriedly glancing over his shoulder, Lionheart saw that the four tigers were now standing, kneeling,
or sitting around Gazelle, each one gazing up with equally adoring, devoted looks, while the
antelope extended her hoof out to the audience, emoting with the lyrics. Looking back, he spied
Bucky narrow his thoughtless eyes at the group of mammals in the spotlight...and as the deer leaped
forward, charging right out of his confinement with tossing head, furious grunts echoing and bellowing from his chest, and the sharp tines of his antlers (some whole, some broken) aimed straight and true, Leodore leaped as well to intercept him.

But he wasn't the only one.

Shots rang out from the side, spasing off the stone wall only inches from the rams beside the cage, and out of the corner of his eye he saw two of them leap out of the line of fire; he thought the one with a gun dropped it.

"Freeze! Hooves in the air!" This came from Judy, but similar words were echoing from Nick only seconds later, so he guessed they must have used the distraction of the large, shadowy bulks jumping between and past them to keep Cyrus or Doug from shooting them in turn.

He couldn't see what either of the rams might be doing though, because he had his paws full with Bucky—struggling, wrestling, bracing his feet against the stone floor and digging his claws in to keep from being shoved backward onto the stage. And Delgato was right there beside him, wrenching at the deer's other bulging shoulder.

"What...do you think...you're doing?!" he hissed, snarling under his breath; the music had picked up to a faster tempo, more instruments had joined in, and Gazelle was singing powerfully once again. There was still a slender chance they could keep this contained, with no one else aware of it.

"Are you kidding me...Leo?" The cop panted, gritted his teeth. "You're a big slab of beef...but so's he! You really think you can handle him by yourself?" He too braced his feet, veins standing out under the fur of his upper arms. "Besides...you're no spring chicken anymore."

"Who are you...calling old?"

Over Bucky's heaving, flexing back, through the jerking, tossing screen of his antlers, Lionheart could see Nick and Cyrus struggling as well, the fox having made use of his smaller, slender build and rapid-fire reflexes to once again get the drop on the ram, ducking under his reach and slamming into his barrel chest. Judy, he saw, was weaving and darting about, trying to use her own paw-to-hoof training, but the other sheep kept evading her. Only Doug wasn't moving, still standing cool and self-assured behind the cage, his rifle held at the ready; whether he was waiting for a command or a clear shot, it had the lion worried.
But he couldn't do anything about that. He could only keep his grip on Bucky—one arm wrapped under and around his chest in a wrestling hold, the other paw locking onto the back of the deer's head and neck to keep him from bringing his antlers into play. Even then he still had to keep twisting and ducking the bony rack whenever it came close. On the other side, Delgato was dodging similarly, and he had to privately agree that the younger lion's fresh, hardy muscles were coming in handy...because the combination of Bucky's natural prowess and that granted him by the Night Howler inflaming his primitive instincts was incredibly difficult to fend off. *He's so...damn...strong!*

Another sound, that of flesh connecting with flesh, came from the right, what he thought was one of Judy's large lapine feet slamming into an abdomen—and despite the fat and wool padding it, the sheep let out a very satisfying oof, staggering back and falling to one knee. But then the other sheep was there, barreling toward her, and she had to dart out of the way again instead of taking advantage of the opening. At least, from what he could see, the cage was between her and Cyrus, so the mobster couldn't get in a shot at her.

Not that he could truly pay attention to her, since at the moment the ram was instead pressed back against the wall, trying to bring his gun down—though whether to pull the trigger or simply pistol-whip Nick, he couldn't be sure. The vulpine was stronger than he looked, however, and was able to keep that hoof raised high, even as he evaded the other fist and aimed several fierce punches and kicks of his own toward his opponent.

Sweat trickled down the inside of his shirt, and Lionheart bit his lip until it bled as he struggled, harder than he ever had in his life. If he could, he would try to either wrap an arm around Bucky's throat to cut off his air supply until he passed out, or simply slam a fist into his temple to knock him unconscious; it would break his heart, but it was better than the alternative. Except the deer was gyrating beneath him so violently, and using so much brute strength, that he didn't think he could get an arm or paw free to do either!

There was, however, something he could do.

Taking hold of the stag with both arms, he managed a corkscrew maneuver that twisted him down and to the side...which not only sent his antlers down at a harmless angle toward the floor, but kept his other side up to the sky, exposed. Putting all his weight into the hold, all his strength, so that the other lion could afford to let up and loosen his grip, he growled, "Go...on! I've got him...for the moment. You know what you have to do!"

For a heart-stopping second he wasn't sure if Delgato understood him...or if he could get past the anguish that wrenched his handsome features. But then he nodded, and even as he still kept one paw in place to aid in the pin, the other moved, down and below...

And then, even over the music and the clapping, he heard it. Three soft, measured reports, the sound
of projectiles hitting their mark, cutting through fur, flesh, and muscle.

The tranquilizers Bogo had brought were some of the best on the market, apparently, and also quite strong. After less than a minute, the deer began to sag beneath them, then to finally collapse in a boneless heap as he once again slipped into a drugged slumber. Shuddering in a mix of surging adrenaline and intense relief, Lionheart staggered back a bit, allowed Bucky to slump to the floor. Helplessly he stared down at his lover, feeling the tears welling up again. It had been the only way, but after so many doses, even over such a long time…? He would have to hope, and pray, that when they got him to a hospital, when the cure had been administered, he would check out in good health.

At least they'd stopped him, though. At least he hadn't gored the tigers, or Gazelle, or gone on a wild charge through the arena—

Delgato’s free paw, which had been resting on his shoulder after also letting Bucky go, suddenly stiffened, clenched tightly. He looked up.

Nick half-lay, half-sat on the floor where he had been tossed when Cyrus managed to overpower him; from the way he was holding a paw to his face, he seemed to be nursing quite the bruise and would probably have a black eye in short order. Although she wasn't on the ground, Judy was also frozen, paws half-raised, as the ram who had lost his gun had recovered it, training it on her—and hers was now the one on the floor.

More seconds passed, while Cyrus aimed at Delgato, who aimed right back, and Doug watched it all with a calculating, cunning expression. Then, when none of them moved, the massive ram let out another bleat...not one of distress or frustration but pure, ugly wrath. "You...you think you are so smart, so strong, so in the right...you've ruined one plan, but do you really believe...that was the only means I had to win? You may have stopped him, but..." He paused, then shot a deranged smile at his sniper, who returned a much smaller, colder version before shifting his gun slightly; the red laser light flashed, then disappeared as it shot off at another angle.

"There's more than one way," Bellwether whispered ominously, "to skin a cat."

Instinctively Lionheart whipped his maned head to look behind him. As he had feared, their struggle had finally drawn notice. Gazelle stood quite still, utterly silent as she held her microphone in a slack grip; her tigers had twisted and turned to look their way as well, their expressions turning to ones of consternation, resentment, and stunned shock; and all the musicians had ceased playing. Other than the querulous sounds of murmuring, grumbling conversation from the audience, and the hum of feedback through the speakers, all was quiet.
And the red dot of Doug's rifle sight was sitting, square and true, on one of the tigers' white-furred, upper pectorals.

The Barbary's heart jerked, his throat locked up—and as he saw Delgato out of the corner of his eye, rushing forward onto the stage and waving both paws vigorously (one displaying his badge), once again he was leaping into motion.

Time seemed to slow.

The glitter-speckled tiger widened his eyes at the sight of two lions barreling toward him, and though he didn't seem to be moving, he did instinctively reach behind him to make sure Gazelle was shielded by his striped body.

Lionheart finally found his voice. "No! Get out of the way! Get out of here, all of you! He's got a—"

Delgato seemed to be roaring too—or was that his blood, surging in his ears?—and without thinking, he twisted to the side, ramming his shoulder into the young cop, knocking him toward the shining blue wall of the stage curving up to rise high above their heads, out of the bullet's path.

He saw the lights of the stadium, and more lights flashing in the crowd as fans inexplicably took photos.

He saw the four tigers finally moving, leaping back, to the side, down, dragging Gazelle with them and pushing her onto the stage floor in the center of their huddled forms.

He heard the gun fire.

Then, as time seemed to speed up again, he and Manuel landed with a solid thud on the smooth, polished wood of the stage itself, rolling and sliding together until they came to a stop, halfway between backstage and the group of distressed performers.

Slowly, very slowly, Lionheart raised his head…stared down at the Hispanic cop pinned half-beneath him, chest heaving and face white with terror…and then as he felt a strange, burning sensation growing and building within him, he followed Delgato's gaze downward.
A very familiar ampoule had the entire length of its needle buried in the golden fur of his chest… right where his mane had shifted aside, and where both his hoodie and T-shirt had, unbeknownst to him, been ripped open by one of Bucky's antlers during the struggle.

And the bright blue liquid inside was draining rapidly into his body.

Chapter End Notes

The only thing really of note here is the concert. As seen in the previous chapter and now in this one, I have Gazelle performing three of Shakira's songs. Like most fans, I think her work is a great gold mine for Gazelle, though of course I commend anyone who picks other artists' songs or even makes up their own. While it would have been nice to find ones I could change to have more of an animal/Zootopia feel, the ones I did find were more representative of the situation and the emotions everyone is feeling in it, and also happen to be ones I really liked once I gave them a listen. I chose these three also because they were the most recent ones of Shakira's I could find that had appropriate lyrics; since I am assuming "Try Everything" came out in 2016 in-universe as well, I wanted something for the concert that wasn't too old (but might be considered favorites the fans would request).

As for Gazelle's tigers, the name I've given to the backup dancers, the Asmita Brothers, is a Sanskrit name meaning "strong as a rock". Appropriate, eh? You'll get to learn their given names too soon enough.
As was usually the case this time of night, in a place as nocturnal as Sahara Square often was (as much due to wishing to avoid the baking, scorching heat of the day as the sleep cycles of its denizens), the most eastern district of Zootopia was well-lit by lanterns and street lights, neon signs and marquees and computerized billboards advertising everything under the sun. The streets were busy with mammals, whether driving in vehicles, riding public transportation, or traveling under their own power—although the winding pattern of roadways combined with the overhead bridges and arches made the warren surprisingly quiet as well as cozy.

The spring weather was balmy, perfect for being outdoors...walking down sidewalks and pathways beneath the ubiquitous palm trees, traversing park oases and gorgeous sand dunes alike, enjoying the starlit sky above, and generally taking in all the sights and beauties the city had to offer. And to be seated on the patio of The Dunes, the swankiest, most exclusive, and most centrally-located restaurant in Sahara Square...with the beautifully-carved sandstone cliffs looming above their heads which contained the lavishly-furnished dining room, lit by large deeply-inset windows and scintillating strings of lights...to be in a place such as this was a rich and sumptuous dream many Zootopians could not ever imagine experiencing.

For Leodore Lionheart, however, nothing about his location, the cuisine, the impeccable manners of the staff, or the overall allure of his surroundings could possibly compare with the company sitting across the café table from him.

Not that he knew exactly why Buckley Stagmire had invited him out to this private, personal dinner together, but he relished any chance to spend time with his dearest friend and beloved partner,
especially away from either City Hall or the DA’s office. Not that they were completely out of the public eye even here, but it was certainly far easier to relax and enjoy himself when they weren’t in places with hidden cameras, constant media presence, or hordes of observant, judgmental mammals. It was a relief to be away, and if it let him sit here and slip into a happy daze staring at the handsome deer, he welcomed it greatly.

Buckley did in fact appear quite dapper and elegant tonight, even for him. While he wore that rather embarrassing paisley tie he’d bought as a birthday gift two years ago, back when he’d won re-election and the deer had become District Attorney...a gift the cervine insisted touched him deeply and meant more to him than any number of far more acceptable and fashionable items, because it came from the heart and testified to Leodore’s rather goofy, irreverent nature when he was truly himself...Stagmire otherwise was dressed in the smoothest of charcoal gray slacks, a crisp but well-fitting shirt of pale cream, and an open-necked silken jacket that matched the slacks—one of the finer suits currently available on the market from Arminki. Fine deerhorn cufflinks, a lapel corsage of mountainbells and crimson columbine, and even cologne by Calvin Koala were the finishing touches; the cervine had certainly gone all out, but what was the occasion?

As he was staring across the table, those knowing dark eyes fixed on him behind his glasses; wine swished around his goblet as he rolled it between his cloven hoof-fingers. "Penny for your thoughts, Leo."

The lion flinched, blushed, then adjusted his collar as he gazed warmly at the other mammal. "Sorry. I was...just thinking about how you looked so dashingly attractive, even for you. One might think you were after something."

Lowering his eyes to the tabletop, Buckley smiled a secret, private smile before nodding slowly. "Yes, I can see why you would think that. And...you would be right, in a way." Carefully setting down the glass so as not to spill a drop, he seemed to be contemplating something very hard, whether deliberating the wisdom of the matter or simply girding himself to act on it at all. Then, just as carefully, he reached into an inner pocket of his suit jacket, removed something, and set it down on the beige and goldenrod tablecloth.

It was a dark, velvet-covered jewelry box.

The mayor’s breath caught in his throat...in fact his entire chest tightened up. Of all the notions which had passed through his mind, or might have, this was the last he expected to come true...even as part of him hoped for it more than anything. Even after all this time, he couldn’t...he wouldn’t...would he? Swallowing hard against a sudden dryness, Lionheart finally managed to tear his eyes away from the box, flicked them up to the deer to see a startling expression on his face—naked adoration and yearning, but also uncertainty, worry, and tension. "I...I...Bucky, I don’t know what to say."
"Well, it would help if you actually saw the gift first before you decide," Buckley responded wryly. He reached down and opened the box with a faint creak of hinges.

Inside, nestled in the pocket of the soft lining, was a ring of purest gold—if it wasn't 24-karat, it was close enough in quality as to be of no moment—set with a faceted, exquisitely polished garnet. He felt his heart thump harder, faster...as if gold wasn't enough of an indicator, that particular gemstone had been associated with lions for centuries. And it was even startlingly close to his own eye color.

"Look at the inscription," the deer said, softly, gently.

With a shaking paw, he removed the ring from its box and turned it over and back so he could see the inside of the band. In the light of the flickering flame produced by the table's central candle, he could see the words etched into the precious metal, though he had to peer closely since they had been rendered somewhat small so as to fit: TO MY DEAR LEO: YOU WILL ALWAYS BE KING OF MY HEART.

Fighting back tears, the feline looked up with a watery smile, shaking his maned head a bit. "You are such a romantic sap. You know that, right?"

"I learned from the best," Buckley replied impudently, though his voice sounded just as shaky and emotional as his own. "Try it on, I want to make certain it fits; it'll be a devil of a time if we have to get it resized."

Struggling to keep his face an impassive mask, he slipped the ring carefully onto the third finger of his left paw, and somehow he wasn't surprised when it nestled into place perfectly.

"I know this is...a bit sudden." The deer was not his usual articulate, erudite self; stumbling over his words, sometimes rushing, sometimes speaking at a snail's pace; not even employing his confident high diction. He sounded more like he had when they'd first met as children. "But at the same time, it's...kind of been waiting long enough, you know? I love you, Leo. I have for a long time. I think I always have. I know I always will. I can't imagine life without you, and I don't want to, because I don't know what I'd do then, or who I'd be. I..." He cleared his throat, coughed, and licked his lips. "I know there's a lot to deal with here. If we do this, I mean. A lot of considerations. Ways it'll change our lives. And I know it won't be easy. But I hope...well..."

Lionheart couldn't even begin to regain control over the turmoil of his conflicting emotions—joy,
rapture, and hope vying with fear, shame, and despair, and more feelings he couldn't put a name to—let alone express them coherently. But he knew he had to say something. Reaching out, he grasped Bucky's hoof...tore his gaze away from the light reflecting in the ring's jeweled facets...and peered into the other mammal's eyes. "Oh, Bucky, I...I...you have no idea what it means to me, that you would say this, do this. Honestly...this is something I've dreamed about since we went our separate ways after ZSU. I never thought...I hoped, but..."

He trailed off, worked to get his voice steady again. "But...I just don't know. Those considerations, those changes you mentioned...they are significant. I don't think—"

The hoof in his paw clenched briefly. "Are you saying you don't think it's worth it? That we're not worth it?"

"Of course not!" he cried, feeling as if he'd been punched in the gut. "It's just...how could we...I mean, we're both government officials, the conflict of interest..."

"Is that all you're worried about?" Stagmire scoffed, even sounding a bit humorously jittery. "I'll resign from the DA's office, if that's the only thing standing between us."

"What!? No!" Lionheart shook his head, slowly at first, then more vigorously. "There's still far too much good you can do there, Bucky. Taking you from that, from all those you can help, just for our own personal pleasure—that would be the height of selfishness."

"Don't you think it's about time we got something for ourselves? That we deserve to be happy, too?" Although he made an undeniable point, and his voice was firm, even a bit bitter, he could still see the distress and anguish on the deer's face; his sense of duty, compassion, and altruism was far too strong to easily set aside Leodore's rejoinder.

"Of course, but there is a time and place for everything. At the very least, shouldn't you look for and groom a successor before you make that drastic a step—or wait till the end of your term?"

"How do you know I haven't been?" the cervine retorted.

"Or were you thinking I should be the one to retire?" Lionheart pressed inexorably. "When our Mammal Inclusion Initiative is finally bearing fruit? Did you see the scores Miss Hopps earned at police academy? Or the look on her face when I gave her her appointment? That alone was worth the photo op." He had to privately admit he'd enjoyed the limelight, as he always did, but he felt he
actually deserved the recognition for this—it had been his law, his program, the results were indisputable, it gave him high ratings in the polls, and it guaranteed real rights and opportunities for all mammals. Win-win all around.

"No, you're quite right, there's much more work for you still to do," Bucky replied. "And that was such a wonderful story to see on the news. I only wish I hadn't been giving depositions that day, I would dearly love to have met her, she's truly an inspiration to mammals everywhere. But surely you aren't suggesting—"

Lionheart bit his lip, paused as he watched a lynx waiter pass by until he was certain the cat was out of earshot, then continued. "I just…I don't think it's time for either of us to leave public office yet. And as long as we're both here, we can't—I mean, it'd be different if we lived in different districts, different cities, representing different constituents. Plenty of married politicians do that. But you'd have to recuse yourself from so many cases, there's hardly any that wouldn't have some impact on the Mayor's Office or my personal interests…it'd make it no better than if you actually had resigned. My trying to stay out of your affairs would be similarly problematic. It might actually have been better if you'd asked me when you were still Assistant Mayor…but even there, the offices need to have some independence from each other…"

Placing both hooves firmly on the table, the deer sighed and let his shoulders slump. "You're right. I hate it, but you're right, of course. We need to be in a different place for this to happen. It's just, we have waited so long, Leo. How much longer must we wait? When will it be our turn? As much as we want to help other mammals, can't we be content in ourselves, and with each other?"

Guilt washed over him, and Leodore sighed as well, twisting the ring on his pawfinger nervously. "I'm sorry, Bucky. Soon. I promise it'll be soon. If we can reach a good place, politically, legally, socially—if we can accomplish the things we still want to see carried out—or once I'm confident Bellwether can handle everything, so she can take over for me. She's seemed more stressed lately though, and distracted too…but after that…"

Bucky nodded slowly, looking as if a great burden were once more bearing him down, and the lion felt his heart sinking. He hadn't wanted this, he'd wanted more than anything to enthusiastically say yes, immediately begin the wedding plans…but there was too much at stake, too much riding on their various agendas and roles in the city, too much that would be against them…would perhaps even try to stop them, fear them, hate them…

As if the cervine had read his mind, his tone suddenly shifted to one of questioning and probing, vaguely suspicious. "But if none of that mattered, or were in our way, you'd say yes? No more dithering, no more excuses, no more worries about what might happen if we were true to ourselves?"
"Of course I would. I promise."

He'd thought his hesitation had been momentary enough it wouldn't be picked up on, but he hadn't given Bucky's intelligence and insight enough credit. Or perhaps it was the unfortunate fact he'd chosen that moment to reluctantly, sadly, remove the ring and put it back in its box. Whatever it was, the deer stared at him for several moments, then snapped the box closed abruptly before thrusting it back into his jacket pocket. "I see. Well, I suppose that's something, anyway."

Now Lionheart's heart sank for an entirely different reason, and he could feel it breaking as well. "Hold on, Bucky, I didn't mean—"

"You never do," his friend and lover replied enigmatically, coldly. "Maybe eventually you'll figure out what you want, and take a risk, before it's too late. Until then, I'll still be waiting. Always waiting."

"But..." The truth was, he knew the deer was right, that even if all the political and social ramifications of this situation were dealt with, he would still be too afraid to act, afraid of what would happen to them, to him, if they openly admitted what they were and how they felt about each other. After all this time though...how could he do it? How could he believe that everything would be all right, that their families would still love and accept them, that they would be able to live their lives in peace...or that even if not, it wouldn't matter as long as they had each other? He wanted to believe it, but...

Shaking his antlered head, Bucky regarded him with a look that mingled pity with long-suffering bemusement. When he spoke again his usual warmth was back, if tinged by sadness. "Sometimes I really don't know what to do with you. It's all right. I love you, flaws and all. And I truly will wait until the time is right...whether out there, or in here." He leaned across the table to tap at Leodore's chest, then sighed and picked up his glass to drain his wine. "In that case, I suppose there's nothing left but to pick up the check and head home." He signaled their waiter to come over.

For the entire journey through Sahara Square, back toward Savanna Central, the bright, flashing lights of neon signs cutting through the sandstone cliffs' shadows like beacons in the starry night seemed to mock him with their cheeriness. All he could feel, as he sat in the back seat of the limo with the deer, was a wretchedness that made him want to squirm and cringe, becoming as small as possible. Even if Bucky had accepted his apology, and his rebuff, with equanimity and grace, he knew he had hurt his lover.

Not even because of the fact he had indicated to their driver that he should be dropped off at his own home, rather than staying overnight with Leodore as was his usual wont, though that didn't help either. It was because of the haunted look on his face...the pain that crinkled the corners of his eyes when he thought the lion wasn't looking...an undertone in his voice even as he remarked on random
landmarks, cases he was working on, or other small talk from the halls of power. Just because Bucky still loved him and always would didn’t mean his rejection hadn’t been deeply upsetting for the cervine.

And why shouldn’t it? Leodore reflected harshly. After all, even if Bucky had been quick to agree, and with complete sincerity and dedication, that the lion should not resign as mayor so they could be together, hadn’t he been the one to offer such a solution first from his side? How must it feel that he had been ready to sacrifice his career in an instant, and the good he could still do for Zootopia—never mind the fact Lionheart had immediately insisted he should not—when the feline had been so quick to deny the same possibility for himself?

How much must that, along with the lion’s other arguments and fears, have made Bucky conclude that however much Leodore loved him, other things were stronger and more important…that he was not as dedicated, did not consider him worth fighting for…? None of this could be farther from the truth, but how could it appear any other way to Bucky?

He wished he knew why he was so afraid. Was it simply his father and brothers? (He thought his mother would understand, and accept.) Was it things said to him by bullies when he was a cub, or that he’d heard at the fraternity at ZSU? Was it indications from the media, and from certain public scandals, that such things were still not accepted or approved of in many places? Whichever it was, he owed it to Bucky to overcome it. After all, at this point who cared what narrow-minded and prejudiced gradeschoolers and fratboys thought? Wasn’t Bucky more important than their careers, assuming the revelation torpedoed them?

What else could be done to them, when any laws regarding mammals of their persuasion had been overturned or removed from the books long ago? (He’d made it a point to check, not long after setting up shop in City Hall.) And as for his family…as much as he loved them, they needed to know all of him, and accept him for who he was, if they were to prove that their love for him was true. If they could not, or would not…it would be painful, but separation would be better in the long run for all concerned. It certainly wasn’t as if he couldn’t live on his own, even aside from Bucky!

Sighing heavily, he turned away from the window that he had rolled down to let the cool breezes of the night wash over his flushed face. The neon lights faded into the background, and the street lights dropped away as well; they were about to enter the tunnel through the wall that divided Sahara Square from Savanna Central. “I’m sorry, Bucky,” he said, reaching over to take the deer’s hoof. “I—”

Because he had shifted position, he didn’t even register the red dot of the laser sight that had been fixed on his shoulder—until it spilled past him and landed on the deer’s upper chest, right next to his corsage. The soft sound of a report filled the back seat of the limo, and Bucky flinched, wincing in pain…and then gritted his teeth, letting out a deeper, more agonized cry as he wrapped his arms around himself and started to double over.
"Bucky? What is it? Are you—?"

What happened next would be burned in his mind forever…would fill his nightmares for the next two weeks, leaving him sweat-soaked and terrified, would stress him to the breaking point whether at work or at home, and would compel his every desperate, illegal act which would follow, if only he could make sure it never happened again…and that it could somehow, some way, be undone.

Before his eyes, something…changed in the deer. Although he still made strange, unnatural, painful sounds, they were becoming darker, deeper, sounding less like something a herbivore like him should make—far more threatening, vicious, and…savage. His body, already bent over in the back seat, shook and lurched and gyrated as if undergoing some sort of twisted transformation, every muscle bulging and flexing until he could see them tearing at the seams of pants, shirt, and jacket alike! Something he once would have found amusing, or even arousing, was fast becoming a source of sheer terror as Bucky clutched at his sides and arms, hooves ripping and tearing…

And then when his antlered head jerked up, nearly stabbing the bony growths into the roof of the car, Leodore recoiled violently, nearly slamming into the door. His eyes…those eyes he had known and loved so long, liquid wet and dark like the sweetest of chocolates, were now bulging, widened into glazed spheres that seemed to show no spark of sentience or intelligence, only fear, rage, and insane hunger…and they were now reddish in hue, reflecting a deep and burning fire.

 Needless to say, by now the bedlam in the back seat had gotten the attention of his driver, and the limo was beginning to rock and jerk back and forth within the confines of the tunnel, nearly slamming into one wall and then the other. Luckily there didn’t seem to be any other traffic at the moment, but the wolf was having trouble keeping the vehicle steady, fighting the wheel the entire time. And while he’d love to explain what was going on, he hadn’t a clue—and there wasn’t time in any event. For at that instant, with a look that mingled fear with wrath, Bucky leaped toward him, tatters of his shirt and jacket fluttering wildly, and he was suddenly in for the fight of his life.

The deer had always been strong, ever since their high school and college days, and only become more so over the years as he matured and exercised religiously to maintain his physique. But even aside from his gentle and kindly demeanor, in all their time together he did not think Bucky had ever used his full strength upon him, whether out of embarrassment, humility, or wishing to refrain from harming him.

No such restraints were upon the cervine now, and with them gone, Lionheart discovered to both his chagrin and panic that his friend and lover was easily as strong as he was…and could do him real and lasting harm if he did not defend himself with genuine force. His muscle mass nearly matched the lion’s, these days, and with this strange, horrifying descent into mindless, feral rage—and the fact he didn’t even seem to recognize him anymore!—every bit of his strength was now pounding into
him, determined to batter him senseless…or worse.

Even as he sent up a silent prayer and apology within, the feline took a deep breath and began giving as good as he got. Long-unused lessons from his sports days of twenty years ago came back to him by instinct, and his arms were wrapping around Bucky's upper half, twisting and jerking him away and to the side. His days as a linebacker allowed him to plow the deer back across the seat, slamming him with crushing force against the far door; his time as a wrestler let him maintain the hold and work to pin him with skill and power.

He refrained from using claws or fangs, of course, other than to latch into Bucky's clothing, but otherwise he had to throw everything he had into it…wrenching the deer backward, slamming his shoulder into the other's chest, getting a leg up when he could to knee him in the abdomen, grabbing the back of his neck to aim his antlers away—as much as the other mammal could smash him into a pulp with hooves and muscles, if he were gored by those sharp tines, he'd be done for…even if the injuries themselves weren't fatal, he could well bleed to death before getting to a hospital.

How much time passed, he didn't know. It felt like eons since that bullet had hit its mark. The back seat of the limo was filled by the rank, sour scent of musk—not the kind which came from exertion or sexual arousal, but fear and belligerence. Sweat ran from beneath Leodore's mane, nearly blinding him before he blinked wildly and shook it out of his eyes; the sting of its salt made him aware that he'd been wounded, another bloody scratch across his cheek from an antler he hadn't managed to dodge in time. His arms and shoulders ached from holding the deer back—the strength in him seemed limitless, his stamina incredible, always just on the verge of exploding through cloth and fur to smash him against window or armrest.

His heart quailed whenever he happened to lock gazes with Bucky, seeing only wildness and berserker hatred in those slitted, animal eyes. He had never imagined a deer could look as threatening and bloodthirsty as he did now, and having this come from his beloved…so soon after his own cowardly rejection of a life spent as mates together…felt even more like a punch knocking the wind out of him.

Just as he thought his strength would give out—or perhaps his willpower, as he gave in to despair and self-loathing—and the beast his friend had become would break free so as to finally attack him in earnest, the limo flung itself to the side, to the sound of squealing tires. Even as the shriek of metal filled the air, as the tirewells rubbed against the stone wall of the tunnel to send out a spray of sparks, both of them were thrown sideways, tumbling across the seat—and suddenly they had switched positions, with the lion behind and atop the other's back.

Taking advantage of the opening, Lionheart swiftly wrapped one arm about the deer's neck again, the other his torso, and bent him back and upwards, twisting him toward the back of the front seat, then toward the passenger door. More cloth shredded as they struggled and Bucky tried to rip free. He felt grass-eater's teeth digging into his arm, far sharper than he expected, only kept from
breaking the skin by the lion’s suit sleeve. He heard a wordless, guttural cry escape the other’s throat. Then, as Bucky’s back slipp[...]

Once, twice, three times…the window cracked, then shattered, and along with it he heard more cracks and snaps. Before he could register what this might mean, and more than an icicle of terror stabbed into his chest, the beast beneath him suddenly collapsed and went limp, toppling across the seat…and it was over.

At the same time the car came to a screeching halt, Leodore managed to get a shaky paw on the door handle, and as the latch popped the panel flung open, allowing Bucky to slide out onto the pavement of the tunnel highway. The lion followed him—half-leaping, half-crumpling on all fours—and instantly had his paw at the other’s neck…feeling, searching, desperate…

A pulse. He was still alive. Knocked out cold, but still alive.

It all came crashing in on him then, what he had done, what he’d had to do, how it had felt, what had happened and what it meant…and in another instant he was leaning against the car, doubled over and heaving violently as he vomited up the remnants of his meal. He didn’t know which bothered him the most…the struggle itself, how violent and brutal it had become, the complete and utter insanity of such an unnatural thing happening, or how close he’d come to killing Bucky (thankfully he not only knew how to pull punches, but just where and how hard to twist and wrench and pound someone without breaking bones or snapping necks). But his stomach was in knots, and as he thought again of this happening to his beloved Bucky, this horrible thing that had no explanation why, his retching turned into sobbing.

Minutes passed. Finally, recovering some semblance of self-control again, the mayor managed to stagger back to his feet, leaning against the car for support until he could stand unaided. One of his ankles twinged; he must have turned it wrong while kicking Bucky at one point or another. He was aware, without really being aware, of how his suitjacket was ripped and torn in countless places, his jaw was aching from where one of the deer’s shoulders had slammed into it, his ribs felt bruised, the blood on his face was trickling down into his mouth, and he was certain an antler had at least scraped if not stabbed into his shoulder, right along the collarbone. But he was alive, and so was Bucky. That was the important thing.

"Sir?"

Looking up, he spied the limo driver standing nearby, eyes flicking nervously from the unconscious cervine on the blacktop to him and back again, his dark-collared coat flipping and rustling in the wind. As rightfully wary as he was of Bucky, there was only deep concern and worry as he gazed at
Lionheart. His heart swelled. The wolf...like all the others at City Hall...was part of the Mayor's Office staff, the municipal answer to the Secret Service, but most of them had moved beyond simple protection by now, their years together leading to deep, abiding, and unshakable loyalty. Something he had always appreciated, something that made him inordinately fond of 'his boys' as he thought of them, and something he needed now more than ever.

"I...I'm all right, Gary. Thank you."

"What...what happened, sir? I don't understand..."

"Neither do I." Lionheart finally allowed himself to look down at his lover. Buckley lay crumpled, half on his side, half on his back, and between the violent flexing and wrenching he'd done at the start and the fight which had followed, his clothes had indeed been badly torn apart—pants ripped at the seams, jacket sleeves separated, shirt torn and almost every button popped so that he could see the other's bare, sweat-soaked chest, rising and falling in an uneven, shuddering rhythm. It was his antlers that had snapped there near the end...four tines on one, three on the other. The side of his head was bruised, and blood ran from the corner of his mouth, but he was still alive.

Yet when he woke, would he be himself again...? 

Shaking himself, the lion tried to focus. The deer would not stay out for long; meanwhile, they were standing here in a public access tunnel, where anyone could come along at any moment, see a seemingly-crashed limo, then just who was beside it and their condition. And he still didn't know what had happened or what—other than that silencer-muted gunshot—had caused this, let alone how to fix it. But one thing was for certain. Something had instigated this, set off age-old instincts long buried in civilized mammals—a disease or other pathogen? A hormone or enzyme from another mammal? Something within Bucky himself, that had been mutated, inflamed, overstimulated?—and it had been aimed originally at him.

Either he'd been intended to lose himself in this same feral bloodlust, or it had been an assassination attempt. Until he knew which it was, and who was behind it, nothing was safe, and there was next to no one he could trust.

Shaking his head to try and clear it, Lionheart gestured. "Help me get him in the trunk. If he wakes up before we get him somewhere safe, I don't want to have to fight him again." Or worry about whether he could be properly non-lethal again.

Gary stared at him in stunned disbelief, but when the lion glared at him with an ugly growl beginning in the back of his throat, he quickly hastened to comply.
After they had Bucky situated as carefully as could be managed under the circumstances and the
trunk was softly closed, they looked at each other for several more distressed moments. Then the
wolf finally asked, "What now, sir? Do you…want me to drive us to Zootopia General? Or call
Chief Bogo?"

"No…neither." Now that the adrenaline was fading, his fear and confusion and frustration were
turning into decisiveness. He was thinking clearly again, and he could take action. There was no
guarantee that whatever this was was something the hospital staff could handle; if they couldn't,
there could well be a savage rampage right in the patient's ward. At best Bucky would end up
tranquilized for the nonce, with nothing being done about him or for him.

And if as he surmised he had been the target in one sense or another, going there would not only
possibly put him in harm's way again, it would allow the one behind this to know they had failed and
put together a plan—the same, or a new one—to try again. Concealing that this had even happened
might throw them off the scent, or at least puzzle them; perhaps they might come out into the open,
give themselves away in the course of attempting to learn what went wrong. It at least would give
him more time, time to find them and stop them. Time to help Bucky.

Besides…he knew the Cape buffalo too well. He did not have the creativity or ingenuity to think
outside the box, the way this situation warranted. He would want to do everything by the book and,
again, far too openly. He would give away to the enemy that they were on to them, while also
showing no cleverness or inspiration in solving this mystery. Without Bucky, the DA's office would
be in an uproar, unable to act quickly or perhaps even at all, which Bogo would insist left his hooves
tied as to what he could accomplish on his own.

And…in order to get the police chief's cooperation, Lionheart would have to tell him everything,
everything about this night, where they had been, why they had been there…if he didn't, the truth
would come out as soon as any witnesses at or near The Dunes were questioned. Or when the cops
or the hospital staff searched Bucky's clothing and found that jewelry box.

No. He wasn't ready for that to come out. Not yet, and certainly not like this. If he'd been worried
about the fallout before from simply announcing it to the public, having their relationship revealed
so graphically, as part of such a vicious crime, would be even worse. The only way he could
imagine a more scandalous result was if this had happened after they had gone to one or the other
of their homes for an assignation, and one or both of them had been caught in the altogether. No, he
couldn't allow this to come out until both he and Bucky were ready. Until he knew who was after
him…after both of them, perhaps?!...and why. Until his lover was himself again.

Turning to look at Gary, who was still staring at him uncomprehendingly, the mayor drew himself
up to his full height and gestured toward the limo. "I'll explain later. There is too much at stake here."
And...something is going on, something I don't understand. That made no sense for a civilized mammal, especially a prey species. You know it, and I know it. We have to find out what is going on, fix it, stop it. No one will believe us or help us, not unless we do this carefully and quietly. Can you get hold of Larry for me?"

The wolf blinked at the seeming change of subject. "Of course, but why?"

"Tell him to gather the rest of your Pack in Black. I'm going to need all of you to take care of this. Especially if this isn't the end of it." If they tried again, if they escalated... Who? Mr. Big and his mobsters? Prey rights groups, who thought he wasn't doing enough for their kind? The Pred Supremacists, who thought he'd sold out his fellow carnivores? Someone else? There were too many possible enemies to choose from...

As he saw the canine had blanched at the order, he came back to himself and snapped curtly, "Go on! And get us moving again. I'll let you know where to go shortly, for now just take us through the backstreets of Savanna Central. No pattern, no destination in particular, anywhere that isn't near downtown."

Climbing into the back seat and closing the door—nothing could be done about the broken glass, but no one would be able to identify where it came from once they were out of the area, and he would be sure to have the damaged limo hidden away from prying eyes as soon as possible—he pulled out his cell phone with a shaky paw, flipped it open, and dialed a number he hadn't used in quite some time. Indeed, the voice on the other end sounded quite surprised to hear from him; but at least they were quite awake and alert, being as nocturnal as he and Gary were.

"Madge? Good evening, I'm so sorry to disturb you, and yes I know we have not spoken in some time, but I'm afraid this is something of an emergency. Are you busy with anything? No? Good... I have a patient for you. A very special and important patient. I don't know what's wrong with him, but you're the only one I know who has the right expertise to help."

And, he left unsaid, had the discretion to keep this hidden from her colleagues and superiors at Lions Gate, though once she learned what had occurred he trusted the nature of the situation itself and whom it involved would by itself naturally instill her silence and secrecy. As it was, he'd need to find some way to keep Bucky's absence from causing alarm at the DA's office or anywhere else in the city's government. I'll call his secretary. Tell her Mr. Stagmire has gone on sabbatical until further notice...

After listening a few moments more, he made a quick gesture to Gary; the wolf, who had the earbud for his own phone fitted in place so he could drive and talk at the same time, gave him an odd look but turned the car northward. "Yes...thank you, Madge. I'm going to come right over there and pick
you up, so make sure you've got all the equipment and medicine you'll need. Plenty of tranquilizers
too. It'll take a great deal of work, but I think my boys and I can get the facility ready you'll be
using." He had never dreamed he would make use of such a disturbing and disreputable place
again, let alone that he would be glad to do so. But there really was no other viable option.

"I trust you remember Cliffside?"

When Judy had been able to at last tear her eyes away from Doug and the other rams, and twist
about (even as she still kept her paws in the air) to stare in helpless distress at the stage, she hadn't
been surprised to see Gazelle and her tigers were finally aware of the drama going on nearby on the
side stage. What surprised her, not that she wasn't grateful for it, was that they hadn't noticed sooner.

As much as the music and singing, as well as the loud noise of the crowd, had drowned out their
voices and the sounds of guns and such, it had been hard to believe their attempts to keep from
disturbing the show and panicking the public had actually worked, to the point even the struggle had
not been observed. But after Stagmire had been subdued once more, and all of them were held in a
Mexican standoff by Cyrus and his bullyboys, the rabbit had dared to look around…and discovered
that the antelope had in fact noticed them all during the fighting, and her trailing off her song had in
turn drawn the attention of her backup dancers—their looks shifting from confusion, annoyance, and
anger to worry and fear as they noticed the guns being trained on the group. The audience, of course,
had still not been able to see anything in the darkness of the stadium wing, only grumbling and
muttering at the interruption of the show.

Now, however? After Delgato and Lionheart had rushed right out onstage to save Gazelle and her
tigers from the Night Howler, and the latter had knocked the former out of the line of fire as well?
The crowd was getting a front-row seat to the unfolding catastrophe, as the enhanced and
concentrated extract of *Midnicampum holicithias* took effect on the last mammal any of them had
expected or would ever in their nightmares have believed it would.

And for Judy Hopps, staring in horror along with them, the only thing she could feel was what had
descended on her only twice before in her young life, when racing away from the maddened
Manchas at Vine and Tujunga and in the immense darkness of the Natural History Museum—pure,
unadulterated, overwhelming fear.

When she'd first met Leodore Lionheart, just over six months ago at her police academy graduation,
she'd known intellectually what a large mammal he was (both compared to herself and in general)
from various photos, TV images, and campaign posters, but it was quite different to experience it in
real life. When he'd stood beside her on that stage, she'd barely reached his knee, and his paw as it
pulled her close for the camera had been utterly huge—more than twice the size of her head, and also large enough to cover her from ears to waist! Ironically, she'd understood later (or so she'd thought) why he had intimidated Bellwether.

She couldn't deny that when he had saved her and Nick back at the Palm, it had been comforting to rest in his arms, held cradled protectively to his warm, bulky chest…despite the uncertainties and doubts she'd still harbored toward the former mayor even then, in that moment she had found it easy to trust, to be grateful he was there. But by the same token, she also could not forget the rather terrifying image he had presented that night at Cliffside, when confronting Dr. Honey Badger about the savage mammals: a gigantic, looming silhouette, his face lost in shadows until only his bulging eyes and bared, saliva-gleaming fangs had been clearly visible in the darkness…shoulders hunching forward, chest thrusting out pugnaciously, claws unsheathing, while his voice became ever deeper, louder, more strangled and lost to furious, threatening growls.

If she hadn't been so distracted by what she'd thought to be the explanation behind the victims' regression, and determined to gather the evidence she needed to bring in whom she thought to be responsible, she would actually have agreed that Lionheart's stance and attitude had proven precisely why the idea of him too going savage would have been so frightening, and one he would rightly not want planted in the minds of the city’s citizens.

Except now…that was exactly what she was seeing happening in front of her. And somehow, after spending the last night and day in the feline's company, she found herself not only awash with fear, but sorrow and regret that something like this was happening to him.

It almost seemed to be happening between each passing second, as if images caught in a strobe light—or more likely, her own mind unable to keep up and process what she was seeing. To one side, Delgato had half-risen from the polished stage floor, a twisted and conflicted look on his young face…anger, distress, panic, fury, and finally pained, wooden acceptance. Beyond, she could see the four tigers still gathered, half-standing, half-crouching around Gazelle—one was even down on all fours!—while they stared at the change happening before them, their looks now ranging from disgusted to pitying to fiercely defensive, growls rumbling in all their chests; the singer herself had both hooves clapped to her mouth in shock.

And Leodore himself…he hunched forward, writhing, twisting, his entire body shuddering and jerking violently, to the point she almost wondered with a fleeting flash of hope if perhaps the Night Howler dose had been too strong, and he would shoot straight past savage into unconsciousness. But then he jerked up again, every claw unsheathed as he suddenly scrabbled, ripped, and tore at his clothes as if his maddened mind found them to be unnatural and restrictive, and in short order he knelt on the stage with hoodie and shirt completely shredded, clad in only his pants. Judy gulped anew. Somehow, seeing him on all fours like this, displaying precisely how massive and top-heavy his torso was, made him seem even larger, as if he had literally grown out of his garments.
Her mind seized up, only able to run over the same litany. *Big. Big. HUGE! Good gravy and biscuits, he's too big!* Muscles swelled out his broad shoulders and chest, bulged out his upper arms as he planted both handpaws on the stage to support his weight, and as both his voluminous chestnut mane and the thick hair covering his chest bristled and puffed out to make him look more gigantic still, she finally noticed his face—and suddenly everything else was shut out as she took an involuntary step backward.

She'd thought poor Mr. Manchas had looked ferocious when he'd snarled at her and Nick from within his messy, cluttered home, but this...every fang was clenched and gritted, his muzzle was pulled back so tightly she wondered if it could ever relax, and his eyes...his eyes! There was nothing in them now but death.

Cold, so very cold, yet at the same time boiling with molten heat as the lights overhead caught them, turned them a blazing, animalistic, lurid crimson much brighter than their usual hue. Not a trace of recognition, sentience, anything—only the deadliest of warning. This was a pride's dominant male, defending his territory. Ready and more than willing to kill.

Judy's throat locked up, as once again she found herself in the sights of a mammal she had called friend, but who now only saw her as an intruder...or worse, prey. With Nick, she'd known the fox had not truly been under the influence of the Night Howler—though for several distressing moments his act had been so convincing she'd wondered if they had made a mistake, if they'd missed an ampoule or Bellwether had caught on to their blueberry-switch scheme. But now, she could feel something churning, clenching, filling her lungs and rising up into her throat, something there'd only been fleeting hints of when facing the vulpine but now all too real.

She bit back a scream...or was it...something more? Something primal? She'd refused to believe it, had never found any evidence to substantiate it other than anecdotal stories, insisted it was a myth...but now, as she found every limb frozen in place and her throat locked up, she wondered, honestly wondered, if perhaps the bunny death shriek was a true phenomenon after all...

Before she could unthinkingly drop her paws from where they were raised to clap them over her mouth or otherwise act, time seemed to pick up again and several things happened, either at once or in quick succession. Behind her, she heard a very familiar, hatefully smug laugh, then Cyrus's soft voice: "Oh. Oh my, yes. Perfect. This is even better than I could have planned it myself. Why do you all keep doing my work for me?"

This was followed by the sound of hooves shifting slowly, scraping on the stone, guns cocking, and then a growl from Nick. "You...you're despicable. You're not going to get away with this."

"Oh really? I rather think you have your paws full with other matters now, don't you? Come along, boys. We don't want to be here when His Majesty decides to rip apart the invading rogues, do we?"
Even as Judy realized they had no need to try and shoot again, to hit Delgato or any of the tigers who were now unobstructed, not when they had an enraged lion just seconds away from leaping into a frenzy of bloodlust at anything and everything around him—and that they still must have their guns trained on Nick or else her partner would have done something by now—the sounds of screams suddenly split the silence as first one mammal, then another, then ever larger groups in the audience were shocked out of their stasis and began to mill about, surging in panic.

The noise drew Lionheart's attention, his colossal blocky head jerking about to stare out into the darkened auditorium...which she knew his night vision could penetrate far more readily than she could, able to pick out one warm, desperate body after another where she only saw countless masses of vague, blurry shadow. Again his lip curled, and his immense weight made the stage creak and groan as he began pacing, stalking, a growl beginning to rumble and resonate down inside that cavernous body. His tail lashed wildly, agitation turning to ire.

From the side came a loud shout in a deep, somewhat-accented voice. "Hey! Cat!" Several more words followed in a foreign language—Hindi, maybe?—followed by the stomp of a huge paw on the floor.

Instantly the lion jerked his head again, twisted about to glare in the direction of the glitter-shorted tiger that had cried out. Despite the striped cat's own considerable size, Judy knew she saw him blanch briefly, eyes wide and swallowing hard. But then he was right back to glaring challengingly, even half-bending forward to present a rival's posture. Beside and behind the dancer, Gazelle extended a hoof toward him, then the tiger next to him. "Hafeez! Dhruti! Be careful!"

As the last word left her mouth, Lionheart again lashed his tail...and then with a violent toss of his head, he let out a shattering, thunderous roar and exploded into motion, barreling straight toward the tigers and the antelope they guarded.

Judy flinched,broken out of her paralysis by the pounding tattoo of paws on the wooden floor and the heavy sound of bodies slamming solidly together—both tigers had intervened in time and caught hold of the lion by both shoulders, in a darkly ironic mirror image of how he and Delgato had held back Stagmire only a short time before. As the striped cats braced their feet and strained the powerful muscles of their arms and chests, Lionheart struggled to break free, lashing out and swiping madly at each of them in turn, while his fangs snapped and scraped only inches away from their faces. The noises he made were feral, indescribable. The younger lion, meanwhile, was coming up behind him, moving as rapidly as he dared while working to stay silent until the last possible moment; the remaining two tigers as well as Gazelle were watching him out of the corners of their eyes, trying to not to draw attention.

Whipping about even though it made her fur itch to have the raging feline at her back, the rabbit
locked gazes with Nick, who had already recovered his gun from where he'd lost it earlier and was rapidly glancing back and forth between her, the struggle on the stage, and the darkness where Cyrus and his rams had vanished. When he saw her looking at him, he paused…swallowed…then nodded slowly. "I already know what you're gonna say, Carrots."

She felt her heart in her throat again and tears standing at the corners of her eyes, even as she replied in the same soft whisper. "Yes. You have to go after them, Nick. They can't be allowed to escape again, or get away with this, you said it yourself. And there's no way you can help against someone as big and dangerous as Lionheart is now."

"And you can?" There was a very unsettled edge to his voice she'd never heard there before; even at the Natural History Museum, he'd been far better at concealing any anxiety and worry he had to have been feeling.

The fox had a point, but she couldn't in good conscience leave Manny alone to bring down the beast the former mayor had become. Not when Gazelle and the concertgoers were all in mortal danger. Not when her dancers, as burly and bravely determined as they were, had no weapons of any kind to use against him…at least, none that wouldn't be far too final in their application. And she had her ideas for how she could help. Ones Nick wouldn't like, but he wasn't going to hear about them and it didn't matter anyway. *My ideas, my choice…my life.*

"I'm not leaving him," she hissed at last, not bothering to explain which 'him' she meant; not even sure herself. "Go on, get going! Or did you forget your friend Xander is still back there somewhere? If they run into him…" She trailed off, leaving it hanging, but she didn't have to explain further.

For a moment panic and guilt warred on the vulpine's narrow features. Then his expression cleared as something clearly occurred to him, a notion that made those green eyes light up the way she loved…the way that told her there was both nothing to fear and everything, because Nick Wilde had a plan and nothing was going to stop him from carrying it out. "Right. Xander. Well then, I'd best mosey, shouldn't I?" Before she could groan in exasperation at him once again acting as if something she wanted was his idea in the first place, he added, "But as much as I am the cleverest of foxes and quite used to taking on *very* long odds, I hope you don't mind if I radio Bogo to back me up? Four against one is a bit much, even for *me.*"

The Bluefang at her ear crackled and the Cape buffalo's voice snapped, sounding unsurprisingly rattled. "Quiet, Wilde. There's no need, I'm already headed backstage with Trumpet and the others. We can come at them from both sides and catch them between us. Stay in touch." There was a pause, as if Bogo were reluctant to say anything more; then he said, quickly and under his breath, "And you stay safe, Hopps."

As the signal cut off, Judy didn't know whether to be touched at the chief's concern, or worried that
he'd felt compelled to express it. Luckily distraction arrived in the form of her fallen gun sliding across the floor to stop against her foot. "That goes double for me, Carrots," Nick said with utter sincerity, lowering the foot he'd used to return her firearm—and then with one last, long look, he turned and darted back into the shadows, disappearing in seconds.

Breathing fast and light, she quickly scooped up the weapon and slipped it back into its holster, then pulled out the tranq gun Fangmeyer had given her outside as she turned back to face the predatory battle going on; though it had felt like ages passing, all of this had only taken no more than a minute. And while she would shoot to kill if she had to, that was only a very last resort.

She just hoped she and Manny had enough rounds left between them to do the job.

A loud scraping filled the air, and as she flicked her eyes down she saw that although the tigers had great mass and leverage between them, that didn't stop Lionheart from resisting them with every ounce of savage strength in his body—his giant toe claws had dug into the stage and were even now literally digging in, ripping up the wood in great curls of peeling, ragged strips as he was driven backwards inch by inch. But there was blood splattered about too, dripping now she saw from several wounds in the dancers' shoulder and arm respectively…and from the lion's flashing fangs. Oh no. No!

Glancing quickly out into the stadium, she spotted several officers—Jackson, McHorn, and she thought Wolfard—working crowd control, and while both the arena floor and the stands were still packed with surging mammals, none were near the stage anymore and the majority seemed to be following orders to head for the exits without raising a bigger ruckus than was unavoidable. None of her fellow cops were close enough to help, but at least no innocent civilians were in immediate danger either that she could see.

Pulling her regular sidearm—looks like I need it after all, no way am I wasting any tranqs on this—she took careful aim high overhead, strode out a third of the way onstage, then slammed her foot down and shouted, "Hey!" The gun fired, and one of the arc lights above them exploded in a spray of sparks.

In other circumstances, it would almost have been comical how rapidly Lionheart moved, leaping both backward and to the side while also twisting about in mid-air. He may be musclebound, but he's still a cat. Landing turned toward her and farther out toward the rim of the stage, he stared at her, for a moment displaying only genuine confusion, hurt, and even fear on his face. But then it passed, and he was all hatred and fury once more—she had interrupted his battle for dominance, or else his hunt, whichever it had been. And it was clear he instinctively knew she was prey, too.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see one of the tigers clutching at his side and staggering back
against the glowing blue wall, his arm still streaked with the blood leaking from four jagged slashes; Gazelle was at his side, pulling one of the sashes off her dress to dab at the wounds before trying to wrap them like a tourniquet, while he shook his head at her firmly. The other tiger hadn't moved, and his two fresh partners had now joined him for a united front. Delgato, meanwhile, was staring at her incredulously, as if she'd lost her mind. And maybe she had. But he at least seemed ready and willing to leap in where needed.

Again she took aim; if she timed this right, she wouldn't hit him (though she might wound him), but she would show him she meant business. The question was whether this would make him back down, at a show of greater power…or if it would make him lash out in even more uncontrolled violence. Either way, her distraction would let the others come at him from behind, hopefully pin him down until he could be subdued. It's just a matter of whether they're doing it to save my cute fuzzy-wuzzy little tail or not.

A pang spasmed through her heart. Nick. Would she ever…? No, she had to see him again.

Without even realizing she'd done it, the trigger moved and she fired again. Another bullet, this one splintering the stage before ricocheting off into the dark—luckily, nowhere near any of the mammals heading for the doors. Lionheart flinched again…then narrowed those cold, empty eyes at her, fangs gritted in that horrendous snarl which was such a hideous caricature of the disarming, reassuring grin he'd sported so often in the past.

Oh, Leodore… It's not working. What are we going to do? How can we save you? Can we save you? She didn't know which was in more turmoil, her heart or her guts, and she really didn't want to find out if she could be made to lose control of her bladder at her age. It's not working. He's on to me, he's not going to fall for this trick twice!

Slowly she took a step back…and he moved with her, pacing her. She recognized the posture anew. Stalking. What lions had once done in prehistoric times, slipping through the savanna grasses that camouflaged their bodies as they moved in for the kill. Not charging, even though he had to have been infuriated as much by the tigers' interference and her loud, frightening noises as by the Night Howler. No, not charging. Because he had her in his sights, he knew her life was his to claim, and when he was ready…he would pounce, and it would be over.

Blood, blood, blood. And…death.

It wasn't the least bit funny now.

Closer he drew, looming ever larger before her, the light which still burned inside the immense tiger
puppet creating an incongruous halo of orange and red as his backdrop…leaving him as only an increasingly darker silhouette coming toward her, with only those blazing, glowing eyes shining in the shadows. Once again, she felt her heart quail, felt something die inside, as she remembered how Manchas had described Otterton six months ago. *An animal...down on all fours! A savage. A demon…!*

But as her nose twitched in that telltale signal of her terror, she remembered something. Something about which senses were stronger for a lion…which they used to hunt and which they did not…Flicking her eyes back to Delgato, she nodded toward him to get his attention and then whispered—not because Lionheart could understand her, but to keep from riling him further with a raised voice. "Manny…cover his eyes."

"What?"

"His eyes! That's how he hunts and tracks, not by smell!"

For a moment the young lion looked as if he were sucking on something sour—presumably at his failure to remember something about his own species. Then he nodded and shifting very slowly, with no sudden movements, he took off his jacket and let it slide carefully to the floor, then peeled off his tank top and held it in both paws before himself. Reminded rather ridiculously of the old does' tales of red-hued cloth being employed to distract and misdirect bulls (and grateful Bogo wasn't here to see it), she watched as Delgato shook it a bit, then slipped soundlessly to the left, circling up behind and to the side of Lionheart.

One step…two…three… She flicked her eyes again to the performers; Gazelle knelt beside the injured tiger, who had finally seemed to realize he could not gainsay her and had succumbed to her tender ministrations, while the other striped felines remained posed like statues, sequins glittering faintly and chests heaving slowly as they worked to remain calm and composed until the time came to act. Another step…another…

"Now!" Judy cried. At the same time she leaped to the right, toward the front of the stage.

Lionheart, naturally enough, whipped about to track her movements, which put Delgato even more fully behind him—and the Hispanic lion sprang into action, leaping forward on light paws while flinging his tank top forward and down. In seconds the garment had been flung over the former mayor's head, completely covering his eyes and part of his muzzle. Letting out a wild yowl and a querulous snarl, he tried to vigorously shake his head back and forth to throw off what was blinding him, but Delgato had continued his sprint and landed atop the other cat's back, arms around the top of his head and paws holding the shirt tightly in place, and such was his weight that even Lionheart couldn't throw him off—at least not yet.
Instantly the rabbit followed up on the rest of her plan, shoving her firearm in its holster again and pulling out her tranq gun. Despite the fear and worry constantly churning inside her, her paw did not quiver and her aim remained steady and true…with the barrel pointed at one golden-furred, exposed shoulder, she fired once—twice.

The savage cat winced, roared in an odd way that mixed pain with distress, and stumbled forward, dragging Delgato with him as he still clung to the ends of his shirt. Even though she kept her finger on the trigger, Judy couldn't help letting out a soft sigh of relief and relaxing a little as she stepped a bit closer. Now, to just give the drug enough time to finish taking effect, while her fellow cop kept him restrained…

Suddenly that heavy maned head shot up again, and even with his eyes still covered he aimed his face in her direction. His elbows, which had started to buckle, stiffened again and he lurched back to his full height. His nostrils flared wide, his lips curled back and his maw gaped as he caught her scent again, and somehow the growl he gave this time was more menacing, dark, and wrathful than any he'd given before. He knew. Somehow, without regaining sentience or intelligence, he knew she was responsible for his predicament, and intended to make her pay for it.

Judy only had time to raise the gun a few inches, and to choke out Manny's name, before Lionheart dug his claws into the stage, hunched his shoulders, and with a wild lash of his body from haunches to head he heaved upward, sending the younger lion flying back into the tigers until all of them were sprawled in a heap on the stage—and the shirt had been tossed away as well, leaving those blazing eyes free to glare at her with a rage that yet again had her stopped dead in her tracks.

_Not enough not enough it wasn't enough—_

He barreled toward her, sprinting so much faster than she had thought possible, a blur of golden and brown motion, and even as she was trying to get the barrel of the tranq gun lifted high enough to jab into that mammoth chest, he was upon her…knocking her back, slamming her so hard into the stage she felt the air whoosh out of her lungs, at the same time hot, moist breath billowed over her face and those great gleaming fangs—just about as long as her forearms—came down toward the side of her neck…

Leaping and darting with his usual light-footed pace so that he barely made even a whisper of sound with his passage, Nick hurried through the backstage shadows of the Water Hole with focused, driven determination. Even though, in the back of his mind, all he could think of was the danger he
had left Judy in—never mind that she had four strapping tigers and a beefy young lion to defend her, as well as her own indisputably unparalleled skills in both brains and speed, he still worried about her more than was healthy—even though this was the case, the fox still knew what he had to do and was utterly devoted to it. The threat to Gazelle, to the crowd, to all of Zootopia was bad enough, and what the rams had done to Leodore was both horrific and heartbreaking.

But the things Cyrus had said back there…the struggle that had taken place between them…the utter insanity he had displayed, and attested to as the nonsensical reasons for his dark plans…and especially, what he had done to Buckley Stagmire…Nick's paw gripped his gun until he could feel his fingers tremble with the pressure, and he couldn't fight back the grinding of his teeth as he envisioned that muzzle again, saw the way the deer had scratched and wrenched at it until it fell away, remembered what it had felt like to be strapped in one…could feel it on him again, as he had in his nightmares for so many years…

No. No more. They're not getting away with it, not any of them.

Of course he had no idea exactly where they were, there were far too many places here for them to hide or evade pursuit as the group had discovered on its way in, they had something of a head start, and he had left his jetpack in his other pants. But there was only one exit as far as he knew (Xander hadn't indicated there were others anyway, at least none that were near enough for use or were left unlocked), and his innate sense of vulpine direction told him where it was, just as impeccable memory recalled the exact path back to it. Assuming the sheep remembered the way too, he was certain to catch up with them eventually if he moved toward it, and Bogo and the other cops were back here as well. If they were lucky, they'd catch the criminals in a pincer between them.

He wouldn't wait for the chief, though, if it kept him from achieving his goal. He'd do whatever he had to in order to find them, catch them, stop them. He wouldn't allow them to escape this time. And in fact he rather hoped, despite the numbers arrayed against him, that he was alone when he caught up. Because while he had every intention of following the law and doing things by the book, he couldn't promise that he would…he didn't actually know what he would do when he had them in his sights.

That, like so much else in his life, would be decided on the fly.

Unfortunately, where before the sounds of the concert had drowned out those which any intruders backstage might be making, now he could hear very little due to the blending of the panicking citizens as they fled and the struggle taking place on the stage. But his hearing was still incredibly acute, so he could just detect, every now and then, the sound of hooves clopping on the stone somewhere in the darkness ahead. He couldn't be certain if it was his quarry, since the Cape buffalo was also around somewhere, but both the direction they came from and that there were multiple treads moving independently of each other told him he was on the right track.
Peering from one side to the next, down an aisle of eerily leaning and sagging animatronics, then down another with racks of costumes and piles of light fixtures, Nick never let his eyes rest too long on any one place. Shifting, darting, examining, dismissing, but always moving. As long as he kept hearing sounds from ahead, there was no point in focusing on the backstage paraphernalia, although he did need to keep an eye out for his backup…

Suddenly the noises ahead did cease, and the fox stopped dead in the middle of the aisle. Had they heard him as well? He'd been certain he was as soundless as could be, and sheep were not known for having good hearing. Perhaps they had simply expected pursuit at some point, and were pausing to check, change direction…or conceal themselves until they could make their escape. Or worse, ambush the police…

Very slowly, Nick started moving again, one step at a time, tail lashing with long, languorous strokes through the air as he narrowed his eyes and peered about even more guardedly. He hadn't heard anyone cry out, so not only had Bogo and his officers not caught up yet, Cyrus and his henchrams hadn't found Xander anywhere, it seemed. Although there were plenty of large, looming silhouettes amongst all the props and junk, he didn't think the tiger was hiding either—at least not anywhere nearby.

Far away, he could hear chains creaking back and forth as they dangled from the ceiling high above, as well as the rumbling hum of some electrical engine; closer, he spied the dark bulk of a silent, squat cannon, several large barrels and crates the contents of which he couldn't identify, and what looked like a giant jester figure of papier-mâché, garish makeup covering its mischievously-smiling coyote head. He shuddered. All I need is more disturbing crap to make me even jumpier. What, did they used to run circus-themed shows here?

Even as he was feverishly thinking, considering and then discarding possible courses of action, he was still moving, still listening and focusing on his surroundings. And after passing by more buckets of confetti, the cars from amusement park rides, unused jetpacks from the flying squirrel shows that had clearly been left there for years (or else he might take the time to try and employ one), and the frames for multi-row stage lights, he finally found himself among the old canvas backdrops again…and as he paused, he saw the bulky, woolly forms of the sheep he was pursuing pass through the pool of illumination from a theater ghost light and couldn't help smiling grimly to himself. Because of where he stood in the shadows, he knew they could not have seen him yet.

Moving down that aisle, gun trained and ready, the fox had nearly reached where he'd seen the silhouettes disappear to the left, toward the back exit, when he suddenly heard a faint crackle and pop in his ear, followed by the soft but still gruffly harsh voice of Chief Bogo: "Wilde? You there? Please tell me you're still picking this up…"
Keeping his own voice as hushed as possible, he touched the Bluefang switch and whispered back, "Right here, Chief. I just saw Baa Baa Black Sheep and his friends heading for the stage door out of here. Where are you?"

"It's damned difficult to see back here, but Fangmeyer says we're near some of the old scenery they used to use for those insipid musicals. Looks like some sort of forest props?"

Nick glanced through and along the rows of backdrops nearest him, spied what looked like a set of carved wooden trees with false knotted roots that helped hold them upright, and then five large shadows crouched or otherwise hidden among them. "Got it. I can see you, I'm two or three rows over from you." He paused, frowning to himself as he ran back over what he'd seen in that momentary glimpse through the stage light; had all the sheep been there? There'd been two for sure, and he thought there was a third, but…

Just as he was about to voice his uncertainty, he felt something hard and cold press up against his left temple and had to fight to keep from cursing loudly. "You foxes really have a death-wish," a deep, familiar voice growled. "Or perhaps you can't read the signals to tell you precisely how badly you aren't wanted?"

Despite the rush of fury and hatred he felt rising up inside him, he couldn't help the glib response, even as he froze in place. "Well now, if we only went where we were wanted, we'd never rustle up some grub from the henhouse, now would we?"

"Typical." Cyrus ground his grass-eater's teeth audibly, then jabbed the barrel of his gun into Nick's head again to propel him forward. "Let's take a little stroll, shall we? Just over there, where everyone can get a good view."

Even as he was still berating himself for allowing the ram to get the drop on him, Nick was doing as instructed, moving at a slow but consistent pace down the aisle, out into the pool of light. As he did so, he called ahead to the other police officers. "Uh…stay where you are, guys. I, uh, may have found our missing mammal."

Unsurprisingly, he heard Bogo's echoing groan, but of course the cops didn't move from concealment, other than to peek out from above or around the various equipment and scenery masking them. Guns which gleamed in the light lowered, although remaining only inches away from being brought into play again the moment the status quo changed.

Coming to a stop in the middle of the cold, pale gray light spilling down from above, Nick saw the other sheep coming back from where they'd disappeared to, and while two of them still seemed very
nervous and worried, Doug was as controlled, professional, and militarily-precise as ever. He'd traded his Night Howler gun for another, either because he didn't want to take the chance of missed shots that would waste his limited toxin ammo or because shooting the cops pursuing him could just turn them into a pack of enormous, deadly savages chasing him down rather than making them turn on each other. The gun he had now still had a sight, though, and the way he held it testified to his competency, not that Nick had had any reason to doubt it.

After a few more moments, everyone stopped in a still, silent tableau…the sheep aiming their guns (though Jesse and Woolter's shook noticeably in their hooves) while the members of the ZPD all stood or crouched without moving a muscle. Eyes darted about, fixed on one adversary after another. Nick knew he heard a growl from the tigress's direction and saw her teeth gleam in the shadows, and the light similarly picked out Simmers' fangs, Trumpet's ivory tusks, and Krumpansky's horn; but none of these natural weapons were of any use so long as bullets and other projectiles were involved, something he knew had to be rankling them and accounting for their clear frustration.

"Now that we're all here," Bellwether said at last, his accented voice marked by a seething resentment that erased its usual drawl, "let me inform you how this is all going to go. I am of course aware my boys and I are currently slightly outnumbered, and also outmassed. But what we are not is outgunned, and you can clearly see I have the upper hoof here. One wrong move from any of you, with a weapon or otherwise, and I shoot your clever little new recruit. Even if I miss, or one of you manages to strike me, one of the other guns trained on you will hit its mark, one way or the other.

"Since none of us wish to lose our followers, you will allow us to back away…slowly and carefully…down that aisle toward the back door. And once we are out of sight, you will allow us enough of a lead time that we'll make it out before you get there; if you don't, we'll be mowing the entire passage behind us with gunfire as we go, and I know you don't want to take that risk, Bogo."

Silence. No one moved, but everyone looked at each other warily, calculating the odds, coming to the same conclusion that this was a standoff which could not be resolved without casualties, not unless something changed. In the darkness of the scenery, Nick saw first one, then another firearm lower until all of the cops had them pointed at the floor or otherwise withdrawn, anger and disgust marring every countenance; the Cape buffalo looked particularly incensed. But Cyrus had read him truly, and no matter how much he might not personally like the vulpine, or how he'd likely read him the riot act later for letting himself get caught like this, he would never place the life of one of his officers in jeopardy without good reason.

Nick, however, was thinking faster than ever, on a par with that day at the Natural History Museum; then he'd had to outwit this insane mobster's far more cunning sister, and once he had come up with the plan to swap the ampoules for blueberries, he hadn't been in fear of his life or sanity (although the sheep cops backing Bellwether up had still been a force to be reckoned with, he'd been confident he and Judy could evade them readily enough).
Now, however? There was real Night Howler to contend with that could not be switched or defused in any way, as well as numerous guns that could take his life or that of one of the other cops in an instant. He could move fast, far more adroitly and rapidly than Cyrus but not fast enough, especially not if he intended to dodge both him and Doug. The only way he could manage that was if there were some distraction, some misdirection or sleight-of-paw that caused them to look the wrong way at the right time…

Even as his eyes were flitting and darting about over their surroundings, seeking something, anything among the old discards of Animalia, he suddenly saw something that didn't fit. Over Doug's shoulder, back among the looming piles of costumes and puppets, was a very large, blocky shape that did not belong with the rest. And it was moving, turning its head…

White fur gleamed briefly in the beam of light that slanted down across the jumble of props onto the floor of the aisle at the sheep's hooves, a pattern of light and shadow that perfectly blended with those black stripes and that scarred muzzle. How one as massive and bulky as Xander had managed to fit there, as well as slip down the passage behind the sniper without being seen, he had no idea, though he could chalk it up to Cyrus's arrogance and the cat's natural stalking abilities.

What mattered was he was there. And as soon as those blue eyes saw Nick had noticed him, the tiger stage hand stopped moving for a moment, then nodded downward—meaningfully, furtively, yet firmly. The fox followed his motions…and his night vision, cutting through the dark, spied the other's huge paw resting on a metal bar extending along the aisle, one that bore a series of hooks around which ropes were tightly tied, as well as levers attached to chains and pulleys. That paw rested atop one of the knotted ropes, claws unsheathed and ready to slice.

Nick had to fight the urge to smile in smug satisfaction. His eyes started following the rope upward, into the gloom…

"I'm waiting, gentlemen." Cyrus's harsh voice broke into his thoughts. "I've given you more than enough time to think over all your options—particularly since you have hardly any to speak of. Now are you ready to comply, or are we going to have to do this the hard, and much more bloody, way?" From the nasty and rather eager tone in his last words, it sounded as if the bighorn hoped they would choose the latter.

He had to keep him talking. Distracted. Unaware. Luckily, this was a skill as natural as breathing to Nick Wilde, one he had mastered long before he was twelve, even if the patter needed for conning marks and other elements of a trickster lifestyle had come later.

"C'mon now, Cyrus," he said, though he had to struggle harder than he ever had in his life to keep his tone light, flippant, and conversational. "I know it can take a while to get through all that thick bone on top of your head, but like I said before, do you really think you can get away with this?"
Your sister didn't, and she was far more intelligent, subtle, and careful about this."

Even Nick wasn't sure which had offended the ram more, the insult to his brains or to his ego when compared to Dawn's nearly-successful conspiracy. But the growl he gave was fierce and vicious enough to have come from a carnivore. "Did you miss class the day they taught you about etiquette and persuasion? Assuming a predator like you even went to school, of course. Since that line of attack isn't about to convince me of anything, you know."

"Hello, pot? This is kettle: you're black." Even as he was speaking his eyes were still raised to the roof of the backstage, a good fifty feet above their heads. Following the rope from the hook where Xander had his paw, he spied what it attached to…how it hung directly over Doug…smiled to himself…and then drew his gaze backwards, toward himself, Cyrus, and the other two sheep. As he did so he turned slowly around to face his interlocutor, one paw still raised while the other slowly holstered his gun.

"Ah, but I'm not trying to convince you of anything," Bellwether said sardonically. "Other than to see the writing on the wall, and understand just how precarious your position is. Once you get that through your limited little fox brain, you'll know I'm right."

"Precarious, yes. Mm." Tapping his lip with one finger, as if truly contemplating what the ram was saying, he instead worked quickly in his head to calculate angles and vectors (he had always been incredibly talented at math, something which had been a godsend once he and Finnick truly began their partnership). As everything added up, he had to smile again at the appropriateness of his words. It was, in fact, all quite carefully balanced, only requiring one small shove to topple everything apart, as far as he could tell.

"And what about Mr. Corlione? I hate to have to keep reminding you, but once we're out of here, he'll be getting an earful on your exploits. And you know he won't stand for anything you've done."

"By the time you do," Cyrus retorted, "we'll be long gone. Do you really think, after all my years on the other side of the law, that I don't know how to disappear when I have to, or have all manner of escape plans and exit strategies?" His voice shook a bit, however.

"Oh, no doubt." Nick smiled coldly, injecting just the right amount of cruelty and lofty disdain into his tone. "But we already know you don't have any other homes but the one, and one vehicle registered to your name. I'm sure you have others we don't know about, or your bullyboys do, and if it comes down to it you can steal them. But that's got to be demeaning for someone of your stature. Then there's the fact you'll always be looking over your shoulder, waiting for the hammer to fall…your movements won't be your own anymore, you'll have to be a veritable hermit if you want to keep some informant from recognizing you and reporting your whereabouts…"
"Oh, and Corlione knows every one of your bank accounts and sources of income. And can cut you off from them at any time. How do your boys like the idea of you not being able to pay them anymore? Or do you relish the idea of living at poverty level when your funds run out? There's an area in the Meadowlands I'd love to recommend for you in that case, and I know there are some mammals living there who'd be dying to meet you."

With every word, everything seemed to be crushing down on Cyrus, as even his unstable, demented brain parsed what the fox was saying and realized its truth. He winced, then flinched…shoulders slumping and body shrinking back, and for the first time his gun wavered in his hoof. Nick took note of this, even as he finally followed the last pulley and chain to its lever and knew exactly what he had to do. He also noticed that the ram's backup sheep were looking even more distressed—worried, afraid, and downright rebellious.

Finally, though, the bighorn snarled, brandished his weapon, and aimed it steadfastly once again, seeming determined to wipe the knowing, wry smile from his hated foe's face. "The only one who will be dying here is you, if you don't do as I say. Which includes keeping that smart mouth of yours shut. And if you push me any further, I may just decide my life is not too large a price to pay if I can take you with me."

"Why thank you, my mouth is very smart. And that's not all it's good for." Behind him he heard a stifled snicker he was absolutely certain came from Krumpansky.

"I said, shut up!" Cyrus tensed his finger on the trigger. "Now, what is it going to be? Are you all going to retreat and let us depart? Or do we get to find out if your blood is redder than your fur?"

Nick paused…flicked his gaze to the side at Bogo and the others…waited until he had their attention, lifted his eyebrows, and then twitched his head meaningfully, just the fraction of an inch necessary to tell them where to look. After they had done so (and he saw both Simmers and Bogo moving marginally in the shadows to reach for their guns), he finally glanced at the hidden Xander for a split second before regarding Cyrus. "Well, let me tell you, Cy…can I call you Cy?…maybe it's just me, but I don't think it would look very good for our department if we let you walk. Not very good at all. So I'm afraid my answer is…"

"Now!" This last he shouted in the white tiger's direction. And with that he threw himself forwards and down, onto all fours.

As he had expected, not only had this maneuver been one the ram had not predicted, but his attention was suddenly wrested toward where Nick had shouted, so he wasn't able to swing his weapon to cover the vulpine's trail as he darted forward and to the side, toward Woolter and Jesse. Particularly
since, at the same time he'd given the command, Xander had sliced through the rope with all four claws, parting it completely from its hook. The sound of something heavy whizzing through the air came from above, along with a wild screeching and squeaking as the broken rope snaked upward over its pulley wheel—and before he could do anything but start to turn toward the tiger who had been concealed near him, Doug Ramses halted in place, limbs frozen at odd angles, hooves twitching before his sniper rifle slipped away to clatter on the stone floor.

Then, with a deep groan, he fell to his knees and toppled forward, the pair of sandbags that had struck him half-sliding from his head while their frayed rope continued whipping downward and coiling up before the end drifted almost serenely into place. Nick didn't know off hand how much such things weighed, but at the height they'd fallen from, he was fairly certain that only the sheep's thick skull and wool had protected him from death. What he knew for sure was that he would be out cold for some time.

Meanwhile, as if they'd rehearsed it, the minute the sniper (the best shot and therefore the biggest threat) was out of the picture, Bogo and the others immediately drew their guns and fired toward Cyrus. Already caught off-guard while staring in mingled shock and fury at the loss of his best asset, the mobster wasn't able to get his gun up in time, but he did still manage to dodge to the side, half-hidden behind a massive chest and a metal clothes-dummy wearing what looked like some kind of Roman armor. Needless to say, the sight of a sheep cowering behind a wolf-shaped figure clad in armor similarly bearing lupine faces, paws, and other design motifs was deliciously ironic.

Yet Nick didn't focus on that as anything more than a random aside, for he was still leaping and darting forward as fast as all four limbs could take him. And while bullets spangled and ricocheted about behind him—most flying from the ZPD's side, but it sounded like Cyrus was ducking out of cover to shoot back fairly often as well—he reached the ropes and levers he had observed on the same side of the aisle as the other two sheep. Leaping up on the bar, he whipped about to face the ovines, gun raised to fire…and even as both of them shot their hooves up and dropped their weapons, he had already cleanly bit through the nearest rope. Another pair of sandbags came hurtling down, striking Jesse and Woolter so that they joined their compatriot in sprawled unconsciousness. And that was for keeping me from getting to your boss in time to save Judy, back at the Palm.

But despite his smugness, the fox wasn't looking at them anymore, since he'd known they weren't a factor as soon as the rope parted. Instead he idly kicked out behind him with one foot…and as he turned back toward the ram who had started all this, the lever he'd struck released its chain in a long, noisy, rattling blur of motion. The heavy canvas and wood backdrop attached to the other end came plummeting downward as if shot from a rocket and struck just where he'd known it would, on the stack of other backdrops piled vertically beneath it…and one by one, slowly at first but picking up speed, they toppled forward in a domino effect.

Cyrus only had time for one strangled scream as he heard the incoming collapse, and then the backdrop was falling straight toward him. He tried to dive, missed, and instead tore right through the canvas with his horns as it banged violently on the floor around him. Scrabbling wildly, he managed
to invert himself and roll clear, back to his hooves—but in the struggle he'd lost his gun, somewhere under the pile of fanned-out backdrops and the huge cloud of dust it had raised. He took one look at this, glared at Nick with a vicious snarl, then let out a howl of outrage as he turned and fled once more, farther back into the cloaking shadows of the building.

For what seemed an eternal moment Nick stared after him, frustration and hatred vying with the surge of triumph rising up inside him; he'd been so sure, so close! Then, as he suddenly found himself back on the ground without having even realized he'd leaped there, a large figure loomed over him and he realized Bogo was there. He jerked back up to his full height, expecting a reprimand…but the Cape buffalo only nodded, once, and while there was a slight exasperation in his eyes, everything else about him indicated admiration, and more than a trace of pride.

"Well done, Wilde. You've got him running now, and completely on his own." He glanced behind him, and as the fox followed his gaze he saw that Trumpet and Simmers were just finishing snapping the handcuffs on Jesse and Woolter, while Krumpansky and Fangmeyer had done the same to Doug. The rhino was grinning at Xander as he stepped out into the open aisle, lifting a callused hand to congratulate him with a 'bro-fist' while the tiger rubbed at the back of his neck, looking appropriately sheepish; the tigress was staring after Cyrus's dwindling form, gun in paw, a severe and smoldering fury on her face he'd never seen there before. He knew how she felt.

Looking back up somewhat pugnaciously, Nick set his jaw, ready for an argument. "Good, but this isn't over. I'm going after him."

"Of course you are." Bogo nodded again in firm approval. While Nick was still staring at him in disbelief and confusion, he added, "We've got things under control here, thanks to Mr. Pounceski, and your partner may well need assistance, after all. Have at the bastard, with my blessing." It wasn't just anger he saw on the buffalo's face…it was something deeper, a disgust that went beyond morality into a repudiation of everything this particular criminal was and stood for.

If matters were otherwise, that would bother Nick greatly, and he'd stop to consider all the possible ramifications and implications. But as it was, all he felt was a rather unholy glee, and all he did was squeeze his paw tighter around the butt of his sidearm before nodding and turning to head in pursuit. As he did so, he heard Bogo call out one last time. "Oh, and Wilde?"

He looked back at the chief's top-heavy form standing rigid, arms crossed over his chest.

"Yes?"

"You have authorization to use force. As much as needed to end this."
Nick smiled slowly, nodded again, then darted off into the towering blackness of the backstage…and as he went, only one thought ran through his mind.

*With pleasure, Chief. And I already planned on it anyway.*

After all, sometimes it was better to beg forgiveness than to ask for permission. And he'd challenge any jury, even one composed solely of prey, to convict him, if they knew what he knew, what this mammal had done, and tried to do, to everyone.

Chapter End Notes

As usual for a climax, not as many references made this time around. The scene at the beginning takes place in another cut place from *The Art of Zootopia*, The Dunes restaurant in Sahara Square. For that matter, having the climax take place at the concert, while this is something which has appeared in a number of other fanfics (particularly ones which involve the tiger dancers being targeted as part of the Night Howler plot), is also a reference to the art book, as the production art shows Nick there, defending a fallen Judy from the encircling tigers. So of course I reversed that here, where the tigers (still sentient) are defending Gazelle, with Judy's help, while Nick is elsewhere. FYI: the names given for two of the dancers here, Hafeez and Dhruti, mean "protector" and "firm, resolute" in Sanskrit, respectively.

One side note of symbolism: the mountainbells and crimson columbine Bucky is wearing as a corsage in the flashback are there because those flowers are particularly associated with the deciduous forests that deer are native to. And to expand on what Leodore thought regarding the garnet: it is specifically one of the gemstones which in antiquity (and to some degree still is today) was associated with the Western astrological sign of Leo, and in gemstone lore has always been a symbol of love (its name comes from a Latin word meaning "seedlike" to reflect how it resembles a pomegranate seed, long a medieval symbol of passion and fecundity), commitment and fidelity, and sexual prowess. It's also connected with healing and protection (the image of a lion, if engraved on a garnet, was said to "cure the wearer of all diseases, protect and preserve his honor and health, and guard him from all perils in traveling"), and ironically enough, Greek myth said it could be used to heal emotional rifts between lovers. Its blood-red hue associated it with warriors and inflicting more deadly wounds, but one which had lost its luster was a sign of coming disaster. Very interesting, hmm? ^_^

Finally, the manner in which Buckley was shot and turned savage is rather similar to what occurred with one of Lionheart's wolves in the story "Patient Zero" by IronicSnap. This would be because I was inspired by the same source as that author was, a theory regarding how Lionheart first learned of the Night Howler conspiracy which was posited on TV Tropes. I can see it going either way, the hit being a mistake that had been meant for Lionheart himself or that the other mammal was deliberately targeted so Lionheart would witness it and try to cover it up, thus setting up for Bellwether's frame job. But regardless, I don't think anything else can really explain how he found out about what was going on and got involved. I just changed it to make the first victim be someone of even greater emotional importance to him, to up the stakes and explain why
he would do all the illegal things he did. Though I will allow if he was as close to his wolves as "Patient Zero" implies, one of them being hit could produce the same results.
Even if she could have gotten the tranq gun into position in time, Judy privately doubted she could have pulled the trigger—the angle was all wrong, the pressure of Leodore's weight atop her was bending her paws back and pinning her arms to her body, and her fear had seized control of her limbs once again. But luckily it didn't matter, and she would never have to find out what might have happened...because just as the giant lion's fangs were coming down to bite with crushing force, so large compared to her they might as well have been sabre teeth, in jaws so strong they would easily have ripped her jugular in two and snapped her shoulder bones into pieces...just as this occurred, another weight landed atop them both, making her breath flee painfully the rest of the way.
Then, as strong young tawny arms wrapped around Lionheart's bullish neck, jerking his head back and dragging the snarling, roaring, struggling cat off of her, she saw the face of Manuel Delgato peering over the former mayor's wildly-disheveled mane. His dark eyes were terrified, but also determined and brimming over with courage, and even as he gritted his teeth and fought with every ounce of strength in his arms and shoulders, he managed to snap out a few words.

"Leo…Leo…no! You're not…getting her!"

At that moment, if they'd both been free and otherwise unoccupied, she'd have kissed Manny. Instead, of course, as soon as he'd pulled Leodore back far enough for her to scramble free, she did so, and just in time—the massive lion had just managed to get one paw free of his attacker, and it lashed out with lightning speed, claws unsheathed, as it moved to strike her. She just managed to evade it, rolling and twisting and tumbling across the stage until she was able to get back to her feet again. Too close.

When the rabbit was able to reorient herself, slow her terrified breathing slightly, and gauge the situation anew, she saw that one of the tiger dancers had joined Delgato again, grasping and struggling with the savage Barbary from his other side, and despite his larger size and muscle mass he seemed to be as hard-pressed and desperate as her fellow cop was. At least he'd succeeded in grabbing the free, flailing paw, keeping him from breaking away or causing any further injuries…but Leodore was still snarling and roaring viciously, straining against his captors as if he had the strength of ten lions his size.

*What is driving him? Is Leo just that much bigger and stronger than most mammals? Or is he just that darned fierce and stubborn?* Her heart sank as she reflected what a terrible irony it would be if the thing that had kept Lionheart going all these months, from his first secretive days of illegal activity at Cliffside up to their current time together, had now been twisted and used against him, driving him to monstrous acts he would never have condoned, no matter how much tranquilizer he was injected with.

Tranquilizer! Lurching out of her daze, Judy quickly looked down at her paws to discover, to her frustrated despair, that she no longer held the gun. Just as she realized that the former mayor's last paw-swipe must have knocked it out of her grasp, she heard a scraping sound, that of metal against wood, and looked up just in time to see the weapon sliding across the stage, away from the tiger's foot that had accidentally kicked it during the struggle. There was no time. Dully, she watched as it slid off the lip of the stage and disappeared into the darkness of the stadium auditorium, so far away that under the grunts, growls, stomps, and scraping, even she couldn't hear it land. She closed her eyes for a pained moment.

The only other means of bringing Leodore down non-lethally now was on Delgato's belt, and he was just a tad too preoccupied to give it to her. Unless she wanted to risk getting that close to all those sweating, snarling, tussling big cats so as to nab the weapon, the only thing she had to help her now

Except...she knew she would. If she had to. If there was no other choice, and it was the only way to stop him, to save them all.

Tears stood in her eyes, and she swiftly dashed them away. If she was going to find an alternative, another way to end things less brutally and fatally, then she would have to think fast. She'd have to think, once again, like Nick.

A deep, male groan came from behind her, and as she swiftly looked in that direction, she saw Gazelle finish tying off the bandage she'd created from her sash, looking up into her dancer's face with concern, fear, and tenderness. For a moment Judy stared in shock, for despite the years the singer had been topping the charts with the striped cats at her side, it had never really occurred to the rabbit how close Gazelle and her tigers might have become. Feeling both embarrassed and ashamed of herself, she hurried over to their side; as much as stopping Leo was paramount, as an officer of the law it was also her job to ensure civilians were safe and protected. "Miss Gazelle? Are you all right?"

The antelope looked at her, startled; at first she wasn't sure if for some strange reason the entertainer thought someone in her position wouldn't bother to notice or care about her and her entourage, but her next words belied this assumption. "Judy Hopps? It is you, yes? The bunny cop, the hero—the one who helped end the Pred Scare."

If matters were otherwise, Judy didn't know which would have flustered her more—the high praise she was receiving, again, for something that had not only been a part of her job (even if there had been nothing simple or ordinary about it) but which would not even have been necessary had she not screwed everything up at the press conference in the first place; or the fact this recognition was coming from Gazelle. As it was, she still had to work to keep her voice level and controlled, and not just because of the situation. "Uh...yeah. Right. That's me! Anyway...are you okay? Both of you?"

She flicked her gaze to the wounded tiger.

"Yes. Or we will be." Gazelle glanced sidelong at the big feline, who after clutching briefly at his arm and hissing between his teeth looked up with a strong, unwavering gaze and nodded firmly, adoration for her in his eyes. "But I do not understand, what is going on? I thought all that madness, that nightmare, was over!"

"So did we." Judy sighed, fighting off a wave of melancholy. "But somebody just wasn't ready to give up on making it come true. We came here to stop him, and we did, sort of...but I'm afraid we
also kind of made it worse." She glanced over her shoulder toward the side wing, a creepy prickling between her shoulders as something made her want to check, to be certain…but no, Buckley Stagmire remained unconscious where he'd been left by Manny and Leodore a short time earlier—ten minutes? Fifteen? Why does it feel like hours?—neither a threat to them nor in danger himself any longer. Unless the savage Leodore found him and...

Wrenching her mind away from that horrific, stomach-churning line of thought, she went on hurriedly, hushed so as not to draw the feral mammal's attention. If the smell of blood or her own fear-musk hadn't done that already. "Anyway, we have to stop Leo. Save him, and all of you, too. Unless you think you can get away, get offstage while we've got him distracted."

For a moment the antelope's brown eyes narrowed, a strange and sudden hostility in them; Judy's heart sank again as she realized that after his arrest and the scandal which had followed, Gazelle might possibly have fallen into some of the same suspicion and distrust as the rest of Zootopia when it came to the disgraced ex-mayor. But then her expression cleared and she nodded, shooting a troubled and worried look toward where Leodore and the others still fought in a tangled knot of muscle and fur.

"Yes, yes of course you do. Whatever else he may have done, Señor Lionheart does not deserve this. And he did save us all..." Biting her lip, she shook her horned head vigorously. "We will stay out of danger as best we can, but I will not leave my tigrítos, and they won't leave me. Besides, it looks as if you could use the help."

Judy glanced back at the others; both Delgato and the tiger were straining at the edge of their strength, from how much sweat was soaking their fur and running in thick rivulets down toward the stage, and how their muscles were twitching, shuddering, and spasming on the verge of giving out from the exertion. She didn't think they could last much longer... "I hate to ask, but yes. I think we do." She flicked her eyes to the other pair of tigers who remained crouched and kneeling nearby in a protective flank, tense as a bowstring and ready to leap into action if Leodore moved even halfway threateningly in their direction. "Do you think...?"

Gazelle again looked at the wounded tiger, then at the pair alongside her. As she did so, Judy could see the fear in her eyes, but also the deep, intense pride at knowing they had the strength, the determination, and the purpose to do something this dangerous but also this important. And the cats in turn were willing to do anything to protect her, to help save the city, to put an end to this terrible descent into barbarous bloodlust and species warfare. Even if it might cost them their lives. As it sank in just what the singer and her troupe was willing to do, she realized something...something unpleasant and uncomfortable, yet undeniably true, and which reminded her just why she did this, what she was fighting for.

That as much as Gazelle was known only as a celebrity pop-star while her backup dancers were fanservice and eye-candy...they were still mammals. Individuals. Animals with personalities, pasts,
lives. Flaws and virtues, dreams and hopes, worries and annoyances. They made dinner and overslept in the morning, lost their tempers and made up with each other by spending the night snuggling, laughed and cried, learned new things and shared of themselves with their fans. They mattered. They deserved to be saved, not just for their role in the city or their fame, but because they were mammals. Just because they had no direct connection to her didn't make them mean any less. Just as she had learned from spending time with him that Leodore Lionheart was a complex fellow who deserved a second chance…who did not deserve what had been done to him now…Gazelle and her tigers had value all on their own. They were precious, unique.

And while this made her want to fight all the harder to save them, it also meant they had choice and agency of their own. They had to be allowed free will, to act as they saw fit. And if she did her part right, if they were lucky, it wouldn't cost them anything more than adrenaline and fear.

Nodding, Judy relented and glanced back one final time at the others; time still seemed to be warped to her, so that only a minute or so had passed, but the tiger and Delgato had nearly lost their holds now, their paws slipping and claws unable to hold onto fur and flesh, and Lionheart was heaving upward once again, bestial roars bellowing from his throat as he shook and tossed his maned head, gathering himself for the final lurch that would throw his opponents aside and leave him free to attack once more.

"Okay then. But if we're going to do this, you'll have to follow my lead. No questions, no debates. Just do as I do, when I say it."

Gazelle nodded and tilted her horned head to indicate the crouching tigers still defending her. "Bhajan and Arjava, they will obey as you need them."

"Good. Then be ready to jump on my mark. Keep Leodore from going for her or the crowd. I need to get to Delgato's tranq gun…"

She had barely gotten the last words out when things started happening too quickly again, and she had to act with split-second decision-making.

As she turned to face the struggling cats, before her eyes she saw Delgato's paw slipping through the bigger lion's sweat-soaked mane—and as it flew off with a bitten-off curse in Spanish, Lionheart surged upward with his renewed freedom of movement, wrenching to the side and sending his arm up to smack with slamming force right across the cop's face. The sound of muscle and bone connecting was so loud, and mixed with such a sickening wetness, that she couldn't help clapping her paws to her mouth; had something broken, had Manny's jaw been dislocated?
There wasn’t time to worry about it though, for the same movement had also sent Delgato flying backward yet again, hurling him into the stage wall so that he let out a roar of pain before sliding downward to land in a heap on the stage. But while he was still in mid-air, the Barbary had already reached back agilely, latching his claws deeply into the furred arm and shoulder of the lone tiger still wrestling with him. In a flurry of motion he had soon delivered the same treatment to the dancer, with the result that he landed sprawled instead on the wood right in front of Judy and Gazelle.

And Lionheart was free. Free to leap to all fours again, twist about to glare with fiery, molten eyes of insane bloodlust at the seemingly helpless mammals cowering before him, lips writhered back yet again to expose those gritted, gleaming, saliva-coated fangs. The sound he made…it was like none Judy had ever heard, even Manchas hadn’t sounded like this. What did he see them as? What all would he do to them if he could get hold of them…?

Galvanizing all her courage, the rabbit clenched her fists and rose to her full though diminutive height; luckily, they would never have to find out. "Now, guys! Grab him and pin him—just like Manny and your brother did!"

As she’d hoped for, the dancers moved with the same sense of timing and coordination that made them so good in their particular line of work; whether they trusted Judy to keep Gazelle safe or also believed their injured brother would defend her to the best of his ability, they didn’t even hesitate. She didn’t think it was possible when under the influence of the hallucinogenic drug, but somehow Leodore’s eyes widened in shock as the two striped felines barreled toward him…and despite his comparable size and the maddening effect of the Night Howler, somehow the self-preservation instinct took over, and instead of fight, it was flight he launched into—turning and scrabbling to get away as fast as he could move his mammoth body, tail lashing, ears flattened back to his skull, claws digging into the stage to send him leaping away.

But the tigers weren’t about to let him get out onto the stadium floor where the mammals of the audience were still milling about on the steps out and among the upper seats, nor could he be allowed to escape into the shadowy backstage where he might never be found before making it outside, there to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting populace of the city. Or maybe they simply wanted revenge for the attack on Gazelle and their brothers. Whatever it was, before Lionheart had even made it halfway to the steps that led down toward the auditorium floor, the other felines were upon him.

He tried to turn back (and she wondered, since they had ended up not very far from Buckley’s fallen form, if it was as much to defend the deer as himself), but both striped cats had their powerful arms around his neck and shoulders, wrenching him toward the back wall of the stage again. And even as the lion’s fangs were flashing as he tossed his head and lunged for one throat, then the other, the dancers’ feet were getting in on the act as well, lifting in primitive fashion to swipe and claw at Leodore’s underbelly. A shriek escaped Judy’s mouth, quickly bit back; if something wasn’t done soon, any or all of them would be fatally injured without any guns even entering into it!
Ripping her eyes away from the horrible sight before she saw something that would traumatize her for life, Judy swiftly darted across the stage instead, hurrying to Delgato's prone form and kneeling beside him to check his vitals. Thankfully he seemed mostly unharmed, although his every movement was slow and painful, and she could see blood leaking steadily from the corner of his mouth. "Manny! Oh please, Manny, are you okay…?"

The Hispanic lion groaned, holding a paw to his head; he tried to sit up, but as he put his weight on his other arm, it instantly buckled and he started to collapse again, letting out a whimper of anguish. Quickly she darted forward a step and caught him, bracing him up on that side with her shoulder. "Ay-yi-yi…man, I was gonna ask if it's really true what they say about prisons, how easy it is to get stacked in the big house…but he's always eaten his Wheaties, hasn't he?" Before she could do more than start to laugh—albeit a bit jittery and hysterical—he went on, "I'll be okay, just a bit shook up, cut the inside of my mouth with one of my fangs, I think. But…I've hurt my wrist. Don't know if it's a sprain, or what." He grimaced.

"You've done more than enough, don't worry." Taking a deep breath, she held out a paw somewhat plaintively. "I can't stop you if you want to keep trying, but I need your tranq gun. I lost mine in the fight."

Delgato nodded and, after using the stage wall to brace his shoulder on his bad side, was able to fish out the weapon and hand it over. He frowned as he did so, though. "But how're you gonna use it, Judy? They're all so close together, getting a good, clean shot's gonna be impossible."

The rabbit felt her throat tighten again, though not with a scream or shriek this time; the thought had already crossed her mind, and she already knew what her answer would be. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Hopefully, if I wait till the right moment, there'll be an opening." And if not…well, it's not like knocking Gazelle's tigers out too will hurt them. She just had to hope, if it came to that, that there were enough darts in Manny's gun to still knock out one with Leodore's constitution after also removing the striped…obstacles in the way.

"Be careful, Judy," Delgato urged her, worry tightening his already-strained voice.

"As much as I can be," she muttered. "Don't have to tell me twice…" Then she turned back to the snarling, growling ball of felines that occupied the middle of the stage.

By now the three had twisted, rolled, and flipped across the wood paneling until they were no longer beside the fallen cervine, and if she hadn't been armed she'd have once again put a paw to her mouth—because she could see the polished surface behind them was now smeared and streaked with vivid red. She had no idea who had been hurt, or how badly, although flashes of images came to her now and then amongst all the puffed-out fur and mane: deep tears in flesh and muscle, leaking bright crimson; splayed claws tipped with the same viscous fluid; and the rictus of Lionheart's bared fangs,
dripping with what also soaked the fur of his entire chin and muzzle.

She had to put a stop to this, now, before things got any worse. Even if the tigers weren't ferociously and vengefully determined to defend Gazelle, it was very clear they might need to do something drastic and permanent to Lionheart just to defend themselves, let alone to avoid fatal consequences. And it might well take something that final in order to stop one as enraged and out-of-control as the lion had become. She couldn't allow either of those things to happen—the first would just lead to the same panic, chaos, and prejudiced cries for justice they'd been trying to avoid, and the second...well, after everything she'd been through with Leodore, that just wasn't in the cards.

Carefully, slowly, inexorably she lifted the tranq gun into position...aimed it toward the cats...and gripped both butt and trigger with white-knuckled pressure. It did not waver. She sighted along the barrel, setting her jaw as she focused, watched the way the dancers worked in tandem to pull the maned cat up on his knees, yanking him back and wrenching his arms behind him to restrain him—something she instantly recognized as the hammerlock usually used to place handcuffs on a suspect, though she wondered how these tigers happened to know it.

But the violently struggling lion was of course resisting, throwing his shoulders back and arching his spine to try and twist free, and such was his strength that both striped cats were being lurched and dragged back and forth across the stage, inch by inch. And of course, because he kept twisting at the waist, bending down, tossing his head, and hunching forward and back to buck his attackers off, what Delgato had warned of stayed true...she simply could not find a target before it either jerked out of view or was blocked by a striped arm or shoulder. She began to despair.

Then...then it happened. It had to be completely by accident, because it was not the sort of thing a feral animal would possibly think of, but as he surged and jerked across the wooden planks, one of Leodore's legs shoved back and up behind him to try and push the muscular weight away that was pinning him in place—and his foot happened to slam with battering force right in one of the tigers' groins. An anguished cry of agony burst from the cat's throat, tight and strained to a higher pitch, and instantly his hold on the lion was lost as he fell back, clutching at his bruised anatomy while tears leaked from the corners of his eyes.

With his weight gone, Lionheart whipped about, the prodigious strength of his chest and shoulders easily lifting the other tiger right off the floor with only one arm...and the dancer only had time for a look that mingled terror with fury before he was flung sideways and back, right into his brother. Both tigers sprawled in a tangle of arms and legs, and once again, the former mayor was free.

Free, and a clear target as he loomed upward in the stage lights, chest thrust out and head thrown back as he let out another chilling roar.

She didn't know whether he intended to turn back around and once more leap for Gazelle (who was
being shielded, she saw, by the tiger who had been helping Delgato before, now crawled to her side), vault off the stage, or come looking for her again. The way he glared downward with hateful blazing eyes, both paws spread and all claws unsheathed, suggested something much more direct and predatory for the tigers who had dared assault him and ruin his hunt.

Regardless, it didn't matter. Judy lifted the gun, aimed it right for the middle of Leodore's back, between the shoulder blades, and pulled the trigger.

Crack.

The sound echoed loudly, resonantly in the vast empty space of both stage and auditorium.

Crack. Odd. It almost sounded like there was another gunshot, slightly off-set from hers.

Crack.

The hammer clicked on an empty chamber, as Manny had previously used three shots on Stagmire. But as she stared with widened eyes, frozen in place as she tensely waited to see if this had finally, mercifully been enough to overcome both the Night Howler and Lionheart's wildly-surging adrenaline, she heard one last shot that she knew, now, had absolutely not come from her tranq gun.

With a long, deep exhalation from his tightened lungs, and a strange sound that mingled a confused, questioning growl with a saddened, painful moan, the form of Leodore Lionheart that had been stiffened in place toppled over and backwards with an almost grand majesty to land, twisted at an awkward angle and completely unconscious, sprawled in the middle of the stage.

It took Judy's mind what seemed an eternity to catch up with events, with what she was seeing, and as she slowly, mechanically, lowered the gun to stare down at the lion's chest, she spied two things—that it was still rising and falling, fitfully but consistently, and that there were four tranq darts in a staggered but perfectly arranged line from the top of one maned pectoral to the bottom of the other. What? How...?

Finally managing to lift her gaze from the sedated feline, she saw a figure at the far side of the stage, standing partway up the steps from the auditorium floor. Someone she'd never expected to see—the last mammal she'd imagined seeing here, in fact—clad in a ZPD uniform, blond hair curling artfully beneath the brim of her cap as she too lowered the tranq gun she was holding in both hooves.
Officer May Swinton said not a word at first as she slowly holstered her weapon, swept her gaze across the stage to take in everyone present and their condition, then finally fixed her cool green eyes on Judy before nodding approvingly. "Sorry I took so long. I was helping evacuate the auditorium, and had a devil of a time getting back through the crowd…and then I had to wait for a clear shot myself." She paused, then said with careful deliberation, "I thought it might be something like this. Why you were all here, I mean. You were doing the right thing after all, even if you had to bend or break a number of rules to do it. Still…it's a good thing I followed you all, and got here in time." She gestured with a hoof to indicate something.

The rabbit, still overwhelmed by all that had happened, how swiftly it had ended, and the startling way it had done so, looked where Swinton had pointed—and ran a paw over the back of her neck, her ears flattening in embarrassment. She hadn't even noticed, but there it was: on Leodore's ankle, blinking and pulsing below the bottom cuff of his pants, the yellow light of the tracker he'd been fitted with what seemed a lifetime ago.

Groaning under his breath, as he could swear every muscle would be bruised black and blue tomorrow and that his bones had been cracked and battered around inside every sore limb, Manuel Delgato managed to lever himself to his feet by leaning against the stage wall. He took a long, slow breath and felt a painful, extremely sharp twinge along his side—the muscle there had been pulled, and unless he missed his guess he'd cracked a rib, too. But as he tentatively explored the limb he'd been unable to lean on before, he found to his relief that his wrist was not broken, only badly sprained.

He'd been very, very lucky, managing to miss any truly severe injuries, though it seemed Leodore's claws had succeeded in snagging him a few times since there were reddish stains down one pant leg and coloring the fur of his other arm; it was already darkening though and drying quickly, too, so it must not be too serious.

The young lion shook his head slowly. Damn. I tried so very, very hard. But my strength meant nothing in the end. My ferocity, nada. He was older than me by a generation at least, our professions couldn't have put me at more of an advantage, and yet he tossed me around like a cub. Dios mio...all that feral power was like nothing I could imagine...it was like a train engine and twice as loud. All my training, all my vigor, all my spirit...and he was still the greater lion...and Judy was as a rag doll beneath his great paw...

It was sobering, humbling, distressing, making him doubt his ability as a police officer—even with the aid of one of the tigers, it hadn't been enough; could he ever apprehend a truly determined, belligerent suspect of a large and powerful species without the aid of someone like Jackson, or even Grizzoli or Pennington?
Yet he realized, as his thoughts settled and his guts unclenched and his heart slowed back to normal, that it had been just enough, in the end. He'd kept anything worse from happening to Gazelle and her dancers, he'd saved Judy at least once, and he'd given her enough time to use the tranqs and save the day. Even if it had also required the surprise intervention of Swinton (what was she doing here?), what mattered was Lionheart had been stopped…and not killed…and any other tragedy that Cyrus had hoped to cause had not come to pass. It had taken a team effort—but that was the way it was supposed to be.

After a brief glance at the horned singer and her hovering guardian tigers—both a little dazed, one from the blood loss in his arm, the other from striking his head on the floor when he was hurled away—he moved to check on the others. Stagmire was still unconscious; the also-drugged Lionheart had jagged claws marks across his belly, along his side, and down one arm; and the last two tigers were mostly in one piece, though he thought from the way one was holding his arm that it had been broken and the other had a paw held to the side of his neck where a deep bite was bleeding rather profusely. Still…damned, damned lucky.

Rubbing at the various aches and pains in his back, sides, and neck, Delgato exchanged a long, rather shell-shocked look with Judy…then Gazelle…and finally the pair of tigers near him before he let out a long, shuddering sigh. "Carajo. That was too close." Shaking his head, he pressed the button on his Bluefang and signaled whatever officers were nearby and not too preoccupied with the evacuation or cordoning off the crowd outside. "Officer Delgato, calling any ZPD who can hear this. I've got two very large mammals down that need transport, the biggest and strongest you've got. And a number of injured civilians. All of them need to get to the nearest hospital ASAP."

Even as he was receiving several acknowledgements (he wasn't certain, but he thought two of them were Trunkaby and Rhinowitz), he saw that Swinton was talking through her own radio. As she signed off, she shot him an assessing gaze before managing a small, reassuring smile. "I called 911, there should be several ambulances here within the next fifteen minutes; both Lions Gate and Zootopia General are nearby."

Letting out a sigh of relief, he noticed that the tank top he'd removed earlier lay nearby. A moment's thought, and he had scooped it up and was kneeling by the side of the tiger with the neck bite, working as swiftly as he could with his injured wrist to wrap it in a makeshift sling around the striped feline's shoulder, circling it through his armpit and making sure it kept tight pressure on the wound before tying the straps together underneath. By the time he was done, the white fabric was already soaking through with red.

"Thank you," the big cat murmured in his Indian accent. "You are a very good fighter."

Delgato tried to wave it off uncomfortably. "All in a day's work. But I didn't really do much, you and
"You held him off just as well as we did," the dancer disagreed. "Better, even. You've got real good muscle mass, mitra. And you're smaller than us and him both, but you still did it." The tiger cracked a smile, and even as weary and pale as he was, the expression was the same charming one the fans knew him for, that made him and his brothers even more charismatic and handsome. "I'd take you at my side any time, paws down." And he even lifted his other paw to bring his knuckles to the lion's.

Delgato stared at him in disbelief; even though he'd not been a Gazelle fan at first, even though Jackson's cynicism about the Stripers had made him somewhat sour about the whole troupe, and even though the clear example they were of 'sex sells' had him rolling his eyes and dismissive of their whole gimmick, even he could not completely resist the tigers' allure. To be so close to them now, and have one praising him so highly? Trying not to be conscious of the fact they were only inches apart and both of them shirtless, he flushed. "Th-thank you."

Cool your jets, Manuel. You've got a boyfriend already, remember? Sweet as anything, real fragile still after what happened to him, best thing that's ever happened to you...

While he was running through the litany of propriety and devotion, he finally noticed Judy had approached him at last—ostensibly to return his gun since she was holding it out mutely, but he could see in her violet eyes how grateful and awed she was. "I gotta thank you too, Manny. You were awesome out there. I knew I chose right, asking for you to join us. I don't know what we would have done without you."

Before he could say anything (even though he didn't think he could overcome his tongue-tied state to do so) or do more than take the gun with a sheepish grin, hooves on the wooden floor became quite audible, and then Gazelle was standing over the group, the other pair of tigers flanking her. "¡Oigan! Enough with the pity party. You all had your parts to play, and you were magnificent. But what I wish to know is…" She trailed off meaningfully, her dark gaze moving from them, to Leodore, and then finally to Buckley. "…just what has been going on here behind my back, eh? Miss Hopps seemed to be saying this is more of that, that monstrous conspiracy the Assistant Mayor was running. But she is locked away, where she should be. So who is doing this? Why? And when will they be taken out of my Animalia and put in the same place as that perra oveja?"

For a moment all of them stared at her, and while Delgato had no idea what the others were thinking, he was utterly shocked—not at the antelope's strong will and proud, take-charge attitude, but at her harsh language. Granted, she had pretty good reason to be angry at Bellwether after the danger her tigers had been put in, both at the protests and elsewhere in Zootopia as the city's prey species lashed out in fear, resentment, and hatred, but he'd never known her to be anything but polite, dignified, and formal at all times.

Then the tiger at his side chuckled softly. "One thing you need to know about our Gazelle: you never want to cross her, because when you mess with her herd, she becomes a devil." Looking up at her...
warily where she stood poised and fiercely combative against whatever threatened, Delgato found that even if the antelope had not possessed those long and deadly horns, he'd have believed his fellow cat.

Gazelle smiled warmly at her dancer despite her determination to get to the bottom of things. "You do say the nicest things, Bhajan."

More footsteps came from the front of the stage before anyone could attempt to explain the circumstances to the singer, and then two more mammals appeared beside and ahead of Swinton, who had been watching silently with a rather bemused and admiring expression. The first one to climb up on stage, looking rather winded, was Benjamin Clawhauser—for a moment Delgato stared at him in renewed confusion until he realized, from the civvies the cheetah was wearing, that the records clerk/dispatcher must have had the night off and so naturally had come to the concert. He was wearing a pair of surprisingly tight acid-wash jeans and a denim vest almost as sparkly as the glitter shorts over an official Gazelle souvenir T-shirt; its image of the singer, surrounded by her tigers crouched as if to pounce and eviscerate her along with the slogan "TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE", was entirely too ironic.

"O-M-Goodness! What're you guys doing here? I mean, I knew you were on a case, and you said it was a matter of life and death, but you can get real melodramatic about your cases—I'm sorry, Judy, but you really do!—and Nick can't be serious if his life depended on it, but anyway I had no idea…
gosh, this is so, so…and, and…" He flicked his saucer-wide eyes to Gazelle, let out a barely-stifled squeak as his paws clenched excitedly under his chin, then tried to focus again. "I don't understand, this is all just so terrible, I'm so glad you saved everyone though, again, and oh-sweet-doughnut-holes-I-am-your-biggest-fan-Gazelle-I-have-your-first-album-special-edition-mint-condition-please-Mr.-Arjava-don't-kill-me!"

As this rush of nearly-hyperventilating words practically bowled over all of them, Manuel tried to make sense of it in pieces but found himself failing except at only the bare minimum of understanding. (And how did he know which tiger dancer it was that had started to rise to move protectively in front of the antelope, when as brothers they really did all look alike? He really must be a dedicated fan!) As Gazelle herself was holding her hooves to her mouth to cover her growing, genuine smile, and the anger and fear left her eyes so they only twinkled with hidden laughter, Swinton rested a hoof of her own on Clawhauser's arm. "Benny. Calm down. Breathe."

Somehow this did manage to help the spotted cat recover some sense of self-control, but after looking at the pig gratefully, he glanced around in bewilderment for a few moments before blurting out, "Hey, where is Nick, anyway?"

Judy started to step forward to answer him, but then the other mammal moved up next to Clawhauser, and Delgato had to blink, startled all over again. It was yet another tiger, and from the white hue of his fur and handsome visage, he was the spitting image of the stagehand, Xander—
except he was much younger, somewhere between his own age and the rabbit's, he wagered, his eyes were green rather than blue, and instead of a powerlifter's build the cat sported a sculpted, bulging physique that any bodybuilder would be proud of, yet streamlined enough he was clearly capable of lithe, agile motion when called for.

All of this was quite apparent to the eye, since he had on a pair of skintight imitation leather Daisy Dukes of midnight black, a matching loose-fitting jacket, and a tank top the same hue as the Stripers' shorts that looked practically painted on. *Was that…a nipple piercing?!* "Nick? Did you say Nick, as in Nick Wilde? Mouthiest red fox in Zootopia, and way too smart for his own good?" His voice was rich and smooth, like a dark chocolate, and once again the lion had to force his mind (and other parts) back to his dear Renato.

Now Swinton was the one trying not to laugh, but Judy only smirked and nodded briskly. "Yup, that's him all right. But I get the feeling he isn't what brought you here. Let me guess: you're related to Mr. Pounceski?"

"Yeah, I'm his nephew, Tyler." The young tiger both looked and sounded deeply worried now. "I heard what you guys were saying, and I saw what was happening—this is more of that Night Howler craziness? Someone's still trying to screw us all over?" Huge paws clenching as if they longed to wrap around the neck of the one responsible (and Delgato didn't blame him, he'd be doing the same to Cyrus if he could get hold of him), the striped cat went on in a rush, "What are you all standing around here for, then? My uncle works backstage here, and it sounds like Nick is still on the lam too. If there's somebody running around back there with that damn savage drug, and they find them…"

Delgato started as his thoughts caught up with events, and their implications. He had no idea how much time had passed, but surely Bogo, Nick, and the other cops would have found Cyrus and his rams by now. Why hadn't they returned?

The bunny seemed to be having the same concerns, her expression extremely uneasy as she reached for the button on her Bluefang. "It's okay, I'm sure everything's fine. I'll just check. Nick? You reading me? C'mon, Slick, what's going on back there? We've got everything under control up here, don't tell me you're the one falling behind now—"

Her words cut off in a startled yelp as she yanked the bud from her ear, and even from where he stood, Manuel could hear the piercing, screeching sound that burst out of it, as if there'd been a massive amount of feedback, or some other sort of mechanical device had suffered a catastrophic destruction in the vicinity of the microphone on the other end.

And then, all at once, every light in the Water Hole failed, plunging them all into darkness.
Quickly ducking down one passage after another through all the looming piles of old theatrical junk, still as light and soundless on his feet as ever, Nick kept his eyes fixed on the path ahead, his night vision easily letting him penetrate every shadow and see what lay concealed within as if it were brightest day. Even as his senses were on autopilot, his mind mirrored his movements in how it jumped from one thought to another, reflecting and considering, discarding old plans and adopting new ones—whatever it would take to bring Cyrus to justice…in one sense or another…and finally put an end to this whole sordid affair.

Originally, as he'd been making his way backstage and hunting down the fugitive sheep, it had been his intent to keep Xander out of it entirely if possible, as it was far too risky the big tiger might get struck by the Night Howler the same as Leodore had, and even if he wasn't, his feline friend was rather the rough-and-tumble sort thanks to the particular side of the tracks he hailed from. He's turned his life around, become a model citizen, and put all those talents for violence and mayhem to good use—protecting rather than intimidating, making sure mammals follow the rules instead of breaking them, taming that temper of his. But that doesn't mean he can't fall back into old habits when push comes to shove.

Not that he cared if that meant Cyrus and his goons suffered overmuch while being apprehended, but he'd rather Bogo and the rest of the ZPD didn't find out firsthand what the tiger was capable of; getting him arrested, and having his own bona fides questioned anew due to being a fox and former con artist who had such a mammal as his acquaintance, were not on his to-do list. 'His old record is how long? And just when were you going to inform the department of the skeletons in your closet that just might cause some headaches at the precinct, Mr. Wilde?'

When the white-furred cat had in fact shown up, Nick had then fully intended to instead work with him to quickly arrange some sort of clever trap for the rams using the various props and equipment in storage—but Xander had been several steps ahead of him for once, and it had worked out better than he ever could have planned. I must be losing my touch. Good for Mr. Pounceski, but I'd better start upping my game again, or I'm the one who'll have to turn in his Fox Membership Card. Or else, he thought darkly, his amusement fading, the perp he was chasing down might make it out of here and get to walk for his crimes.

No. Unacceptable. And in fact, now that it was only the bighorn and himself, and the chief had given him free rein in whatever actions were needed to stop the mobster's escape? Well…Nick had never been a bloodthirsty sort, never one to let his temper get the better of him, and while he certainly could hold a grudge like nobody's business or feel exceedingly high contempt for many of the mammals he encountered, that did not at all equate with wanting to see them dead. He did, after all, have standards, and most of those individuals weren't worth it anyway.
This ram, though…there was something about him. It wasn't his line of work, since prior to earning Mr. Big's enmity he'd never really had anything against the mafia. It wasn't his particular plan, since it was really no worse than his sister's objectively speaking, merely quicker and more brutal, and while Nick had wanted to stop Dawn of course, he hadn't had any personal hatred or animosity toward her—okay, after she'd attempted to dart him and make him rip Judy to shreds, there'd been some. But nothing this visceral or dark, if anything he'd felt pity for her in the end.

Maybe it was Cyrus's clear insanity? Or maybe it was a mix of that muzzle with his ranting about the wild and the way the world was supposed to be, which as accelerationist and nihilistic as it was had more than enough echoes of the fox's own cynical worldview as to give him pause. 'If that's all they'll ever see us as…that's all we'll ever be.'

Whatever the case, the vulpine found himself yet again contemplating feelings he'd never faced before, and a course of action unlike any he'd allowed himself in his life. This was, after all, what separated him from the views of the prey of Zootopia—for while he had accepted with bitter resignation that he would always and only be seen as sly, sneaky, and untrustworthy, he had no intention of being the hunter and killer they believed all predators to secretly be. In this case though, he just might make an exception. He'd certainly be far less careful about this suspect's fate. If he could stop him, bring him in so he could face the music for what he'd done, all well and good. But if not…

On and on he threaded his way through the maze, both memory and instinct guiding him as much as the sounds coming from the darkness ahead. How much time passed, he hadn't the foggiest, but he did know they were drawing closer to the back exit through which they'd first entered the stadium. And just as importantly, as he turned down one corridor after another through the dusty discards of the past, Nick found himself moving into an area that seemed to be a dead-end—no other way out that he could see, anyway, no spaces between crates and wardrobes and metal cabinets except ones only the tiniest of mammals could squeeze through—or ones as slender and flexible as yours truly.

There might possibly be a way to scale the cluttered piles and stacks, if they were arranged properly (Bellwether might be too bulky and top-heavy to fit sideways through the cracks, but he did have size, strength, and hooves comparable to a mountain goat, if climbing were required). But until such a thing turned up, it appeared as if he had Cyrus trapped.

Nick frowned. On the other paw, a powerful rumbling sound was also echoing toward him through the darkness…deep, almost to the point of being subsonic, something that made his fur practically stand on end and his skin prickle, as if an entirely different sort of dangerous beast were buried under his feet and might burst through the floor at any moment. As far as he could tell, it seemed to be the same electrical engine he'd heard before, but either it was far larger than he'd realized, or being this much closer to it put everything more in perspective. What worried him was, the louder the machinery became, the more likely that it would conceal other sounds nearby, so that even his keen hearing would not detect what Cyrus might be doing until it was too late.
As this realization sank in, the fox slowed his pace even more…paused…and then turned sideways to narrow his profile even further. Gun raised beside his ear, he crept up to the next corner, pressed himself against the stack of crates that formed it, and inched forward just enough that his eye could peer past it, down the aisle beyond.

Nothing. Only more costumes and dummies, an old swivel chair, piles of tangled string lights, some strange assortment of silvery pipes and prisms that could have been an elaborately elegant mobile or an odd musical instrument, sacks which bulged with unseen contents, stacks of metal stands for microphones and stage lights, and who knew what all else. He let out a slow, barely audible sigh, and moved at a crawl around the corner, down the passage to the next turning.

So it went for the next several minutes, time seeming to come to a standstill as there continued to be nothing and no one to find. Nick's breath rasped in his throat and his pulse pounded in his constantly-pricked ears; if there was any sound of movement ahead, it was completely masked now, as he had feared. The area itself was not as large as the rest of the backstage, particularly with all the props and equipment hemming things in, and there were not as many turnings as he'd navigated earlier, but his need to move as slowly and carefully as possible made it seem far larger than it was, much more to explore and more time needed to do it. By the time he reached what he thought might be the last passage (barring another egress he hadn't seen), the tension was as high as could be and his nerves were frayed to their limit—not that he would ever show this, of course.

Finally, as he came around that last turn, moving so incrementally he rather thought he could give Flash a run for his money, he spied two things in his field of vision, just past the barrel of his gun. At the far end of the aisle, the way was indeed blocked to any further travel by the source of the mechanical rumbling—although at this vantage he could now also hear (as well as see) the occasional crackling and snapping of the high-voltage lines that emerged from the top of the structure and radiated out in a web of energy to every distant part of the stadium.

At an educated guess it was the power generator for the entire building, and from the way the coils quivered and zapped, the belts and wheels whirled, and the panels rattled and shook, either it needed a major re-servicing or something about this particular show had overtaxed it. Perhaps Xander, or some other worker, hadn't gotten the chance to service or maintain it because of the police presence or the rams' activities? Whatever it was, that thing is most certainly not OSHA-compliant. No possible way anyone is getting close to it, let alone making it past it.

The other thing he saw, of course, was Cyrus Bellwether.

Breathing hard and raggedly (though whether from the run which had brought him here or from being overwhelmed by his emotions, Nick couldn't say), the bighorn had backed as close as he dared to the rumbling machine behind him. He clearly seemed to be trying to maintain some kind of poise,
control over the panic and frustration and rage he must be feeling, but there was only so much he could do; the way his horned head jerked about, up and down, back and forth, as it looked for a means of escape was indication enough.

He had next to no options left, and he knew it. And unless he had some other concealed weapon, the loss of his gun and having to leave his bullyboys and their armament behind meant he was now mostly defenseless. He still had his mass and strength for paw-to-hoof fighting, as well as his horns, but that wouldn't avail him much against an armed police officer. Short of him taking his chances, pushing this over the line into a deadly firefight, there was only one way this could end now.

"Well, well, well," Nick drawled, slowly and with deep satisfaction. "How the tables have turned." He came the rest of the way around the corner and moved toward the ram, one step at a time, his gun lowered to aim with unwavering precision at the other mammal's heaving chest.

"Your kind always thinks itself so clever—you more than most!" Cyrus sneered, but his face was rather pale under the wool, and his hooves were raised. "You would never have found yourself here, or placed me in such dire straits, without help, however!"

"Yeah, that would be because of a little thing called cooperation and teamwork. Ever heard of it?" The fox regarded him contemptuously. "That's what happens when mammals care about each other, count on each other. We're all in this together, and the sooner you realize that, the easier it is to make the world a better place by putting a stop to mammals like you." Once he couldn't have uttered even half of those words without bursting out in derisive laughter, let alone mocking them endlessly (and anyone who believed in them). But that was before Judy. Inspiration and enlightenment come to us all in the end. And by gum, that little bunny can wring hope out of any heart, no matter how stony and pessimistic.

Cyrus snorted and laughed darkly. "Noble words, but you and I both know they have no real meaning in this world. And how like a shifty fox to take credit for someone else's hard work. My point still stands: it took Lionheart and that other cop to stop Mr. Stagmire, your precious Miss Hopps is the one who's out there now trying to bring down the rest of my plan, and it took your chief and that stupid stagehand to bring down my men. Now it is only you and me…what possibly makes you think you alone can stop me?"

"I don't know, I think I've done pretty well for myself over the years." Nick moved several paces closer, although still well out of reach should the ram attempt to charge him; at least this way he wouldn't have to speak quite so loudly to be heard. "And you're kind of forgetting it only took me and Judy to make your sister's scheme fall apart."

Scowling with venomous hatred, the ovine somehow managed to stand straight and imperious despite being held at gunpoint. "I suppose that makes you feel so very superior. But I wonder if
you'll still be able to look at yourself in the mirror after you're through with me?"

Nick furrowed his brows, not at all following this line of thought or why Cyrus would be bringing it up, other than as a way to keep talking, keep him distracted until he could try something. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I can guarantee you that I won't simply buckle under easily for you. You're going to have to do something rather permanent...or at least unpleasant...if you expect to take me down for good. Luckily for you, there's no one else here to stop you from doing so—or even witness what you do next." The ram smiled coldly. "Is that why you're so certain you don't need anyone else backing you up? Because you intend to revert to type, and do what foxes always do?"

Without even realizing it, he suddenly found his finger flexed so tightly on the trigger that he could feel the tension in the small piece of metal that told him it was only a centimeter away from tripping and firing. He also discovered he'd moved several more long strides closer, and his breath was hissing from between clenched teeth. "Hmm. Not exactly doing a good job there of convincing me not to, Cy."

Again Cyrus laughed, and it was a toss-up whether it was the sound's rough ugly quality or the condescending tone that infuriated and chilled him more. "As if you need more than the barest suggestion before you drop all pretense of civility and show everyone who you truly are. You didn't tonight. You haven't since you first made yourself one of Dawn's targets. I doubt you ever have."

Growling with an endless animosity, something he'd forgotten his throat could produce if he'd ever been aware of it—even the sounds he'd made when faking being under the influence of the Night Howler hadn't been this blood-curdling—Nick tried to steady himself, to stay in control of his temper and instincts. He could feel he was right on the edge, that if he crossed that line he might not come back for a good long time to come...that he would have let Judy down, proven everyone right about him, and probably ruined his career for the sake of only a momentary thrill of vengeful victory. This was what Cyrus wanted, and he absolutely did not want to do anything this crazed lowlife desired...but it would be hard to resist. The path was so tempting...

"All you're doing, woolly, is giving me plenty more reasons to shut you up and bring you in. Blathering and stalling until you can make a move, thinking you can rattle my cage and give you some kind of advantage over me. Well, I've got news for you, pal." Again he took aim, this time with precision at the ram's temple, just clear of the bony base of the nearest curled horn where the bullet could penetrate quite easily.

"Better mammals than you—smarter, too—have tried that, and in case you couldn't tell by the fact it's my furry red tail that's still here, they all failed. So maybe you might want to consider cutting your losses, hmm? I can't think of a single thing you could say to make me put in a good word for you,
but I'm the only hope you've got, so how's about a bit less antagonizing, a bit more surrender?"

Cyrus curled his lip. "Just because I'm trying to make you do something stupid, so that I can escape, doesn't mean I'm not speaking the truth. You and I both know who you really are, and you and I both know that in many ways, we're not that different at all. We'd both do anything to get what we want, and we have. I can see it in your eyes, the life you've led and the choices you've made—just as illegal and immoral as mine. What makes you think you're any better, just because you carry a gun and a badge now?

"Nothing has changed, Mr. Wilde. You haven't let rules and laws apply to you any more than I have. You still don't. Why would you, when they just get in the way of you doing what you want, getting back at those who have hurt you, getting what you feel you deserve? I'm just the same, except I've actually admitted the truth of what mammals are, and been willing to go all the way to put them in their place and achieve my goals. You've held back, and so I have achieved more. For every one of the crimes and sins I've committed, I can list just as many that I know of yours. And of your perfectly innocent Miss Hopps!"

Before the vulpine could do more than lash his nearly-rigid tail and let out another vicious snarl, the ram actually dared to lower his arms and begin counting on his hoof-fingers, his eyes never leaving Nick's face. "You somehow managed to persuade Bogo, and yourselves, that it was both appropriate and legal to break Lionheart out of jail and put Corlione in his place. You intimidated poor Bartholomew back at the Palm. You broke into an elite, high-paid suite—with no warrant, I may add. Instead of simply shutting the concert down, you put all of those mammals in danger just for the chance to capture me—and made things worse by bringing Lionheart here. And now you're ready and eager to shoot an unarmed suspect.

"As if that isn't enough, there's everything you did to stop my sister…I read the newspaper articles, and Corlione tells me everything that happens behind the scenes. Working with Mr. Big, intimidating that poor weasel? Being seconds away from a train collision that would have killed all those mammals? That explosion under the Natural History Museum? Exactly how much can you convince yourself is justifiable by your end goals…or by the simple fact you think you're a hero?"

Nick stared at him, the disgust and disbelief and loathing building inside him until he was quite certain that if he'd been a larger mammal, he'd have crushed his gun in his grip. That this sociopath would even attempt to make such an argument after the things he had done, believed he had the right to sit in judgment or compare their actions as crimes, was bad enough. That he would attack the fox's credibility and morality was to be expected, and even to some degree acceptable; he'd made his den and laid in it, it wasn't the first time someone had held his criminal past against him, and it wouldn't be the last. But to say such things against Judy…?

Especially when he was painfully aware of how many of those very acts had deeply distressed and haunted the rabbit, overwhelming her with guilt at how her impulsive nature, expediency, and the
greater good had allowed her to justify such things and thereby compromised her morals and integrity. In the days following Bellwether's arrest—and even in frantic, sobbing, late-night calls during the weeks of his police academy training—the fox had had to soothe and comfort Judy repeatedly, reminding her of the good they had accomplished and that, despite the danger, in the end no innocents had suffered because of her choices.

It hadn't helped, of course, that at least some of those choices had been made because of him, either in reaction to his lifestyle and example or because he had directly advised her to do so. In particular, the intimidation of Duke Weaselton had been his idea completely—with time being of the essence in stopping the Night Howler epidemic, her no longer having access to ZPD resources (or the weight of the law behind her), and the mustelid being notoriously stubborn, close-mouthed, and greedy, Nick had felt forcing a confession was their only option; that the only one they knew who would do such a thing (and do it effectively) was the mafia; and that after building a questionable and unethical bond with Mr. Big, at least Judy could make use of it to save Zootopia, something the shrew had shown himself willing to aid before.

The lapine had been extremely hesitant, torn between her duty to the mammals of the city, her code of honor, and the likely results of the interrogation if it went wrong. But Nick, still in hustler mode, had assured her that they weren't going to kill Weaselton, that if Big went too far they would step in as "good cops", and that since she had turned in her badge and was only a private citizen, Judy was not bound to the same standards as law enforcement. "Not too big an issue, in the grand scheme of things," he'd breezily presumed.

And indeed, in the end it had all worked out, for aside from Bellwether's arrest and everything which came of it, Nick had helped his new partner finesse the paperwork so the details of how Weaselton's confession was procured were glossed over (though of course they'd come fully clean to Bogo in private); the weasel had been granted immunity thanks to how he had helped them crack the case (and considering all he'd done was sell flower bulbs, the use and effects of which he hadn't even been aware of, he wasn't truly part of the conspiracy at all, and it had been she who had chased him into Little Rodentia, against police regulations); and he had even been placed in Witness Protection until such time as Doug and the other sheep had been caught (which in retrospect had also shielded him from Cyrus's mafia thugs).

None of that changed, however, the guilt which still hung over Judy...which had not only played into why she'd been wary of trusting Leodore at first, but why she had been so stricken by the possibility that she had similarly compromised herself by trusting Big and Corlione, this time in circumstances that had gravely threatened Zootopia. And this had in turn affected Nick, stressing for him how he allowed his eagerness to employ his shady expertise for a good cause to cloud his judgment, and nearly endangered the life of a mammal who, while hardly innocent, had really been no nastier...had been no less selfish and willing to manipulate and cheat others, because he too had a lowly background marred by prejudice...than the fox himself.

So to hear these things now from Cyrus, things he and Judy had beaten into the ground as they debated in circles over the past three months, things which dredged up all that old pain, self-doubt,
and morally gray decisions—well, it made Nick defensive, and more importantly, furious. Yet he still managed to muster his best arguments, some of the same ones in fact he had used to successfully calm and sustain the rabbit, as he rose up to his full height to stare into the bighorn's dark, soulless eyes.

"Well, listen to you with your 'holier than thou' talk, like you're some kind of innocent lamb," Nick sneered, and wasn't surprised to find himself trembling with the emotions he was barely keeping in check. "Don't you dare come at me with some pretend high ground. As so many mammals love to say—and for once, they're right—actions have consequences. Rocks cause ripples in a pond…and that goes for any deed, bad or good. So tell me something: what, exactly, in your dumbest daydreams, makes you think that anything Judy or I or have done somehow diminishes the good we've done?

"Are we perfect? No, no we are not. Especially me, as you have so hypocritically attested. Because we have to live in this world, because we're flawed, because we make mistakes and bad choices or have to pick from among a lot of crappy options to find the one that'll do the least harm in the end. Did we bend the law, maybe scuff it up a bit? Yeah, yeah we did. And you know why? Do you know why we did those things, Cy-ly-ly?"

Again the fox shook with the dark ball of rage that was growing inside him. Part of him was horrified by this, at how animalistic and predatory it made him feel, and he wondered just how far he might be from regressing, if maybe the Night Howler wasn't as necessary as they all thought to bring out a mammal's savage origins. The rest of him reveled in it, in the freedom which seemed to stem from cutting through all the lies and dissembling, the endless rules and regulations of a lawful society, to get at the simple heart of matters and lash out at one who had caused such suffering and terror out of sheer greed and selfishness. And the fact that sounded rather like what Bellwether had ranted about, back before he released the maddened Stagmire…that as the ram had implied, there wasn't as much difference between him and Nick as the fox wanted to believe…was as disturbing as anything else in this whole mess.

But he couldn't hold it back, he had to go on and grind the truth in. Because this time, he'd let someone know they got to him…so he might as well make them regret it.

Wrenching his thoughts back on course, Nick snapped at last, "Because psychopaths like you and your demented sister think they're doing everyone a favor by making 10% of everyone else into an enemy! Us and them, top and bottom, haves and have-nots, prey and preds, normal and other. That's all it is, that's all it's ever been!" He let out a sarcastic laugh. "Or hey, what about your brilliant idea to burn society to the ground. Yeah, that's such a heroic thing to do. 'Sorry about your lives, everything you've built and learned, everything you could still do if we just tried again in a different way! Nope, we're going to just tear it all down, throw the cubs and kits out with the bathwater and start over, hello-good-bye-nice-knowin'-ya.' That'll go over well.
"You see? We good guys have had to do some nasty stuff, all right, but it's because we're the ones that have to wade through the muck to stop your villainy. We own up to it, we take the lumps, we're willing to get reprimanded and docked pay and have our day in court to defend ourselves, put our actions in context." And if you think we're getting off scot-free, even if we never lose our badges over it, then you don't know what it's like facing an office visit with Bogo. "And no, we don't make excuses or pretend what we do is okay because awful experiences we had in our pasts are just proof that our whole society is corrupt and to blame." At least...we don't anymore.

"Oh yeah, don't think I don't know about that thing with Mallupe, Cy ol' buddy. What happened to you was awful, yeah. Tragic even. But that doesn't give you the right to sermonize, and it definitely doesn't give you the right to be a monster yourself and take the whole world down into insanity with you."

Once more, he cocked his gun and brought it into play, this time aiming at the ram's chest; a larger target, and much more likely to leave the mobster alive and able to stand trial for everything he'd done. "So, shut up, and for the last time: make this easy for the both of us by surrendering, and maybe I'll talk to the prison warden to get you a nice pillow for your cell." He paused, then added one last artful jab. "To muffle you, so nobody has to listen to all your whining and complaining."

Cyrus had been staring at him the entire time he'd been making his righteous diatribe…and while he thought at the start the mobster had been smugly satisfied at having so riled him, and watching carefully for an opening to rush past him while he was lost in his fury, by the time he reached the end the ram was as quivering and on edge as he was. The reference to what Judy had discovered during her research was, unsurprisingly, what seemed to have set him off the most…and as Nick's last words faded into the rumbling hum of the generator, the fox couldn't shake the unsettled churning from his stomach. Because the murderous look Bellwether was shooting him now was so cold, yet also so blazing with hate, that he was fairly certain any last shred of sanity his adversary had still possessed had just snapped and shriveled away into nothing.

"I see," he said, his voice so soft (especially in contrast to his previous bellowing and roaring) that it turned Nick's spine to ice. "Well then, I suppose that settles that. In that case…well, I do have one…final…weapon I can bring into play." The vulpine instinctively whipped his gun about as Cyrus thrust his hoof into an inner pocket of his jacket, but somehow the sheep was even faster, and before Nick could pull the trigger he had withdrawn something—no, a collection of somethings—and…shoved it into his own chest with a small, deep grunt of pain.

It only took a few seconds more, as Nick stared at what Cyrus held in his now-spasming hoof, for it to register just what he had, and what he had done. Three vials…no, syringes…now stood out in a diagonal line over his heart, plunged in right through shirt, wool, and flesh, and they were filled by a sickeningly-familiar bright blue liquid. Or had been, as it was already draining into the mobster's body as if being absorbed, water evaporating away in a barren desert. And before his widened eyes, the ram was doubling over, his already bulging back and neck hunching, shoulder muscles flexing and swelling to strain the seams of his clothing as he let out a strangled bleat which sounded like nothing any mammal should make.
No. No no no. Well okay, of course he did, it's pretty damned fitting, really, and now we'll finally get some of that eyewitness testimony to what Night Howler can do to a prey species that all the doctors have been clamoring for, but still—DO NOT WANT.

But as usual, the world didn't care about his oh-so-important desires, and if he didn't do something in the next few moments, he'd be facing a situation just as bad as they'd been fearing with the kidnapped District Attorney—only worse, since he was all by his lonesome. He really wished he'd insisted on Bogo or at least one of the other cops coming along. But even if he could get hold of them now over the wire—not guaranteed, considering the distance and the possible interference from all the electrical circuits in this area—there was no time, certainly not enough for them to get here.

He could simply dodge Cyrus, of course, once he launched into his inevitable charge, but assuming his savage mind didn't just lock onto Nick as the enemy predator trying to hunt him down, so that he would wheel back for another go, that would allow the ram to make his way back through the building and attack any and all mammals he ran across in the process.

No, he had to keep Cyrus contained here as long as possible. He had to find a way to bring him down on his own, which probably meant a fatal shot or series of them. Whatever it took. That was what he had sworn, what Bogo had given him permission for. It was what he longed to do, after all those twisted things the ram had said. But his heart sank as he knew what Judy would want, and how all this would play out in the media if they weren't able to make Bellwether face the legal consequences. What choice did he have though? He had to stop him, had to—

Wait a minute. 'Wheel back for another go'?

Something clicked into place...a memory, another confrontation so recent and yet seeming eons ago now, another way to handle a violent, pugnacious enemy, something he'd gotten to see up close and personal, something about his current surroundings. And with a bolt of clarity, he knew what he had to do. It too might well be fatal, but even a slim chance of survival was better than none...

As he snapped back to the present, his racing thoughts having taken less than a minute, Nick saw that Cyrus had of course fallen forward on all fours, an incongruous sight since he was still clad in his suit, with only some tearing in the cloth and stitches of his jacket to show anything was amiss. But as that horned head lifted and hot breath puffed out in deep snorts from his flared nostrils, the fox felt his throat seize up again. Those eyes...while they had lost none of their menace or frigid hatred, they had changed...become flat, slitted, their pupils even shifting shape to become that more disturbing rectangular one that unsettled so many mammals. They were soulless, empty of sentience, intelligence, anything but the maddened desire to kill, only augmented by the reddish hue burning in them now. He swallowed hard.
With another grunting, bestial cry unlike any he'd made before, the ram burst into motion, lumbering on all four hooves but rapidly picking up speed, every pound of muscle and fat barreling toward him while that horned head tossed and twisted meaningfully. Nick waited until he was certain the crazed mammal could not change direction, was committed to his course, and then threw himself forward and up in an agile leap.

One, two, hup! Pushing off from Cyrus's horns with one foot as he passed right beneath him, the fox jumped high, turning himself into an effortless backflip, and even as the ram was charging down the aisle where he'd been standing (and letting out quite the bellow of rage as he did so), Nick was flying through the air and landing atop one of the stacks of crates that lined this particular passage.

Laughing softly to himself, he ran rapidly along the aisle toward its dead end, leaping from one crate to the next as needed but otherwise following the path formed by how closely pressed together each stack was. He knew it would take Cyrus some time to reorient himself, but also that his rage would drive him on, so he needed to get back into position as soon as possible…

Luckily there were several lower tiers of boxes and cabinets near where he wanted to climb down, so that he wouldn't have to jump from such a height onto a cold stone floor, and so it was kit's play scrambling, leaping, and hopping downward until at last he was back in the aisle again, this time standing almost exactly where Cyrus had been pinned before. By the time he had done so, he could see that his earlier surmise was correct—the ram hadn't gone charging off through the backstage, but had fixated on him as his enemy, the predator who was the threat, because he had slid to a stop a good ten or fifteen yards down the passage and spun about to face him again. Which was good for Bogo and the other cops, as well as everyone still in the auditorium if he made it that far, but not so good for Nick.

Unless his plan worked. And he was almost positive it would, because he was that clever and a victim of the Night Howler was just that limited to thoughtless instincts.

At the far end of the aisle, near where the path through the dusty piles of props and supplies made its lone turn away, Cyrus snorted and stamped his hooves against the floor, more as if he were a savage bull than anything else…building up his anger, his hate, and his determination to remove the fox that had dared threaten his flock, or whatever passed for reasoning in his drugged mind. Once again, he knew nothing would turn the beast aside from its path…that if he wasn't fast enough, or the ram somehow caught on to what he was doing or made a lucky (unlucky, to Nick) move, then it might well be curtains for him.

Because even if the ovine didn't have the meat-eating fangs to tear into his flesh (though he wouldn't put it past the Night Howler to make him willing to try anyway—Buckley had certainly seemed willing to do so), those horns could break ribs and smash other bones, as could those powerful hooves, trampling and battering him into a bruised heap. Even if that was all Cyrus did, he could still succumb to internal injuries before help arrived. And if the enraged beast just kept at it, or even
started tossing and hurling him around…?

It would require split-second timing. He knew he could do it. And if he had any doubts, all he had to do was recall Judy's multiple examples from throughout their case, whether leaping down into the vines to escape Manchas, flushing them down the waterfall below Cliffside, or especially hitting the track switch to avoid that collision Bellwether had so tauntingly mentioned. *But if you ever find out, somehow, that I'm the one using you as a role model, Carrots, I'll deny it with my dying breath.*

Narrowing his eyes at the blocky, bulky form of the ram which had begun pounding back down the aisle toward him—easily discernible despite his dark-hued suit thanks to the relative brightness of his wool and his own night vision—Nick took a deep breath and poised himself on the tips of his toes. Although he still gripped his gun, he kept both arms wide to present a bigger target and prepare for what his next move was going to be. Closer…closer…the sound was echoing louder and louder, each iteration overlapping with the previous until it sounded as if an entire stampede of rams was about to trample over him.

Those horns were lowered, and he knew with the speed Cyrus was building up, if they struck him he'd be lucky not to have his chest caved in, or to be thrown with stunning force into the crates towering over them. And those eyes were burning brighter than ever, the hellish shapes of their pupils only reinforced by the fiery color surrounding them. Light flickered across their flatness, cast by the endless crackling of the generator's sparks, and he shivered.

The hoofbeats thundered in his ears, in counterpoint to his heart. He slowed his breathing to a dull rasp…every muscle tense…ears stiff, tail flattened to the floor for balance and support… The ram was only a few yards away.

And right when he calculated he should, Nick launched into action—pushing off and leaping forward, right toward the incoming savage.

For a moment startlement and confusion overrode anger and bloodthirstiness; then, as the fox closed more and more of the distance between them, Cyrus gritted his teeth, snorted, and leaned forward, throwing even more speed and weight into his charge. Just as Nick had hoped, he was committed now. With that kind of inertia, nothing could stop him now except a very solid object that wanted to stay at rest…and with a smug, oddly exhilarated grin, the vulpine used his own momentum and threw himself forward and down into a swan dive.

The ram could do nothing to stop him, or himself. Nick's spread arms swept in a breaststroke, sending him sliding and slipping across the floor, which was just slick enough—although there were rough patches that did catch on his clothes and fur—that he was flung underneath the ovine's barreling form as it passed right over him. And the savage mammal, unable to brake or turn aside in any way, could only let out a bleat that mingled terror with fury as he slammed right into the looming
generator, the force of the collision flinging him up against one of the giant, wire-festooned electrical coils.

Just as had happened at the Palm, bolts and streaks of blue-white energy skittered and raced all over the sheep, but this time on a far larger scale than from a simple taser. A piercing, screeching sound burst upon his eardrums to the point he had to flatten his ears to his skull, cover one with his free hand, and press the other against the floor…but nothing could truly block it out as the cascades of electricity surged up and down the mobster's body, along every twitching, gyrating, flailing limb, forming an incongruous halo over his horns. A sheet of pure white shimmered in the air and flowed across the generator, and every time it crackled, flickered, and snapped, all the lights in the building followed suit. He could see the dark silhouette of the ram in the midst of it all, suspended by arms and legs, twitching like a rag doll, smoke and steam rising as cloth and wool both smoldered and ignited. It was a horrifying sight…and yet somehow, it also filled him with vicious vindication.

But he had made his decision, when Cyrus had begun making those twisted insinuations, trying to make it seem as if the fox and the rabbit were no better than he, that they were not heroes or at least he was not villainous in comparison. That, and what he had ranted in response, had convinced him. Not only did the ram need to pay for what he had done—and not with his life—but he, Nick Wilde, would not stoop to his level.

He was better than that, better than this.

The gun lifted. Taking careful aim, his paw somehow not even quivering (all that time at the firing range had paid off after all), he fired—again, and again, and again, striking the wiring to make it tear free of its fastenings, the gauges and controls, the grates covering the whirling, humming parts of the motors, even the coils themselves. And as he did so, just as the last bullet ran out and the hammer was clicking on empty chambers, there was one last explosion of light, sound, and force, and then everything went dark.

Minutes passed, as Nick lay prone on the floor, feeling every abrasion the stone had given him, the rents in his clothing, the bruises from where his shoulder and chest had struck. He could also feel his heart thudding wildly against his chest and his breath rasping in his throat. Too many emotions to name were running through him, but he knew he was alive, which was most assuredly the top concern for any self-respecting fox.

As information filed in through his senses, he also knew other things: everything had become deathly quiet, as unsurprisingly the sound of the generator's motors had also been silenced; there was a very unpleasant smell in the air, a mix of scorched cloth, charred wool, and singed flesh; and there was light again, albeit dim, distant, and faintly flickering—the emergency generator and lighting must have kicked in.
Very slowly, letting out a groan and then a grunt of pain, the fox rose to his feet and turned to look toward the generator. It was a still, silent hulk now, dark and marred by electrical burns, one of the coils bent and toppled, numerous wires down—some sparking, others quite dead. On the floor where it had been flung, several feet away from the nearest wire, lay Cyrus Bellwether's crumpled body. Fearing what he would see, that he had fired too late to save him, or that his fate had been sealed as soon as he'd been flung into the grid, he approached one step at a time, peering ahead through the shadows and the haze of the lingering smoke and steam.

When he stood over the bighorn, it took all he had to keep gazing down—despite what he'd been taught in forensics class at the academy, and what he'd seen growing up on the streets in the most dangerous and murderous parts of town, he'd never seen anything like this. Not that Cyrus was char-broiled or anything, in fact the worst burns he could see were along his arms and legs where the cloth had turned to powdered ash, across the fellow's broad chest, and from his throat up underneath his chin—the thick wool had saved him once again.

Still, there were plenty of places with bright red skin exposed, even bloody patches where the edges were seared and cauterized, and overall so much of his wool and skin seemed to have turned black, either from being coated by soot or flash-fried of a sort. He...really is a black sheep now. Trying not to laugh at the inappropriate joke, Nick took a breath—through his mouth, so as to clear his nose of the smell—and then knelt by the grisly body to check.

It took him several tries to find it through the thick wool that remained, but it was there...a pulse. Rather thready and uneven, but continuing on its staggered rhythm as he held his fingers in place... and as he stared down at the ram's massive chest, he could see it too was shuddering up and down, very slowly, with his barely audible breaths. He was alive. Unconscious of course, so that he could no longer lash out in savage attacks, but alive.

With the extent of his injuries, Nick didn't know if Cyrus would thank him for sparing him—not that he would ever do that, even when not under the influence of Night Howler—but if the ambulances could get here quickly enough, there was still a very good chance the doctors could save him. Burn units could do wonders these days, after all. And then...then some justice could finally be served.

Sighing, he stood back up, moved away a couple paces, and fingered his Bluefang. "Uh...Chief Bogo?" he said, tentatively.

There was a moment that seemed to last eternally, one quite ominous in its leaden silence, and then that familiar voice burst in his ear with a bellowing flare. "What in the bloody hell was that, Wilde?!" It was interesting how there was not a question in the Cape buffalo's mind that he was responsible for what had taken place.

"Ah...yes. That. That's an...unusual story, sir. And I'd be happy to tell you all about it, as soon as I
can, but before we get to that, we're going to need the paramedics back here right away." He paused. "I did what I had to do, but I've caught him, and if the hospital does its job, Cyrus is going to make it and have a lot to answer for."

Bogo grunted. "They've already been called, but I'll see if they can get here any faster. I expect a full report when you make it up here to the stage with the rest of us." Now it was his turn to pause, and when he spoke again there was a surprising tone in his voice—weariness mixed with a kind of desperate hope. "So that's it, then? This whole blasted thing is finally over?"

Nick glanced down again at Cyrus's still-smoldering form, and the three cracked syringes lying a few feet away, a few drops of blue liquid still clinging to the insides. "Yeah. Yeah, I think that now, it's over."

By the time he had made his way back to the Water Hole's main stage again, two things had occurred: the sounds of sirens had echoed loudly from all the parking lots outside the stadium, letting him know that all those injured, drugged, or otherwise out of commission would soon be given rapid treatment on the spot and then taken to one of the nearby hospitals; and more of the emergency lights had come on, and brighter, as the backup generators thrummed with greater life and pumped out more energy. So all in all, despite feeling very out-of-sorts and quietly distressed over how close he'd come to that dark precipice, Nick found himself feeling better than he had since this whole caper had begun.

And he felt even more wonderfully, gratefully, blissfully relieved when he saw that everyone, but especially Judy, was alive, safe and sound.

"Nick!" The cry, half-shriek and half-squeal, was all he heard before a blur of pink, blue, and gray came leaping at him. He only had time to brace himself before the rabbit was slamming into his chest and stomach, arms wrapped tightly around him, and even then he still let out an 'oof'; for her small size, Judy had a lot of energy to pack a wallop, and of course he was still rather bruised and tender in some places.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, Carrots." He instinctively stroked the back of her head and ears, then quickly shifted his paws to simply embrace her, though he thought he saw a smirk from Delgato out of the corner of his eye. "While I do appreciate that you have finally learned to bask properly in my presence, that does not mean I'm in a condition to handle such effusiveness. Also, we do have standards of decorum and all that."
"Shut up," Judy said fondly, the big smile on her face quite evident in her voice. "I was so worried about you! What happened back there? I tried to contact you, but all we heard was that feedback explosion, then all the lights went out and we didn't know what to think…"

Nick paused, considering, and realized that what with the sound of the generator, his distracted evasion of Cyrus, and the ram's bellowing and bleating, he likely hadn't heard her trying to contact him, even before the electrical grid went haywire. He also privately thanked whoever was looking out for him that this meant she hadn't heard the previous exchanges between himself and the mobster—either the taunts and criticisms belittling her heroism, or his own rather dark words and actions he'd used to counter Bellwether.

The former he had no idea how she would handle—despite how strong, brave, and idealistic Judy was, she still had a vulnerability about her at times that he felt compelled to protect—and the latter was something he hadn't even come to terms with himself yet, let alone figured out how to explain or justify to her.

Finally, as he looked from the rabbit to the other cops gathered on the stage in the emergency lighting's isolated pools, the fox said, "Like I told the chief, things got a bit out of hand for a while. But despite how hairy it got, I stopped him, we got all the bad guys, and now we can finally put all this nasty business to rest."

He looked around again, as more details finally registered on his weary, overtaxed mind. The ER staff had indeed arrived (by the logo on the backs of their jackets, a proud and regally-maned cat, he had to assume they were from Lions Gate Hospital), a whole fleet of them being dispatched rapidly backstage to where Cyrus still lay badly in need of treatment; they hadn't wanted to move the ram at first, but once Nick and Simmers had determined no bones were broken, they had at least brought Bellwether close to the stage so the paramedics wouldn't have to search for him in very dim lighting through the same jumble of the stadium's past.

Meanwhile, the other medical personnel were operating here—he saw two of Gazelle's tigers being loaded onto stretchers, another EMT (a soft-spoken snow leopardess) was carefully putting a splint and sling on Manny's arm, and still others were loading the unconscious forms of Stagmire and Lionheart onto other stretchers to be taken to the gurneys waiting outside. Bogo, he saw, was standing near the latter two and seemed to be firmly explaining something to the attendants—the critical need to keep the patients sedated until the Night Howler cure could be administered, he presumed. He'd need to remember to give the same urging to those caring for Cyrus...

Then, just as he noticed that Officer Swinton of all mammals was also standing nearby, in conversation with both Clawhauser and Gazelle—though it looked more like the pig was refereeing, with wry good humor, as the cheetah pestered the fondly-smiling antelope with question after question while he bounced and practically ran in place—something else drew his attention. From the far side wing, a large, familiar silhouette loomed, one sporting extremely thick amounts of muscle
sheathed in fat, and then Xander Pounceski stepped out into the light.

Judging from the fact that Nick could see Fangmeyer, Trumpet, and Krumpansky back in the shadows behind him, and that Doug and his boys now sat on the floor in a sullen heap of wool and handcuffed limbs, the stagehand must have helped the officers bring the conspirators up to join everyone else. Now, as he strode out onto the stage with a heavy sigh, there suddenly came another cry of relieved joy, and then another massive, white-furred figure leaped up the steps and across the wooden floor to take Xander tightly in his arms. "Uncle! Uncle Xander, you're all right!"

Laughing affectionately, the older tiger hugged his nephew just as tightly, even ruffled the fur between his ears (to a decidedly annoyed yowl), but he still sounded deeply tired. And Nick didn't think it was all due to the altercation with the rams. "I'm fine, kiddo. You really think a little dust-up like this would be enough to take me out, after all I've been through? Besides, I had ZPD's finest back there protecting me. Oh, and there was Nick." Smirking at the off-handed, almost absentminded way he'd said those last words, Xander chuckled and added, with more sincerity, "Seriously, he actually was a big help back there. I'd never have believed it, but it looks like Mr. Wilde has cleaned up his act and turned his life around, too."

Nick narrowed his eyes at the striped feline, and he could feel his hackles rising slightly while his tail lashed and whumped vigorously behind him; while he allowed that their past…associations gave Pounceski the right to be wary of him, even distrusting, he thought this might be taking things a bit too far. Especially after how hard the fox had worked to make sure Xander wouldn't become another Night Howler target. But before he could say anything, Tyler (for of course that's who it was), turned and regarded him with an almost equally skeptical look. "Huh. What do you know. Well, then I guess thanks are in order." And he held out a huge paw.

Now the vulpine felt himself careening from resentment to embarrassment. Swallowing back what he'd been going to say, he rubbed the back of his neck, performed a sort of half-bow, and tried to brush it aside. "No need, no need, my friend. Just doing my job for city and precinct. Besides, there's plenty of thanks to go around." He gestured expansively to take in not only Judy, but also Delgato.

Ty glanced at the now-shirtless lion…paused, pursing his lips briefly as he ran his green eyes up and down the young cat's frame…and then said, "Okay, you've got a point there. I saw the moves you were using up there on stage, holding back Mr. Lionheart—you were amazing! If it weren't for you, I think everyone up here would be in a real sorry state…if they were even still alive at all." A stricken look appeared on his handsome young face.

From the side, striding along next to the stretcher carrying one of his injured brothers, another of the Stripers spoke up. "You're not kidding, studmuffin. Holding off a lion almost twice his size? He's way stronger than he looks, and that's not a string-bean physique he's carrying. As for his moves…" The glitter-shorted tiger smiled wider, gazing admiringly at Delgato. "If he weren't already a cop, and if we weren't a tiger act, I might just offer him a place with us. Maybe just until Hafeez and Arjava
Quickly looking back to Ty, Nick saw the white-furred cat giving Manuel an even more open inspection and had to hide a grin behind his paw. "He's right. And if he and his brothers don't want you, I do." He reached into a pocket of his jacket and pulled out a business card that he handed to the befuddled lion. "If you ever want to try another job on the side, something for your off-hours, give me a call. I promise you, the pay's real good. Way better than anything you make at the ZPD, I bet."

Even as Delgado was peering at the card, Nick couldn't resist his own contribution, since he knew exactly what Tyler was talking about. "All up to you, Manny, but as I told you once before: you've got a set of hips on you."

At the same time the words crossed his lips, the lion finished reading the card—which Nick knew would list exactly what sort of company Ty worked for—and once again Delgado blushed beet-red and began spluttering in flustered Spanish.

Beside him, Judy had been watching all this with arms crossed over her chest, alternately puzzled, amused, and (from the set of her ears) relaxing back into contentment. But as he turned to look at her for her reaction to his latest sally, the rabbit was pursing her lips, violet eyes narrowed—and then she gasped, her eyes shot open wide, and she twisted her head to peer up at him, both triumphant and accusing. "Wait a minute! I thought he seemed familiar, and not just because he looked like your friend Xander. Ty? As in, 'Ty the Growler'?"

Instantly Nick froze, the satisfied grin that had been plastered on his muzzle slowly sliding away as he realized he'd been trapped by his own cleverness. Not that there was any way he could have expected Judy of all mammals to know…but hadn't he already learned (or rather, shouldn't he have) that there was more to her than met the eye? "Uh…well now, I…I don't know everything about all my friends…"

Judy smirked, tapping her foot in a careful, thoughtful beat. "Did you really think that just because I'm a countrybunny, I don't have a private side, or that I don't know what that back room through the curtain at the video store is all about?" She shook her head in mock reproach, her tone chiding, and then smiled wide as she let the axe fall the rest of the way. "So tell me then: just how do you know someone as…adult…as Tyler, Mr. Wilde?" One eyebrow lifted meaningfully.

Sweat trickled through the fox's fur, down the back of his neck and under his shirt, and it didn't help that he could see Bogo watching from nearby, and not only was he also smirking broadly, he seemed to be struggling not to burst out in gales of uncontrolled laughter. It was, he had to admit, a wonderful antidote to all the stress, paranoia, fear, and deadly danger that had preceded this, but if there was one thing Nick did not enjoy, it was being on the hot seat himself.
Well, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, you did bring it on yourself. What did Dad always used to say? 'Take what you want, and pay for it.'

Flicking his eyes to Xander, who was also watching with a leering grin that was somehow strangely proud as well, Nick sighed, then chuckled under his breath. "That's...a really funny story, and I bet you'll be enjoying it the whole way to the hospital, since it may just take that long to tell..."

Things were definitely getting back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

So comes to an end the action climax of my story! What's left now are emotional and character arc climaxes, as well as a lot of loose ends to address, points to explain, and general wrap-up. I don't do so for everything, since I do want to leave some things for you to think and wonder about, while other aspects will only be implied or happen off-screen.

The last two tiger brothers, Bhajan and Arjava, have names which mean "devoted, venerated" and "upright, sincere" in Sanskrit. More Spanish again: Carajo means "fuck", oigan means "Hey, listen up!", and perra oveja means "sheep bitch". :D Mitra, meanwhile, is Hindi for "friend, chum, partner." The civvie clothes Benny is wearing (and the exchange between Gazelle and Bhajan) are something of a shout-out to the awesome fanfic "Silent Civil War" by RenkonNairu, although altered a bit to put my own special touch on them ;) while Tyler Pounceski is yet another reference to my friend 6wingdragon's "Neverwere Moments" universe (mentioned, but yet to appear on-screen). As you will see, my friend didn't make his line of work quite so naughty and risque as I did (you should be able to figure it out, I just didn't want to spell it out and make it too blatant), but it will be quite fun and memorable regardless.

Speaking of fun, I've kept up my usual tradition of mocking myself when Judy was contemplating how the "ten minutes, fifteen" passing had felt like hours—lampshading, of course, my tendency to be very wordy in describing thoughts and actions so that events which take little time in-story take quite a while for you to read. :P And speaking of tropes, I couldn't resist having Manny discuss the Prisons Are Gymnasiums trope, just because of Lionheart being so large an animal and having been in prison—and before you say he wasn't there nearly long enough for that to have applied, a lot of examples of the trope in fiction involve an unrealistically short time period too. :P Finally, Nick's nastily snarky suggestion to Cyrus that he would find a pillow for his cell to muffle him is an oblique reference to a Rumpelstiltskin line in the second season of Once Upon a Time (albeit in a very different context).
"Good morning, Zootopia. This is Fabienne Growley with ZNN. " The posh, British accent of the elegant snow leopardess reporter was as dignified and professional as ever, despite recent events, as was the smile she gave the camera, although a trained eye might catch the way she shuffled the papers in front of her a bit nervously.

"And I'm Peter Moosebridge," her co-anchor added, voice even and friendly, with the down-to-earth charm that put most viewers at ease and had long made him a ratings favorite. Yet he did perhaps seem a bit more stiff than usual inside his suit.

"Our top story of the day, of course, is the unfortunate disruption of Gazelle's 'Greatest Hits' concert at Animalia's Water Hole stadium last evening," the feline began. "Although some details remain sketchy, Chief Bogo of the ZPD, who were on scene for the event, apparently due to prior knowledge there might be a danger to the public, has released the following statement. Acting on evidence which provided strong suspicions of another criminal plot to cause unrest in the city, he and his officers, led by Officer Judy Hopps and Officer Nick Wilde, penetrated the backstage area of the celebrated stadium to intercept the conspirators. Although they were not successful in apprehending them quietly, the police were able to keep a general riot or panic from occurring
during the process, and all concert attendees were evacuated with minimal injuries and no deaths."

The antlered reporter at her side took up the story with a tone that was both solemn and remonstrating. "The perpetrators of this terrorist act, we have learned, are none other than the very same rams who were behind the Pred Scare/Night Howler plot, including the sniper Doug Ramses, who until last night remained at large. Their ringleader has been identified as Cyrus Bellwether—brother to disgraced former Mayor and Assistant Mayor Dawn Bellwether, long-time Head of Security at the Palm Hotel and Casino and, sources say, long-time notorious gangster and key figure in the criminal underworld."

An image of the bighorn appeared on the screen alongside Moosebridge's disapproving face, a shot taken near the entrance of the Sahara Square venue where his suited bulk stood with crossed arms as he glowered rather menacingly at those going in and out the glass doors. "What precisely his connection may be to the original savage mammals case has yet to be determined, but eyewitness testimony as well as corroboration from sources at the ZPD have confirmed the usage of Night Howler at last night's tragic concert as well."

Growley once more joined in on the report, and although she continued to maintain her poise and calm, the spotted cat did swallow slowly before resuming. "ZNN has in fact received exclusive footage, as recorded from an attendee's smartphone. I should warn viewers that what you are about to see contains graphic and disturbing imagery not suitable for children, so please ensure they have left the room. Discretion is overall advised."

What appeared then, on the screens of televisions, computers, and various electronic devices throughout Zootopia, was a film displaying the events onstage, beginning from when Gazelle broke off mid-song to when the mammal holding the phone had to flee for the doors. Although shaky and often off-center, many of the images—though unbelievable—were undeniably and upsettingly clear: two lions, one of them recognizably the former mayor of Zootopia, struggling to hold back a violently straining, bulging, nearly-naked deer with the familiar crazed eyes of a savage Night Howler victim, while Gazelle was defended by the crouching forms of her tiger dancers. The cervine collapsing unconscious, only for shots to suddenly fly from the shadowy wings. Lionheart diving to protect the lion beside him, while calling out to the singer in warning. And then the horrifying transformation in which his mammoth frame became an engine of feral rage and predatory instinct unleashed as he sprang to bring death and bloodshed to all who fell in his path.

For several more endless, agonizing minutes the scene played out, with both the tigers and the younger lion wrestling with Lionheart, teeth and claws flashing, blood spurting and streaming visibly, one striped cat flung away in a heap on the stage, the other bodies still gyrating and heaving with ferocious energy, until Judy Hopps stepped into clear view, aiming her gun upward to shoot out a bulb for attention and fright. Then, before it could show her diminutive form being pinned by a terrifying pounce and biting lunge, the video mercifully veered wildly away, then cut off.
After a few moments of meaningful, respectful silence, Growley spoke again. "The young lion just shown onscreen has been identified as a plainclothes member of the ZPD, Manuel Delgato. And yes, you saw it correctly and you saw it here first: that was indeed Leodore Lionheart, both intervening to save Gazelle and her troupe and prevent an attack upon the crowd, and eventually, sadly, succumbing to the Night Howler himself. No word has yet been received on just how or why he was out of prison or what role led him to this series of events, but it has certainly complicated the case against him as being complicit or corrupt in the Pred Scare, both for good and for ill. What is known is that Mr. Lionheart was brought down safely by tranquilizer, without any fatalities on either side. He has been admitted to Lions Gate Hospital, administered the Night Howler cure, and is listed in fair condition.

"Only two members of the famed Asmita Brothers have also been placed under doctor's care, but despite some blood loss and rather serious wounds, both are doing well and expected to make a full recovery. Cyrus Bellwether, however, sustained grievous injuries during his arrest, and while it is believed he will survive, the ram is currently in critical condition. He too, it appears, fell victim to the Night Howler, but has also been cured. Ramses and the rest of his terrorist group, whose names have been released as Woolter Whitewool and Jesse Pinkram, are all in custody in the meantime and are being arraigned and booked without bail in preparation for what is sure to be a lengthy trial."

Moosebridge looked, if anything, even more sorrowful and worried than his co-anchor had been at the lion's fate. "The final victim of the Night Howler has also been identified as District Attorney Buckley Stagmire. No information has been released as to how he ended up in such a state, or where he has been for the past six and a half months, as it was believed by all at the DA's office and City Hall that he was away on personal leave. But Chief Bogo and Officer Hopps have confirmed that he was in fact the unknown first target of this heinous plot, and that his appearance at this juncture was due to kidnapping with intent to incite chaos and division once again in our fair city. Mr. Stagmire has also been given the cure, but while he is listed in fair condition as well, doctors seem uncertain if he will recover with all faculties intact, and have noted he could slip into serious condition at any time."

There was another pause as the moose, who had had to clear his throat and endeavor to overcome the slight quaver in his voice, blinked away the tears that made his deep, dark eyes shine. Fabienne Growley, in a moment of mammalian unity that transcended experience and formality, placed her thick-furred paw on his hoof, even squeezed it briefly, until he could continue.

"As this is a breaking story, more information will be made available as we receive it," Moosebridge said reasonably. "However, we do have a final statement which has been provided to us, to help us all try to make sense of this terrible act…one which will hopefully be the last gasp of this madness which has gripped us. Recorded earlier, let Miss Gazelle speak to you now in her own words."

The image of the reporter's broad face and wide, spanning antlers was replaced by the upper half of the pop-star antelope. From the appearance of the wall behind her, the interview seemed to have been recorded in a hospital room rather than her usual suite at the Palm. She'd had the chance to
change from her blue concert dress and now wore a simple white blouse and cream shoulder-wrap that yet managed to look both fetching and tastefully expensive.

"Before I begin, I first must make sure that credit is given where it is due. Were it not for the efforts of the fine Zootopian Police Department, especially Officer Hopps, Officer Delgato, and Officer Swinton, things would have turned out very differently indeed—all those at the concert, as well as myself and my tigritos, would be far more injured, perhaps we would not even be here. But we also owe our lives and safety to Señor Lionheart. I shudder to think what would have happened without him…and the reward he has received for this is, I think, the height of injustice. Thankfully, I know he will recover, and I dearly hope Señor Stagmire will also."

Her dark eyes fixed on the camera, filled with both compassion and ferocity, wisdom and judgment. "I also think that going forward, if the city I love is to be herself again, if we are to learn from this so that such awful things may never again happen to us, we, all of Zootopia, must remember what we saw last night and again today. Two lions, a fox, and a rabbit protected an antelope and four tigers from a deer and the sheep who drove him mad. And a pig played her important part, too. So many species…predator and prey…saving one another, coming together to fight for life, for freedom, for what is right. This wicked plan to destroy us has a very good chance to bring us instead together. I look around, and I see very different things from when the Pred Scare took place. I do not see us divided. I see shame, and mammals who will not be fooled so easily again. I see solidarity and pride. I see hope.

"This is our moment. Our moment to choose. To forgive. To punish those who did wrong, but also honor those who did right…and those who have shown they are willing to try again, to make better choices, and be a part of a brighter future. I hope, and I believe, that this time, Zootopia's choices will be for healing, for understanding, and for the dignity of all mammals. Thank you."

Growley and Moosebridge reappeared, and though both reporters still looked concerned, a bit haggard and weary, and definitely uncertain, their smiles were genuine and there was relief and bravery in their eyes. The snow leopardess brought the report to a close. "And there you have it. Stay tuned for future reports as the situation and its aftereffects develop, but for now, all of us here at ZNN wish everyone good luck…if we heed Miss Gazelle's advice, however, it may be we won't need it."

The moose nodded, adjusted his tie and jacket collar, then said with more relaxed amiability, "Moving on, then, to this morning's weather…"
lights in whatever room he found himself were somewhat dimmed, they still seemed painfully bright—partly because of their fluorescent nature and the stark white walls of the room which reflected them back, partly because he had the most painful of splitting headaches he could ever recall in his life. Everything ached, which made him wince for a different reason: his eyes felt as if they were being stabbed repeatedly, his temples were pulsing fiercely, every muscle screamed at him with stiffness, soreness, and tension—some felt stretched to their limits, others produced such agony when he moved them even a little he was certain he'd torn them, or close to. Other pains filed in from his neck, his back and shoulders, all across his chest, and a particularly intense throbbing from his abdomen.

He could feel he was lying in a bed, soft and giving enough but with an underlying starchiness and rigidity that he knew it was meant to be utilitarian, not truly for comfort. How had he gotten here? What had happened to him? His mind was still so woozy, his thoughts so unfocused.

Suddenly it hit him. Memories filtering in...one by one at first, then more and more in a rush, an avalanche. Snarling, growling, roaring, so bestial and savage—and all from his own throat. Fangs flashing, claws ripping, blood spurting. Anger. Hate. Paranoia. Fear. Fury. So many wild impulses, all surging and mixing and intensifying in a contradictory morass. Flashes of striped fur. Another leonine face, younger, familiar in its ferocity, yet also terrified. A rabbit, bold and determined. Struggling, wrestling, the scents of sweat and musk and blood filling the air, screams and shouts, smoke and gunpowder, the sound of shots fired. It all blurred together, and yet one thing still stood out with utter clarity. Primitive, feral, unchecked insanity. All of it stemming from him. The nightmare he'd had since Bucky had first been shot, all those months ago. Now come true at last.

Panic flared in his breast, along with a sob of remorse and self-loathing, despite the fact he was here, alive and conscious and sentient, proving the Night Howler cure must have been administered, and he started to sit up and scrubble around in his bedclothes. But then a sound in the background he'd become so accustomed to he hadn't been aware of it picked up speed, loudness, and shrillness. A high, rapid, incessant beeping.

A heart monitor.

He knew where he was now—in generalities if not specifics—and forced himself to lie back, breathe slowly, and calm down. After several minutes he managed to do so, a feat that also lowered the machine back to its usual steady, soft, low pitch. No nurses came to check on him, either because he had recovered so quickly or they were occupied with a genuine emergency, but that was how he wanted it. He needed peace, quiet, and solitude until he could face the world again. Face himself, and what he had nearly done.

Yet as he lay there, staring alternately at the plaster ceiling, the tiled walls, or the IV stand rising alongside his bed with its tube leading down to the needle in his right arm, the former mayor realized he was wrong. There was someone he wanted, needed to see, or at least learn the whereabouts and
condition of. The one he’d thought about just a few moments ago, when caught in the grips of his trauma and despair. The one who mattered more than anyone else.

And as if those thoughts, that yearning, had summoned him, he heard a voice…hoarse, raspy, dry and thick with disuse. But still familiar, still recognizable, still loved, still able to make his heart pound and lurch. "Well…it’s about time you woke up. I’ve only been dying of boredom, and waiting for hours to talk to you again…make certain you’re all right."

The Barbary shifted his maned head, which felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds (yet also seemed stuffed with cotton), looking to his left.

And there he was. Across the pillow, beyond the lowered metal railing of his hospital bed, another patient reclined in the adjacent bed. Or rather, he was half-sitting up, propped on his own pillows. His fur was still ragged, dirty, and mussed; his eyes were bleary and a bit bloodshot; and he looked almost comical in the white gown with its blue trim and faint polka dots. But despite his broken antlers and pained expression, the gauntness of his features and the paleness beneath his fur, he was otherwise the same. His eyes were warm, dark, and most importantly aware. He knew him. He was himself again.

"Bucky," he murmured, and it wasn’t just his own scratchy throat that made him choke up, nor could that explain the thick streams of tears welling up in his eyes. "Oh, Bucky…"

The stag smiled lopsidedly. "You remember my name, that’s a good start. But my word, Leodore, you look like something the you dragged in."

It took Lionheart several moments to realize what this mangling of the usual cliché meant, since he was still staring in heartfelt disbelief at what he had dreamed and hoped for for so long finally living and breathing truthfully before his eyes…his friend, his beloved, the other half of his soul, safe and sound at last… After it finally sank in, and he had shot his lover as scathing a look as he could muster, he glanced down at himself. Although also clad in a matching hospital gown, he could see what the deer was referring to.

His right shoulder was a mass of bandages—from the pattern of the brownish-red stains soaking them, he assumed some rather vicious bites lay beneath—and he could see a streak of similar coloring down the fur of one forearm where a bullet had grazed it. The front of the gown was taut enough (it looked to have been meant for a less broad-shouldered mammal) that he could see through the translucent material to the multiple squares of gauze across his chest; the tranquilizer darts must have been fired from fairly close range, to be embedded deeply enough to leave such wounds. And as he shifted he could also see through the side of the gown to the wrappings which encircled his belly. He winced again; he could feel every laceration there with stunning keenness. So that’s what it feels like to be clawed. Marvelous. I can count sit-ups and touch football out of my schedule for the
immediate future, then.

Glancing back to Bucky, the lion let out a slow, shuddering sigh and rumbled, "Er…yes, it does seem to be as bad as it looks. But I do believe I'll live."

"You'd better," Bucky said ominously—but then his chin quivered a bit and he blinked several times as his eyes too grew moist. "I…I don't remember much of what happened, yet. Or what I do recall, I do not wish to speak of unless I must. Nor do I know how you ended up here, with me, in that condition." His words were spoken rather slowly, and while at first Leodore thought he was simply choosing his words with care and deliberation, there was a certain slurred quality to his voice that brought a renewed chill to his heart; had he not recovered all his faculties, after being so long under the influence of the Night Howler? Or might he never fully be himself again?

This fear was driven from his mind however, at least for the present, by what the deer said next. "But I suspect the reason I am here, and can speak to you, is because of you. So thank you, Leo. Thank you so very much."

And he reached out his hoof, extending it across the space between their beds.

Instantly, despite his weariness and pain, how muddled and fragmented his thoughts and memories remained, and how much was still unknown to him, Lionheart reached out and took that hoof in his massive paw, squeezing it tighter and more powerfully than he ever had before. If he had his way, he would never let go again, not for a long time.

While they were still staring at each other, hearts in their throats, tears running down their cheeks, locked in a silence that said everything and emotions that no words could express in any case, the sound of a discreet cough came from the doorway. "He's right, Leodore. We owe you a lot, and he's not the only one who should be giving thanks."

Looking swiftly across the room, the former mayor couldn't hold back the fond smile. It was of course Judy Hopps, leaning casually against the doorframe, paws in her pockets, ears erect, whiskers twitching with an air of eager excitement. Beside her was Nick Wilde, and while he thought for a moment that there was something dark and haunted in those green eyes, in a flicker it was gone and the fox was smirking lazily once again. "Carrots is right, too. We all had our little parts to play, and it wasn't smooth sailing, but all in all I'd say you're one of our team's MVPs. And I'm not the only one who thinks that." He gestured into the hall behind him.

Judy was shooting her partner an odd and conflicted look—why, he had no idea, since she'd clearly approved of the help Leodore had given them, but she seemed to want to amend or add on to his last
statement. But the feline couldn't be bothered by that, because he had seen who stood outside the door and his breath had fled as a result.

A lioness…she had always been more what one would call handsome, not beautiful or pretty, and this had only become more severe with age, but as far as he was concerned she was the loveliest lioness there had ever been. White fur grizzled her chin, while iron gray had covered the black trim of her ears, but her golden eyes were as warm, alert, and bright as ever.

Behind her were three lions who almost stair-stepped in height, the tallest with a mane even more voluminous than his own but pitch-black in hue, the middle a warm cinnamon, and the shortest with a flame-red mane that had been carefully trimmed and shaped to surround his face rather like a wolf's ruff so that it blended perfectly into his beard. All but the youngest wore glasses; the eldest looked uncomfortable while the youngest had his arms crossed in an air of slightly aloof disdain, but all of them were looking at him with relief, respect, and pride.

His eyes rested most, though, on the lion standing beside his mother…tall, only slightly stoop-shouldered, otherwise still in fit and well-built condition, his mane also black but streaked everywhere with gray and silver, it being quite hard to tell where his beard left off and it began. Eyes the same shade as Leodore's own fixed on him from behind squarish spectacles, and although his wife was crying openly now, he too had tears flowing visibly.

"I am so sorry, lad," Cornelius Lionheart said slowly and thickly (he was the only one ever allowed to call him that). "For not trusting and believing in you. For believing all the lies, falling for the same smear campaign as everyone else. For everything." He paused, then went on with profound gravitas and conviction. "You have done so very, very well, my son…a true lion's gift, and a true Lionheart. Can you ever forgive a foolish old lion?" His paws clutched at the hat he held before himself, as if it were his lifeline, the only thing solid and real he could cling to.

Suddenly, no pain or confusion, no injury or loss, no fear of the past or worry about the future, nothing mattered to Leodore any more, all of it melting away like frost in the morning sun. He only gazed back at his father, at the approval and love in his eyes…and how it did not flicker or falter even a moment when they rested on his son's paw still clasping the hoof of the stag beside him. If he could have, he would have leaped from his bed and swept the older lion into a rough and tearful embrace, regardless how such demonstrative gestures had usually been frowned upon in his household.

He squeezed Bucky's hoof tighter still. He didn't know if Judy and Nick had specifically sought his family out to tell them the truth behind his actions and choices, then bring them here, or if they had come on their own after learning of it all in some more public manner. But now, no matter what happened next or what his ultimate fate might be, what he did know was that somehow, everything would be all right.
The next several days went by in a blur. Part of this, of course, was that despite being cured of the Night Howler, there were still a few lingering aftereffects in Leodore's mind—whether a slightly stronger propensity for meat in his diet than usual, an innate aggressiveness that would sadly manifest itself at odd and inopportune moments (like when a nurse came to draw blood for testing or to change his dressings—sometimes the latter would cause him to pull away and attempt to clean his wounds with his own tongue before the bandages and his shamed embarrassment stopped him), and moments when he would forget a word or lose his train of thought.

But another part simply came from the injuries he still needed to recover from—both the blood loss and the drugs given to him for the pain tended to make him light-headed and weak, so that he slept a great deal more than usual. And the other part came from the fact that, when he wasn't sleeping, speaking with his doctors, or otherwise attempting to rest and heal, he was receiving quite the number of visitors in his room…particularly his family.

Once the initial shock and joy of their reunion had passed, the full story behind what had occurred six months ago, as well as within the last several days, had of course been absolutely necessary to relate…which in turn had required the former mayor to explain just what Bucky was to him, how deep their emotions ran and the true nature of their relationship. To Leodore's bemusement and fondness, Martha had noted she'd known he was gay all along, and had certainly gotten an inkling of what lay between him and the deer—possibly in high school, but undeniably so during college. She had simply been waiting until he felt comfortable enough to trust her with the truth.

Cornelius, on the other paw, had been entirely oblivious until his wife had gently brought it to his attention, at which point he had rather fiercely resisted the idea for some time—less because he had an issue with the concept itself and more because he was worried about the kinds of mammals his son might become involved with; and, of course, the need for the family to have heirs. Once his brothers had taken care of that matter, however, his father had settled into a benevolent magnanimity—for in truth, the elder Lionheart had explained with a somewhat evasive look and a diffident cough, such relationships had actually been quite common throughout leonine history, dating back to the time of primitive prides.

All Cornelius had wanted had been for Leodore to be happy…and, God willing, to find someone who would bring further distinction, respect, and prestige to the family. Now that he knew whom his son had chosen, the elder lion simply couldn't stop smiling in the charismatic, inestimable fashion that had always bred true in the Lionheart line for generations—because not only was Buckley's dignity, reputation, and honor of impeccable pedigree and beyond reproach, the simple fact was he had already seen the deer very much as another son for years, certainly since the elder Mr. Stagmire's death. To make it official now in any capacity would touch him deeply.
As for Leodore's brothers, there was some discomfort and uncertainty there. The eldest, Elliott, was the only one who expressed any reservations or disapproval of his sexuality, while the youngest, Franklin, seemed still unhappy with his overall actions during the Pred Scare and how they had jeopardized both Leodore's progressive accomplishments and the family's reputation. But in the end, after facing how close he had come to fatal injuries or losing himself in Night Howler madness, and seeing what his brother had been willing to suffer in order to save Buckley, Elliott had finally, if gruffly admitted that what Leodore did in his private life or whom he loved was none of his concern.

And Franklin had allowed that his actions at Gazelle's concert, foolhardy as they had been, had shown his personal bravery and his desire to atone, as well as gone far toward explaining his prior acts and convincing the majority of mammals of his sincerity and honor, at least so far as opinion polls and political/press analysis were indicating. Overall, each of them was simply glad he had survived his ordeal and proven what truly lay in his heart, and had apologized for their various rejections of his overtures for reconciliation over the last six months, as well as their general disdain and anger.

While Leodore had never been as close to them as he might have wished (save for Franklin, who had probably been his greatest inspiration for mammal equality, political acumen, and societal progress, other than Bucky and his own father), it was still a great relief to hear these words of encouragement, forgiveness, and acceptance from them, to know his family did not hate him after all, and there had been more embraces between them in those days than he ever recalled from the many years before.

Now that he had Bucky back, if that was the only loved one in his life, he could stand it…it would be enough; but knowing this was not the case, that his family had accepted him back with open arms, had him overwhelmed with tears of gratitude and love. And it certainly made him happy to know he'd once more be able to spend time with his darling nieces and nephews, whom he treasured now more than ever—that is, of course, once the matter of his legal and personal future was finally addressed.

To some degree, thankfully, that very subject had been brought up by the next several visitors who had come to his bedside after that. For while of course his recovery was something necessary before his trial could move forward, as well as something all of those who had spent time with him for the last several days now wished for his own well-being, there were naturally still a great deal of questions to be answered, rationales to be given, and matters of police procedure and law to be satisfied. And no one was more owed such things, more determined to receive them, or more critical that they be swayed even nominally to his side with them, than Officer May Swinton.

When the clearing of a throat from the doorway made him look up from his hospital lunch, Lionheart was surprised to discover the pig standing there, and that she no longer wore her usual police uniform; instead her garb consisted of a pair of loosely comfortable blue jeans and an untucked, button-up house-shirt of pale lavender. Brushing her lock of blond hair out of her eyes, she regarded him with a lopsided smile. "I'd ask if you minded me interrupting your meal, but even at Lions Gate
Despite the pain in his bandaged stomach, Leodore laughed softly, ruefully. "Oh, it's not all that bad. But I'd much rather be eating at home, that's true. Not that I have any chance of that, as we both know where I will be once I'm no longer confined to this bed." He paused, downed a swallow of pomegranate juice, and then eyed her knowingly. "Is that what you're here about, Officer Swinton? Or is there another reason I'm receiving the honor of your visit?"

The pig actually had the grace to look contrite, and after a brief glance at Bucky, who had already finished his meal and was watching her from where he was still propped up by his pillows, a very cool look in his dark eyes, she crossed over to the lion's bed and sat down in the nearest vinyl chair. "Ah…no. This is…not very easy for me to say, but I wanted to apologize."

Lionheart blinked; that had been the last thing he'd expected to hear, even if her expression was conciliatory. "Oh really? Do tell."

Swinton's eyes lowered to the bed, and he noticed how they kept flicking from one injury to the next upon his massive frame, but always returning to his clawed belly. "Look…I don't need to explain to you why my treatment of you up 'til now has been…less than stellar. You know my views, and you know what caused them, the same thing practically everyone else in Zootopia fell for after the scandal broke and we all learned just what you'd been doing behind the scenes. But now that more has come out…both what you didn't do, and why you did what you did, well…I've realized I was being unfair to you."

He could tell from her diffident tone and stiff posture how hard this indeed was for her; Swinton seemed the sort who, once she made up her mind, could not be dislodged from her views without an act of God…and once she did realize she was wrong, felt great shame in this. Even as she spoke, she still could not meet his gaze. He sighed slowly. While he knew this admission would go far toward making his jailtime much more bearable, he couldn't let it pass by without qualifying her remarks.

"That's very kind of you, Officer," Leodore replied gently. "But aside from the fact that, as you so astutely point out, there was plenty of evidence to make me look bad and the full story was unknown, this does not change the truth. I still broke the law; I still did wrong; I still need to be punished for it." He carefully avoided his lover's hurt look—he was not ready to weather that conversation, to reveal what all he had done to save the deer and keep their secret, didn't know when or if he ever would be. Though it would have to happen soon enough, and the longer he waited…

Swinton frowned, shook her head. "You don't need to tell me that, I already know what you're in for and that you've got a pretty serious day in court ahead of you. That doesn't mean it was right for me to treat you so callously. Especially now that I know why you acted as you did…what, or whom, you were trying to protect." Now she finally glanced at Bucky again before daring to reach out and
rest her hoof on Lionheart's paw.

"Judy explained it all to me. I can't imagine what it was like, watching someone you cared about turn into a savage right before your eyes and try to kill you...to not know why it happened, whether you were the real target, who might be next. And just because you broke a lot of laws to keep him and the other mammals locked up while you worked on a cure...doesn't mean your heart wasn't in the right place." During the last few days, Leodore had finally confessed the last of the secrets he'd been keeping to the rabbit who had saved him, saved them all; that she'd been busy since then, giving an earful to anyone who would listen that had once been firmly set against him, should not have surprised him.

"Yes...well, it was rather awful," he observed, unable to keep the bitterness fully from his voice, but mostly feeling only pangs of deep sadness. "But that is all in the past now, and the damage has been done. I don't know what comes next, for any of us...but at least the truth is out now, and everyone who needed help has finally received it. Thank you, though, for your understanding."

She snorted softly, interlacing her hoof-fingers; once again, the lock of blond hair fell over her eyes. "Even now, after all these months, we just still keep finding more layers to this damn Night Howler case, don't we? I'm starting to wonder if the city will ever really recover from what Bellwether's done to it." Swinton shook her head. "I wish there'd been another way—you took way too damn many risks, it almost all fell apart and caused as much chaos as you were trying to prevent—but I understand why you had to get out, to intervene the way you did."

Lionheart smirked lopsidedly. "You don't have to tell me that. None of this worked out the way I intended, or wanted. I guess I'm still a better dreamer and believer than I am a planner. Though I'm sure you know by now that the, ah, jailbreak switch was actually Miss Hopps' idea, not mine."

The pig laughed briefly, even as a flash of ire glinted in her green eyes before subsiding. "Oh, I'm well aware of that. She and I had some words, believe you me. But...it all worked out in the end. We caught the criminals, everyone at the concert was saved, Mr. Stagmire got rescued, and I even got to keep you from killing anyone in the bargain. It's not every day I get to be quite so active on duty." She chuckled. "And in a way, I do have you to thank for something else."

The mention of what might have happened had Swinton not been there to aid Judy and Delgato had made Lionheart cringe, feeling small, distressed, and sorrowful again, but her final words made him sit up a bit, furrowing his brow in confusion. "What? You do?"

"Yes." She smiled wryly at him. "That clever little scheme they used to get you out of prison, and put Corlione in your place? Well, it just so happened to expose some pretty big holes in our security. I've already put in a request to Bogo, and we're going to start examining and revamping the whole camera system. Now that we know how easy it is to hack in and take control, we're going to get the
techs to work on it, covering and plugging those holes...that way, none of the true criminals will be able to use the same means and escape for real.

Despite how backhanded that gratitude was, Leodore only stared at her for a few moments before it was his turn to chuckle. *What do you know. For once the unforeseen consequences were positive ones.* "I see. That's good news, then. In that case, may I suggest you speak to Nicholas about that? He can tell you in much more detail just what they did and how those flaws can be corrected or adapted for." He knew, of course, that it was the fox's friend Finnick who had actually done the hacking, but despite knowing the fellow had had nothing to do with Bucky's kidnapping from Cliffside, he didn't want to expose someone with such illegal skills to the authorities if he didn't have to; whatever information the ZPD needed to address prison security could just as easily be passed through Nick.

"How did I know that was the case?" Swinton smirked. "Well thank you, I'll be sure to do that then. Although there was something else I wanted to ask for your help with, if it was all right with you."

Lionheart frowned. Nothing in her voice suggested this was a dangerous or inappropriate request, in fact she sounded quite relaxed and calm. At the same time there was a slight smugness in her tone, and she had leaned imperceptibly closer as if excited by the prospect of whatever she was about to say. It was clear whatever she wanted to ask for was her real reason for coming to his hospital room. "I suppose so," he replied slowly. "Was this something you wanted added to the plea bargain Judy and Bogo made with me...?"

"No. At least, not officially. After what you've done and were trying to do, I think I owe it to you to not only ignore what happened at the jail, but start giving you better, proper treatment. However...in return there is something I'd very much like, and I think it's something that will also benefit you and the rest of the city." The pig paused, then turned and looked once more at the other bed in the room. "I suppose so," he replied slowly. "Was this something you wanted added to the plea bargain Judy and Bogo made with me...?"

 Needless to say, Buckley was as startled and puzzled as he was. "Me? Whatever do you have in mind, Ms. Swinton?" Sitting up a bit farther, and letting out a soft grunt, the deer leaned against the upper half of his bed and eyed her speculatively; although he still required a little extra time for thought before speaking, and his voice was a bit uncertain and wavering at times, he had improved remarkably during those past several days, displaying once again the intellect and incisiveness he was so renowned for.

He was also much more presentable, since his fur had been carefully cleaned with a proper spongebath as soon as was feasible. (Although neither he nor Bucky would have objected in the least to Leodore watching, propriety and public decency had required him to turn his back during the activity. Amusingly enough, although not surprising for this particular hospital, the nurse who had handled it had also been a lion, a young and strapping fellow with a handsome, almost boyish face—crowned by a fiery mane, closely-cropped above but properly wreathing his cheeks, jaw, and chest
—but the serious demeanor of one wholly dedicated to his honorable profession. Imagining his lover having to deal with another leonine of such bulky, virile proportions attending to him in such a personal and private fashion had kept Lionheart entertained for quite some time, and he didn't know which had produced more of his much-needed laughter: the nurse wryly but calmly noting there was "no need to apologize, that sort of reaction happens all the time", or the glower the cervine had directed toward his bed for the rest of that afternoon.)

The police officer, meanwhile, was squirming a bit in her seat—as kind and reassuring as Bucky usually was, there was also a fierceness and unwavering sternness in his gaze, the one which had made hardened criminals break down and confess, frightened and desperate witnesses become convinced he had the power and tenacity to protect them, and even the most recalcitrant and closed-minded of judges see things from his perspective.

"Well, Mr. Stagmire…it's like this. There's a particular case of mine which has been languishing on the back burner for some time—partly because I was still gathering evidence and making sure my witnesses were safe and still willing to testify, but mostly because I needed permission from the DA's office before I could get any warrants or the approval from Bogo. Now that I know where you've been, and why everyone over there has been in such a state over your absence, the delay makes a lot more sense." She shot a deprecating look at Leodore, which made him wince and then shrug apologetically. And now we're back to the negative repercussions again.

"Anyway, I happened to check up on the case while I was pursuing Mr. Lionheart and my colleagues—why doesn't matter, now—so it's been on my mind. Now that everything is…mostly explained and under control again, I thought that a good way to help show the public that law and order have been re-established would be to have something this high-profile and controversial finally get prosecuted. It's even relevant to the Night Howler case, since it involves unearthing another secret plot against predators we didn't know was there, from prey mammals we thought were harmless and innocent." The look on the pig's face was a familiar one—disgust, fury, and dark resentment—but now it was directed elsewhere rather than at the former mayor.

"So. Since I assume you're going to be laid up still for some time, I was hoping you'd agree to pass your authority officially to someone else in your office, and anything else you can do to help move things along, so I can make the arrests and get this horrible operation shut down." Swinton paused again, jutted her chin out as she clenched her jaw, and then uttered forcefully, "It's the Pred Therapy case. Dr. Clea."

Lionheart frowned; if anything about this had been bruited about between the ZPD and the DA's office, he'd never heard about it—though it was possible Buckley might have mentioned it at some point in the days before their fateful dinner at The Dunes and he had simply forgotten, what with far more pressing and upsetting matters to deal with.

He knew, of course, about the general psychological practice Swinton was referring to, the rather
ridiculous notion that predators still retained their hunting instincts, feral hungers, and other primitive attributes beneath their civilized exteriors, and that these could be worked through and overcome by means of careful discipline, anger management classes, and other rigorous mental health options—even, in certain cases, by judiciously regulated psychiatric drugs.

But he had assumed either the practice had been generally discontinued once it was proven to be either ineffective or unnecessary, or that its success stories had made it something useful but now unremarkable as it had been developed into just another of the many treatment and wellness plans out there which helped mammals handle modern society. This...sounded far more dangerous and unsanctioned, and if it was as deplorable as Swinton seemed to be implying... His paws clenched on the bedsheets.

Meanwhile, Bucky was still staring at their visitor, and if Leodore was confused but starting to entertain deeper worries and angers, the deer looked colder and more enraged than he had ever seen him—similar enough to how he had appeared under the Night Howler's influence that for a very terrifying moment, the lion thought he might be relapsing, might even have permanently retained some portion of the plant's psychotropic nature after it had coursed so long through his veins.

"Oh yes. I know quite well of her and her exploits. Only whispers and rumors at first...mysterious disappearances and deaths, tales of those who came back from her 'retreats' forever changed, and not in ways which improved their lots, however healthy or stable they might otherwise appear. I had been gathering these cases slowly, building up my own file to document her practice, finally catch her in the illegal acts I was certain she was committing. But to use the vernacular, I had yet to find the smoking gun." He paused, then spoke slowly and deliberately. "You say you have the proof, and can finally pin her down, expose what she's been doing?"

The pig smiled smugly, nodded once. "We have eyewitnesses. Their stories corroborate one another, and they hold up so we know they weren't coached by any adults. All we need is to get into her offices, bring her in for questioning, and do it all quickly enough we can search the premises before her staff have any chance to hide or destroy the evidence. Who would you recommend over at the DA's office to help me with that?"

"Well, that would be my Assistant District Attorney, of course. Russell Burnram," Buckley said matter-of-factly. "If there's anything I don't know about criminal law, he does. And he's in fact made it something of a specialty, pursuing cases where prey mammals were unfairly or prejudicially harming the lives or rights of predators."

He stopped, then went on with a fairly wicked gleam in his eyes and a knowing, confident smirk that Leodore had rarely ever seen...but he knew for a fact that everyone, whether defendants, opposing counsel, or even judges, always regretted it when they did. "However, there is much more I can do for you than simply giving Russ the go-ahead to prosecute. You do know, I hope, that I was once a major shareholder in, and legal counsel for, Hexward Pharmaceuticals?"
Swinton raised an eyebrow. "Yes, but what does that have to—" Her eyes widened. "Wait, are you saying…"

The deer nodded slowly, grimly. "Dr. Clea was a long-time client, Hexward supplied her with most of her medicinal needs. Including a number of drugs which, shall we say, were not available on the open market because they did not pass all the proper safety tests. Nothing could be proven one way or the other about the nature of her therapy programs, or just what she was using these substances for, and so the CEO and the board tended to look the other way for the sake of profits. That is until I called for a true audit, and after determining just what side-effects these drugs could have, I made it very clear to them that if they did not want me blowing the whistle and calling in the ZFDA, the costs of continuing to patronize Dr. Clea—in any sense of the word—would far outweigh the gains. Suffice it to say the program ceased immediately, all ties were cut, and production of the drugs in question halted, never to resume again. I should know; I kept tabs on them in one way or another in the years since."

Quiet filled the hospital room, other than the sounds of the heart monitors and other equipment connected to the patients, and Leodore found himself holding his breath…reading between the lines, realizing this case was even worse than he had suspected, but also grinning rather savagely to himself as he understood how this unethical and sadistic doctor had just met her match in his beloved. As had, it seemed, Hexward, though he hadn't even been aware of it until this moment.

The pig officer seemed to have reached the same conclusion, although a slightly troubled furrow still marred her brow. "If those drugs do what I think they do to her patients, that would be the final nail in her coffin, even aside from being illegal. But how will that do us any good? I mean, you don't work there any more, when you did that was, what, ten years or so ago? And I can't just waltz in there and demand their files…"

Bucky coughed discreetly behind one hoof and shot her a candid look. "Hexward keeps excellent records; everything you need will still be stored there, waiting to be entered into evidence. And although I did end up selling my shares and leaving the company—as much because of this scandal as to join Leodore here in running for office—I still have contacts and friends in their legal department and elsewhere. Those at Hexward who were interested in putting a stop to Dr. Clea…to cover their liability if not out of altruism…will be happy to help, now that you have witnesses and paperwork to back you up.

"Even if the company itself is not willing to become a litigant in the proceedings, or even assist at all directly, I personally know from having drawn up their NDAs that in a matter such as this—especially if a Hexward product was involved—their employees may freely offer testimony as their consciences dictate and the law demands. Those involved in the clinical trials, the actual drug-makers, even the administrators who handled the finances and contracts for the deal."
He paused once more, then chuckled softly. "Just bring me stationery from my office and a pen, and I'll write out the subpoenas for you; we'll need them to make everything admissible at the trial, and there might be a few higher-ups at Hexward who could get in your way and need...persuading. Also, if you will give the note I'll write for you to either Russ or my secretary, they'll be happy to let you bring my Rolodex here. I have every contact, and their department information, ready and waiting at your disposal."

Very slowly, but with gradually greater vindictive pleasure, Swinton smiled. Leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs casually, the pig observed, "I love the way your mind works, Mr. Stagmire. And what a thorough recordkeeper you are. Isn't it nice when you can stay on the right side of the law...and still plot and scheme well enough to make sure crime doesn't pay?" Leodore, marveling silently as his wrath and contempt turned into admiration and pride, could only wholeheartedly agree.

Even as the lion was reflecting with chagrin that a scene very like this might have played out six months before, if he had been willing to trust Chief Bogo and if he had been able to overcome his selfishness and fear, Swinton was rising to her feet and reaching out to shake Bucky's hoof. "I have the feeling it'll be a very great pleasure working with you and Mr. Burnram in the next few months. I just hope you'll be as ruthless and diligent when it comes to throwing the book at Cyrus Bellwether."

Ironically, it was the cervine who looked as if he were the predator who had captured and eaten his prey. "Oh, believe you me, Ms. Swinton. We will be."

Thanks to that encounter having gone so relatively well, much better than he had expected, Lionheart was in a far better mood than his situation likely warranted when the next set of visitors came to his door. He had just set aside the newspaper he had asked his nurse to deliver to him each morning—the articles which continued to cover the ongoing story ranged in their views and attitudes toward him, some blaming him yet again for causing havoc in the city by disturbing the concert and allowing himself to be shot with Night Howler, others joining Gazelle in praising him for his quick thinking and selfless heroism.

But at least there was overall condemnation for what Cyrus had attempted to accomplish; a desire to see the ram locked away for life for his conspiracy (some editorials even called for investigation into the mafia, to see if the bighorn's plot went farther and reflected even more insidious corruption than simply his own power-mongering and revenge fantasies); and nothing but extreme gratitude and relief at having Buckley Stagmire cured and restored to the city.

With that out of the way, the Barbary had begun watching television for lack of anything better to do
—*All My Cubs* was airing, and somehow seeing an actual soap opera in lieu of the one his life had become was rather entertaining—when there suddenly came a knock on the door. "Come in!"

The door opened, and he was unsurprised (though quite pleased) to see Judy Hopps bound across the threshold and stride with her usual confidence and determination across the room toward his bedside. "Hi, Leodore! It's so good to see you awake and doing so well. I knew you'd be recovering in no time flat, you're a real trooper." She paused as she noticed what was on the TV screen, and then she grinned wide, ears stiff and erect. "Ooo! I used to watch that show all the time with Mom when I was growing up. Is Erica Kanine on today?"

Lionheart chuckled in wry bemusement. "I wouldn't know, I just tuned in."

From behind the rabbit, Nick shook his head slowly, *tsking* under his breath in mock disapproval. "You know, Carrots, every time I think you've surprised me, shown real depth and that you're far more at home here in Zootopia than I gave you credit for…you do something to remind me you're still that ignorant country bunny I first observed."

"Shut up," Judy said automatically, her nose in the air even as she smiled winsomely at Leodore. Like her partner, she was back in her proper police uniform again—and the two of them weren't the only ZPD officers in the hospital room. Following the fox was the form of Officer Delgato; thanks to still having his arm in a sling, he could not fully don his uniform jacket, but the fastenings must have been undone long enough to allow his shirt to be slipped carefully into place, leaving the jacket only half-on, slung over one shoulder. He stood as proud and dignified as ever, and the look he gave Lionheart was one of relief, understanding, and apology.

Less reassuring, however, was the fact the last one to stride into the room was the giant, looming bulk of Chief Bogo; the stiff knots in his hunching shoulders were not at all encouraging, and neither was the severe glower on his face. *So it comes to this. I should not have been tempting fate, thinking so much of him. Finally time to pay the Piper, Leodore.*

At least there was a welcome distraction in the form of the rabbit, who had leaped up onto the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. From the way she wiggled and the warm smile she directed his way, the lion rather thought she'd have been embracing him if not for her superior's presence, and the look in her eyes was one he'd been longing to see for some time. "Anyway, we just wanted to check on you, see how you were doing. Both of you." Her violet eyes flicked to Bucky, who was currently slumbering peacefully in his adjoining bed.

"Yes," Bogo interjected rather testily, "it's particularly good to have Mr. Stagmire with us, back among the cognizant and accounted for. Not that we knew he was anything else, until a few days ago." Oh yes, the Cape buffalo definitely had a bone to pick with him. "But that isn't the only reason we're here." And unexpectedly, he placed a hoof on Delgato's back and pushed the young lion
forward—gently, but firmly, in a manner that brooked no argument. "I believe someone here has something he wishes to say to you."

Lionheart furrowed his brow, puzzled. Unless Judy had been typically detailed in her report, and passed on what Nick in turn had witnessed between the lions back at the Cloven Hoof, the only way Bogo could know of it was if Manuel himself had told him. Which if so, suggested the other cat's feelings toward him had changed indeed, if he found his previous attitude something to regret and apologize for. But either way, why would the Chief of Police care?

While he was still considering the matter, Delgato cleared his throat and looked at him, flushing a bit and smiling sheepishly as he rubbed at the back of his maned neck with his good paw. "Uh…well first of all, since you were kinda, you know, not yourself until we got you to the hospital and the cure and all, I didn't get the chance to thank you. You saved my life back there, at the Water Hole, and kept me from becoming a savage instead." He paused, quirked a brow and smirked a little. "Not that things were any safer, with you losing your mind, but…at least you were already a felon. Me, an officer of the law going crazy with bloodlust, right there in public?" He shook his head and shuddered. "That would have been a disaster."

"That's an understatement, all right," the Cape buffalo muttered.

"Anyway…" The younger lion bit his lip, then sighed. "Thank you. I…I've had time to think. About you, and me, and…the things I said to you before. They're still true, most of them. They needed to be said, for a lot of reasons. But some of it wasn't right, or only saw half the picture. And some of it, you've made up for, at least a little. So…" He held out his paw, tentatively. "I just wanted to say, well…we don't know yet what's gonna happen to you. It's still up to the judge and the lawyers and all. You're probably gonna be back in prison, at least for a while. But…if it makes you feel any better, I don't want ya to rot no more?"

It came out as a question of sorts, and Delgato's somewhat-toothy grin was as uncomfortable and weak as Leodore's own could be when he was caught in a distressing situation that reflected very poorly on him. It was sincere, though, and so was the effort being made.

For several long moments, the former mayor stared at his fellow lion, trying hard to sort through all his conflicting feelings of disbelief and anguish, awe and guilt, suspicion and hope, and so many more…trying just as hard not to show them but certain he was failing. He knew his heart was in his throat and his breath was rasping audibly. All he kept coming back to, however, was that it was a start, a very good one, something he had been hoping for…and that even if he still wasn't certain he deserved it, if others were offering forgiveness and a chance to start again, it behooved him to accept. What is it Yax always liked to say, when I'd go to the Oasis? 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'
Holding back an extremely inappropriate snicker, as the yak's manner of speech made those words sound funnier and much more trite in his head, Lionheart took the paw extended to him and shook it...slowly, carefully, solemnly. "You're welcome, Officer Delgato. You have no idea how good it felt, doing something right and for the benefit of everyone again. And by the way, it does in fact make me feel better. Out of sheer coincidence, rotting is nowhere to be found on my bucket list." Despite the cheeky, dry joke (which, from the look on his face and his slow applause, Nick absolutely approved of), the Barbary couldn't stop the tears from welling up yet again.

As he blinked their film away so he could see again, Delgato did laugh, with a warmth that matched the paw gripping Leodore's. "Actually, I do have an idea. And please...call me Manuel."

Even as they were smiling at each other, Judy suddenly intervened, bounding along the mattress to wrap her arms around the young lion's chest. As she deftly avoided both sling and injuries to embrace him, she cried, "I knew it! I knew you two could patch things up, if you just made the effort, and saw who you really were at heart!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Lionheart saw both Bogo and Nick strike almost the identical posture of hanging their heads and covering their eyes—except while the buffalo seemed on the verge of nausea, the fox was smirking more broadly and knowingly than ever. It was Delgato, though, who voiced what they seemed to be thinking: even as he held the rabbit against his body, he cast his gaze between her upright ears, grinned at Nick, and said, "You were right, Wilde. Bunnies do get all emotional."

Lionheart couldn't help himself, even as he dashed the last of his tears away he started to laugh—and both Nick and Delgato joined in when Judy, sounding quite indignant but with her face a bright blushing pink, hissed, "Stop it, both of you!"

After a few more moments, a deep, harrumphing cough interrupted their levity. "Yes, very amusing. Now that that's out of the way, I do believe all of you have things you should be doing. Delgato, rest. Take care of yourself. You should be at home, but if you simply must work, sit down in the waiting room and I'll take you back to the precinct when I'm through here." Bogo's voice, which had shifted almost imperceptibly to a tone of concern, even caring, instantly hardened again as he fixed his sights on Judy.

"Hopps, stand guard outside the door, make sure no one disturbs us. And don't think I'm letting you off the hook on that expense report, or the press release." Finally, he peered down his nose at the fox. "Wilde...wasn't there something you promised me after all this was over? A full, detailed report?"

"Yes, in triplicate, sir, I know. I'll get right on that as soon as we get back to the office—"
"By you," the buffalo interrupted him harshly. "Not Hopps; you."

"Why me?" Nick's reply was instantaneous. "Judy fills out reports so much better—" Again his superior cut him off, this time with a snort of hot breath, and the fox's shoulders slumped visibly. "…fine, I'll do the report. But let it be known I am doing this under duress."

"In triplicate." The ghost of a self-satisfied smile hung over Bogo's muzzle as he rather forcefully guided his officers to the door.

Inside, Lionheart was becoming more and more uneasy, for while he knew the police chief would never bring him to any harm, or do anything at all to break the law if he could help it, the idea of being alone with him was…quite disconcerting. Now he was beginning to understand what was happening.

For more reasons than one, he refused to tear his eyes from Manuel's face as the other lion departed; after all they had been through together in such a short time, it was heartwarming and reassuring to know they could start afresh together, could perhaps even become friends of a sort. He didn't know if it had been Delgato's own idea to approach him or if Bogo had urged it—whether to restore departmental discipline and decorum, to help ease the progress of the plea bargain as his trial was soon to begin, or (as he now strongly feared) as a simple excuse for him to accompany the detectives so that he could corner Lionheart where he couldn't get away and no hospital staff would think anything of it. But he did know that the words the younger feline had used had been his, they had come from the heart, and they meant not everything was hopeless, there was still a chance for better things to lie in the future.

So it was only slight exaggeration to say that watching Delgato go was like watching his last friend leave him with his impending executioner. Well…not quite, as the look Judy shot over her shoulder at him was questioning, worried, and encouraging all at once. But in any event, she was leaving too, so the end result was still the same. This was why the Cape buffalo had made these arrangements, why he had bothered to involve himself in what was otherwise a personal, emotional matter. But what did he want, and would he be able to give it to him?

Bogo shut the door behind the others with deceptive softness, as if closing the lid of a carton of eggs…then wheeled back slowly to face him. "I don't imagine I have to explain to you why I'm here."

Lionheart closed his eyes for a few moments, shook his head. Glancing aside at his still sleeping lover, he spoke softly. "Just get it over with, Arthur."
The buffalo narrowed his eyes and snorted. "So now we're back to first-name basis, hm? Bit presumptuous, don't you think?" As the lion looked at him pointedly, but he was quite certain also projecting the real pain he was feeling, Bogo sighed and moved over to the bed, half-seating himself on the foot of it. It was nowhere near as informal or amicable as if he had sat in the bedside chair, particularly with the way he crossed his arms severely over his chest, but it still displayed a far greater willingness to come down to Lionheart's level than he had expected.

"Fine. I don't have time to mollycoddle you, and that isn't my way in any case. It's quite clear now just what you were hiding, why there was all the secrecy, and what your intentions were." He too flicked his gaze to Bucky. "So I understand now what was at stake, where you were coming from. But, that doesn't alter one jot any of the things you did. You lied to me, you used me, and worst of all, you didn't trust me."

He extended a finger to point accusingly. "One phone call, Leodore. That's all it would have taken. I thought we understood each other. I thought you knew me, what I would do and what I wouldn't. If it was the whole predator and prey madness, I thought you knew by now that what you used to eat doesn't mean a damned thing to me—it's what's in your heart that matters. As a very well-known predator-rights activist once said, that you be judged not by the shape of your teeth, but by the content of your character! And if it was just whom you chose to romance or take to bed—could you really look at Clawhauser, and the respect I have for him, and think I would turn on you for that?"

The bovine was shaking with the force of his convictions and the power of his emotions…and staring at the police chief, Leodore could only flatten his ears back to his skull, shrink down in his hospital gown, and grip his blanket as if it were the only thing keeping him from sinking through the floor. "I…I'm sorry, Bogo. I really should have thought, have realized…" Trying to regain control over his stammering voice, he went on defensively, with a trace of spite. "It's just…I was scared, dammit. But I don't suppose you'd understand that."

Once again he'd had a major lapse in judgment—the fire that suddenly burned in the herbivore's eyes, the way his nostrils flared, how his teeth gritted, were all so hostile and intense that he instinctively pulled back against the headboard. "I'm doing my bloody well best to take that the way you meant it, since I know you couldn't have possibly forgotten what my line of work entails on a daily basis. I've lost more good mammals than I can count on raids and stakeouts. I've had to wait out hostage situations where there was only a heartbeat between life and death, a bullet or a bomb. I've been in major firefights. I've faced down mobsters and worked the scene after a serial killer struck. I've had to talk down the suicidal and kill to save the lives of my officers or civilians. I've met death time and again. You'd better believe I know about fear."

Very slowly, he inhaled deeply…held it…and then let it out, along with much of his anger. Jaw clenched and shoulders tight, he then gave Leodore a look the lion had never seen from him before—one of deep sympathy. "So…I do know what you were talking about. I know what you were afraid of. I've seen it from plenty of mammals who damn well should have known better. And I'm
sorry you had to face that. I just wish you'd realized the truth, what would have happened if you'd come to me. I know it's partly my own fault, driving others away by being such a jaded grouch…but if you'd come to me, I'd have helped you out right then and there. So much of this mess could've been avoided, if you'd just trusted me. Like you used to."

For a long time the hospital room was silent, again save for the sound of the heart monitors and other equipment, and the occasional announcement from the intercom out in the hallway, as Lionheart tried to reconcile everything he'd just heard with what he knew—or thought he'd known—about Bogo. To square such nakedly honest words with how reticent, cynical, and hard-nosed the Cape buffalo had always been before, and how startlingly they dovetailed with his own thoughts during Swinton's visit a few days ago. As he did so, he felt his heart sink for a whole new reason…for he finally realized how wrong he'd truly been about the other mammal.

Still softly, but now due to regret and sorrow rather than just to keep from awakening Bucky, he said, "You're right. And I'm sorry, Arthur. If there was any way I could take it all back, I would. I should've trusted you…and I would have, if I'd had more time to think, if I hadn't been under so much pressure to stop that savage plague, and save the one I love. You know what they say, 'heavy is the head that wears the crown.' And I may not actually have been a king, but…"

Even as a small smile was turning up the corners of his mouth and tinging his voice with amusement, he could see the same expression on Bogo's muzzle. "No need to explain. I've felt that burden of authority just as much as you have." Uncrossing his arms, he sighed once more. "Apology accepted…Leodore. What's done is done. Before we can move on, though, I do have one question for you that's been nagging at me for a while now."

The former mayor frowned a bit, even as he felt a great deal of that guilty weight leaving his shoulders. "Only one?" he asked, mildly bemused.

"The rest I can get from Wilde's report," Bogo retorted wryly.

Lionheart chuckled. "All right. Ask."

The look on the other's face was genuinely perplexed. "I get why you waited to reveal anything about Buckley's situation until after we caught Bellwether and there was a cure. Hopps made it clear in her report, wasn't much point in doing anything until the Night Howler could be undone and the one using it couldn't just try again, and worse. But…after that, why did you wait so long before you finally started trying to get someone at ZPD to listen to you?"

So that was it. The final piece…the one he could not reveal unless everything about Bucky were
known, the one he had refused to even think about in any case because of how it underlined his true ignominy. His stupidity. His pathetic naivete. But there was no more reason now to hold it back, everything else was known, and at this point he didn't see how he could appear any lower or more worthy of ridicule. Besides, he owed Bogo this at least.

Shaking his maned head, Lionheart spread his paws somewhat helplessly. "Because…until it was almost too late, I didn't even know I needed to intervene. Because until nearly the last moment, I didn't even realize Bucky hadn't been saved too."

"What? But how—?"

"Let me finish." His words came in a rush, even as they also came with some pain. "Dr. Honey Badger was the key. Even isolated as she was out at Cliffside, I was certain she would have access to the news, would keep close watch on developments so she would know when the terror was past, and hopefully a cure had been found. And once she knew, then for the sake of her patient's health, she would contact the authorities…break her silence of secrecy, let you know there was one more victim, and then one way or another you would find a way through the laboratory door and get Bucky to a hospital. She never came to see me, whether to tell me of this, to ask my permission to tell, to seek my aid in getting past the voiceprint, or anything—but I hadn't expected her to. How could she approach me, speak of any of these things, when the guards could have overheard or our conversations would have been recorded on the security cameras?" He shook his head sadly, his voice becoming choked up in his throat.

"Bucky didn't come to see me either…I really should have been suspicious, but I assumed that was either because of…how things ended between us, just before he was shot, or because he had found out just what all I had done, every illegal action I had taken, while he was lost to the world." Leodore bit his lip as those awful feelings came back to him: not only how their final conversation at The Dunes had continually played again and again in his beleaguered mind, but how he had been seized with fear and guilt at just what the deer would think, once he knew how far the lion had fallen from grace for the sake of his pride and his own selfish goals.

"After a couple of months of nothing from either of them, though, I started to worry. Prior to then I had been avoiding reading the papers or receiving any news at all…I'm sure you can imagine why. Because I knew just what a colossal fool I'd been, and I couldn't stand to see every damn hit piece…all the salacious details of the scandal…every last negative story that dragged my name through the mud, pounding in just how much I had ruined my life.

"To put it quite simply, I was depressed and wanted nothing to do with the outside world if I could help it. I figured it was best, and my only real option, to simply stay silent, accept my punishment, do my time, and then if anything was still left to me at that point, go quietly into retirement since nobody cared anymore about a tarnished mammal who had failed them." As Bogo nodded glumly, he finally uttered the last words, slowly and woodenly.
"But once I finally pulled myself together again, and brought myself to check out the news…I discovered that not only was Madge mentioned nowhere in connection to the Night Howler plot anymore, but nothing about Bucky was being reported in the press either. If the District Attorney had suddenly reappeared, with a story of how he too had been targeted by the Assistant Mayor, it would have made major headlines. But there was nothing…no one even seemed to realize he was missing. I realized that even if I was right about how Bucky now felt about me, him simply cutting off all contact like that was not at all like him—he'd want to have it out, end things face-to-face.

"I knew then that something had gone very wrong…that my false tale of him going on vacation was still all that anyone knew. So, I decided to come clean, or as much as I could to get Bucky released and cured without revealing what all had happened. What he truly was to me." He snorted derisively. "And that worked out so well, didn't it? I went right from one kind of foolishness to another, and another."

Bogo stared back at him, disbelief turning to disgust in his dark eyes, then frustration, and finally sardonic acceptance. "Bloody hell. A perfect storm," he muttered. "Everything that could go wrong, did. First you were far too careful and calculating, then you rushed ahead without thinking. It all makes too much damned sense." He smirked lopsidedly. "If it's any consolation, Leodore, all that proves is that you aren't cut out to be a successful criminal."

As the feline struggled not to dissolve into agitated laughter—or else sobs, he wasn't sure which—the Cape buffalo stood up, shook his head heavily, and moved up beside him so he could rest his hoof on Lionheart's shoulder. The reassuring gesture was as unusual as the warmth in his eyes, but both were clearly quite genuine. Once again, he had to reassess as Bogo surprised him.

"Well, that's all in the past now. You should have trusted me—but you are now. You made mistakes…but you've been working to make up for them over the last several days. That's why I brought Delgato here, so everything could be resolved. No more leftover baggage, everyone on the same page and looking forward instead of back. And since you've finally been fully honest with me…” He paused, squeezed his hoof, and ended with unwavering firmness. "I'm giving permission for him, Hopps and Wilde, anyone else who wants to put in a good word for you, to become part of your plea bargain. Offer whatever they think can help, put your actions in context, when you go before the judge. I just might say a few things myself."

With one last pat, Bogo turned away and strode back to the door. As Lionheart gazed after him in stunned wonder, chest tight as his emotions careened from self-loathing and worry to gratitude and desperate hope, the police chief glanced back over his shoulder—and now he seemed back to his old self, glaring sternly. "That's all you're getting, however. And no matter how things go, I fully expect you to accept the verdict and take your punishment." Squaring his shoulders, he growled, "Now I'd better make sure that rabbit hasn't tried writing up every health and labor violation in the place. As for you? Get some rest, too. You'll need it."
After the buffalo had left, Lionheart stared at the door for some time, his mind in a whirl—still not certain what had happened and what it meant, if he could accept that in his own way, Bogo had given him support, understanding, and forgiveness. The world had turned upside down yet again... Then he heard a soft grunt, the creak of bedsprings, and a clearing throat before another voice spoke, low and insistent. "He's right, you know. About a lot of things."

Something in that tone made him turn and look, a new dread rising up within him. Bucky's dark eyes were open, fixed unerringly on him, and despite the fact he still lay supine in bed, there was a definite strength and stone-like steadiness in them that had ice forming in the pit of his stomach.

"Leodore…it seems you and I need to have a very long talk."

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist using the reporters from the Pred Scare as they were both so memorable, the situation is still part of the same case, and it was the best way to cover all the information that needed dumping while also letting the rest of the city in on what was happening. I used Moosebridge rather than one of the others because, of course, he's the one I saw since I'm in the US, and also because him being a horned prey just worked too well with Bucky and the overall story.

As far as shout-outs go: the full names I've given to Doug's co-conspirators, Woolter Whitewool and Jesse Pinkram, are of course references to characters from Breaking Bad. I've never seen the show itself (nor do I really care to), but once I learned online that Doug and his little lab for making a blue-colored, mind-altering drug were a reference to the show, I felt I needed to carry the shout-out to its logical conclusion. :P The outfit I put Swinton in during her visit is a shout-out to Rosita from Sing; the two movies were already dueling in some manners, and many have compared them, favorably and otherwise, but since I loved them both I wanted to do a cute nod. And of course I loved getting to rework a famous Martin Luther King, Jr. quote to fit into the Zootopia world.

For other fanfics, I need to note first of all that the Assistant DA Bucky mentions, Russell Burnram, is a reference to my dear friend and fellow writer Luna Goldsun and her wonderful Zootopia fic, "Wilde Card." (As she explained, the name is a reference to Frederick Russell Burnham, conservationist and "Father of American Scouting.") Needless to say everything I've said about him here, particularly his defense of predators against the prejudiced nature of the Zootopian justice system, is true to how Luna depicted him as an Atticus-Finch-type figure, and is the reason I loved the character enough to include him. While he's gotten an upgrade here from defense attorney to Assistant DA, that's only appropriate since near the end of her story, he actually won the election to become DA. Whether that will happen to him here as well remains to be seen. ;)

And in my continued inclusion of numerous references to my friend 6wingdragon's
"Neverwere Moments" universe: the nurse who gave the spongebath to Bucky was of course Lanny Wild again (classic source of comedy, that); Bogo wanting a report in triplicate from Nick is something which occurred as well near the end of "Brave"; and Dr. Clea and her Pred Therapy have reappeared, as well as her connection to Hexward (though reworked a fair amount). For anyone wondering why I spent so much time covering this for something that both never occurs onscreen in my story and is going to be addressed as well by 6wingdragon, two reasons—first, because I had already brought it up before when Swinton went to see Clawhauser, so I didn't want to leave that plot point hanging; and second, because I wanted to give you a chance to see more of Swinton acting as a heroic cop rather than a seeming antagonist, and get to know more of Bucky's personality, particularly in the present.

Lastly, I feel I should address Bogo's question to Lionheart as to why he didn't come forward sooner about Bucky, and what his answer actually was. I'm sure to some of you this comes off as a Retcon (though I prefer to think of it as an Author's Saving Throw), but I hope I did provide a good enough reason to explain it: that as long as Leodore was trying to keep his true relationship with Bucky a secret, he couldn't admit why the deer might not want to come visit him in prison, even to himself; that once he did come out of his depression and realized it, he couldn't tell anyone for the same reason; and that his failure to realize Bucky wouldn't just refuse to ever see him again had meant he was still in need of the cure, and he'd wasted all that time he could have been getting him help, and thus he felt so stupid and ashamed he couldn't admit it until someone like Bogo browbeat it out of him. It may not make complete sense or may seem too convoluted, but what I was trying to establish is that Leodore was a very confused, desperate, and paranoid cat who acted way too impulsively and without thought...and understanding this, the bad things that happened because of it, and trying to make up for them, is why and how he needs some sort of redemption. Whether I succeeded in this is up to you.

As to how Bucky will react to all of this...you'll just have to wait and see.
Unfortunately, it actually took several more days before that talk could be completed, even though it began almost the moment the last syllable had left Bucky's lips and Leodore had been unable to tear his gaze away from those hurt, accusing eyes. As much as the deer insisted on it, and the lion knew he could no longer evade the coal-raking he would be rightfully enduring, the simple fact was, both of them were still recovering. There had been tests the doctors periodically carried out, changes of dressings and bandages, discussions of the physical therapy Bucky would need to undergo—without the adrenaline rush and accompanying aggression the Night Howler had induced, the deer now had the expected weakness that came from long confinement and forced intravenous survival—administering of medicines, and more.

And there had been continued streams of visitors whenever time and energy permitted, ranging from Lionheart's family, Judy and Nick, and even surprise drop-ins by Gazelle and the uninjured Asmita Brothers (to apologize for having to take him down so violently, and offer him free tickets to their next concert), to Swinton showing up with Bucky's Rolodex and Burram appearing for signatures and depositions, since it turned out he would be prosecuting Cyrus's case as well. (The first time had
led to a brief moment of panic from Lionheart, who had never met the ram, since seeing the stern, professionally-suited bighorn had instantly given him flashbacks to the mobster himself. Thankfully a sympathetic Bucky had helped calm him down, and he'd discovered the Assistant DA had more integrity and honor than Bellwether had in one hoof shaving.)

In between all of that, however, the entire tale of what had taken place, both six months ago and over the last few days, was related. Bucky had heard some of it from the news, of course, and still more had been revealed or at least implied by the things all of their ZPD visitors had said, but the deer had wanted to hear it all anyway, every detail from start to finish and placed in its proper context. And however long that took, no matter how shameful, terrifying, or painful it was to relive those events and the decisions that had led to them, Leodore was determined to do as his lover asked. So...he held nothing back.

What made the whole situation even more uncomfortable was that for the most part, the deer seemed content—or perhaps more accurately, determined—to display no reactions, particularly emotional ones, to anything he said until the story was finished. Whether he simply wanted to have the entire thing laid out before him before he rendered judgment or didn't trust himself not to derail matters and keep them bogged down in arguments and other conflict-laden commentary, the end result was rather unnerving.

Not that Bucky never said a word at all, whether to ask for clarification or to make the occasional observation, and he did have definitely strong reactions to certain revelations—that Bellwether had been the mastermind, for starters, and what precisely she'd been willing to do to achieve and retain power. The state the city had fallen into because of her machinations had alternately saddened and horrified him; how close so many, including Nick and Judy, had come to death infuriated him; and knowing that the ewe's equally corrupt, vengeful, and prejudiced mafia brother had intended to release him on all those innocents at Gazelle's concert had made the cervine look absolutely sick to his stomach.

And when the condition the missing mammals had fallen into was described to him, his ashen-faced lover had actually stiffened before stating that *Midnicampum holicithias* had actually been among the many plants which Hexward's botanical division had studied in the past…but in the end it had been deemed too unpredictable, with too many dangerous hallucinogenic side-effects, and all research on the matter had ceased, all records and results carefully sealed from prying eyes.

Lionheart had winced at hearing that. Keeping Night Howler away from even more unscrupulous rival companies, as well as preventing recreational use among the public, was critical. *But if we could only have known of this plant's existence, and what it could do, far sooner, imagine what could have occurred, how much differently things would have turned out...?* Targeting Bucky had been a brilliant move on Dawn's part, in more ways than any of them—perhaps even the sheep herself—had known.
Aside from all of this, however, his dearest friend had remained silent, still, expressionless, and pensive…even woodenly so, at times. It had made the lion more and more unsettled, bringing sweat to his brow, churning in his gut until he lost most of his appetite, and keeping his voice low and uneven. It certainly made it so that he had to avert his eyes from Bucky far more than he would wish. By the time he was nearing the end of his tale, it had gotten to the point he wished he could shake Bucky, even shout and scream at him. Say something, anything! Even if it was what he expected in response to the many foolish, selfish things he had done, it would have to be better than this.

Finally, however…in the late morning, after another brief visit from Judy and Nick before the two junior police officers went to 'rustle up some grub' in the hospital cafeteria…finally, he came to the end of the story. And then he stared at the other bed, across the silent room, where Bucky was now the one to keep his gaze averted, looking down across his sheets toward the wall…and waited. Waited. How many minutes passed, he had no idea, he only knew it felt like forever, as if time had utterly stopped, and the empty quiet just made him more and more distressed, awkward, and afraid the longer it stayed unbroken. At last he couldn't take it anymore. "Well?"

The cervine sighed heavily, then at last turned his head to look at him, and even if it was sidelong and still didn't quite meet his eyes, there was a small portion of sardonic wryness in his tone to briefly offer hope. "You do understand, of course, that after a tale that long, with that many unbelievable shocks, it's going to take some time to process it all. To wit, it's a lot to take in and deal with."

It was on the tip of Leodore's tongue to retort with Try living it!...except he knew that even though this was quite accurate and true, it was grossly unfair to compare his experiences with what Bucky had gone through, trapped for so long in the confines of his own savagely maddened mind while also held within Cliffside and the clutches of his kidnappers alike. Not to mention it would be absolutely the wrong thing to say to someone he was trying to sway to his side. Someone he deeply loved.

Instead he came up with something which, even if it was lame and out-of-place, would at least supply a flash of humor to break the ice, get the conversation moving again. "Yes, I know. Now that word has leaked out of what happened, what I almost did this time, it's going to be murder on my insurance premiums."

The deer blinked several times, then shook his head and let out a soft, bemused laugh. "Droll as ever, Leo. Thank you for that. But need I remind you, after what you've just told me, it rather sounds like I'll need to worry about the same thing."

Leodore frowned a bit. Although it had only been a joke, the fact was that even with the truth about the savage plague revealed, many insurance companies in Zootopia had still unfairly raised their rates for their predatory customers; it had long been established, even with centuries of civilization behind them, that the prey of Zootopia required extra provisions to reassure themselves of their safety. Forget what drivers dealing with the joys of traffic contend with—there's a reason 'pred rage' is still bandied about as a legitimate thing.
Of course size difference between species always had to be taken into account, and the larger prey could be not only dangerous, but also violent and belligerent. But that hadn't stopped predators from being singled out, deemed a "high-risk pool" the way young drivers were, charged an arm and a leg for the sake of the mammals who, rightly or wrongly, felt in fear of their lives. After what had been filmed live in Animalia and broadcast across the city, the former mayor would be lucky if astronomical pred insurance rates were all he suffered.

Yet his beloved had actually made a good point—the same thing had been witnessed and reported about him, a prey. Might this mean there would at last be an end to this antiquated vestige of prejudice and elitism, and mammals in Zootopia would no longer be punished for the "pre-existing condition" of being a predator, descended from meat-eaters and killers? Would something else good have come of all this? Or, more likely, would citizens like rhinos, elephants, bulls and moose, elk and stags and other horned mammals, be added to the high-risk pools? Nothing equalizes more than the desire to make others pay for your own misfortune.

Sighing at how even a bureaucratic regulation could be turned from a positive chance to teach life lessons into another thing to feel cynically morose about, Leodore shook his head. He was letting himself get distracted from what was far more important, even if he did have very good reason to be wary of it, or its outcome. After a considered pause during which the lion gathered his thoughts again, he was able to speak with moderation, rather than the resentment he'd originally felt. "You could be right. But that isn't what we need to talk about, and you know it. And as much as there is to address, I don't think it requires much insight to guess at least some of what you're thinking. I'm certain 'I told you so' is near the top of your list."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Why would you think that?"

Lionheart stared at him flatly for a few moments, then said wearily, "Why do you think? Bellwether. You made it quite clear to me that I not only needed to begin treating her better, but to actually let her know how I truly felt about her. I did neither. There always seemed to be something else that was more pressing, or it slipped my mind, or any of half-a-dozen other pathetic excuses. And what was the result? This. Her plot, her wanting to discredit and ruin me, everything." He felt himself getting more incensed and agitated, and despite the twinges of pain in his abdomen, he couldn't keep his voice down.

"It's just another example—probably the biggest one of all!—of how what I've done has almost single-handedly brought down all the good I've done, or have been working for. You know it, and I know it. What have we always talked about since we were kids together, when we were in college together…why did we run for office in the first place?" He shook his head violently.

"I wanted to help mammals, Bucky! I wanted to make Zootopia a better place, a place for all
mammals to come together, where anyone could be anything, and no one had to live in fear or inferiority or poverty. And I've failed the city, I've failed all those mammals, I've failed her. I failed everyone she hurt too, or who listened to her because they felt the same as she did, because they could only see the bad and not the good...because I just gave them all the more reason to do so!" His voice cracked, and he had to struggle to get out the next words as his chest heaved and his breath came more raggedly. "Why? Because I convinced myself Zootopia was as good as it seemed, but it was all a lie. Because I wasn't as good as I seemed either...as I thought I was."

Fighting back tears yet again, he couldn't bring himself to look at his lover...he didn't know what he would see, an expression of disgust and anger at hearing the lion run himself down so harshly or one of cold rebuke as he agreed with every single word Lionheart had said. And he somehow didn't know which of these would be worse. He could only look down at his paws, remembering disconnected flashes of nightmarish memories...of himself savagely clawing and tearing at Delgato and the tiger dancers, as the Night Howler revealed the darkness that lay inside him, too...while he listened to the heart monitor beeping somewhat stridently with his elevated blood pressure, and waited for whatever would come.

After another long, silent moment, he heard a slow, shuddering sigh, and then the deer spoke quietly. "Whatever else can be said...and you must believe me on this...that is not your fault, Leo." Looking up at last, miserable but with another small spark of relief, he saw his dearest friend looking back at him with earnestness and concern.

"The things you said and the way you treated Dawn didn't help, no, in fact they surely contributed to her choices. She certainly wouldn't have had it in for you so personally if not for that, I don't think, and either way it likely cemented in her mind that her plan was the only way for prey to excel, that her beliefs about predators were right. But." Bucky set his jaw as his voice became firmer, more confident and strong.

"You had no way of knowing what truly lay in her heart. As much as I was worried about your attitude toward her, I never would have guessed she harbored such deep-seated hatred and contempt, let alone that she would carry out such a vile scheme to punish the predators that were her targets. The things she did, or wanted to do, were unconscionable—who could ever imagine such views in modern times? And who knows how much farther she might have gone, if there had been no one to stop her, if she believed it both necessary and justified?" Horror tightened his features, highlighting the bones in his still rather gaunt face.

"All of this tells me, however, that there was far more to Dawn Bellwether than either of us knew. None of this could be explained simply by your being a bad boss to her. Clearly something else made her the way she was, pushed her into such a twisted mindset, and if you were the proverbial straw that broke her back, that does not make you responsible for her crimes. Could you perhaps have helped her, brought her back from that brink, if you'd done better by her? Possibly...but I think it would have taken more than that. We can only hope her time in prison will help her think...and help her change."
He paused, then said slowly, with conviction, "Either way…you did not make her what she was. If you could not see her flaws…any more than you could your own…that only makes you as fallible as the next mammal. Hardly a reason you should toss aside any hope for betterment or progress. The dream is still good, even if the dreamer cannot achieve it—at least not alone, and you have never been that, whatever you might think." Now Bucky was smiling, still tinged with a bit of melancholy but otherwise quite determined.

"And Zootopia has survived, and can rise higher, greater, and more united than ever, because of the actions of Officer Hopps and all those who assisted her. She, in case you have forgotten, is something you undeniably did right. So I refuse to believe that there is no light ahead for us…and neither should you. Whatever else you have done, you did not destroy that. We Zootopians may have been knocked down, but we will always, always get up to fight together again."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Lionheart was beaming with pride…recalling that while his lover had always been eloquent, this sort of shining idealism and sincere optimism had usually been the feline’s stock-in-trade. While Bucky had helped write a number of his speeches, whether during their campaigns or after he became mayor, ones of this nature had always been left to him to compose—they certainly matched his stirring charisma more than the deer’s pragmatic realism. Now he was wondering if he had misjudged what truly lay in the other’s heart…or if perhaps some of the viewpoint which had promoted this rousing speech had rubbed off from him.

Swallowing hard, the Barbary blinked away his tears, the rest of him only able to gaze at Bucky with a rasping breath and his heart thudding powerfully as he contemplated what the other had said—and what he seemed to be saying. "Thank you," he whispered in a rumble. "Even after all this time…after all this…I can still trust you to find a way to pick me up and inspire me." He sighed, then ventured, "So…does that mean…that you forgive me?"

For a long, pregnant moment, the deer gazed at him solemnly, nothing about his eyes or countenance revealing what he was thinking. Then he looked away. "No."

Leodore gasped, all of his hope, self-esteem, and goodwill evaporating as his heart plummeted somewhere far down in his bowels. It wasn’t just the answer itself, it was how simple and matter-of-fact it was—not spoken in ire or hate, but with a sad, dull leadenness.

He had only managed to splutter a few incoherent syllables before Bucky spoke again…and this time he sounded pained and uncertain. "At least…not yet. Maybe? I don’t know." He hissed softly between his teeth. "It’s complicated."

Finally he managed to say something, even if it made him cringe to hear how much his voice
sounded like a whimper. "But...why? I mean..." He knew what all he had done of course, knew how wrong he had been in so many ways. Yet he had thought, had believed more than anything, that once it was all laid out before him, his lover would understand.

At last Bucky looked at him again, with such a mournful cast to his tapered muzzle and large liquid eyes that Lionheart felt almost completely undone—he couldn't tell if that was due to the awful situation and what he had done to create it, or if it was at something the deer now saw as long lost, forever beyond his reach. "Do I truly have to spell it out for you, Leo?"

"Yes!" It came out sharper than he'd intended, and he quickly recoiled a bit. "That is...I know I broke or circumvented or ignored so many laws, crossed too many lines, didn't care what I had to do if it would keep the city safe and put a stop to the savage plague..."

"Indeed you did." The cervine's voice was mild, yet still somehow possessed an underlying edge. "The DA's office is probably throwing the book at you. They should be—and they would be even if I were still in charge there."

Lionheart flinched, even though he would expect nothing less from such a principled and lawful mammal, and he deserved it. "They are, and you're absolutely right. I'm not above the law, and I know it. I've hurt the city and everyone in it, everything we've built and accomplished—"

"Yes, why should that bother me, I wonder?" Bucky's stilted sarcasm cut though him like a knife.

"—and you have no idea how ashamed of myself that makes me!" Snapping his jaw shut, he noticed the deer's raised, skeptical eyebrow, and though he was tempted to look away again, he did not...only staring at him challengingly. "I've let you down, the citizens of Zootopia, and most of all myself...but even though I know it was wrong, and I'd go back and change it all if I could, you have to know it was for you. I wanted to help the city and all of its predators, I wanted to keep myself and my career out of the line of fire—but the beginning of it all, and the end of it as well, was you. Everything was to protect and save you!" He jutted his chin out. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

Bucky's stoic calm and cool demeanor cracked and faltered, his expression softening as yet another hurt appeared in those dark eyes, along with undeniable guilt. "Of course it does, Leo. It means everything. I know you've been through hell and back, just as I have, and don't think I don't appreciate the sacrifices you've made. In many ways you've been a damn, blasted fool...but...thank you, for trying so hard to save me. I know it can't have been easy, and...I'm sorry that not only did you suffer through that horrid ordeal on my account, but that you did it alone..."

Now he was the one who was crying, and Lionheart knew that despite the rejection of a few
moments ago, if they were out of bed they'd be embracing now, if the deer had anything to say about it. At the moment, despite that upwelling of empathy, the lion wasn't as sanguine.

It took some time for his lover to wipe his eyes and compose himself again, and even then he seemed to still be floundering. He gestured with his hooves, as if trying to grasp at something no one could touch. "All that being said, though, there's more to this than you're seeing. It's just that…" He bit his lip and let his shoulders slump, much of his sternness gone now, replaced by confusion.

The lion leaned back against his pillows, crossed his arms slowly and carefully. "What? Is it that you don't understand why I did it? What I was afraid would happen if the truth about you and those other missing mammals came out too soon?"

"No," the stag said slowly, thoughtfully. "You were quite right, without answers it looked very bad indeed, and everyone was far too willing to jump to conclusions that upheld their own fears and biases." Lionheart wasn't certain if the deliberate pace of his words was because he was reluctant to acknowledge this, or because he was being his usual careful, methodical self—but he thought it was the latter, as he worked to gather his wits and thoughts back about him.

"Or," the former mayor continued after a suitable pause, "is it that you don't realize why I wanted what we are to each other to stay private? What I was afraid would happen if it didn't, because it came out during Bogo's search and questioning?"

For a deeply distressing moment, he felt a vicious stab at the possibility Bucky was going to object to his use of the present tense regarding their relationship. But then instead the deer's brow furrowed, and an introspective look appeared in his eyes, as if he were contemplating something which had escaped him before. "No, I do."

Leodore nodded slowly, then sighed. "You and I know both know what I'm referring to. We don't even have to think for more than a moment before we remember the number of bullies we encountered throughout our school days, and how they treated anyone they even thought might be a 'fag'. Or the actual beatings…and worse…that happened to those that were outed, or who actually dared to admit the truth and try to live an open life as who they were. And that the law rarely if ever properly prosecuted those cases. It was a different time then. The less said about the old Zootopian laws of those days—rarely enforced, but held sacrosanct by certain extremely traditional segments of our society—the better."

The cervine looked away again, but this time he could tell it had nothing to do with anything the lion had done or his feelings about it. "Yes. I was always galvanized by such things, determined to make the world a better place, to fight back against hate and intolerance, so that every mammal could have truly equal opportunities. I knew you wanted those things too, wanted to work hard at my side to achieve them…I also knew what we were facing frightened you, if you let yourself think about it too
long." He paused, feeling his way toward a conclusion. "I just had no idea how afraid you were."

Once he would have bristled at hearing that—for all the more reason because it was true—but now he could only knit his pawfingers together and gaze across the hospital room sorrowfully. "Not in the way you mean. Knowing what would be arrayed against us, that just made me more committed than ever to our cause. Every bigoted, narrow-minded mammal we'd be standing in the way of, taking out of power, so their outdated beliefs could be shoved in the dustbin of history where they belong? I was looking forward to that, I wanted them to bring it on and live to regret it!" He exposed his gleaming fangs in a rather feral, nasty grin…but then it faded.

"No…it was you I was worried about. Well, both of us, but mostly you. There were too many terrible things that could happen to us if the truth came out, I thought. Losing our jobs, our standing, and our public support would have just been the start. I couldn't stand the thought of you having to face all that. They'd be vicious…cruel. I couldn't stand you suffering that. And worst of all…I was afraid they might take you away from me. One way or another."

Bucky inhaled sharply, then let out a low groan, as if he'd taken an elbow to the stomach. "There are still those who hate us for what we are; it may be there always will be. And some who even would see us killed, if they could. But we've changed so much in this city for the better. We've eliminated most of those old laws, swayed hearts and minds, brought true progress. And there are far less of that sort of mammal now than there were when we were growing up, Leo."

"I know. But even one is too many. And all it takes is one to take you away from me forever." Yet again he felt the tears welling up, and had to fight to keep his voice steady. "That's why I did what I did, when you get right down to it at the core. I'd do anything to keep you away from all that. I had to protect you…to save you from that as much as from Cyrus or the Night Howler."

His partner turned to look back at him at last, and although his expression was inscrutable, there was a yearning and sympathy in his eyes that made his throat tighten and his heart pound anew. This was quite at odds, however, with what he said next. "I do understand. But you see…that, too, is just another part of the problem."

Lionheart was still staring at him in consternation when they were interrupted by a sudden knock at the door, heralding a nurse entering to bring them their lunch—not the lion who had visited them before, whose nametag he had finally managed to see was marked "L. Wild", but all things considered that was probably for the best. It certainly made it much easier for him to focus his racing thoughts on trying to decipher what in the world Bucky had meant by that cryptic response.

Yet by the time they had both finished eating and set aside their trays, for the life of him the Barbary still had not been able to figure it out. Why, after he had confessed his secret fears and worries, after explaining just what awful fate he had been trying to prevent, had the deer not changed his tune?
Why had he said, after learning everything which had occurred had been for his sake, to keep him safe and ensure they never be pulled apart, that this very thing was part of why he could not bring himself to forgive?

After the nurse had returned, taken away their trays, and closed the door carefully behind her, Bucky cleared his throat, looked pointedly at him, and then started to speak again before he could even begin to form the question. "I know you must be very confused, Leo. That you genuinely don't see the mistakes you made…which is why I'm not as angry at you as you think I am, or perhaps as I should be. Let me explain." Once again, he gave the lion that strange, upsetting, conflicted look, the one that mixed the love and tenderness he had always cherished with this new, distant sadness. His voice was clearer now, however, and he seemed on much firmer ground than he had been a short time ago.

"Like so many things you've done…especially what you've told me about from these past six months…your heart is in the right place, you had only the best of intentions. I know you were acting out of love, that you only wished to keep from losing me in any sense of the word. I am deeply touched by that, Leo, and it means more to me than I can ever say." He paused, rested his gaze on his hooves—which had briefly clutched at the sheets covering him before relaxing again—and then stared at him with an unwavering burden of truth in his eyes.

"But where you went wrong, my friend, is in not realizing that in giving me safety, shielding me from hatred and prejudice and harm, ensuring no one knew the truth about us so that you could secretly get me the help I needed…in all of this, you were also taking away something precious."

The former mayor blinked, frowning, even as an inkling started to whisper in the back of his mind…a sense of something he had missed, nebulous but looming with ever greater portent and importance until it cast its great, impenetrable shadow over his heart and everything good he had tried to do. "What…what are you…?"

Bucky pressed his mouth closed, disapproving and dejected. "You didn't stop to think—even once—about what I wanted, what I would choose if I were awake and aware, did you?"

Leodore's stomach twisted anew as his uneasiness turned to shock, then shame. "I…no, of course not! How could you think—"

Shaking his antlered head slowly, the deer looked for all the world as if he were a judge seated upon his bench. "I hate to say it, but easily. What you were trying to do…it was a good thing, a noble thing, being so determined to protect me, protect us. But as laudable as it is on the surface, underneath all of that lies something inescapable. You took my choices away, Leo. You allowed me no input, no agency at all. And yes, I know you couldn't very well ask me while that damned flower had me dead to the world…but you had to know what I would say if you could have."
"Yet you didn't take any of that into account in your actions. And what about before that, when you wouldn't accept my marriage proposal? The reasons you said no then...the reasons you were too afraid to commit...are the same reasons you were so desperate to keep anyone from finding out what we were to each other."

He wanted to deny it. He wanted to cry out against it with every fiber of his being. He wanted to insist that it was simply about protecting Zootopia, keeping prey from turning on predator until the source of the terrifying savagery could be identified and stopped. But he knew Bucky was right—he'd even admitted it to himself before, while creeping through the backstage of the Water Hole. He just hadn't followed it through to its selfish conclusion.

As much as he'd wanted to restore his beloved to himself, he'd twisted himself into a moral Gore-dian knot trying to justify all the broken laws and unethical means he'd used to achieve his ends. And not only were those means ones he'd known Bucky would never approve of, ones that were not true to the goodness, honesty, and idealism he'd striven so long to cultivate inside himself...they'd stemmed from fear.

Not just fear of the Night Howler, or of what might happen to the city and its mammals, but of what would happen to both of them if their love for each other were revealed in the process...and he'd been so determined to make sure it wasn't, he didn't even consider—hadn't let himself consider—what Bucky would think, or that he should have any independence at all.

Bucky regarded him carefully, knowingly—he'd always been able to read so much of the lion's inner thoughts from his face, the same trait that made him such a phenomenal prosecutor in court. "Yes. You see it now. Whether it was us openly becoming a couple, or anyone finding out what we meant to each other during the ensuing investigation...you were afraid of the repercussions. As you said, our families, the public, our jobs, the blandishments of ignorance and bigotry, all of this and more could have been at stake.

"You were right, of course. They might well have hated us, made our lives a living hell. Even threatened our personal safety. But, don't you think I deserve the chance to face that head-on, if such is my wont? To stand up against injustice, to shout down those small-minded cretins who think they can tell us how to live our lives because their own fears compel it of them?" He scoffed, his expression more severe than ever, and Lionheart cringed instinctively. "Damn it, Leo, what do you think I went into law and politics for? After all this time, all we've been through together, did you think I didn't know, or wouldn't be ready to weather any idiocy they tried to throw at us?"

As if he couldn't hold in his emotions any longer, the cervine finally stabbed a hoof accusingly at him, even clenched it visibly. "I do admit that having it all come out in the middle of a terrorist attack, while I was lost in a feral drugged stupor, would not be the best circumstances for such a revelation
about us, to make a massive understatement. But that wouldn't even be an issue if you'd been willing to face all this far sooner, and we'd come out long ago.

"I'm an adult, Leo, I know all the possible ugliness and harsh realities which being such confers. I demand those rights to choose and act, and stand up for what I—we—believe in. No matter how well-founded your worries might be, you choosing for me took all of that away. It was beneath you, and it makes me wonder how much of a cub you might still be."

The deer was trembling now, but from the feelings coursing through him rather than any physical weakness or ill health. It seemed to take every ounce of willpower for him to get out the last of what he had to say, but he did. "So tell me, then, Leodore: why couldn't you let me do that? Did you really think I wouldn't be willing to face down our persecutors? Or that I wouldn't believe in you, fight for us? What weren't you trusting—my dedication, or your own worth?" Falling back against the upper half of his bed, he deliberately turned his face away.

Lionheart stared at him for many long, silent, anguished moments…feeling smaller, more cowardly and worthless indeed, than he had in a very long time. Even the things Delgato had said to him hadn't hurt as much as this. This was just as true, but it came from someone who had known and loved him for well over half his life…someone he had thought was his soulmate.

Yet he realized now if that were true, he should have trusted Bucky, should have believed in him and their love, in the deer's stalwart heart and integrity. He'd been through as much as the lion had, he'd proven to have incredible endurance; if he couldn't handle the worst things that other mammals might subject them to, no one could. And yet…when the test had come of his faith, he had failed it. And that meant there were absolutely no answers he could give to those rhetorical questions, no explanations that would be sufficient…

How long they sat like that, he didn't know. He only knew that once again, tears were streaming down his face, and that despite his bandaged injuries his arms had lifted unerringly to wrap about himself. Despite everything, he felt so alone now. He'd been such a fool to think everything would be fine just because they had rescued Bucky and stopped Cyrus's scheme…how, how could he ever make it up to his lover?

"I'm so sorry," he whispered at last. He bit his lip until he thought it would bleed, then he too looked away.

Muffled, the reply that came was not at all what he expected. "I know you are, Leo. Remember…I said I understood. As hard as it might be to believe, I knew you truly were completely and hopelessly oblivious to what you were doing, and why it was wrong." He knew the other was shaking his head by the sound of his antlers scraping against something—the window frame, maybe. Then there was a tired but gentle chuckle. "Face and brains. No matter what, that never changes for us. You'll always
have the biggest heart of anyone I know, but that's what leads you astray...because you never think things through when you should, as far as you should."

Carefully he lifted his maned head, tentatively looked in Bucky's direction. The deer was still turned toward the wall, but he could see his shoulders shaking—half-sobbing, half-laughing. Even if it wouldn't be welcomed at this moment, Lionheart was now the one to wish more than anything that he could be hugging him, tighter than he ever had in their lives. Not despite that painfully blunt but incisively accurate assessment of him—because of it. "I should know by now," he replied...just as softly, a note of wistful humility in his voice, "that I won't ever learn, or be the best mammal I can be, if you're not beside me, and I'm not listening to you."

"It certainly took you long enough to figure that out. But wisdom comes to us all in the end."

There was just enough sly sarcasm in those words to give him back a trace of hope again. "Am I... going to have to do without you, then? Or not?"

A pause. "I don't know. I..." Bucky shuddered. "You didn't know what your deepest mistakes were. Now you do, and you've admitted it. That's only the first step, but it's a very large one. You said you're sorry, and I believe you. And the reason we're still talking, Leodore, is because despite all of this, I know you love me...and I still love you. How could I not, after how hard you fought to save me?" Even as the Barbary's heart once again lurched in his chest, the stag continued, "Sometimes though, love isn't enough. And even if I can get past all this, because I know why you did it...it doesn't change what you did."

Lionheart sighed, but even as his distress and pain felt like a cold ball of clay rolling around, wet and heavy, inside his stomach, somehow he found this easier to hear and accept. After all, it was no different than the things Delgato and Bogo had said, or that he'd berated himself with. "You're right, again."

"You'd better believe I am." Bucky at last lifted his head and turned to look at him again, and while the hurt and anger were still in his eyes, it was muted now, and he didn't think just by lethargy. "You did the right thing in the end. Thanks to you, Miss Hopps, and the others, you finally put a stop to that deplorable madman's plans, and I have to stress, again, that I am grateful for the rescue and restoration. Everyone seems to be seeing your better nature once more, and I've been reading the mea culpas and olive branch overtures in the papers as much as you have. But none of that makes what you did any less selfish or illegal, and you still need to be held accountable for all of it, one way or another."

He paused, and the scathing look he shot him then made that heat flare in his eyes anew. "Let me put it this way, Leo: Bucky the deer loves you. Buckley Stagmire, the District Attorney, is furious with you."
Again, silence descended. The feline slowly, softly, blew air out of his cheeks. Yes, it still stabbed
deep to hear such a thing, but he more than anyone could understand how much of a divide there
could be between personal and professional feelings, how one could be torn between conflicting
loyalties, the need to be objective and one's deepest emotions. And so…this, oddly enough, was
something he could handle. "And I knew he would be. Very well then. What can I do to make things
right? How can I even begin to earn your forgiveness?"

Bucky looked at him, and if the disgust had faded from his face, if there wasn't ridicule or dismissal
at him even daring to ask such questions, there wasn't much encouragement either. Still, all he did
was sigh, lay his head back into his pillows, and close his eyes. "Again, I don't know. You've
already promised Bogo you'll go through the trial, and accept whatever comes of it. That's all anyone
can expect of you."

Opening his eyes again, he gave him a sidelong, pensive glance. "I suppose we'll just have to see
what your sentence is…how well you take it…and what the city does in response. They're the ones
who felt betrayed by you. Public opinion is what it is, but their goodwill is still critical. I'm the
premier guardian of justice in Zootopia—how can I in good conscience offer you clemency if most
of them still won't do so? It's bad enough that if I weren't still recovering I'd have to recuse myself
from the case. I have to be as impartial as I can be. Let the system do its work, and see how that
influences things."

Lionheart set his jaw at hearing that, a wave of moroseness washing over him. "Well. That doesn't
bode well, does it? If they punish me to the full extent of the law, it won't matter how you feel since
I'll be locked up with the key thrown away for who knows how many years. And if they don't,
there'll be accusations of bribery, 'pred privilege', mammals in high places covering for me, you name
it. Not even Judy and Bogo standing up for me might be enough to sway some of them if that comes
to pass."

He glanced over, unable to hide the despair he was feeling and not even trying. It took all his self-
control to once more keep his voice from cracking. "Either way…I think we both know it's going to
be a long time before I can get trust and respect back from Zootopia again, if at all."

Bucky didn't seem to have anything to say to that—whether because he couldn't deny that painful
truth or because he didn't feel like arguing any longer—but the look he returned showed he quite
understood the implications of the lion's words. At least he seemed to regret it had come to this and
didn't outright say it was impossible for it to change. Half a loaf is better than none.

As the Barbary was about to apologize again and offer some further means of making it up to his
beloved, however—though he had no idea what that could possibly be—there suddenly came
another unexpected knock on the hospital room door, making both of them jump. "Ah…come in?"
The door opened, and a rather bulky figure poked its head in, silhouetted somewhat by the light from the hallway. "Howdy there! Is Judy 'round these here parts? The lil' lady at th' front desk done tol' me she wuz up visitin'—" The stranger broke off, blinked several times, and then looked deeply embarrassed. "Oh! Er, um, par'n me, didn't mean t' interrupt."

Out of the corner of his eye, Leodore could see Bucky looked as startled and confused as he felt, but he couldn't take his gaze off the new visitor. It was another red fox like Nick Wilde, although a much bigger example of the species—not in height, since he actually seemed a couple inches shorter, but in breadth; what his mother Martha would call "accustomed to good eating." It wasn't his size that drew the lion's attention, however, but his overall appearance: he wore a crisp clean white dress shirt (albeit with the sleeves rolled up to uncover his forearms) with a smart bowtie almost the same shade as his bright blue eyes, and the thick curls of red bangs atop his head were carefully parted and apparently held in place by some sort of styling cream. But over all this formality he also wore…a pair of denim overalls. They were perfectly clean and properly fastened, with their straps even standing in for where suspenders would otherwise be, but they certainly were more suited to a farm than the rest of his wardrobe implied. He was also clutching a bouquet of flowers in one paw.

For several moments they all stared at each other, and then finally Lionheart found his voice. "No, no, it's quite all right. Nothing to worry yourself about." In spite of himself, in spite of all the turmoil he was going through, the doubts and depression and painful loss, he couldn't help but smile at the visitor; the distraction was welcome, and there was something rather endearing about him. "You said you were looking for Miss Hopps? She should be back soon enough. You're welcome to wait, or you might find her and Mr. Wilde in the cafeteria."

The vulpine nodded almost mechanically, and he wondered if the fellow had even registered what he'd said. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and couldn't seem to tear away from the maned figure in the bed. At first he thought the poor mammal might be frightened by his massive bulk, or even his species, but then after a few more moments in which his unslung jaw quivered and shook, the fox stammered, "W-wait just a goldarned minute. Y-you're Leodore Lionheart, ain'tcha?"

Of course, that was it. Whether he wanted it or not, he couldn't avoid recognition, it seemed. Girding himself for the likely reaction of fury, disgust, and resentment—shouting and cursing, perhaps throwing that bouquet wildly in his face, denouncing him as a low-life criminal before stalking out—he sighed and clasped his paws. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am."

The fox kept staring at him, from the sounds coming from his mouth seemingly unable to speak. Then he suddenly sprang and bounded eagerly across the hospital room to his bedside, tossed the bouquet on the sheets, and started pawing hurriedly through every pocket of his shirt and overalls. "Shoot, where is it…never can find it when Ah need it, nohow…well, there it is!" Pulling out a small spiral notepad and a pen, he quickly flipped to a blank page (in the brief glimpse Lionheart had of the previous one, it looked to have held a recipe of some sort) and held both items out tremulously. "Please, Mister Leodore Sir…can Ah have yer autograph?"
A strange snort came from the adjoining bed, and when the lion dared to look, he saw Bucky trying extremely hard not to burst out laughing—but the look on his face was fond, bemused, and reassured all at once. When he saw him looking, the deer chuckled and shook his head. "It never fails." With mock petulance, he spread both hooves and bemoaned, "Why is it I never get asked for my autograph?"

For a split second Leodore stared back at his beloved, stunned to hear a return to their usual bantering and self-deprecation and knowing exactly what it indicated—and then they both burst out laughing.

Into this unexpected and much-needed frivolity, the poor farm fox—who finally seemed to have come out of his stasis—suddenly interrupted, his blue eyes even wider while his face flushed with embarrassment. "Good gosh and gravy! Ah'm so sorry, Mister Stagmire Sir, Ah didn't even recognize ya there." Looking as he if he wanted to kick himself, the smaller mammal continued, "Ah can't believe...tarnation, after all those times ya done stood up fer fox rights, took us on as yer clients an' everything...mah sister Essy made darn well shore Ah knew all 'bout ya afore Ah went into that there votin' booth, she's a lawyer too and a tootin' good'un, but then Ah bet ya already knew that, all you lawyers an' city-types know each other..."

He jerked his babbling up short, then gestured with the notepad. "Ah'll hand it right on over fer you too, sir, after Mister Leodore Sir. If...if'n that's okay with ya?"

A critical silence settled over the hospital room as the lion and the deer regarded each other. In spite of himself, in spite of how much he'd just been made aware that he should not hang his entire sense of self-worth and importance on Bucky's goodwill and support, Lionheart couldn't help putting as much pleading into his gaze as possible.

Not because he so desperately wanted an autograph or validation of any kind, but because he doubted whether he deserved it. Because Bucky had also made it clear how important it was to ask for his opinion, to take his feelings into account. With a flick of his eyes and a slight tilt of the head toward the door, he sent the wordless message: *If you want him gone, if now isn't the right time, if the last thing you think I need is an adoring fan, then I'll send him away.*

But after gazing speculatively back, the stag pursed his lips, gave him a real and caring smile, then finally nodded permissively. "How can I say no to one so eager? Or who remembers my own contributions so well?" He grinned lopsidedly, although the Barbary thought he might be flustered behind that studied casualness.

As their visitor beamed at them both in pride and vindication, Leodore let out a soft sigh and took the
pad and pen—like the deer's initial response, with a certain sense of wry inevitability. There was hope. The vulpine's reaction was far better than what he had been dreading; and with Bucky's shift in mood and commentary, well...it made his eyes rather wet and his throat tight... With the writing instrument poised over the paper, he paused and raised an eyebrow. "And...whom do I make it out to?"

The fox blinked again, then stammered anew. "Oh! Plumb forgot, Ma would have mah head…it's Gideon, sir, Gideon Grey. Ah'm from Preds' Corner, out near Bunnyburrow."

That explained the accent and overalls, as well as his acquaintance with Judy. "And just how is it you know me, may I ask?"

Gideon looked at him as if he'd grown another head. "Heck, everybody knows who you are, sir. Both of ya! Ah mean, you two were 'mates an' all." Leodore stiffened—not only was it yet again a stab in the heart to hear the past tense applied to that relationship, but he could scarcely believe what he and Bucky were to each other was so obvious that the public knew about it already, or at least this charming but uncomplicated fellow. But then, even as he swiftly looked over to Bucky and saw the same conclusions mirrored in his eyes...and that same sense of distress and sorrow...he realized the fox must have meant "running mates" and relaxed.

Heedless of the stir his inadvertent phrasing had caused, the red-furred canid was speaking again. "But well, th' truth is Ah voted fer ya. Both times!" He grasped both his overall straps proudly, rocking back and forth on his heels. "An' it's all thanks t' Judy. She done showed me there really wuz somethin' t' that whole Zootopia motto thing." He paused, ears drooping with a distressed look before he resumed his hero-worshipping expression. "Let's just say Ah wuzn't th' best t' her when we wuz young, but she held nuthin' against me when we grew up. An' that made Mister and Missus H. gimme another chance, too. We're bizness partners now, an' everything!"

As Lionheart kept looking at him inquiringly, he flinched and rubbed the back of his neck. "Anywho, she wuz so dam convinced predators an' prey could get along, an' all mammals could do whatever they wanted t' do...an' then you came along, runnin' fer th' same idears as Mayor, so of course, Ah voted fer ya!" Grinning wide, he added, "Good thing Ah did, since it wuz that law of yers that helped her become a cop, wuzn't it? Payin' it forward, an' alla that. Ain't much Ah wouldn't do fer Judy."

Somehow, the big lion wasn't surprised; the rabbit seemed to leave her mark everywhere, and make countless lives better after they crossed paths with hers. What Bucky had said about her earlier, and what she stood for in his legacy, was absolutely true. "An admirable sentiment indeed." Smiling again, he signed the paper with a dedication he was certain would please the fox: 'To Gideon Grey—predators who want to make the world a better place should stick together.' As he handed the pad and pen back, he chuckled and gestured to the flowers. "So are those for me as well?"
The smaller mammal was staring at the pad in his paws as if it were a holy relic, mouth moving silently as he read along with the words. Suddenly realizing what Leodore had said, he looked up with a jerk, his cheeks turning quite pink under the fur, and then let out a jittery but warm laugh. "Quit pullin' mah leg, sir! You know darn well they're fer Judy. Picked 'em up at a nice lil' flower shop on mah way here t' th' hospital from th' police station. When Ah tol' that otter Mr. Emmitt they were fer Judy, he gave me a real nice discount. She shore does make a darn good impression on everybody, don't she?"

Bucky exchanged a look with him, one filled with wonderment at the coincidence, but also a knowing approval that united them together again. "Yes. That she does, Mr. Grey."

Gideon waved him aside with a paw, then rather reverently placed his pad in the other's hoof. "Jus' call me Gideon." After the stag had also signed, still looking a bit stunned, the vulpine took it back and nodded, bobbing up and down in a little bow. "Anyway…thanks fer th' autograph, Mister Leodore Sir, Mister Stagmire Sir. Ah'm treasurin' it always. But Ah should be gettin' t' findin' Judy now. Haven't seen her in months, not since she drove off rantin' 'bout them Night Howlers, an' we've got a lotta catchin' up t' do. 'Sides, she wanted t' introduce me t' that new partner of hers." Chuckling, he scooped up his bouquet, put his pad and pen away, and turned toward the door.

He had almost made it back into the hall when Bucky called out to him. "Gideon…may I ask you one last thing?"

The fox peered back over his shoulder, furrowing his brow. "Shore, what's that?"

"If you know who Leodore here is, and what he's done as mayor…then surely you must also know where he's been the past six months, and what happened during the Pred Scare."

A wary look appeared on the vulpine's broad, easygoing face, fear mingled with distress. Swallowing slowly, he said, "Yessir, Ah'm afraid Ah do."

Taking a deep breath, Bucky carefully avoided even flicking his eyes in the lion's direction. "Then why is it that you still wished his autograph?"

Gideon seemed puzzled, as if he genuinely didn't understand why the deer would ask him such a thing. Still, when he looked back to Lionheart, a shadow seemed to fill his now-haunted eyes, and when he spoke his voice had lost a good part of its cheerful exuberance. "Well now, that there's a predicky-ment all right. A lotta bad stuff happened. Lotta mammals got hurt. An' when he got locked
up, it looked real bad. But...Ah didn't believe we wuz gettin' th' whole story, yanno? Whatever wuz
go'in' on, Ah thought his heart had t' be in th' right place, he wuz just tryin' t' help all those poor
mammals, an' things just got mixed up. 'Sides, Ah ain't one t' be castin' stones. Like Ah said, Ah've
done plenty of awful stuff m'self, so Ah know all about turnin' over new leaves an' askin' fer second
chances. No way Ah'd turn on him without knowin' more. An' Ah wuz right in th' end, wuzn't I? It
wuz all that Miss Bellwether.

He shrugged his broad shoulders, and suddenly his warm smile was back again, infectious and
irresistible. "Truth is, Ah believed in ya when Ah voted fer ya, Mister Leodore Sir, Ah believed in ya
when ya got arrested, an' Ah still believe in ya now."

Lionheart heard his breath rasping and had to blink away the blurriness in his eyes. But all he did,
after recovering his equanimity, was nod gravely and rumble, "Well thank you very much then, Mr.
Grey...Gideon. I truly needed to hear that right now." And I'm not the only one.

"'Tweren't nuthin, Mister Mayor Sir." For a split second he only beamed proudly; then, as he realized
what he'd actually said, the fox was once again blushing brightly and stammering. "Ah'm so sorry,
sir! Just a slip of th' tongue, it's too darn easy t' think of, yanno..."

The Barbary smiled sadly. "I understand."

After offering several more embarrassed apologies, Gideon finally took his leave, and from the way
his tail was swishing wildly and his ears alternately flattening and pricking up, it wouldn't have
surprised Leodore if the fox had immediately turned and run for the cafeteria as soon as the door was
closed. Letting out a long sigh, the lion turned to appraise his beloved.

That amazed, warm smile was still on the deer's muzzle, and even if the hurt, uncertainty, and distrust
were still there, they had retreated greatly. It seemed the interruption had been something they'd both
needed.

Lionheart swallowed, and found that desire to tease bubbling up inside him again. "You do know
that if he'd agreed his bouquet was for me, or if he'd offered to leave one flower out of it for me and
given Miss Hopps the rest, I'd have asked for one for you too, right?"

"Thank you," Bucky said dryly, though again he could hear the sincerity behind it. "With my luck,
yours still would have been bigger, though."
Again, they both lapsed into healing laughter...though Leodore was rather afraid he might be right.

When all was quiet again, the deer took a deep breath. "Well. It appears we were both wrong. Not that one voter is at all an acceptable sample size, but...it's a start. Perhaps it will be easier to make amends...to earn back that respect and trust...than it seemed. We shall see, eh?" Bucky sighed and leaned back in his pillows...but as he closed his eyes this time, there was something new on his face. Chagrin, curiosity, reflection, and—he thought—hope.

Leodore too leaned back, content to stay silent; even if they hadn't already reached an impasse, said as much as could be said, and determined that it was up to him and what he did next before anything between them could change, those final words were a much happier place to leave matters. But as he closed his eyes and tried to rest, so many thoughts churned and swirled within him. Making amends. Turning over new leaves. 'Awful stuff.' Second chances. Predators and prey getting along. Choices. Paying it forward. Trust and respect. Time to think...and change.

Just as he was about to doze off, it all clicked together...his eyes popped open again, as suddenly he knew. He knew what he had to do. It might be the only way to convince Bucky, show him he had learned his very hard lesson. That he had grown up after all, yet still had that brave cubhood heart. Even if it didn't, it was still the right thing to do and something he had to do, whatever the outcome.

All he had to do was convince Judy, Nick…and somehow, Bogo…to go along with it. Compared to the original deal he'd persuaded them to accept, this would be a piece of cake. Somehow, though, that didn't settle his stomach any further.

Chapter End Notes

Very little to say here. Gideon's appearance may have seemed like quite the contrived coincidence, but if he were in town to see Judy, and came looking for her at this point, chances were he would cross paths with Leo and Bucky eventually. That it would happen right when his faith and trust were needed the most is just one of those lovely quirks of fate. I should mention, BTW, that his sister Essy is another reference to 6wingdragon's "Neverwere Moments" universe in the character of Esther Grey, as is the town of Preds' Corner. (You must be getting sick of these by now, but really, he's an awesome writer, his stories are wonderful, and I love including bits from them.) Also, for anyone who is confused how Gideon could live near Bunnyburrow yet have voted for Leodore as Mayor of Zootopia, this too is something from 6wingdragon's work, and the explanation is fairly simple: that while Bunnyburrow seems like a separate town or suburb, it is actually a part of Zootopia. Note its name is a homophone for Bunnyborough (as in, a borough of a large city like New York), and in the original pre-production art, it actually was shown on the map to be another city district (then called "The Burrows"). Basically, I consider Zootopia to be something of a city-state, and so the districts and even suburbs around it get to vote for its leaders too.
As for the rest of the chapter...I felt it was very important to let you see more into Bucky's head (even if not a direct POV—that will come later). After all, the story is indirectly named after him, he's the main reason behind most of Leo's choices and actions, and after everything that's happened it would be cheating to deny him the chance to truly react to all that he missed, all that Leo did. And as you might have guessed from last chapter's cliffhanger, despite knowing it was done out of love and fear and a desire to protect, Bucky is not the sort to instantly forgive or make exceptions, even for someone he loves dearly (or even especially not for them). At the same time, he's eminently logical and fair, so he's going to explain his thought process and justifications, and how things can get better from here. Plus, as you'll see later, he's not necessarily as intractable and hard-nosed as he appears here. Still...I'm not going to make this easy for Leo now, either, and if this scene makes you resent Bucky in any way, that just means I did my job in making him a more rounded character instead of the flawless paragon he's seemed to be (and Leo thinks of him as) until now.
As he had suspected, Chief Bogo had been quite wary of granting his request—not so much because he did not trust him as because he was not altogether certain what Lionheart wished was wise, all things considered. And if news of it got out to the press, it could hurt the former mayor's chances in court, and possibly even reflect badly on the ZPD again as supporting collusion, even just by implication. Judy, of course, had immediately jumped at the notion, and Nick, while far more
cautious, had observed that "tying up loose ends and getting closure could be quite good for the soul."

In the end it had been the surprising endorsement from Delgato that had tipped the scales, as the young lion officer had immediately, and insightfully, understood why the Barbary wished this particular accommodation to be made…and absolutely approved of the rationale behind it, even if nothing more could be accomplished than salving his conscience and being able to say he made an honest attempt at burying the hatchet.

Upon hearing that, the Cape buffalo had given his still rather disgruntled permission, with the caveats that both Nick and Judy would be accompanying Leodore and that, of course, the lion would be cuffed the entire time—despite their deal, until such time as he was tried and his punishment decided, the feline was still an arrested felon. Understanding completely, Lionheart had of course agreed, but it was still more than another week until the visit could be carried out, seeing as he still needed to finish recovering from his injuries, at least enough that he could move about without waves of agony flaring through his belly if not receive a full release from the hospital. As soon as that milestone was achieved, though, all the wheels were put in motion and the excursion from Lions Gate was finally planned in full.

When the day finally came, the lion had to admit his nervousness if only to himself, though unsurprisingly Bucky had picked up on it almost instantly. Knowing just whom Leodore planned to visit and why (since he'd been there for all the discussion and planning), the deer had been alternately impressed, troubled, and even a trifle worried for him. But in the end, although he had not offered any unequivocal testimonials to what this excursion might do for his leniency toward his old friend, he had agreed it was the right thing to do…and if things went as badly as they all feared, at least Nick and Judy would be there to get him out of it, and offer comfort if needed.

So after a swift, careful, but genuine embrace between them, Bucky had wished him well and good luck, and then Lionheart—clad in new street clothes the ZPD had provided him to replace those that had been so shredded and stained—left his bed behind for the first time…making his way down the halls and elevators of the hospital to the squad car that waited for him. And there, with the cuffs linking his wrists, he sat docile and subdued behind the mesh grille…watching Judy in the driver's seat in front of him as she sent them through the streets of Zootopia toward the maximum security prison…where Dawn Bellwether awaited them.

Unusually, almost the entire ride over took place in silence, with the only conversation happening between Nick and Judy for the most part. Despite her garrulous and energetic nature, and her desire to help mammals in need that compelled her to reach out to those who were hurting or seeking redress of wrongs, the rabbit somehow seemed to sense that interaction and discussion were the last things Leodore wanted or needed just now. And while the fox could fill the air with all manner of witty repartee or cynical but insightful observations about the city and those who lived in it, he was quieter than usual, too—whether because he was also bothered by the notion of confronting the former Assistant Mayor, or because he understood even more deeply how important it was that the lion face the one who had brought such harm to Zootopia, and to him personally…face the prey he
had once trusted and believed an ally if not a friend.

Instead, then, the two police officers only spoke to each other, when they broke the silence at all, and then only to trade friendly jabs and precinct gossip, or make reference to other aspects of their lives—some he understood, and some he did not. There was fond laughter at how Officer Clawhauser had reacted when, after the events of the concert, they had obtained for him autographed copies of his favorite Gazelle albums (the joke came up that they expected him to show off his species’ usual rapid speed, which he hadn’t been able to achieve for years, in order to rush home and place them in his shrine to the antelope singer).

Corlione had apparently been released from prison (although Swinton had informed him quite coolly that she fully expected him to be back to stay soon enough, under her care or otherwise), though the mafia lion seemed understandably preoccupied with replacing his Head of Security and doing damage control, both with the public and his no-longer-secret criminal underlings. Delgato, according to their tales anyway, was being inordinately fussed over by the black jaguar Manchas, who had passed on through Judy his gratitude at having been saved from the Night Howler (and that he harbored no ill feelings toward Lionheart over his brief stay at Cliffside), and even offered to drive for him in the future…assuming matters went well in court, of course.

But there had also been commentary on Judy's family in Bunnyburrow and just how they would react to her fox partner (something that had the rabbit looking rather paralyzed and beaded with sweat) and a number of bets placed between them and their fellow ZPD colleagues which had money changing paws multiple times. (The nature of Bogo’s punishments when he saw how poor Nick’s report turned out to be had been heatedly debated, as had what precisely Swinton would demand to get back at Judy for her rule-breaking prison-switch.)

Some officers also seemed to believe that Fangmeyer would soon be dating Xander, the white tiger from the Water Hole backstage crew…and bringing this up had somehow led to an offhand reference to someone Leodore had never heard of, a mammal named Tyler, and how much Manchas had wished the younger tiger to make good on an unknown offer he’d made to Delgato…something that had Nick sweating nervously in turn when Judy slyly brought up his knowledge on the subject.

On the one paw, hearing that life seemed to be getting back to normal for the pair reassured the Barbary greatly, some of what they spoke of was actually rather amusing even without the context, and he did appreciate the time to himself. After all, he already knew why he was doing this, and what happened at the prison, what he would say and do, depended entirely on how Dawn reacted to his presence—so no amount of pondering and planning ahead of time would help.

At the same time…having nothing to do but gaze out at the city streets in silence, trying not to think of the sheep, of what she had done and of how he had helped drive her to it all unknowing, yet also have nothing else to think about…well, it was both frustrating and disheartening, to say the least.
So in the end it was a great relief to arrive at their destination; even though this led to his handcuffed form being escorted through numerous locked doors, hallways, and security stations, past cameras and guards alike that watched his every move, it was still a grand sight better than all this worry and anticipation. Whatever happened, however badly this went and however it ended, at least there would be no more wondering. At least he would know, and could close the book on this last chapter of his past. Regardless what came of it, that would allow him to look only ahead and focus on his trial, and after, the way he should be…

Naturally, the waiting room for a maximum security prison was different than for a less strict and regulated facility—namely that visitors and prisoners were kept from interacting directly via the typical arrangement of a clear Plexiglass barrier rising vertically to divide a plain white tabletop. Because of the possibly sensitive nature of the things which would be said here, Nick and Judy had requested a smaller room, so that there was just the one table rather than an entire countertop cut into booths, but the process was otherwise the same…officers standing on guard, one outside the door and one within the room; no weapons or other dangerous items allowed inside; and communication occurring through the special phones installed on either side of the barrier.

Lionheart was, however, not exactly reassured by the room's layout. He had rarely ever had occasion to visit any of Zootopia's prisons, as any information procurement or plea bargain deals with inmates had always been handled by either Bucky or one of his staff, when it didn't fall under the jurisdiction of the ZPD itself; the few times he had, of course, had been when he was not arrested himself. Apparently the practice was not completely unheard of—some previously-sentenced criminals, particularly those considering turning state's evidence or seeking witness protection, had felt more comfortable working with law enforcement if they met with their former partners or employers who had also been charged and were seeking plea bargains in return for their aid in bringing down still bigger fish. Still, the whole thing made the Barbary wary and nervous, on top of the reasons he already had to be so. At least they had arrived early, and so did not have Bellwether already waiting for them.

By the time he had seated himself with the rabbit and fox bracketing him on either side, however, it wasn't long at all before the jailers on duty were emerging from the door on the opposite wall of the visitors' room…and they had with them, of course, the diminutive, orange-clad form of the delicate little sheep he had very much needed to see—but also dreaded.

She looked the same in so many ways it was uncanny…the over-large glasses that magnified her already big eyes to immense size, the bouncy poof of fluffy wool atop her head, the comical way she was dwarfed by her chair and the rest of the furnishings around her. But in other ways she was completely different: the severe posture of her arms crossed tightly over her narrow chest, the stubborn set of her chin, her expression which mingled the annoyance and frustration he had often observed there with a new sullen anger, dark resentment, and even exasperated boredom. How much of this, he wondered, was due to having her scheme ruined, being locked away in prison for what would surely be many years to come barring extremely good behavior…and how much had always been there inside her all along, and he had just been too blind and dismissive to see it?
At least she had come into the visitors' room at all, rather than refusing to meet when told who had come to see her. At least she wasn't openly glaring and lashing out at him. But those good signs didn't tell him what else she might think or feel, what she would say in response to him. For that, there was only one way to know, once he could nerve himself and take the plunge.

For several very long, meaningful moments they stared at each other silently—almost a full minute, but it felt much longer—while Nick and Judy shifted, squirmed, and otherwise made their discomfort known in the chairs beside him. On Dawn's face he spied a certain smugness, a nasty vindication, inspired either by the obvious detail of his handcuffs or the overall dolorous and despairing air which surrounded him. Despite this, and despite everything he knew she had done, he couldn't help gazing back at her mournfully, his shoulders slumped and sorrow filling his heart.

Who would have thought, after another sweeping victory at the voting booths, a festive and joyous celebration party at City Hall, countless congratulations and acceptance speeches, high hopes for the future of Zootopia, and even sharing a few too many glasses of spiked punch together…that two years later, we'd end up like this? Two leaders, two politicians with great plans and noble oaths sworn to the city…now arrested (and in her case, convicted) felons, their careers in ashes, their reputations in disgrace, nothing left to show for all their hard work and dedicated service, hated by one segment of the population or the other. So much that could have been…so much that had been lost. How could he have let it come to this?

He sighed heavily, and in the same moment felt a nudge in his side which could only come from Nick's elbow. Across the counter, Bellwether's mouth moved—he couldn't hear her through the glass, of course—and the prison guard, a female camel, came forward to take the phone down from its niche and hand it to her, since being sized for a larger mammal it was out of her reach, before going back to stand by the barred door. Lionheart swallowed, then took down the phone on his side and carefully put it to his ear.

"Hello, Dawn." He was surprised at how steady his voice sounded, how he'd managed to keep it and his emotions under control.

"Hello, Leodore." Her tone was cold, flat...but more than anything, it sounded empty and weary. As if, unsurprisingly, this was merely something she had to do, and was looking forward to it being over more than anything.

"You...you're looking well. All things considered." He tried to put a touch of encouragement into his voice, a tiny spot of brightness in this whole situation, in their environment.

Instantly he knew it had been the wrong thing to say, and winced. Thankfully, all Bellwether did
was regard him with disbelief and scathing contempt before she answered him. "You mean, considering I'm locked up in here with hardened criminals and psychopaths, predators who would love to kill me or even rip me apart for what I did and prey who think I'm nothing but a traitor to my kind? Yeah, when you put it that way, it is kind of a miracle I'm still here, isn't it? Thanks, thanks so much for reminding me! But at least I'm alive, right? At least I get showers and passable food every day, and my glasses have reinforced frames so they can't be broken, and there are no marks on me, and my wool is clean! As long as I look nice, I must be okay, and who cares what goes on in this place or how I feel about it! Thanks awfully." She paused, gathering herself after that rather breathless rant, and then shot him a rather wicked smile as her voice turned sickeningly sweet. "I wish I could say the same about you."

Even with how selfish much of that sounded, especially after the things she'd done to end up here, Lionheart realized he deserved a good part of that. Still, he couldn't hold back his immediate, somewhat testy response. "No, you don't. In fact I'd say you are quite pleased with yourself, and are downright happy to see me like this."

"Really? What was your first clue?" The sheep laughed, bitterly. "Maybe you haven't heard of it, but there's a concept called sarcasm. Learn it."

Anger started simmering inside his chest...but then the feline caught himself. Aside from the fact this was completely against his whole reason for coming here, he realized what Dawn was doing. Well, aside from trying to get a rise out of me. For the first time, she was being completely honest with him. Letting him know how she felt and why. It was shocking, even painful, less because she was personally insulting him than because it didn't match his concept of her before he'd learned she was the ringleader behind the Pred Scare.

But he also realized that, like so much about the ewe, he'd been wrong about her. Sweet, timid, docile, a shrinking violet who would rather stay in the background and remain invisible than upset anyone? No, that wasn't her true self, or at least not the entirety of it. It had been a mask she'd been forced to adopt—to conceal her inner resentments, prejudices, and other dark thoughts, but also to simply get by in a world where almost everyone, whether predator or prey, was larger than she. Had more respect, more acceptance, more privilege, regardless their actual station in life.

It was the reason he, like everyone else, had found it so hard to believe Dawn Bellwether could have been such a cruel and devious mastermind—the reason she had so easily gotten away with it all, and would have kept doing so if there hadn't been a clear-cut case, physical evidence she and her rams had been caught red-hoofed with, knowledge she shouldn't have had and her presence where it couldn't be explained, and her own words used against her.

Suddenly, despite everything she'd done, how much she deserved everyone's fury and hatred, how she had rightfully earned her punishment...Leodore Lionheart couldn't help admiring the sheep, just a bit. Not for her scheme—even if it had been artfully planned, cunningly developed, easily adapted,
one that had taken advantage of so many mammals' flaws and irrational beliefs—but for how she had managed not only to survive but thrive in this world. How had she actually comported herself at City Council meetings, at fundraisers, with other politicians and the elites of Zootopia, as opposed to how he'd simply assumed she had? How had she persuaded so many, gotten them on City Hall's side...or more strictly speaking, her own? Which of them truly had the real charisma here?

It was difficult to believe, but despite the insanity of what she'd done and why, he realized that what he'd told Bucky several months before their fateful dinner at The Dunes, about that novelty coffee mug, was truer than he'd realized: Dawn really was the best Assistant Mayor he could have had, aside from the deer.

The lion sighed, tamping down his ire and otherwise letting his negative feelings go. Forcing his paw to loosen on the phone handset, he said, "Look, Miss Bellwether—Dawn. This isn't why I came here, and while we could snipe at each other all we like and make nasty little barbs to get under each other's skin until our time is up, that would be pointless and counterproductive. So instead let me say that while you have no reason to believe me, I genuinely am glad you are all right for the most part.

"As awful as your crimes were, the court decided you did not deserve to be put to death for them, and I agree. Even the jury was divided on that. Which means that it is important you be kept safe and secure until you have served your time. It is in fact more important than ever, considering the circumstances, that we be civilized mammals about this. You have been placed in solitary confinement for your own protection, rather than among the general prison population—and you know exactly why that is, who argued quite strongly for that on your behalf."

He didn't even look at Judy out of the corner of his eye as he spoke, and Bellwether didn't flick her gaze toward the rabbit either, but neither of them had to. As he'd said, they both knew it was the brave and idealistic Officer Hopps, who had managed to be more honest, good-hearted, and faithful in the inner goodness of mammals than the two of them put together, that had ensured the ovine would be kept away from anyone who might want to take matters into their own paws.

The timing may have been all wrong, and Judy had good reason to doubt herself after that awful press conference, but I read the stories, I saw the ZPD flyers, and Bellwether was right about one thing: when it comes down to it, when matters of rules and regulations are set aside, there's no one who's a better role model for integrity than this little bunny beside me.

After a suitable pause to let that sink in, he continued. "So if you don't mind, perhaps we could dispense with all this, and at least agree not to..." He almost said 'bite each other's heads off' but realized at the last second how that would not go over well at all, even as a figure of speech. "...not to lash out at each other for a past that is now over and done with. Then we can address what I did come here for, this will be taken care of as quickly as possible, and we'll never have to see each other again unless you wish it. Fair enough?"
For several more very long moments, the sheep stared back at him silently, and even if she seemed annoyed at having to cease hostilities with him, her hoof did loosen on her receiver as well. Then it was her turn to sigh. "Okay, fine. It's not like I can make you, if you won't even keep playing the game. And the sooner you're out of here, the better. Let's get it over with, then. What do you want?"

Lionheart took another long, slow breath and forced himself to look her in the eye. This was not going to be easy—especially after he had just spoken of leaving the past behind—but nothing worth doing was, and it had to be done. Even if nothing came of it, even if she rightly refused to believe him, and even if the things she had done far outweighed the injustice of his own actions...he still had to say this. "Dawn, I...I came here to tell you that...I'm sorry."

The sheep blinked, hard. For several moments she simply seemed unable to comprehend what he'd said; then, as it sank in, he saw a brief glimpse of the mammal he'd first campaigned with two years ago, one with high hopes and big dreams, one who believed in species solidarity and his devotion to making it happen, one who had even admired him for his own goals and aspirations. But then the moment passed, and she snapped right back into suspicion, bitterness, and resentment. "Uh-huh. Right. You? Mr. Leodore Lionheart, big cat on the Council, always has to be the center of attention, doesn't care who he has to step over or even on to get what he wants. You're sorry?" She shook her head and snorted. "As long as I've known you, you've never been sorry about anything. Or if you were, you sure as heck never showed it around me."

For a moment he squeezed his eyes shut; he'd deserved that, too. When he opened them, he was surprised to see Dawn actually looked a bit troubled; had she realized that was real remorse he was showing? "That's...the image I cultivated, yes. But you couldn't be more wrong about me. There's so much I've done that I regret. And one of the biggest...is the way I treated you."

"I should have told you this long ago. I should have said it from our first day at City Hall together. I did not show it; I took you for granted; I overlooked you, often literally; and I ignored your contributions for the sake of my own grand plans and how they made Zootopia a better place. But you were always a critical part of my administration, and I could never have accomplished half the things I did without you. I can't begin to name all the roles you performed, all the tasks you took on, thanklessly, without acknowledgement from anyone. Especially me. And I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for that. No, not just because of what...this led you to do."

Again he locked gazes with her. Her eyes were wide, luminescent with unshed tears, and her chin was trembling.
"I could claim it was unintentional, which it mostly was. I could say it stemmed from my being stressed and overworked. I could point out the unusual burdens on my shoulders thanks to the missing predators, which you orchestrated, and how you being preoccupied with your conspiracy kept you from being your typical diligent self, only piling more duties upon me...except my actions long predated all of that. I could claim I thought you already knew how much I appreciated you, except I never said a word and had a rather odd way of showing it.

"I could point out how a number of times that I ignored you or pushed you out of the limelight or, God forbid, actually came this close to stepping on you, truly was a case of my overlooking you, not noticing you were there until it was too late. But that would just be deflection, a visible manifestation of how oblivious I was on every level. And it wouldn't conceal the fact that my pride was far too strong for my own good." Recalling Judy's graduation from police academy, where he had almost absently shoved Dawn out of the way so that he and the rabbit could receive the entirety of the adulation and focus from the press, the lion cringed.

"Anything I could say would merely be excuses. I don't blame you one bit for hating me, wanting to do all you could to ruin me and bring me down. The way I acted was appalling, especially for one of my station and bearing, even more so because much of it I did without even being aware of it. Whether I realized it or not, I fell into old species stereotypes I should not have been reinforcing. Without you, I would have been lost, and I should have told you this. I should have told you a lot of things." He stopped, partly to nerve himself for what he was about to say, partly to recover his poise so his voice wouldn't break. "Do you remember that mug I gave you for your birthday?"

Bellwether had been staring at him in utter silence, her throat fluttering with her intense emotions, but hearing this snapped her out of her stasis. "How could I forget?" The fact she said it so quietly, her voice tiny, plaintive, and forlorn, was far worse than if she had lashed out with screams and strident bleats.

"Well, I meant every word I wrote on it. And since I know you won't believe that on its own, let me tell you three things you don't know. That mug was originally a gift to me from Bucky...and you know how good a friend he is to me, how long we've known each other. So you have to know I wouldn't give away lightly something he gave me. Even more to the point, everything I'm telling you now, that I should have said when I gave it to you if not before? It's something he urged me to tell you."

Now the tears were undeniable, starting to trickle through the wool covering her cheeks. "He...he did? I...I had no idea. He...he was always so good to me..." She broke off, as well she might, considering what had happened to the deer because of her vengeance plot.

But Leodore didn't upbraid her for that. He only paused long enough to let the revelation sink in, to take another shuddering breath, and then he forced himself to say the final words; she had to know, and even if she reacted the way he'd always feared she would, it would be good practice for when
the rest of the public found out. "Yes. As you might imagine, what happened to him—and how the savage mammals took up all my time and weighed heavily on my mind—kept me from even thinking it, let alone saying it, but it's true. And so is one thing more, Dawn. I love him. I love Buckley Stagmire more than my own life, and I always will."

After so long keeping it secret, refusing to let even a hint reach the wrong ears, it was incredible how good it felt, how freeing and beautiful and right, to finally say it aloud. He trembled.

"So...now maybe you can understand how important it is that I'm telling you this. We're talking about the mammal who, if I'd been brave enough and strong enough and adult enough to face whatever scorn you and everyone else might throw at me, would be engaged to me right now. And I am now, at last, taking his advice and telling you how valuable you always were to me. After giving you something he gave me. And we're talking about the mammal who was an amazing and brilliant Assistant Mayor to me in my first term. Yet even with that being the case, I'm still saying you were the best thing that ever happened to City Hall after he was gone. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to see it...to say it...to see it needed to be said." He swallowed. "I'm sorry, Dawn."

A small whimper broke the silence, one he thought came from the seat to his right as well as through the wire that crossed the plastic barrier. But otherwise the cops with him stayed quiet, as they had the entire time, something for which he was eminently grateful. Then, after staring at him for several more stunned, confused moments, the shock of what he'd told her clearly vying with her pain, her disbelief, and so many other conflicting feelings, the crying sheep managed to choke out two words:

"Oh, muttonchops…"

There was really nothing to say to that, and even had he been in the right frame of mind to speak up—and after uttering the last word, he certainly wasn't—Lionheart realized this was a very critical juncture, a moment everything hinged upon where things could finally start going right again, or descend into an even worse state. As such, and with it not yet being clear how exactly Bellwether's attitude might have changed, or whether him intruding on her feelings would help or hinder, it was far better for him to stay out of it...to wait for her to recover in her own time and see what came next when she was ready.

So instead he managed to wipe his own moist eyes, swallow hard against the thickness in his throat, and glance at his chaperones to see their take on the situation. To put it mildly, both of the police officers seemed to be rather stunned by what they were seeing. Unsurprisingly, the way Judy's ears and nose twitched, how large and wide her violet eyes were, and the entire cast of her features made it clear the rabbit's sympathy had been aroused and her heart had at least somewhat melted.

More startling, however, was the fact that even Nick Wilde, as much as he retained his usual skepticism and cynical nature, appeared deeply troubled by what he was witnessing and uncertain
how to respond. Pushing his hat up on his head, he rubbed somewhat absently at his brow, noticed Leodore looking at him, and instantly sat up straight again, adjusting the cap to its proper position once more...but his lips were still pursed, his brow furrowed, and there was a light of understanding gleaming in his eyes that couldn't be dispelled. If a fox, particularly this one, can be thrown for a loop by it too, then at least I know it's not just me, and this truly is something remarkable that can't be readily dismissed.

A sniffle drew the feline's attention back to the plastic barrier, and as he swiftly looked back again, Lionheart saw that Bellwether was clutching her receiver as if it were a lifeline to sanity, the only thing that made sense in a world that had just turned upside-down. When the sheep saw him gazing back at her, she started briefly, then rubbed her tears fiercely away before letting out a long, ragged sigh. "Damn it, Leo." Her tone wasn't hateful, vicious, or condemnatory, but disappointed and even sad. "Do you have any idea what it would have meant, what it would have done, if you'd told me that, any of that, long ago?"

He bit his lip. "I think I'm starting to. I never claimed I was the smartest mammal at City Hall."

Bellwether snorted, but it was surprisingly good-natured. "Good, because if you had, I think that would've counted as the biggest lie in Zootopian politics in years. Or, like, ever."

Despite himself, he couldn't help hunching his shoulders and shooting her a resentful look. "Well really, there's no need to be that harsh about it, is there? I may be slow on the uptake sometimes, when it comes to personal interactions, but I do get it eventually, if I have my muzzle rubbed in it enough." He hesitated, let the annoyance leave his voice, then added, "Besides, I think we both know that there's no possible way I could have said such a thing, because Bucky was always the one who could lay claim to such a title."

The ewe regarded him solemnly for a moment, then said in a very small voice, "I think that's actually something we can agree on."

He couldn't help it, but after making such a deeply private admission that had filled him with paralyzing fear and self-doubt for so long, and after doing so had apparently finally convinced the ovine of his sincerity toward her, Lionheart couldn't hold back what had simmered inside him ever since he found out who was truly behind the Night Howler plot. Just as quietly, but with a firm, meaningful resolve, he said, "Really? Is that why you had Doug Ramses turn him into a mindless savage, then?"

Dawn flinched, a stricken look on her tiny face, and then she closed her eyes. "I know you have no reason to believe me, but that wasn't my intent. That wasn't how this was supposed to go at all."
Leodore sat back and frowned. "I see. How was it supposed to go, then?"

Again, she sighed, ducking her chin into the receiver. "You really have to ask, Leo? I'm sure you figured out long ago...it was you. You were the one who was supposed to get shot." Despite the overall distress she was showing, a certain nastiness and satisfaction crept back into her voice. "I didn't even know Buckley was supposed to be with you that night; the plan was to have your driver take you to a hospital, or else for you to break out when the limo crashed and go rampaging through the city. Either way, you losing your mind and proving to everyone how dangerous and untrustworthy predators were would've fulfilled all my needs. I'd get back at you, I'd take over as Mayor, and I'd have the pretext for putting the preds in their place, all nice and neat."

Without even having to look, Lionheart could feel Judy fairly quivering beside him, as her sympathy careened back to righteous fury again; the lion wasn't much better, and he could definitely scent a certain rank musk of vulpine aggression in the air as well. Luckily for Bellwether, she seemed to pick up quickly on their anger and the reason for it, and the gloating tone quickly fled, replaced by contrition. "Um...never mind that. Anyway...after Doug told me what happened, I didn't know what to do at first. Everything seemed to have gone wrong, I panicked a bit; I was sure you were going to go right to the press, crack the whole thing wide open, and after what happened to poor Buckley, I thought I deserved it."

"But you didn't...you drove off with him instead. Doug told me which way the limo went, and you know, I was really confused there for a while...but after I remembered you'd given me the password to log in to the city's traffic cameras, I checked and saw you going into that maintenance tunnel. There's only one road from there, and it dead-ends up in the eastern Meadowlands...and that's when I remembered Cliffside, and I realized what you were planning to do."

"I got the plan back on track. I knew if I shot more predators you'd take them all to the same place, and it'd be easy to get someone on your trail, catch you with the evidence, and have you take the fall for the whole thing. Especially if I made sure you knew about them by reporting them to you or your wolves anonymously." She paused, swallowed slowly, and regarded him with those big, mournful eyes, the same hue as her brother's but a richer, warmer emerald.

"As soon as you were arrested, I had every intention of getting Buckley out of there, putting him somewhere safe, and having Doug whip up a cure for him. What I would have told him, I still don't know. But it was all moot anyway, we couldn't find him...by the time I figured out where he was, and that you had him behind extra security I'd need more time to crack, Zootopia was already falling apart at the seams and I had way too much on my plate to deal with him. Then Judy found Banyan Station, and...well, you know the rest."

The former mayor nodded; he could see how it all fit together, now, in its own way as much a perfect storm of errors and distractions, unexpected developments and swiftly-altered plans, as what the sheep had ended up orchestrating to fully come to power over the predators—or for that matter,
how events had spiraled out of control during their search for the kidnapped stag. And he'd suspected all along she was responsible for him and his Pack in Black finding the savage mammals. But there was still much left unexplained...and it didn't at all exonerate the ewe of what had happened to Bucky. Or anything at all, really.

"I would say," he rumbled with an undertone of threat, "that if you believed you could ever convince Bucky that I had somehow regressed to savagery for no explicable reason, and that you had nothing to do with what had placed you and your rams in control of the city, then you were not nearly as intelligent and clever as you believed." Amazingly, she didn't contradict him, or even protest in any way, only grunted and leaned glumly against the glass.

Perhaps that was why, as much as his wrath still burned deep within his heart, and how every word of the devious plan to violate mammal rights—so callous, clinical, and calculated—insinuated itself in his mind, he was able to restrain his temper as he spoke once more. "But are you truly trying to tell me that not only was his fate a complete accident, you regret it and never meant him any ill?"

Dawn bit her lip. "Yeah, pretty much. I know it doesn't look like it, but...I meant what I said to Judy. I don't just believe in all us little guys sticking together, but all prey, too. I never meant him to come to any harm...he was good for the city, for me. I guess I thought, if I could keep him off-balance awhile, stop him from putting all the pieces together, he'd have to believe I was right...that predators really were just dangerous beasts, and always had been. That his heart was in the right place, but for the sake of public safety he'd have to go along with my plan, suspend habeas bestia and other civil liberties until we could get to the bottom of what was happening. Or else seeing what was happening, and losing you, would make him leave Zootopia, and then he'd be out of my wool." She shook her head. "It was stupid, I don't know why I thought it would work. Desperation, I guess."

Wisely choosing not to comment on that, Leodore instead let out a sardonic growl. "Well, we'll never know what might have happened now, will we? I still can't believe this is all because of me, however. I mistreated you, yes, but surely that cannot justify—"

Bellwether clenched her jaw. "You're right, it doesn't. And there's way more to it than that. You were a bad boss, Leo, but I've had those before. Including, maybe especially, other predators. I really don't want to get into it, but I've got a lot of reasons...a lot of awful things in my past...I was set to find a way to grab power, take whatever chances I had to take over and remake Zootopia the way I thought it needed to be, long before I met you. If it wasn't you, it would have been some other mammal."

As if to belie this, a shadow of hatred darkened her narrowed eyes now. "You sure as heck didn't help, no...you were always so full of yourself, and even though you said all the right things, made all the right gestures, after we got to City Hall and you just muscled your way into everything...pushed me down, aside, out of the way, however you could...well, I just snapped. I thought you lied to the public, to me...that you just used me to get what you wanted, like every other politician under the
sun. And that hurt." Tears welled up anew, and somehow, despite the ugly things she was saying, and everything he knew could be placed at her hooves, the lion felt a stabbing pain in his chest at hearing the true anguish in her voice.

"Nothing I did mattered, you got all the glory for everything we did...another predator, living off his prey...and I couldn't even tell if you were doing it deliberately, or you were so arrogant you didn't even realize you were doing it. That just made it worse." The sheep took a deep breath, let it out in a long, shuddering exhalation, then gestured a bit pathetically with a hoof. "So, I was a bitch, I admit it. I plotted revenge against you, but...it was really against every predator who ever knocked me down, who hurt me...against the whole stupid system in our society. I mean—I'm sure you don't know anything about it, but my family…” She choked up and couldn't continue.

Indeed, Lionheart had no idea what she was talking about, but before he could even attempt to address anything she'd said about predators or him in particular, Judy cleared her throat and leaned forward on the white countertop, her small face intent and every muscle clenched and taut. Even her ears twitched stiffly as she held out her paw for the phone and he wordlessly handed it over. "I do. I made it a point to find out, once I realized your brother was involved in all this. And I am sorry for what happened to you...I can see why you might think the system failed you. Peter Mallupe was brought to justice, but that couldn't bring your father back."

Even as the feline was staring at her, stunned but with understanding slowly sinking in, the rabbit continued, her voice hardening and her violet eyes flashing dangerously. "But that does not excuse or change what you did. And maybe it's just me, Miss Bellwether, but I'm having a hard time believing you think so highly of Mr. Stagmire, and would have tried to help him if you could. Because from what I was told, all you saw him as was a 'loose end' you wanted done away with. Preferably in a way that would destroy the city if you couldn't be Mayor."

The sheep coughed, nearly choking on her tears, but even after she had recovered, she was still staring at Judy. There was guilt there, but also consternation. "What? That was not what I—"

Smacking her hoof down on the countertop, Bellwether breathed in and out several times to steady herself, then growled, "That wool-headed, mutton-brained, no-good brother of mine! He must have told Doug...I specifically said…"

Finally Nick interjected, leaning in to the receiver from the other side, and unsurprisingly his tone was so dubious and dripping with sarcasm that Leodore rather thought a carving knife couldn't cut through it. "You honestly expect us to believe that? Our very reliable informant heard dear Douglas say these were your last orders you absolutely demanded be carried out."

"Emphasis on were my orders." Dawn seemed to draw on a well of unknown strength as she sat up straight again in her seat. "I've had...a lot of time to think since I've been locked up in here. No, I haven't magically been washed white as snow or anything like that—I don't think that's even possible now. I've still got my grievances. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at Leodore, or think of him,
without my blood boiling. I don't know if I can forgive him, either. But I do know I did a lot of things wrong. Crossed lines I never should have. And all else being equal, I did not want Buckley dead!" Shivering, the ewe looked from one set of suspicious eyes to the next. "Tell me: what did Cyrus try to do? Or...God help us...actually do?"

Lionheart couldn't bring himself to recite the litany of crimes the mobster had committed, even if he weren't overcome by the fury still churning inside him, so he left it to the others—mostly Judy—to explain. By the time she had finished with the final recitation of the events at the Water Hole, Bellwether's eyes were wider than ever and he rather thought the sheep looked as if she would be sick. As the last words were leaving the rabbit's mouth, Dawn was shaking her head...slowly at first, then more rapidly.

"No! That....that wasn't what I asked for at all. I mean..." Her shoulders slumped. "All right, I did want some last bit of nasty payback, if I couldn't get what I wanted. And okay, I did say I wanted him to ruin Buckley's reputation—he was close to you, your dearest friend, so if I couldn't run Zootopia, I wanted to hurt you one last time. But I figured after he gave everyone a good scare, turned the city on its head so it couldn't recover, maybe made the City Council push for some new laws that would change who was in charge, he'd get cured and that'd be that. I never thought...I never wanted..."

She looked at them imploringly. "I wanted the predators to be hurt, not the prey! And I never wanted anyone to die if I could help it! I...I knew some might, once all the unrest started happening, but I...I thought it was a price that had to be paid if us prey would ever be on top. I wanted to rule, I wanted the predators afraid of us prey...of themselves...but I didn't want everyone slaughtered! How could you think that, after what happened to my—after I saw my own—" She gulped, hiccupped, dashed away thicker streams of tears. "No, I never wanted the Night Howler used indiscriminately like that...and I certainly didn't want the mafia taking over Zootopia!"

Bellwether let out a small sob, rubbed at her heavily-leaking nose, her voice becoming thinner and even more plaintive. "This wasn't what I wanted at all...please, you have to believe me!"

Once...right after his arrest, during his months of incarceration as he learned more of what had happened to the city he loved and the full extent of the diabolical plot against its innocent mammals, during the mission to rescue Bucky, even only a short time ago, in fact...Lionheart would have refused to believe her. He would have not only scoffed at her 'heartfelt' confession, dismissed her crocodile tears and viciously remonstrated her for daring to act as if she had any moral high ground left, he would also have relished watching this breakdown. He would have thoroughly enjoyed the already-unstable sheep falling apart as she was faced with the true depravity of her crimes and their consequences she had not foreseen.

But now? Listening to her, witnessing this, the maned feline could not hate her. All Leodore Lionheart felt, as he gazed through the clear barrier at the former Assistant Mayor, was sorrow. For
what he beheld was someone truly pitiful, in every sense of the word. And what he heard in her tone and words...something he could never have imagined, but also something he could not deny...was just how much she sounded like himself, when the enormity of his actions—and just how he had disappointed, forgotten, and turned his back on those who had believed in him—had finally sunk in.

Whether everything Dawn Bellwether had said was true, or whether some of it might be self-serving lies and the rest was illusory rationales she used to maintain even a slender hold on sanity...he could hear sincerity in her voice. She was horrified by what had occurred, or almost occurred, and wanted them to understand even if they could never approve.

Very slowly, the big cat let out the breath he'd been holding, as well as the fiery resentment. "I do believe you. God help me, but I do. If for no other reason than because it rather sounds as if we are not the only ones Cyrus hurt...nor is Mr. Corlione the only one he lied to."

The look Bellwether gave him was one he never thought he'd see, and also quite at odds with itself—on the one paw, startlingly grateful and relieved, and on the other paw, pinched with disgust and loathing. But before the sheep could say anything, Judy interrupted again, and this time she seemed curious rather than angry or dismissive. "Yeah, about that. Leodore may have had his own reasons for coming to see you, Dawn, but I wanted to know just what part you played in this whole plot...and after what you've just told us, things really don't add up now. If you didn't even know what your brother really did for Vinny Corlione, let alone what he might do in carrying out your orders, why did you even ask for his help in the first place? How did he get involved in this whole Night Howler mess to begin with?"

Shifting her gaze back to the rabbit—with an odd fixedness, as if she were only just now aware of her presence or even recognizing her at all—the sheep sniffled, wept, and bleated for several more moments, then at last wiped her tears away rather forcefully and gave a firm nod. "A-all right. After everything I've done, I at least owe you that much. It certainly can't hurt...and after everything he's done, it just might help."

She shrugged a bit listlessly. "Why did I go to him? He's my brother...the only family I've got left, at least that I could...still talk to. After I was arrested, he was the only one who still stood by me, and I never really had many friends before that anyway. Who else was I going to turn to for anything, let alone what I wanted done?" Dawn stopped. "Besides, he was the one who introduced me to Doug originally."

Lionheart let out a gasp as he too sat up and leaned forward; somehow, despite the fact the rams who had run this conspiracy had apparently transferred their loyalty seamlessly from the ewe to her brother, he had never made the logical connection between them. "What? You mean...of course!"

In spite of the situation, the sheep seemed unable to keep from smirking wryly at him as he realized
his own ignorance and lack of insight. "Well, darn it, Leo, looks like you really do get the solid gold Kubbie doll, huh? Though I admit I'm flattered you thought I was that well-connected and that much of an evil genius, that I knew or could easily find a sniper of that skill, at that short a notice." As Judy gave her a frosty glare and Nick cleared his throat meaningfully, Bellwether quickly backpedaled, offering them a toothy smile the sincerity of which was even more questionable than his own.

"Uh...anyway! Yeah, that's the kind of mammal someone in my line of work isn't exactly likely to stumble across, you know? And no, us sheep don't all just know each other, thanks." Lifting her chin with an audible sniff, the former Assistant Mayor rolled her eyes, then continued. "When I said I needed someone who could take out dangerous mammals quietly and from a distance—I made him think I was worried about assassins at City Hall and the like—he sent me to a shooting gallery he knew, and a guy he said the owner had recommended to him."

Finding his voice again, the lion couldn't keep the accusing note from his tone. "And you actually believed that?"

"Why not?" she shot back. "I happened to know a reporter who was so fed up with politics and the predators who dominated it he'd be willing to do anything to bring the whole circus crashing down. And Doug knew a guy from the Black Sheep Market who happened to have a background in biology and chemistry too, so he could find and distill the Night Howler for me. When you're looking for resenters, mammals who live on the dark side, operate on the wrong side of the law, it isn't much of a coincidence to find out they have lots of different talents in common that can be combined in nasty ways."

After a few moments, the ugliness melted out of her face and voice, and Dawn shook her head. "You're right though. I really should have realized. But my brother had done a great job hiding the truth from me for years, and...I didn't see because I didn't want to see."

Beside him, the fox stirred. "Ah. Aha. Suddenly it all makes sense." Crossing his arms over his slender chest, Nick raised an eyebrow. "Cyrus didn't just 'happen' to know a sniper at the local firing range, who just 'happened' to have military-level training. He and Corlione were the ones who set it up in the first place...the guy who owned that firing range, or somebody else who went there, was one of their illegal contacts in the military. So every student he turned out would be right at paw when the mafia had need of them, and ol' Cy knew just where to go when you asked him for help."

Bellwether nodded glumly, but Lionheart was peering at her in some consternation again. "All right, I suppose I can see how you could have overlooked that. Gun control never came up often at City Council meetings, and you never seemed very interested in such violent matters anyway. So you couldn't be expected to know how unusual Doug's sniper skill was. But why didn't you even wonder? Or think to look into his background, or why your brother would—?"
The ewe slammed her free hoof down on the countertop again to cut him off, flinched as she glanced back worriedly at the cop on duty who was frowning at her like a threatening thunderhead, then visibly forced herself to stay calm. "Because, Lionfart, I was as much a dodo in the end as you are." Despite the use of that nickname, she sounded far more despairing and guilty than she did disparaging. In fact the look she gave him was more the sort his mother used to use when he was being particularly cubbish, once upon a time, not the one of hate and disgust he'd come to expect.

"I was so focused on my great plan, so obsessed with getting back at you and gaining power, I wasn't paying attention the way I should have been. If I'd really been thinking, I would have put two and two together and realized no reputable security force would have contacts like my brother seemed to. And if I'd looked into where all he was working, I'd have understood as soon as Corlione's name came up." Bellwether sighed and sagged in her seat again. "You were right again, Leodore. He lied to me and used me, just as much as he did anyone else to get ahead in his world. It was his mafia contacts that got Doug set up, it had to be. And when I went to him for help...when I told him about Buckley and how to get to him...I just played right into his hooves."

If he were feeling vindictive, Lionheart would have been gloating about how Dawn, too, had been fooled and taken advantage of. But not only did that run completely contrary to the reason for his visit, it was hard to enjoy knowing how close Zootopia and its citizens had come to ruin, and how he himself had nearly lost his mind in the nightmare he had so greatly feared, because Cyrus had been clever and skilled enough to manipulate his sister as well as Corlione and the rest of them.

So instead he cupped the receiver close and injected as much sympathy as he could muster into his voice. "If it's any consolation, his own boss didn't see the truth, and walked right into a jail cell to take my place without even warning Mr. Big something like this could happen. The mafia is all about loyalty, and you don't get very far there or in the criminal underworld at all without being dangerously intelligent. But Corlione fell for it too."

Again Bellwether gave him that narrow-lidded look behind her glasses. "Don't try and deflect, you were never any good at it. I know what I did." She paused, her tone sounding both disgruntled and oddly touched. "Thank you, though. But it's true...I told him everything I knew about Cliffside, even all the passwords and codes he'd need to access the old Meadowlands files from my computer, where to find the floor plans at the Zootopian Zoning Board and the library. I gave him the codes for the hospital, told him where the recordings I kept of you were, everything.

"I screwed up even more than I knew. If Cyrus hadn't had to wait until enough time had passed that I wasn't being watched as closely here anymore, so he could visit me and ask sensitive questions like that...and if they hadn't needed so long to grow and distill more Night Howler...this whole thing would have gone down months ago, and who knows whether you could have stopped it?"

The mix of fear and bitterness in her voice faded, leaving only a hollow sadness. "And the worst part is...after all that, after what Cyrus wanted to do to everyone in Zootopia, and how he used my last
plan to try and make it happen...I don't even know what he would have done about me. Would he have broken me out of prison? Or would he just have left me here while he and the mafia took over, and forgotten I was even here, because he got everything he wanted from me?" Unable to meet his gaze longer, the sheep half-turned away. "If so, it's the least I deserve."

It was amazing, really, Leodore marveled—the change he was seeing in Dawn. Not that he believed the sheep had truly become a different and better mammal; while she had been locked in maximum security for over three months, and would have had plenty of time to consider her actions and what came of them, that was not nearly enough. Even if she were not truly as unstable and malicious as she had seemed, or her mental acuity had recovered; even if she had realized she had allowed herself to go too far in the danger her plans had posed to the innocent—no, she still harbored too much resentment toward him. Despite what he had concluded about her overall sincerity, she could not be fully trusted, and it would be a long time, if ever, before she could be assessed to see whether she had earned any reprieves, a relaxation of her harsh surroundings and the granting of special privileges.

But he did think that hearing the truth...about himself, about Bucky, about what he actually felt and believed about his former subordinate...had at least allowed some of those darker, nastier feelings and attitudes to be eased, if not laid to rest. It was the most that could be expected, the most she deserved, but it was also the right thing to do. And it at least lifted some of the guilt weighing down his heart.

"Perhaps so," he said at last, softly. "But the simple fact is, we were able to stop it, and despite all those who were put in danger, the madness has finally come to an end...and Miss Hopps and Mr. Wilde were able to bring your brother, Mr. Ramses, and the others to justice. So you can at least know the city is safe again and no one else will suffer from your actions." Or from mine.

Dawn did look a little relieved, but somehow he wasn't surprised when the ovine tilted her head slightly and shrugged again. "I guess. I mean, I'm glad nobody died or anything, and like I said, I never wanted the mafia to take over, but...other than that, I really don't care about anybody else, you know. Don't have anybody to care about, any more. But that's why it's probably best I'm in here."

She furrowed her brow pensively, and then her expression lightened somewhat as her gaze sharpened on him. "There is one thing I'm really glad about, though. I'm glad now that you were able to save Buckley, and not just because I like the guy. What you told me, about him and you?" A genuine smile appeared on her little muzzle, one that blended wistfulness with sardonic irony.

"I know why you hid it...and if it were anybody else from the Meadowlands, you would've been absolutely right to do it. But...I actually think it's great. Kinda awesome, even. It explains a lot, looking back I can't believe I didn't see it—but well, I think it's something Zootopia needs now more than ever. If predator and prey can come together like that...and if everyone sees you two together...then there's still hope." Now her look turned crestfallen again. "It sure shows I was wrong about mammals. Wrong about you."
The tentative way she said it was clearly not a full forgiveness or acceptance, more a small admission based on this sole exception rather than how the maned cat had comported himself overall and especially not toward her. But it was far more than he had hoped for, coming here. At the same time, Lionheart couldn't help but wince a bit. Most likely due to everything which had come out about her scheme, plus what he had done now to stop Cyrus, the ewe seemed to be assuming that the former mayor would be exonerated completely, free to resume his life or at least his relationship with the stag. Yet even if matters at his trial went far better than he expected...he still wasn't sure, even now, if he and Bucky could recover what they once had.

And on top of that, Bellwether's final observation was another twist of the knife in his back, one that made him want to beat at his head and roar to the skies...since it was yet another mark of his own paranoid, desperate stupidity. True, there was no guarantee that if he and his lover had publicly admitted the truth of their relationship, this would have changed matters enough—his former running mate would still have despised him for what she viewed as ill treatment, she still would have been enraged by the state of predator-prey relations in the city.

But what if it had made a difference? What I was so afraid of was unfounded, after all. Could I really have caused so much harm, hurt so many, and in the end it was all for nothing...?

The Barbary was still reeling at what all he had learned—but especially this last revelation from the sheep—and trying to think of how he could possibly respond when the police officer on the other side of the barrier stepped forward to place her hoof on Dawn's shoulder. "Time's almost up," he heard the camel say over the line.

Nodding in acknowledgement, Bellwether sat up straight once more, composed herself—and then turned to look directly at Judy. "Okay, then in that case, I just have one more thing to say. Judy? I...I know there's no way you can forgive me, especially after what I tried to do to you and Nick, but...I meant what I said at the museum. I really did like you, and wanted only the best for you. I'm glad you're still out there, doing good for Zootopia. Maybe you can do for prey what I wanted to do...but never could."

The rabbit gazed at her inscrutably, then leaned into the phone to speak decisively. "No, I'll do it for every mammal. Not just prey."

Dawn seemed to take this in stride, even if she did cringe a bit. "Of course. Anyway...I'm sorry. And...I know I have no right to ask this of you, especially after what you've already done for me, but I was wondering...could you maybe, possibly, find it in your heart to make a visit on my behalf?"

This was apparently the last thing Judy had expected, and Leodore had to admit he was rather
startled too. "Oh...um...to whom?" She sounded wary.

"My mother." Bellwether's voice shook, but she worked to steady it. "I...highly doubt she has any idea what's happened to me. What I did. Or what Cyrus did, for that matter. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell her. I don't think she could handle it. But...if you *could* tell her I'm okay, or at least that I will be, it'd mean a lot to me." Quiet sorrow and uncertainty turned to a sudden rush of hasty reassurance. "If you don't want to, I completely understand."

For several long moments, the lapine stared at her, her emotions and inner thoughts even less discernible than before. Then, finally, she said, "I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you!" Despite the lack of a definite commitment, the ewe's gratitude was effusive. Smiling wider than she had the entire time they'd been speaking—and more like he remembered her from days which seemed long past, warm and shyly gentle—she started to turn in her chair to climb out of it, standing up so she could place the phone back in its niche.

Now it was his turn to recover his voice, as he finally gathered his scattered thoughts and knew what he had to say. Especially after her last request, which had been as heartbreaking as it was ennobling. "Dawn?"

She stiffened and looked back at him, querulous and quizzical at once. "Yes?"

"Thank you, too. For the things you said. You didn't have to, but I can tell you meant them. I don't know what is going to happen next either, but...it's good if we can put all this behind us, it'll make our chances that much brighter." He managed a smile. "So keep your chin up."

To his surprise, she actually smiled at that, even if it was a trifle lopsided. "I will do that. You too, Leo."

He watched her hang up her phone, hop down to the floor, and be escorted from the room by the cop. But as he absently hung up his own receiver and allowed Nick and Judy to gently but firmly nudge him out of his seat, Lionheart couldn't help letting out a deep sigh and squeezing his eyes shut for several long moments. He felt...so much lighter, as something he hadn't even realized was there until his talk with Bucky had brought it out into the open finally melted away. There was still so much he had to face, and do. But he knew he could never truly heal, if *this* burden had not been confronted. And now...now he had let it go.
Opening his eyes, and somehow completely disregarding the handcuffs which still joined his wrists, the lion smiled to himself as he followed his guardians from the visitors’ room. Perhaps there was, indeed, some hope after all.

Chapter End Notes

Hardly any comments to make here. Only two references really—the Kubbie doll which is of course a Zootopian-ism for a Kewpie doll, and which would obviously be cast in the shape of various predator cubs instead of human babies, and *habeas bestia* which would be Latin here for "that you have the animal". The rest of the chapter pretty much speaks for itself. While there were a number of loose ends related to Bucky’s shooting, Bellwether’s plan and how Cyrus modified and carried it out, how all the sheep knew each other and got together, and other details (some of which won’t be fully addressed until Leo’s trial and after), the majority of the chapter, and the reason for it, was of course so that Dawn and Leo could get proper closure. Again, while I am not redeeming Dawn here, I did want to show that not only were the surmisings made by our heroes about her and her part in all this not fully correct, there was a bit of Even Evil Has Standards going on which we weren’t aware of, and that she had reflected on her actions and their consequences enough to at least have a few regrets. She still did wrong, she’s still pretty contemptible, but I think she does deserve at least a little pity, particularly with the backstory I gave her and her family. Whether there is hope for her now, and how much, is something mostly outside the confines of my story (though she does still have one small role left to play before the end), but at least there’s more chance for Leo and Bucky patching things up because of this. And you’ve also gotten more of a window into my version of Leo and Dawn’s relationship, and how what we saw in the movie fits into what I conceived for them.

Also, I wanted to briefly observe for anyone who might be skeptical, or even outright angry, at the fact it seems that Corlione has gotten off scot-free just because he had no knowledge of what Cyrus was planning, two things: 1) they don’t have any clear, hard evidence of his mafia dealings, which is the only thing which could legally be used to hold him at this point and 2) he too still has a role left to play, and it doesn't necessarily involve him continuing to evade the law...

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