The Measure of a Mammal

by Aegis_Di

Summary

In order to prevent a global catastrophe where all mammals go savage through a combination of night howler toxin and secret coyote dark magic, Judy's consciousness is sent back in time to her 9 year old self. Only there can she stop the coming apocalypse by killing the mastermind behind these attacks, Coyote Astronaut Carl Latrans. The catch is that while she will survive this crime, she must suffer for her sins for the rest of her days.

The current story line picks up 19 years later where she is living homeless on the streets of the Zootopia. After a silent and dramatic encounter with Nick Wilde and his family in the Rain Forest District, she flees into the night and ends up in Tundra Town. Dying of hypothermia, she is found by chance by Dr Hugo Wiedii who me her during her 9 year incarceration at Cliffside Asylum. He takes her in and she begins the long road to recovery.

Interwoven into the story are flashback chapters that detail her past struggles to survive in a world that can’t accept predator murderers like her. Along the way she will find pain, forgiveness, love, and heartbreak as she struggles to carve a little bit of happiness out of her bleak existence.

- Inspired by Debts Unpaid by Dan French, aka Magick205
Monday Night: Knocking on Death's Door

Chapter Summary

A lost wandering soul.

Judy has been living homeless on the streets of Zootopia for the past three years. After seeing Nick Wilde walking through the Rain Forest district with his mate and kit, Judy could no longer take the heartbreak and suffering that the Divines had promised her, and ran off into the night. Soaking wet, she arrives in Tundra Town in the dead of night, and begins to feel the effects of the cold. Delirious, she wanders through the alley ways muttering to herself, slowly dying of exposure and hypothermia. She is rescued by an old doctor of hers, a margay named Dr Hugo Weidii, from her days spent at Cliffside as a young felon. Shocked to find her here after 13 years, he struggles to save her life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * * Somewhere Else * * *

Has she not suffered enough? Has redemption eluded her, even in the depths of her trials?

Can no solace be offered for her sacrifices? Can we not intercede upon her behalf?

Yes, You May…

For a time…

* * * A Cold Monday Night In Tundra Town. * * *

The night hung over Doctor Hugo Weidii's head like curtains of still black velvet, a mane of rising exhalation wreathed around his ears while a few lonely snowflakes drifted past his nose like sleepy moths. It was a fine night in Tundra Town, and while the cold air stung his jungle born lungs, he could not help but grin.

The monthly dinner of Tundra Town’s chapter of the Zootopia Neurological Society had gone smashingly well, with an excellent presentation on the current innovations in Mustelid spinal repair
given afterwards. The two ferret doctors presenting it had enjoyed a packed audience of over 30 medical professionals, and quite a few interested lay mammals had attended it as well. He certainly enjoyed their rapt attention during the presentation and the questions that they had asked the two speakers afterward were certainly thought provoking, even to his tired mind.

The snow crunched under his wide margay paws as he strolled back to his SUV. He was certain his parents, down in the Orinoco jungles of the southern continent, would find this place to be the surest embodiment of a frozen hell, but he enjoyed it. This impossible city was his home.

A murmur, drifting back amongst the flurries, twitched his ears. They swiveled back and forth, trying to pinpoint the sound. **There, look there, down that alley way, it came from there.** He looked up from the street he was strolling along at the darkened alleyway across from him. His tree born ears, optimized for hunting in dark dense jungles, zeroed in on the mutterings emanating from the dark.

He stopped, cautious but alert. He felt little fear, for while he shared his margay father’s size, hidden under his bulky parka was a compact version of his mother’s jaguar build. Many a bully encountered during his childhood had tried to tease him for being a half-breed runt, only for them to regret ever meeting him and his powerful claws. More modern criminals knew that by just meeting his eye that he was no easy mark, and would leave him to go in search of easier prey.

No, not a mugger. The mutterings weren’t directed at him. They were sing-song, repetitive, almost prayer-like in their cadence. “**I had to…. I had to…**” They sounded drunk, almost feminine? Not a mugger. And certainly not a bar-crawler. There weren’t any open on this street that he could see. A homeless mammal? If that were the case, the shelter sponsored by Her Lady’s Divinity over on 10th should still be open. Maybe he could get them to go there. It wouldn’t be the first time he had to escort an unlucky mammal to a homeless shelter. Far better for them to be there than out here on these frozen streets, even if they had to put up with the singing and sermons before they could sleep.

He stepped across the pavement, and into the gloom of the alley, the pupils in his nocturnal eyes widening to take in the dim illumination drifting in from the lone street lamp at his back. Color bleached from the world around him as the darkness fled and the scene before his eyes turned to monochromatic shades of gray and sepia. Empty pallets lined the walls, in between the ubiquitous rusting dumpsters that squatted on the asphalt like boxy toads, and a slow rivulet of icy water meandering around the garbage strewn down the center.

A small dark figure, mumbling at the air, listed down the alley towards him as he stood bathed in the cool light of the street lap behind him. He sniffed the night’s breeze, but he could not detect the tell-tale tang of alcohol coming from them. Drugs, perhaps? It was certainly not a night-howler derivative, not if they were lucid in their whispers. Maybe they were an opioid addict, a victim of the latest scourge in a long line of pestilences to plague the city?
Another scent wafted in to his nose, riding in upon the breeze. *Rabbit.* He breathed in deep, his nostrils flaring as he drew in more information from the dank air. *Wet Rabbit.* No, not drugs or alcohol. It was something far worse for a night like this, and with that his medical training kicked in as a single thought screamed through his mind.

*Hypothermia!*

He yanked his zipper down and ripped the parka off his strong frame. Stepping forward several steps, he carefully wrapped it around the small shivering figure. The rabbit’s eyes closed upon feeling the trapped body heat in the long coat embrace them. He looked down at the slight figure, trying to determine if they were a teenage rabbit, or a small female. *Female,* his nose told him.

“Miss”, he quietly said, trying not to spook her with his voice. Rabbits were flighty creatures, prone to shock at even the mere presence of a predator. And the confusion that came from hypothermia doubled the danger. She was at extreme risk of cardiac arrest if he wasn’t careful. But he had to get her out of the cold and out of her wet clothes. She was in serious trouble, and a fire & rescue unit might not make in time before she slipped into shock.

He knew his SUV was right down the street, and it had his gym bag and an old blanket in the back seat. It was the closest shelter available to him. He bent down on his knee before her and said “Miss, I need to get you out of the cold, and get you dried off. Can I pick you up, and carry you to my car? It’s warm and dry there.” He gestured down to the end of the alley way.

*Diosa, I sound just like a stalker saying that!* He mused wryly to himself.

Her nose twitched, breathing in the scent of warm predator standing just in front of her, but she didn’t panic or try to bolt. A small smile appeared on her lips, and she breathed “Okay…”

*She is really out of it,* he worried. As a rabbit, she was far too trusting of the feline kneeling in front of her. There had always been a whiff of fear from the rabbit families and patients he had dealt with in his career as a neurologist. Well, except for Dale and Meredith, but they were his neighbors and knew him well. They didn’t count. But nothing from her, which was strange.

He slowly gathered his arms around the small shivering form, one arm around her back, and one below her hips. He pulled her to his shoulder, embracing her, and prepared stand up, taking her weight into his arms. *She’s light, far too light,* he thought. He stood easily, without a complaint voiced from her, and turned to exit the alley.
As he stepped out on to the street, he looked down at her head resting on his chest. Her cheeks were sunken, her fur was matted and mangy. He sniffed her head, between her ears, and smelled the distinct odor of ammonia. The horrible scent of a body that consumed itself as it fought to survive.

This confused him, as he knew that there were a quite a few shelters or soup kitchens, both private and publicly run, even right here in Tundra Town, where she could easily get two square meals a day. She might not get a bed for the night, but she wouldn’t have starved. And they would at have least have made sure that she was dressed warm and dry before sending her into the night.

She might be a battered female, escaped from an abusive household or marriage. Or maybe a gang member on the run from retribution. But he couldn’t see any telltale bruises or scars on her head. And as he tucked his muzzle in between her ears again for another sniff, she reached up with a cold and clammy paw to bop him on the nose. “Stop it, Nick, I’m trying to sleep….” she whispered.

That name, and the scent of her paw on his nose, jogged a memory in him that he couldn’t yet place. He should have, but the wet fur hid the rest of her scent from him, hints of an earthy scent which was very similar to another, older scent, that he was familiar with. He couldn’t place it in his distracted mind yet, as all of his concentration was now on her immediate survival.

He looked up and realized his SUV was just a few cars away. He hitched her around so that he could free up a hand to dig out his keys. He hit the auto start button and opened the rear doors to slide into the backseat. The change in motion stirred her to wakefulness, and she turned her head up towards his, opening her eyes.

Seeing those eyes, in the here and now, shocked him to his very core, freezing him right in place. Eyes that reminded him of sunsets and storms over the mountains, and of orchids and water lilies in the jungles back home. Eyes that screamed their connection to that tingling scent he just couldn’t place before. Eyes he had been searching so long and fruitlessly for in this past decade.

Eyes of the clearest amethyst.

Mi diosa! It’s Judy Hopps!

* * * * *
She shivered in his coat. Shaken from his reverie, he mumbled an apology to her and ducked into the backseat. Shutting the door beside him, he turned to her, and open the coat. He orientated her so that she was facing him and straddled his lap with her legs, but she shivered violently when the open air hit her wet fur.

“I’m sorry, but we need to get you out of those wet clothes and dried off, or you could go into shock from the cold.” She looked down at the torn blouse clinging to her chest, and picked slowly at the hemline. Seeing that she really wasn’t going to be able to help take it off, and that the blouse was a lost cause anyway, he hooked a claw in the front and ripped down, shredding what was left. As he reached into his gym bag for his towel he heard her mumble something like, “and we haven’t even gone on our first date yet…”

Turning back to her, and looking into those eyes, he didn’t see any fear. They were a little confused, which was but to be expected, but the hint of humor glinting there seemed a bit out of place. He started to towel off the front of her torso, and he was appalled by the feel of her rib cage under his paws. When she was still at Cliffside, even after being pumped full of Thorazine every day, she had still been an active and healthy bunny. She had fallen far since she had left that horrible place.

He finished with her front and reached up behind her to pull off her jacket, dropping it to the floorboards. The remains of her blouse quickly followed as he got to work drying off her back with the towel. He knew that the inside of his parka where it had touched her would dry quickly enough, as the inner lining wicked off any moisture that collected against it. As he worked the towel into the fur on her bony back, she in turn leaned into his chest and dug her tiny paws into his thick feline chest fur.

Her wet shorts had soaked into his lap by that point, which reminded him that she was still wearing them. Putting down the towel, he unfastened her shorts, picked her up under the arms, and pulled them down and off of her legs with a wet shucking sound. He pulled her to his chest, and carefully worked on drying her thighs. He didn’t want the cold blood from her extremities rushing to her heart, as that could also cause her to have a heart attack.

As he was doing that, she had cuddled into his chest and neck, and had started to make a sound kind of like soft purring, which he had never really heard a rabbit make before. He let the coat fall back to cover her legs, and since she had mostly dried her own arms on his shirt and underlying fur, he went to work on her ears that were draped over the back of the coat. As he slowly drew the towel down the ears, she sighed and closed her eyes. A slow smile crept up over her muzzle.

He was rather confused by all this. Either she was in shock or she had really changed in the intervening years. He was getting the distinct impression, both from her actions and her rising scent, that she really enjoyed the touch of a predator on her fur and skin. A scent he found to be totally at odds with her current physical state.
“Judy…” he softly spoke to her, trying to get her attention without also scaring her. “You’re suffering from hypothermia and exposure. I need to take you to the hospital. Is that okay? Can I do that?”

She shivered again, not with cold, but with fear. He could smell the spike in her scent as it washed over her in a shudder. “Nooooo…. They’ll catch me….” she moaned.

“Who will find you, Judy?” he queried her. But she just started to cry in these strange little hiccuping sobs. She was definitely in shock, and he wasn’t going to a straight answer from her in this state. But something was definitely terrifying her.

So that meant hospitals were right out. He knew the local shelters really weren’t really equipped to handle hypothermia and exposure cases of this magnitude, not without sending her to a hospital. And he didn’t want to risk her trying to escape, just like she used to do with great regularity at Cliffside. The ZPD would just shove her in the drunk tank to sleep it off - just one more homeless rabbit that they didn’t want to deal with.

That left him with just one final option at this time of night.

Neighbors!

* * * * *

“It's okay, Judy, it’s okay” he crooned to her. “No hospitals. We won't take you to the hospital. I’ll just take you home and tuck you into bed, instead. Would you like that, conejita?” he asked her. (*Conejita: Bunny Girl*)

She gulped back a sob with her eyes clenched shut and nodded once into his chest. Yes.

“Okay, I’m just going to call my neighbor Meredith to help me. You’ll like her. She’s a bunny just like you – an arctic hare. Is that okay?” He put his nose back down in between her ears, as it seemed help calm her. An action that seemed on the surface to be counter intuitive to him, placing his teeth so close to her head and neck, but she seemed to like the closeness. She must have had a predator for a boyfriend or loved one in her past for her to respond like that. Strange. The decade since he has last seen her must have had so many changes in her life.
Sniffling, with her eyes starting to relax, she let out a soft “yeah…”

He fished his cell out of his coat pocket, scrolled through listing until he found Meredith’s number, and pressed “send call”.

Ring, Ring… “Woot?” A sleepy, slightly cross, masculine voice answered.

“Dale? This is Hugo. I’m sorry to have called so late, but I have a bit of a medical emergency here, and I was wondering if I could talk to Meredith?” he asked.

“Cat, we just got to sleep…” Oops, Dale and Meredith had headed off to bed early. They must have had plans for an early appointment in the morning or something. Plans which he was going to now thoroughly upset. Mierda!

Mumbled sounds came from the phone. “Meredith…. Meredith, wake up. It’s the Jag. He’s got some bloody emergency he wants your help with.”

A sigh “Well, give it here, luv, and I’ll talk to him.” A bit of shuffling noise came over the phone, and Meredith piped in “Hello, Hugo. What do you need?” The voice was sleepy but distinctly not angry or annoyed like Dale. In fact, she sounded rather happy. And then the light dawned on Hugo as to why they had gone to bed early, why Dale was so annoyed, and why Meredith was so happy right now.

They had gone off to do that special thing that hares do, with the hares that they love, with great vigor, and commendable enthusiasm. And considerable stamina. It was scary, after all, considering that they were grandparents. Well, at least he had caught them after the fact. Dale would have probably broken the phone if he had called earlier.

“Hello Meredith. I am sorry to call you so late, but I need a bit of your nursing expertise. I have found one of my strays, but she is refusing to go to the hospital.” Hugo started off with.

“Oh! She?” Meredith’s question hung in the air. “Which she?”

“Judy Hopps, Meredith! After a decade of searching, I finally found her! Or more precisely, she
“What? Wait, is she purring? Why Hugo, you randy devil, you!” Meredith softly chuckled.

“What? No, it isn’t like that. She’s in a bad way. I found her wandering around Tundra Town soaking wet. She’s suffering from exposure, hypothermia, some dehydration and also what smells like malnutrition. She’s paranoid about going to the hospital, something about somebody being after her, which would explain why she was in such a state here tonight. But it seems that she is willing to go to my house to rest. I thought we could get her cleaned up and hydrated tonight before taking her to the clinic in the morning. With that in mind, what I wanted to ask you is when was the last time you ran an IV? I’ve got a full emergency kit down in my home office for when patients come over and something horrible happens, but truthfully I’m not all that good of a stick.”

“Truthfully?” Meredith replied, “Thursday.”

Really? Oh! Oh, okay, that’s good”.

“Really. Hugo, luv, for a doctor you are profoundly ignorant as to what happens inside a maternity ward on a daily basis. Or even, I might point out, the means and methods of reproduction for mammals in general, for that matter.” She managed to get a little dig in under his skin. He was a dear, and she did consider him to be a good friend and a good neighbor, but his timing just always leaves something to be desired.

“Ha Ha. I work with the pointy end of the mammal, not the middle part. Less screaming that way.”

“Uh huh…” She patiently replied. “And are you actually going to bring this female patient up here, or are you going to banter with an old doe all night?”

“Oh, sorry, I’ll head up now. It should be about twenty or so minutes, at this time of night.”

“We’ll be waiting.” Meredith chuckled as she ended the call.

Hugo closed the phone app and opened the SUV control app so that he could send the front passenger seat all the way back and down. Peeling her up off his chest, he wrapped her up in the
coat and lifted her up over the center console so that he could settle her into the seat. Pulling up the blanket, he turned and draped it over her slight frame, and watched quietly as she fell back to sleep. Watching her, he realized that while she was out of danger for the moment, it would be a long and tough road to her recovery. She had no reserves left – the next shock could kill her. She needed time and support to recover those reserves.

But he needed to take the next step, and actually drive her to her next destination. He looked down at himself, and realized he was soaked from chest to knees. “Ooo this was going to be cold” he thought as stared at the side door with trepidation. He did not want to go back out there. Screw it! He clambered up between the seats, getting wet mud from his feet on the center console and his alligator leather seats. He steeled himself for a OCD attack over getting them so dirty, but nothing really happened. *I guess it helps to have somebody else to worry about,* he thought, as he buckled her in, then secured himself.

He pulled out of his space and went down the road, heading off to his house. As he did, he passed a ZPD cruiser driven by a lone cheetah. Ah, it looked like it was Officer Clawhauser on patrol tonight, and looking miserable to be stuck in Tundra Town. He waved at him, wished him well on this cold night and turned down the street for home.

**Chapter End Notes**

Doctor Hugo Weidii is based on an early version of the character that would become Clawhauser. There were several variants of the story that the Disney writers worked through before they arrived at the story that we know as Zootopia, and in one of those story variants Nick was a secret agent. He meets a bartender named Hugo, a large orange tabby cat wearing shorts and a green tropical shirt, and does a scene at a bar with him. This character would go through many changes, but would eventually become the adorable cheetah we know as Benjamin.

I needed a character that Judy could have interacted with during her time at Cliffside, and since "Hugo" means mind or spirit, I picked him as a base for the doctor. In Zootopia there are no human domesticated animals, being that primates died out before the rise of Mammal Sapiency, so the character would have to be based on a wild cat. I picked the Margay feline because it was about the size of a very large housecat, orange, and because it was an expert tree climber, which was cool. Also, Hugo is a very common name in Venezuela which is part of the Margay's home range.
Flashback: The Escape Artist

Chapter Summary

When Hugo first met Judy...

A flashback to 13 years ago when Judy first met Doctor Hugo Weidii while she was a patient at Cliffside. Hugo has just finished Medical School, and is doing his post-doc work with The Zootopia Mammal Health and Welfare office. He has come to the Cliffside Asylum to try new and experimental treatments with patients where traditional methods have failed. Arriving on his first day, he first meets with Administrator Swinton, but their tour of the facility is interrupted by Judy's bi-weekly escape attempt. Judy is captured by Hugo as she attempts to flee, and Hugo chooses her as his first patient.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13 Years Earlier At Cliffside psych ward: Hugo’s First Day

“Good afternoon, Administrator Swinton. It is a pleasure to meet you.” Hugo held his paw out to greet her, as he stood in the marble clad atrium outside of her office.

“Why, Thank you. It’s good for me to finally speak to you in person as well, after all the phone tag and emails we have traded back and fourth. Did you have any difficulty getting here?” she shook his paw politely with her hooves, and let go.

He smiled back up at her, amused by her discomfort but careful to keep his teeth hidden. While she was taller than him, she appeared uneasy in his presence for some reason. He didn’t want to appear intimidating to her, as he needed her help and cooperation for the program to succeed, experimental as it was. “No, the drive up here was relaxing, and the location is fairly pretty, all told. The only complaint I could voice is, and I am sure you get this a lot, the lack of parking at the entrance way.”

“Yes, one of the common failings of building anything right up on the edge a cliff. That is why most of our employees take public transportation to get here. You might want to consider availing yourself of a ZPT Metropass,” she pointed this out to him.

“I shall consider it, thank you.”
She turned and started to walk down the hallway, and he fell in step easily beside her. “And were you still looking to start your patient interviews today?” she asked him.

“Yes, please,” he answered her. “It will take some time to sort out which form of cognitive therapy will work best for each of the individual patients that I would like to include in the program, and then I will have to test them together in their groups to see if they work as a synergy, or will they too be disruptive to the objectives of the group. That is why I am limiting the initial participation to just 30 patients, so that I can limit the number of variables I have to deal with. Hopefully the interview process won’t take too long over all.”

“Do you have these 30 patients already picked out, then?” she asked of him.

“I have about half picked out so far, but I wanted to wander around the facility a bit, maybe see the other patients, and evaluate their potentials,” he nodded.

“Very well, Doctor. My staff would be pleased to assist you in this,” she assured him.

“Watch Out! She’s making a break for it!” somebody yelled down the hall.

A grey flash zipped by them, moving fast and low to the floor. Hugo looked up to watch a rabbit or perhaps a small hare, her legs pumping furiously, disappear down the hall and around a corner. A crash of falling sheet metal echoed down the hall, along with a shouted curse. Two bear orderlies came running down the opposite end of the corridor towards the corner, spreading them selves out to block that end. The rabbit pelted back around the corner, saw them both and made a radical 90 degree turn away, sliding along the wall, to bolt back down the hall she had just come from. Towards him.

Time slowed in Hugo’s mind as his eyes narrowed. He canted his head down to give his ears better coverage of the approaching lupin. The noisy corridor stilled, as his mind blocked out the voices yelling all around him and soon all he heard was the sound of her claws scratching on the floor tiles. His paws flexed as his legs slide slightly apart, putting himself into a stable ready stance.

As she whipped past him, he kicked his leg out in front of her paws to block her stride, and used the momentum of their collision to spin himself up and over her back, landing on his paws over her. They slide a few feet down the hall, her smaller body trapped beneath his, the impact causing her breath to go out of her in a whoosh. But she wasn’t stunned at all, as she immediately started trying to kick and scrabble out from underneath him. He snapped his paw to the back of her neck,
and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. As he stood up on his other three limbs, he placed his muzzle right by her ear and let a soft little growl escape his lips that only she could hear. Her ears went back in fear, and her eyes snapped back in her skull, locking on his eyes as she froze.

Smiling, he stood back up on his hind legs, and with his paw still wrapped around her scruff, he pulled her back upright. She dangled from his paw, her nose twitching madly as he grinned down at her. Turning his head back to the wide eyed administrator, he inquired of her. “And whom might is this little energetic rabbit be?”

“That’s Judy Hopps, our resident escape artist. She must have gotten out of her room. Again,” she replied, with a hint of concern in her eyes.

What is with all the nervousness? Does she somehow think that I am secretly here to inspect them? He wondered.

A wolf orderly puffed up to stop in front of them, and turned to apologize to the administrator. “I’m sorry, ma’am. She slipped out from under my legs the moment I opened the door.” She nodded at him, acknowledging his apology but her eyes promising him some carefully considered choice words would be said later in private, and then she tilted her ears back at Hugo and Judy. The wolf, contrite, turned to Hugo and held out his paw, “I’ll take her now, sir.”

Hugo held up his other paw and replied, “No, that is quite okay. I think I will hold onto this one for the time being.” The wolf turned his head back to his boss in askance.

“Doctor?” Swinton squeaked, plainly looking confused and a little worried.

“This one will be the first official patient in my program! I’m sure we will be able to find a more constructive outlet for all that nervous energy she has just displayed.” Hugo replied to her, grinning at the rabbit while she just looked miserably at the floor.

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Judy had awoken that morning to the sound of rabid howling. Beaver howling to be precise. Mr. Millpond was at it again, howling like a wolf. But only because he thought he was a wolf. She pulled her pillow up over her head and pulled it down, grinding her teeth in frustration.
There was a clatter at her door, and she peered from under the pillow at it. It was just her breakfast – some limp carrots, and some wilted greens to go with them on a cheap paper plate. Oh joy, the kitchen must being trying to save money again by recycling last night’s left-overs.

There was a distant muted thunk, and the howling stopped. Oh good, the orderlies had managed to gag Millpond. He’d chew through that in a few hours, she knew, but that meant at least she’ll have some peace and quiet to choke her breakfast down in.

She got up and made her bed. A failure to do so would result in her being straitjacketed for a day as punishment. It wasn’t really worth the aggravation for that small defiance. She walked over to the door and pick up her food, and took it back to the steel table bolted to the wall. Plunking it down, she started to pick over her selections, putting them into her mouth and slowly chewing away. As she did she could hear the other herbivores getting up and getting their breakfast by the sounds that came echoing through the vents in her ceiling.

She finished her breakfast quickly, even considering how uninspiring it was, because she knew she would need her strength today. It had been two weeks since her last escape attempt, and she was getting restless. The orderlies were vigilant for a few days afterwards, but by now they were just tired, overworked, and bored. They would get sloppy and present her with an opportunity. And then she would finally get out of this place after six long years and know freedom.

It’s not really like she could actually escape, though. She knew that if even if she managed to get out of the building, it was a long causeway across the river to get to dry land and the safety of the mountains beyond the fence. The security wolves would run her down quickly enough before she could even get across all the way. And the only other alternative was to jump in the river, which just meant drowning to death after going over the falls.

No, she tried to escape because it gave her something to live for, otherwise the hopelessness and boredom of this place would kill her in the end. There was no future at Cliffside: no engaging education, no effective therapies, and no interesting diversions. Just dour staff, bleak beige walls, howling patients, and crappy TV to eek out the time. When they didn’t drug her for trying to escape, that is.

At least when they did manage to drug her, she didn’t care about any of that. But she hated the drugs as much as, if not more than, the hopelessness. It was just one more wall add to her cage that she had been left to rot in.

As she waited for the day’s activity to start, she absentmindedly munched on the paper plate her breakfast had come on. She needed the fiber to wear down her front teeth, because the orderlies wouldn’t give the patients chew sticks. Why give the patients anything that could be turned into a weapon and used against the staff? And if she tried to chew on any of the wood furniture in the
group rooms, she would get thrown in the Roof Box for her transgression. She hated the Box.

The door buzzed, and she stood up, and walked to the middle of the room. If the orderlies couldn’t see her through the porthole, they wouldn’t open the door to let her out. The door slowly slide into the wall, and she lifted her head up to gaze on the pudgy visage before her. It was Milton, one of the two brown bear orderlies in charge of this floor. He glowered down at her as she shuffled out to join the rest of the herbivores going off to this morning’s group session, which was down several floors. His twin brother John brought up the rear.

The two of them marched the group of much smaller herbivores off to the cramped group meeting room, where the wolf orderly in charge of the room held open the door for them to enter through. The various patients filed in and scattered around the room, most of them looking for the best seats to plunk themselves down into with various sighs of resignation. The door behind them latched shut and the wolf came back to watch them finish getting seated.

There was a tapping at door, and the wolf turned to go open it. Judy’s ear swiveled to listen. It sounded like the intern in charge of today’s group session had brought a large cardboard box and she was struggling to bring it through the door. The orderly offered to help her, and he took the box from he, much to the intern’s expressed thanks.

Great! Judy knew this was her opportunity. His back was turned on the patients and he was now distracted, encumbered, and blocked from leaving the room. She wouldn’t get a better opportunity today. She quickly dropped from the chair onto all four feet and darted between the chairs. She charged between his legs, causing him to trip and fall, dropping the box on himself where it knocked the wind out of him. She evaded the skinny goat legs of the intern, and blasted out into the corridor as the door shut behind her.

A left and a quick right, and she would be at the emergency stairwell, and halfway out. She tore down the hallway, flew past Cliffside’s main administrator and some small doctor in a lab coat, and hung the quick right to go down the back stairs. But as she turned the corner, she crashed into an orderly pushing a cart full of aluminum feeding trays, knocking over the cart, causing them to go flying, landing scattered all over the hallway leading towards the stairs.

Crap, crap, crap! She couldn’t go that way now, too many obstacles sliding around now. She had to get to the other set of stairs, further down and back the way she had come. She scrambled back to her feet, her claws scrabbling to get a grip on the cold tile floor. She accelerated quickly down the hall, and started to turn right, only to see the bulk of Milton and his brother block the way.

Damn it! Now the other stairs were blocked. But maybe she could go hide in the administration section just beyond her group room. Damn it, she was so close this time! Well, she wasn’t gonna roll over and play dead for these idiots! She would give them a chase to remember.
She switched her direction back again to the left and slide into the far wall. She used the wall and door jambs to jump off of as she sprinted for the end of the corridor. As she approached the Administrator, who was still a gaping idiot and the little doctor who was standing with her, she realized that he was some kind of small and speckled orange cat, smaller than a fox. She had never seen one like that here or anywhere else before.

That moment of distraction was enough to be her undoing. He swiftly slide into her, causing her to crash as he tripped her to the floor. She tried to scrambled out from underneath him, as he wasn’t really that big, but he grabbed the scruff at the back of her neck and held fast. And as soon as he had growled in her ear, that was it – all the fight that she had in her evaporated in that very moment as her mind was flooded with primal terror.

Her eyes snapped back to look into his large feline eyes, and she quailed at what she saw there. It wasn’t just some little cat that had stopped her, but something much worse, something that smelled and sounded like a jaguar that had just escaped from the deep jungle. Fast, furious, and very hungry. And as she gazed in horror deep into those great emerald eyes hanging above her, she saw Death personified. Her death, finally come for her, now, in this place. She froze, as her muscles refused to listen anymore to the mad jumbled confusion shrieking out of her brain.

He picked her up, gave her a little shake, and turned back to the administrator in triumph. He talked with her, but Judy was so discombobulated from the crash and the look in his eyes that she missed most of what he said. And when the wolf orderly had come for her, the cat just waved him away, and kept her hanging in his paw. She was really frightened then. She would have really preferred to go with the wolf, as any punishment met out by Cliffside’s staff would have been infinitely safer than being held up by this cat’s claws.

The chase was completely over, now she realized, as she hung limply from his rather larger paw holding her up by her scruff, her toes just barely touching the floor. But he had somehow claimed her, she knew, and he wasn’t going to let her go now. She was powerless to contest with him and escape was now impossible.

But she had come so close!

Chapter End Notes

The story will be told in an alternating fashion, switching evenly between the current events and flashback sequences from Judy’s and Hugo’s past. This is done for three reasons, even though it breaks some literary conventions to do so.
1) It allows me to expand on the details that the Divine characters in Debt's Unpaid
Chapter 19 had summarized, without having to do too much exposition in the main story line.

2) The flashbacks are in turn referenced in some way by either the proceeding or following chapters, as a means of fleshing more detail to the relevant scenes.

3) While I could have written the prequel first followed by the main story, that would be a large amount of details for a reader to retain going into the main story. Best to have those details close by, in my opinion. It would also have made the prequel a very depressing read. I felt it would be better to have the story of her fall tempered side-by-side by the story of her recovery.
Monday/Tuesday: The Long Night

Chapter Summary

Back to the world of the living.

Doctor Hugo Weidii works with his neighbors Meredith and Dale to save Judy from the effects of hypothermia and exposure. Sleeping soundly after her experience, Hugo writes Judy a note and goes to sleep himself. She wakes early in the morning, and is moved to tears by the fact that she has been found by the last mammal on earth she ever expected to meet again. The next morning over a simple breakfast, she agrees to go to the Tundra Town Free Clinic with them for further medical care related to her ordeal.

*** Late Monday Night in Snowy Hills. ***

As Hugo pulled into his driveway, he could see that the lights were on in his house. **Bueno.** That meant Meredith was already there, and hopefully she had set things up already. He drove his SUV into the garage, and parked it. At least his pants and shirt had mostly dried in the drive over, so he wasn’t going to get chilled himself carrying her in. He got out and walked around to open the passenger side, and bent in to pick up Judy.

“Oi, Doc! Let me get her. Go wash up. Meredith is waiting for ya inside.” Dale loomed behind him, and half glowered down at him. Surprised and just a little embarrassed, Hugo felt his ears go back, and he smiled a little guilty smile. “Okay” he managed not to squeak. **Maldición!** He was so preoccupied with his patient that he never managed to hear Dale open the door and come up behind him.

He walked inside, and turned to the kitchen where he heard a noise. Meredith stood at the counter besides the sink, warming a couple of saline packs in a large bowl of warm water. She turned towards him, took in his bedraggle appearance, and shook her tongs at him. “Oi, you’re a mess. You need to go get changed and washed up before anything else.” He looked down himself and nodded at her suggestion, walking down the hall to his bed room. There he pulled his damp clothes off and replaced them with some of his spare scrubs. He returned to the kitchen to wash his paws in the steel kitchen sink.

As she stirred the water, Meredith asked him, “Have you ever dealt with hypothermia, luv?”

Hugo scowled a moment before answering, “Um, I had two cases where I assisted with brain
aneurysm repairs where the surgical team had induced hypothermia in the patient. But that is about it. I had done my initial trauma rotation over at Sahara Square Central Hospital – we didn’t get many hypothermia or frostbite cases when I was there,” he explained to her. “And you?”

“I dealt with three or four during my last trauma rotation, but we lost two due to complications, poor dears.” She shook her head and sighed.

He looked at the bowls of water, and asked her, “Should I go fill the bath?”

She shook her head, “Oh, no. No, no, no… That can lead to thermal shock and a cardiac arrest. The temperature difference between the limbs and the core body can strain the heart too much, and lead to shock. It’s much better to just warm the body slowly and naturally. Blankets and warm IVs, that’s the business.”

“Alright,” he replied, shaking his hands dry.

“What you could do for me, instead, is go find me a good vein to poke and shave the fur off it? Please?” She asked him.

Hugo stepped past her, and walked out to the living room. Dale had laid Judy down on the couch and was standing behind it, watching over her. “How is she doing? Any changes from in the car?” Hugo asked him.

Dale shook his head, “Not really. Her nose is twitching like she’s smelling everything but she’s still sleeping as far as I can tell.” he replied back.

Hugo picked up a pair of gloves, and slipped them on his paws. Putting on a fresh surgical mask on over his face, he handed another one to Dale. While Dale fumbled with that, Hugo pulled back the blankets and coat over her torso and arms so that he could examine her in the light.

“Oh damn!” Dale looked down at her, his eyes widening in concern. “I’m sorry I snapped at ya, mate. You were right to wake us. She’s in bad shape and certainly needed help.”

Hugo looked up at him, humor alight in his eyes, accepting the apology. “It’s alright,” he assured Dale, and turned his attention back to Judy. He ran his paws over her arms and torso, feeling through her fur the condition of her muscles and skeleton. So very thin. Wait, there, on the back of
He reached back to the coffee table and picked up the little shaver/vacuum. He turned it on, and shaved the back of her paw clean. She twitched a couple of times, but didn’t wake up. He cleaned the bare skin with an alcohol pad.

“Looking good, Doctor!” Meredith observed from behind him. Hugo twitched just a bit himself as she startled him. Damn arctic hares and their soft padded feet, always sneaking up on him.

Meredith went over to Dale, and hung a warm towel around his neck. Over that she hung two IV bags, and hooked them together with a Y-tube that connected to the battery powered warming unit. “There you go, dear. You can be the bag warmer for tonight, just like you do for my paws.” Dale rolled his eyes, and sighed dramatically in response to her teasing.

She slipped on a pair of gloves herself, and nudged Hugo with her hip. “Move over, luv. I’ll do the stick now.” She picked up a sterile catheter pack, tore it open, and extracted the needle. Using her other paw to slightly pinch the vein on the much smaller paw, she slid the needle in with one smooth motion, and then covered it up with surgical tape. Judy never even flinched. She connected the rest of the tubing up, and set the drip. “There we go!”

“Nicely done.” Hugo complimented her.

“Thank you, dear. I work with babies all day. They really don’t appreciate getting stuck multiple times while you hunt for a vein. They tend to get a bit fussy about it all. So either get it right the first time, or find somebody else to do it the second time.” She smoothed down the fur on Judy’s head, helping her to slip into a deeper sleep. The poor dear, she thought.

“Should we also set up a glucose pack, maybe feed her intravenously?” Hugo asked her next. The bones sticking up prominently from underneath Judy’s skin were really disturbing him as he remembered the poverty and hunger he and his family endured in their early years, before his father had gained his postal employment and things at home had improved. It was those experiences that helped to drive his the work that he did with the Free Clinics and the homeless programs in Zootopia.

“I don’t know. Actually, I don’t think we should, not without running some blood work to tell us what her blood sugar and insulin levels actually are first. We get that wrong, and we could stress her heart even more.” She shook her head.
“Well, I don’t have the ability do that test here, so I guess that will have to wait to ask a nutritionist or small mammal doctor in the morning.” Hugo frowned. He wanted to do more, but there wasn’t much left to do.

“Are you thinking TTH, or someplace else?” Meredith inquired of him.

“She’s not keen on hospitals, which I quite understand, considering all of her years stuck at the hell that was Cliffside. No, I was thinking the Tundra Town Free Clinic. She looks like she's been living on the street for at least the past few years. TTFC deals with a lot of the street people who can't afford medical care elsewhere. They have a nutritionist on staff that can advise us, and their small mammal doctor there, Victoria, owes me a favor or two. It shouldn't be a problem getting her in for an exam and treatment. If Judy doesn’t mind, we can go there first thing in the morning.”

Dale yawned, looking bored at his post as a post. Hugo grinned up at the larger male, his smile hidden behind his mask.

“Ah, well, not much else I can do tonight. We’ll go back home, and come back in the morning? Maybe we could bring her some breakfast, and some clothes for her to change into?” Meredith offered to Hugo.

“Yes, please. I don’t have anything for a rabbit her size here.”

“Will do!” Meredith replied as she lifted the bags from Dale, and reattached them to the IV stand. “Come on, luv, let’s go to bed,” she turned Dale towards the door and gave him a gentle push. “Remember to clean up your mess, before going to sleep yourself, Doctor!” she reminded him as they slipped out the door.

“But I thought that was what nurses were for,” he replied, but she was already gone. He smiled as he took off his mask. He was going to have to do something nice for them to thank them for helping tonight. Probable invite them over to dinner later in the week.

He picked up the rest of the medical supplies, and took them back to his office. Coming back down the hall, he turned up the heat for the night, so that Judy wouldn’t get a chill, and stripped off his gloves and scrub top. He rearranged the blankets around her, and thought of what else he might be missing? He got a bottle of water, and set that within reach of her paws. Maybe a note, explaining the situation, just in case she woke up before he did?
He sat down to write her one.

* * * * *

* * * Early Tuesday Morning in Snowy Hills * * *

Wakefulness came slowly.

She slowly blinked a couple of times, pulling on the dried crusts gluing her eyelashes together. She rubbed a paw slowly across her face, trying to clear them out. When she opened her eyes again it was to a darkened living room. Out the large bay window she could see the light of the coming dawn, which was enough for even her lupin eyes to start to make sense of the outlines. She sniffed, and she smelled not only antiseptic and saline, but also the scents of pine trees and mountain flowers. And rabbits? That scent was weaker, overlaid by the stronger scent of a feline. But she didn't feel any fear from smelling that scent, and she had to ask herself why?

Looking down at herself, she took stock of herself. She wasn't dead, that at least was obvious to her. She should be, though. She had desperately wanted to be, strangely enough. She had been so tired of this nightmare of a life that was filled with so much heart rending grief.

A memory, or maybe a vision, of last night came to her as she stared into the lightly graying dark. A vision of a dark and damp alleyway, and the specter of Death striding towards her through a brilliant halo of cold light. Lord Jaguar had risen from the Realm of the Dead to come and personally collect her weary and overdue soul.

The Divines had promised her suffering, and after she had seen Nick's happiness, she could finally take no more pain and had run off into the stormy night. She ran blindly, consumed by her grief, and desperately sought a release that had been long denied her. She wandered without purpose, weary, lost in time and place, and the echoes of her own mind. She had somehow ended up passing under the climate barrier mountains, and was thrust out upon the cold embrace of Tundra Town.

So when Lord Jaguar had come to her, wrapped her in the warmth of his cloak, and bade her to go with him, she was ready. So very ready. She had closed her eyes as he bent down to her and she breathed in deeply of him. She smelled his musk, a warm and safe scent, and had submitted willingly to his warm embrace when he offered it.

As she slid into exhaustion, she felt him root his nose between her ears, just like Nick used to. Or
did do, or would do, in another life. She missed Nick, but he was gone. He was with his family now, bonded to a mate, and even had a kit. But it wasn't her kit. That life was forever denied to her.

The next thing she knew, she was being carried into a car. She looked up, but Lord Jaguar was gone, replaced by a smaller, more delicate feline face. Still handsome though, his eyes were kind, filled with sorrow and worry. He had set her on his lap, and unwrapped his coat from around her. She shivered and glared at him.

*Damn him! That was cold!*

He wanted to take off her clothes. It wasn't that the request was so unusual to her experience, but that he seemed to be in such a damn hurry. As he ripped her blouse off, all she could think of was about how she was supposed to get home now? *He better pay for that!* She thought. *He should know that she charged more for that rough and kinky shit, and she had liked that blouse, damn it!*

But he wasn't feeling her up, rather he was just rubbing her down with a towel? Her fur was soaking wet. Why was she wet? But that question could wait, as he tossed her blouse away, and pulled her back into his warm fur. She dug her paw pads into that fur, and breathed in his musk, the scent of jungle loam and passion flowers.

Her pants were gone now, but his touch remained gentle. He must be one of those clients that just liked to cuddle and touch, and wasn't there for the sex. Which was too bad, she thought, because she hadn't had sex with a gentle male in far too long.

He wanted to take her to a hospital, and suddenly she was back at Cliffside, trying to out run the orderlies. *Hide!* They would make her to take the blue pills. She hated those blue pills! They made her feel weird, like her fur was drifting away from her skin, and made everybody talk funny. But he wouldn't make her take those blue pills. He would let her draw, and he would listen to her. He was the nice doctor. He was her favorite doctor.

The vision slowly ended, and she stared down at her paws. In the dawning light from the windows she saw that there was a line coming from the back of her paw. She traced that line up to a bag hanging from a pole - an IV line. She could barely feel the needle going into the vein under the shaved fur on her paw. Somebody know what they were doing when they had stuck it in, unlike those palsy-handed idiots at Cliffside. Pulling her paw up, she could smell the light scent of a female hare on the tape, certainly not her own rabbit scent, but a welcomed scent none the less.

Beside her head, on a low coffee table was a bottle of water, a phone, and a pad of paper with writing on it. She couldn't read it from her spot on the couch, so she threw back her covers, and
slowly sat up. Her head swam a moment, but eventually the room stopped rocking, and when she looked up she could see him.

He lay across the room from her, asleep in a recliner with a quilt thrown across his legs as he softly snored. Her doctor. Of all the places she had ever dreamed that she would see him again, it had never been like this. She looked back down at the pad of paper, but she couldn't read the whole note written on it. But she could read the name at the top, though. Her birth name.

Gingerly sliding off the couch, she grabbed the IV pole to stabilize herself. Picking up the pad with her other paw, she slow walked over to the windows, keeping one eye and one ear turned to his direction.

Holding up the pad up to the light, she quietly read off the note:

Dear Judith Laverne Hopps,

My name is Doctor Hugo Wiedii, originally from the Orinoco river on the Southern Continent, and I am a neurologist here in Zootopia. I found you last night wandering the alleyways of Tundra Town, suffering from exposure and hypothermia. I brought you back to my house here in the Snowy Hills, where my neighbor Meredith and I took care of you last night.

You may not remember me, but I was your doctor for a short while some thirteen years ago at Cliffside. I had heard from one of my other former Cliffside patients that you had moved out west, but they had lost track of you before I could reach out to you. While I am surprised to see you here and now in Zootopia, I am truly glad. I have been searching for you for a very, very long time.

You owe me nothing for last night’s care, and are free to go if you wish. But I would hope that you would stay, for I believe that you and I have so very much to talk about.

If you don't feel comfortable with this situation, or have any concerns for your personal safety, please call the ZPD from the phone in front of you. You may tell them my name and that the address here is 1123 Gooseberry Way, Snowy Hills.

Sincerely,

Dr Hugo Wiedii
P.S. I am a very sound sleeper during the morning. If you need to wake me, please put a claw in to my ear.

She stared at the note in disbelief, her paw shaking, and moisture glinting upon her eyes.

Judy wept as a new dawn broke over Zootopia with glad and golden exclamation.

* * * * * *

Judy sniffed, and wiped her tears away. Turning back to look at Hugo, she realized two things: she needed to use the bathroom, and that she was very hungry.

She carefully walked back over to his recliner, and stood beside the headrest. Softly, she called, “Dr. Wiedii, Dr. Wiedii? Hello? Wake up, please!” Nothing. So, looking again at the post script at the bottom of the note, she reached up and sank a claw in the tip of his ear closest to her. The reaction was immediate!

He shot upright and out of the chair, belting out “Estoy despierto, Abuela!*” He looked around in a panic. (*I'm awake, Grandma!)

Judy dissolved into a ball of snorting giggles.

* * * * * *

“Morning, Luvs!” Meredith breezed in through the door, bearing a duffel bag and a paper sack of groceries. She stopped to take in the scene before her: Hugo contritely looking like a cub caught with his hand in the snack jar, and Judy doubled over in laughter. “Should I come back later?” she asked the room.

But Judy's laughter quickly turned into a wheezing and coughing fit. Meredith set down her packages on the table, and rushed over to Judy. “Hugo, get the oxygen!” she ordered, continuing with more loving, “Dale, be a good dear and shut the door, please”. The two males jumped to action at the note of command in her voice, the sound of a head nurse taking action. She lead Judy back to the couch and sat her down.
Calmed by the larger female's presence, Judy tried to get her coughing under control as Hugo wheeled up the little tank to their side. Meredith looked at the gauges, then handed the mask to Judy and stated, “Just take in normal breaths in through the mask, and you'll be fine in a moment or two.” Judy smiled from behind the mask, and nodded.

Hugo motioned to Meredith “Judy, as you could probably tell from the no nonsense nurse's voice that this here is Meredith, and her husband over there by the door is Dale.”

Judy shy smiled at Meredith, and then turned to wave at Dale and mumbled around the mask a muffled “Hi.” He just snorted and turned back to the door to take off his coat.

“Would you like some breakfast, dear?” Meredith ask her.

Judy nodded and added “I need to use the bathroom, too.”

“Okay, let me unhook and cap your IV, and I'll show you where it's at.” Meredith stood and took up her paw in paw, and lead her into the back of the house.

At the mention of breakfast, Dale dug through the grocery bag, laying out a light plate of spinach, cucumber, and tofu with a small bottle of children’s electrolytes for Judy. Hugo took care of himself by popping a frozen shrimp arepa in the microwave, and wandered off to get dressed for the day.

They all returned to the table for a spot of breakfast for Hugo and Judy, and tea for Dale and Meredith. Meredith had apparently raided her grandchildren's clothes, because she had dressed Judy in this bright pink hoodie with strange four legged flying cartoon creatures on it's back and a matching pair of sweat pants. ‘Friendship is Magic’, indeed!

Hugo finished his corn cake, and turned to Judy who was happily munching on spinach leaves. Addressing her, he began with “Judy, it is good to see you eating. We were all quite concerned yesterday that you might indeed be needing hospitalization to address your hypothermia and malnutrition issues. However, you are plainly doing better now, but I would be remiss in my responsibilities as a doctor to point out that Meredith and I are probably not the best equipped medical professionals to deal with your situation. By trade and training, I am a neurologist who currently specializes in brain trauma and Meredith here is the head nurse in a maternity ward. We can do the basics, but I believe you could benefit from the services of professionals who more often see these kinds of cases. I know you are wary of considering a hospital, and as such would you
consider other alternatives to your medical care?”

Judy paused momentarily on her cucumber slice, tilted her head at him, and replied, “I just want to avoid anyplace with a connection to psych wards.”

Hugo nodded “Knowing your past history as I do, I can certainly sympathize with that. What I was actually thinking of instead was the Tundra Town Free Clinic. The doctors and nurses there are quite used to meeting the medical needs of the mammals who live on the streets. And from the looks of things, I would guess that you have been living on the streets of Zootopia for at least some time, at least a year or so?” He left the question hanging.

Judy swallowed, “About three, actually.” she answered, embarrassed.

Hugo tried to reassure her, “It’s okay. I’m not passing any judgments here, I just want to make sure that you get the best care I can find. I’ve done a lot of pro-bono work over the years for the Free Clinics here in Zootopia, most of it for the TTFC. Lots of icy streets and sidewalks lead to street mammals slipping and falling on their heads. The TTFC doctors treat a lot of concussions and other head injuries, and they like to call me in to consult.” He paused and looked at her, “Were you living in Tundra town?” He asked the question and left unsaid the obvious statement that she had not been dressed for it, at least in his opinion.

“No,” she replied, “I mostly lived over in the Rainforest district. Lots of sheltered places there to sleep and hide in, and more things to eat.” She slightly emphasized the word “hide”, Hugo noticed, but he decided to file the next questions in his mind for later. Who was she running from? Who was she hiding from? Why were you in Tundra town, so far from the Rain Forest districts? What was chasing you? So many unanswered questions that crowded together awaiting their time to breathe.

He nodded sagely and continued, “I can set you up an appointment this morning with Dr. Victoria Longs, who is the small mammal doctor there. But as Victoria is a stoat, if you would prefer a small mammal doctor who's not a predator I am afraid we will have to go to different clinic.”

Judy shook her head, “I don't mind having a predator for a doctor.”

“You don't?” Meredith sat up and glanced at her. “I thought the bunnies from Bunny Burrow were quite particular about strange predators.”

“I think you will find that Judy is made from sterner stuff than your average Bunny Burrow rabbit.
The other thing for you to remember is that street people assess risk differently then the average member of the public. Another rabbit is just as capable of killing you for your sleeping bag as a wolf is. And in fact they are more likely to, since the sleeping bag won't fit the wolf.” Hugo explained to her. *She's certainly not running or hiding from predators. She may even prefer their company to that of prey species?* he wondered to himself.

Judy shook her head in agreement, and then turned her head to the larger doe, “Although... could you come with me, Meredith? Please? I just want somebody familiar there I know that can explain it all to me.”

Meredith looked at Hugo, who replied “That is up to you. I would certainly appreciate it. I could sit in with Judy, but I know that the other staff there will most likely drag me off to demand my medical advice the moment I show up.”

Meredith blinked, and then agreed “Oh, okay. Dale, do you mind if I spend the morning with Judy? I should be done well before the concert tonight.”

Dale shook his head “Nah. It's fine. I'll just go raid the woodworking shops. Give me a jingle on the mobile when you want to be picked up.” Dale took a case out of his coat pocket, pulled a stick out of it, and stuck it in between his teeth. Judy sniffed and perked up. Dale looked over at her, and held the case out to her. “Want one? They're applewood.”

“Yes, please.” Judy smiled, and shyly plucked one out for her to chew on. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Dale's eyes crinkled as he smiled back down at the younger doe.
Flashback: Group Session

Chapter Summary

Judy discovers the joy of art.

Hugo is running a group art therapy session for his chosen group of patients. He instructs Nurse Manchas on how to deal with a misbehaving goat, and turns his attentions to Judy's art group. Seeing how far her progress has taken her, he安排s for her to have a very special visitor.

Chapter Notes

Be sure to check out Scaramedn's Pigment & Clay for more fan-fic of Judy as an artist! It's an excellent read!

13 Years Earlier At Cliffside Asylum: Group Therapy

“Doctor, he’s eating the glue stick again.” Nurse Manchas just shook his head. He couldn’t image that they were that tasty.

“Which one? Ed, Edd, or Eddie?” Hugo gestured to the trio of goats that occupied one of the rear tables currently working on collages. They had chosen their nicknames, based on some obscure animated children’s show he’s never seen, but since the names were harmless he saw no reason to restrict the practice. Manchas pointed to the middle one. Hugo just nodded.

“While they are goats and will quite happily eat almost anything, I will point those glue sticks are non-toxic. If he insists on eating it, he may. Just remind him that if they run out of glue sticks, they will have to switch to rubber cement to finish out their projects, and that it smells and tastes far worse than the glue sticks.” Hugo instructed him.

“You don’t want me to take it away from him? That can’t be good for him.” Manchas tried to press his case.

“It might not be, but since we are talking about a species that happily considers poison ivy to be a spicy delicacy, I don’t think we have to get to worked up about it. Ranato, please keep in mind that I want to avoid taking choices away from the patients, as a matter of course, if I can avoid it during
this art therapy program. Most of this is geared towards preparing them to move out of a rather regimented program like Cliffside here, to a more open and less restrictive psych ward program somewhere else. And part of that process is allowing them to make informed decisions on their own and to learn about the consequences that those decisions bring about, rather than having the decision be made forcefully for them. Even if that decision is nothing more than what glue they want to eat today.” Hugo smiled up at the larger predator. “In addition to that I don’t imagine you want to spend the rest of the session in a wrestling match with three ornery goats. You get one fired up, and the other two will act up just to be supportive of their fellow goat.”

Manchas shook his head in agreement, and wandered back to try a gentler approach to goat artistic management.

Hugo turned back to the group he was working with. This group of six include most of the smaller mammals in his class: a porcupine, two squirrels, a rabbit, and two rats. The objective of this session was to draw somebody or something they loved, and see how they reacted emotionally to that process. He knew that most of these teenage mammals had varying levels of attachment and empathy disorders, and so they mostly drew things they loved. Scribbling with chalks and crayons, they mashed out pictures of food, some bad anatomically incorrect porn, and even some abstract images where he had trouble discerning any pattern or meaning in the lines.

All but one of them them, though. Judy was doing something different. Instead, she was drawing little vignettes of rabbits in a muted pastel style, using bright pencil colors on black construction paper. Images of family, relatives, and friends adorned the pages, all crowding out to the margins. It was quite impressive, really. In the past three months, she had taken to drawing like a otter takes to swimming, and her skills had grown in leaps and bounds. What a rabbit metaphor, he thought. But so true.

Judy had just needed an outlet for her energies, and this particular one seemed to be working wonders with her, he decided. After that first escape attempt that he thwarted three months ago, she had tried one last time to escape the group sessions, but she never even made it past Nurse Manchas that time. Ranato had been carrying a large cardboard box, and at first she must have thought he was struggling under a heavy load and not paying attention to the rest of the students. She then tried a repeat performance of the last time she had escaped group therapy, only to discover all to late that Ranato was not as distracted as he seemed. As she skittered past him, she discovered to her horror that the box he was carrying was quite empty as it came crashing down over her head. It had been a lesson that Hugo and the nurse had devised as a means of distracting her at that session, and getting her to second guess just what a box like that in somebody else’s arms might meant the next time she considered that escape strategy. It would hopefully help with any future injuries to orderlies and their pride due to overly bored and energetic bunnies.

But the box hadn’t been devised by them as a punishment; instead Hugo turned that box into the class lesson for the day. Hugo pushed her box to the middle of the room, opened the top, and handed her some crayons. He told her to decorate her ‘fort’ while the other students assembled their boxes to create their forts with the help of Nurse Manchas.
The patients, or as he like to consider them ‘the students’, spent the next hour coloring and decorating their boxes. When they were finished up he directed them to go visit and explore each other’s spaces and to make compliments on their fellow artist’s artwork. It was probably the first time that any of them had been able to define a space as ‘theirs’, and in turn be social with others in their social group inside those spaces since they been sent to Cliffside.

After a few minutes of pouting, she started scribble a bit randomly. But this soon gave way to a serious effort to decorate her box like it was a rabbit’s underground burrow, using the brown color of the cardboard box to her advantage. She drew in roots and rocks, worms and insects, and more dark passages leading off into the depths of her imagination. But it was the detail and quality of the insects that she drew that gained the most admiration from the rest of her of fellow teenagers in the class, as they clambered about each other to explore what other bugs hid in her ‘burrow’.

She had this grin splashed across her face as they crawled through the ‘burrow’, pointing out this worm or that spider. She basked in their attentions and their appreciation of her creation. That was the last time she tried to escape his class.

Or even trying to escape from Cliffside, for that matter. With that change in Judy, and the decreases in similar episodes from her fellow students as well, he had managed to gain some concessions from Swineton for their good behavior and grant him some considerable leeway in what he could do with his students during their class time. So when it came time for the students to clean up the room for the day, and after Ranato had herded them off to lunch, he stayed behind to make a phone call, and arrange a special surprise for his star pupil at tomorrow’s group art session.

* * * * * *

“Paging Doctor Weidii, Paging Doctor Weidii. Please come to the front security desk. Doctor Weidii to the front security desk. Your party is waiting.”

Hugo looked up from his desk in front of the room as the speaker finish crackling out it’s page. They are right on time, he knew. He turned to Nurse Manchas, “Ranato, could you watch the room? I’ve got to go to the front desk.”

“Certainly, Doctor,” the nurse replied.

Hugo jogged down the elevator at the end of the hall. He was going to enjoy this meeting.
A few minutes later, the elevator door chimed as it came back up to the floor. Hugo escorted his
guest out and down the hall to the classroom door. Knocking on it, he waited until Ranato buzzed
them in, and then opened the steel door for them to enter. He turned to his guest and asked, “Wait
here a moment, please. I’ll let her know you are here.” He walked over to Judy.

“What are you drawing now?” he asked her, bending over the table to look at her work.

“Foxes eating blueberries. This one is Gideon, and the other one is Slick! Gideon’s a bit of a bully,
but he’s really good with making pies. He’ll make a great pastry chef one day. And you better
watch out for the other one, cause Slick is sly and shifty. And the best friend a bunny could ever
have...” She exclaimed, holding the picture up to him.

“I can see that, most definitely. I will have to put this in the portfolio with all the others. But in the
mean time, you have a visitor.” He stood back up.

“Visitor? I don’t get visitors. Swineton revoked my visitor privileges after too many escape
attempts.” She scowled at the table.

“You did. But you’ve made such progress in the past couple of months that I convinced her to
return some of them back.” He stood back up, and turned back to the door. Judy slide her chair
back from the table, and hopped down out of the seat to look back with him. As soon as she saw
who was at the door, her jaw dropped open, and she sprinted over, gleefully yelling out.

“MOM!!!”
Tuesday Morning: The Clinic

Chapter Summary

Judy and Hugo go to the doctor.

Judy, Meredith, and Hugo go to the Tundra Town Free Clinic. After filling out her paperwork, Judy is entertained by a little kit, while Hugo is called away to consult on a case in the clinic. She goes through her vitals with the nurse, talks to Bob the nutritionist, and is finally examined by Doctor Victoria Longs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5

Tuesday morning in Tundra Town at the Free Clinic

“Fill out the top three forms, and make sure to sign the waivers at the bottom of the last page.” The nurse at the TTFC front desk handed a pen and a clipboard of forms over to Judy.

As Judy scowled at the forms, Meredith looked down at her and asked “Do you need any help filling that out?” Judy waved her paw at her and replied, “No, I got this.” She jumped down from the bench in front of the counter, and wandered over to a chair. Judy did turn back to say, “I don’t have any IDs on me. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, dear, just fill it out as best you can.” Meredith looked down at the nurse and she whispered back, “Most street mammals who come here either lost their IDs a long time ago or don’t want to use their real names, for what ever reason. That’s perfectly okay here – we just want to make sure they get the help they need first and foremost.” Meredith nodded her head in response, and turned to look back at Judy. She was chewing on the end of the pen as she scowled at the forms.

Meredith glanced around the rest of the room, filled somewhat haphazardly with all sorts of different mammal species. A couple of caribou looking hung over, a sleeping arctic fox, a porcupine arguing with the wall, and another very tired looking arctic hare doe with a trio of crying kits. She pushed away from the counter, and wandered over to see if she could help the poor doe.
On the other side of the room, Hugo was taking to Victoria who asked him, “Where did you find her again?”

“What, last night? Or originally?” Hugo was a bit confused as to which question she meant. She grinned and helpfully clarified her statement in no way whatsoever by replying, “Both!”

“Well, originally, she was a patient of mine in a pilot art therapy program at Cliffside that I was conducting about thirteen years ago. She was responding very well in that program before it got shut down a few months later. I lost track of her after that, and didn’t see her again until last night, wandering down a Tundra Town alleyway soaking wet.”

“Shut down?” She asked him, “Why did you get shutdown if it was going good?”

“I don’t know. I could never find out, but my best guess was that the program was too experimental for their administration. They were pretty conservative out there. But I did manage to get at least half of my patients transferred out of Cliffside before they shut me down. Just not her.”

“Alright. Well, Sally should be able to get her back into a room just as soon as she is done with her forms and they’ll get started with the physical stuff. You sitting in on this one?” Victoria queried him.

“I can, or Meredith over there can. Would it be a problem if I did?” He responded to her.

“I don’t mind – it all depends on what the patient feels comfortable with. I do know that Amanda perked up when she heard you were coming down, so I’m not entirely sure you’d make it down the hall before she absconds with you.”

“Amanda Panda? What does the good doctor want with me today?”

“She had a male patient come in first thing this morning that was slurring his words, and having trouble focusing without bursting into fits of giggles. She wasn’t sure if it was drugs or head trauma. There weren’t any injuries to the head or cranium, and the x-rays didn’t show anything obvious. But she was concerned, none the less. You think you could take a look at him with her? She’s got him sleeping downstairs in a bed at the shelter.”

“Sure, I suppose. I’ll just check up with her up now, and maybe met up with you all after that?”
Relieved, Victoria thanked him, “You are super! Yeah, Bob’s not in yet, so we will have to wait at least until he examines her before we can get you a recovery treatment meal plan. We really not in a hurry here. I’m gonna want to do a blood draw, by the way. There’s a nasty fungus running around the street community here, and early symptoms can look just like pneumonia, but since the anti-fungal has some serious side effects, I really don’t want to prescribe it unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Okay, I will let her know, and then I’ll go talk to Amanda.” Hugo pushed off from the wall, walked over to Judy, and sat down next her. “Hey,” he said to her.

Judy looked up at him, “Um, Hi?”

“They want me to go check on a patient downstairs who is apparently slurring and giggling. They don’t know if it’s drugs or head injury, so they would like my opinion on the matter. Is that okay with you?” He asked her.

“Sure, I suppose, as long Meredith is with me. Will you be coming back?”

“Absolutely. This shouldn’t take to long. The doctor, Amanda, is pretty good, so I’m just going to see if she missed anything really. Oh, and Victoria wants to do some blood work. Would you be okay with a blood draw?”

Judy looked stricken, “Does she have too? I, um, really don’t like needles.”

Hugo patted her paw and tried to reassure her, “It’s okay, they are just on the look out for a fungal lung infection that is making it’s rounds. Seems the anti-fungal is pretty nasty, so they don’t want to prescribe that if they don’t have to.” He cocked his head down, and looked at the forms she was filling out. “Jessica Lapin?” He raised an eyebrow and cocked an ear at her in question.

Distracted and embarrassed, Judy dropped her ears. “It’s my street name. I don’t have to use my real name here, do I?” She looked pleadingly at him, “You didn’t tell them, did you?”

“No, you don’t have to,” he hurriedly tried to reassured her, “I just told Victoria that you were a former patient of mine, and that I found you wandering around Tundra Town last night soaked to the bone. As for your name, the TTFC doesn’t submit any paperwork to the state or to any insurance companies unless you specifically ask them to. They are pretty good about keeping strict
patient confidentiality here, even with their monthly reporting to the city. And they treat everybody alike – soldiers, civilians, kids and ex-cons. They don’t discriminate. They don’t care about your past, just your present, okay?” He reassured her, “Just let Meredith know about that, since she knows your real name. She’ll understand why.”

Judy nodded, and Hugo stood and walked down the hall. She finished the forms, and waked the clipboard back over to the front desk. The head nurse thanked her and said, “Thank you, dear. Sally will be out a few minutes to take you back. Why don’t you have a seat?” She started to type on her computer keyboard, tuning out Judy.

Judy turned and walked over to where Meredith was sitting with the other arctic hare, each with a kit in their laps and the third one playing on floor. She sat down in the chair next to the larger doe, and stared off into space. The little doe on the floor, having identified an unclaimed lap, stood up and walked over to Judy’s chair, pointing to her head and belted out loud, “UP!”

Judy, startled, stared back at the demanding little doe. Meredith chuckled, and turned to pick up the doe and place her in Judy’s lap. Judy tried to protest, but Meredith just waved a paw at her and turned back to her conversation with the other hare. Judy turned back to the little doe sitting in her lap in trepidation and said, “Hello.”

The kit smiled back up at her and sang out, “HI! Do you want to meet Mister Juniper Berry?” She held her little rabbit doll up to Judy, “Sure...” Judy replied, and she was given a rapid fire introduction to Mister Juniper Berry interspersed with complaints and explanations as to why the doe’s two brothers were do-do heads. Judy just smiled, and tried to keep up.

* * * * *

“Jessica?” a pika nurse stood by the waiting room door, a clipboard in her paw. “Jessica Lapin?” she called again.

Judy perked up, and waved her paw, “That’s me!” she called out. She turned to the doe in her lap and said, “Sorry, but I have to go see the doctor now.” She picked up the little doe and set her down next to her, and climbed down out of the chair.

“Do you want to take Mr. Juniper Berry with you so you don’t get scared?” her pint-sized companion offered her. “No, that’s okay,” Judy assured her, “You keep her. Meredith here is coming with me. She can hold my hand.” Meredith nodded this confirmation as well. “Okay, see you later!” the little doe called out. Judy waved back to her “Bye!”
“Sweet kit,” Judy commented to Meredith as they weeded their way past the chairs. “She is, and the rest of her little family is too. I got their mother’s contact info, so we will be seeing them again, I think.” Meredith paused and then asked, “Jessica?”

“It’s my street name,” Judy tried to explain to Meredith. The older doe looked down at her and just replied, “Okay.”

“Jessica, I’m Sally Rosebay, and I’ll be your nurse today. Come on back, and we’ll get you started.” The pika lead them back to an examination room, held the door open for them to file through, and came in after them. She bent down to a cabinet, and rooted around inside it for a rabbit sized examination gown which she handed to Judy. “What are we in for today, Jessica?” she asked.

Meredith handled the reply as Judy was busy undressing, “After effects of hypothermia and malnutrition.”

Judy looked up in alarm as she was lacing up the gown, but Meredith just shook her head and smiled, tilting her ears over at Sally, who just jotted some notes down on her clipboard. “Okay, then let’s take your measurements before Doctor Longs comes in for the exam.” She had Judy step up on the scale, where she measured her height, then her weight. “Hmm.. Yup, you are underweight for your height and age, but that’s okay. Bob will give you a diet plan that will get you fattened up in no time. His stuff is usually pretty tasty, and good for you too.” she assured Judy.

“Fat?” Judy’s ears twitched and fell back.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with a little padding added to your hips, darling. It definitely helps bring the boys to your yard, I can tell you that.” The pika’s forward attitude had Meredith snickering behind her paw, and Judy’s ears turned pink at the innuendo.

That’s odd, Judy thought to herself, when did I turn back into such a prude? She stopped herself and pondered on it a bit. Well, three years of enforced celibacy on the streets didn’t help, she admitted.

The door opened up, and a male capybara walked in. “Hello,” he said and stuck out his paw to Judy, “I’m Roberto, the resident nutritionist here. I just have a couple of questions, if I may? Hum…” He looked at the clip board that Sally held out, “Yes, yes, definitely.” He held his paw out
to Judy, who tentatively took it. He felt her paw, wrist, and the muscles and bones of her arm. He also did a gentle pinch of her skin below her fur. He released her arm, and took a pen light out of his pocket.

“Open your mouth, please,” he asked her. She leaned her head back a bit and opened wide, her eyes going over to Meredith, who smiled gently back to her. He examined the state of her teeth and tongue, making sure that the teeth weren’t cracked or riddled with cavities and that her tongue was the right color. “May I ask what you’ve been eating lately?” he inquired of her.

Meredith came over and took up her other paw. Judy looked up at her, and silently thanked her for her forethought. She needed the support, and squeezed the offered paw a little bit. Turning back to the male, she replied honestly, “I’ve been living on the street for the past few years, eating what I could find out of dumpsters. I also ate a lot of kudzu, and other weeds.” Looking up at the capybara, she didn’t see any of the judgment she feared, just sympathy.

He responded, “Kudzu's actually a pretty good food source, rich in vitamins and minerals. It’s just a bit poor in starches, so it’s not a good long term food source. Hum… Any food allergies?” he asked her. She shook her head. “Okay, well, we will start you off with some of the rabbit basics, and add from there. Do you have a place to stay, like a shelter or someplace else with a kitchen? Or are you going back out on the streets?” He tilted his head and looked at her, no judgement in his voice, just concern.

“No, I’ve got a place to stay. Dr Weidii has offered me a place at his house up in Snowy Hills,” she told him. Meredith squeezed her paw, and Judy looked up at her. “You can also stay with us if you want, luv,” the doe kindly offered her. “We’ve got plenty of room.” Judy just nodded, a little moisture creeping into her eyes at the kindness.

“Alright then,” Roberto replied, “That works for me. Hugo’s a decent enough cook, as long as you keep his desire to put hot peppers into everything he makes under control. Honestly, his contributions to our potlucks should come with warning signs attached,” he shook his head.

The door opened, and Victoria walked into the examination room, which was running out of floor space with all the mammals crowded into it. “Doctor Longs!” Roberto greeted her. “Hello, Bob,” she replied, “How goes our patient?”

“Good, good. I am done with my initial examination, so I’ll go prepare a meal plan for her. She’s all yours!” He shook Judy’s paw again, and slipped past the stoat. Victoria took the clipboard that Sally offered, and Sally slipped out as well. As Victoria read the notes, she gestured for Judy to get up on the examination bed.
Judy climbed up into the bed, and Meredith sat down in the chair next to it. Victoria started her basic exam checking the eyes, ears and throat. “Any loss of sensation in your extremities? Any tingling or numbness in your fingers, toes, or the tips of your ears?” she asked Judy as she examined those body parts.

Judy shook her head, “No, they feel fine. But I am starting to wheeze and cough if I laugh or move too fast.”

“Hum…” Victoria took out her stethoscope and hooked into her ears. “Sit up straight, please, and breath in deeply and slowly.” she requested of Judy. As she did Victoria moved the stethoscope around Judy’s chest. Victoria stepped back, and frowned. “I heard a little rattle in there that I don’t like. It’s probably the onset of pneumonia, typical of what I would expect of hypothermia in Tundra Town, but it could also be a fungal infection that we have going around right now, so I would have to take a blood sample to be sure. Will you be okay with that, Jessica?” she tilted her head at Judy.

Judy looked a little nervous, “I don’t really like needles,” she told Victoria. “That’s okay, we don’t need to do another needle,” Victoria assured her, “We can just use the IV tap on your paw. Nice job, by the way. Did you do that?” She turned to Meredith. “Hugo said you were a nurse over at TTC.”

“Head Nurse of the Maternity wing, actually. Thank you. I am a pretty good stick, if I do say so myself, Doctor.” Meredith sat up straight, and placed her paw over her heart.

Victoria smiled, “Just Victoria, dear. We aren’t big on formality here.” She turned back to Judy, “I’ll check with Bob, but I think we can also do a glucose pack after the blood draw, to replenish the lost fluids. He’ll probably also want to do a vitamin booster, so that can go into the IV without needing another needle. And until we get the blood work back and know for certain what we are dealing with in your lungs, I’m going to go ahead and prescribe an AZ-Pak for you to start with. Have you taken an AZ-Pak before?” Judy just nodded, but she wasn’t about to explain why. (AZ-Pak is a 6 day broad spectrum antibiotic.)

“Alright, I’ll be back in a few minutes. Sally will be in shortly do the blood draw, and hook up the IV.” She took her leave. Meredith took that as an opportunity to climb up on the bed next to Judy, who was looking a little overwhelmed, and give her a hug.

Chapter End Notes

Judy’s street name is Jessica Lapin.
Jessica -> Hebrew for God is Watching
Lapin -> French for a castrated male rabbit, or a rabbit with unusually sheared and dyed fur

I'm not sure it was any better a cover name than her birth name. But Dan had a reason for choosing it, and we are going to explore those reasons later on.
Chapter Summary

Bonnie Comes to Visit

As a reward for her continued progress in his class, and the end of her escape attempts from confinement, Hugo arranges for Bonnie to come visit Judy for lunch. Once they are done, Judy spends the rest of the period sketching her mother. Afterwards, Bonnie pleads with Hugo for help.

Flashback: 13 years ago at Cliffside

“MOM!!!” Judy careened up to her mother, and enveloped her in a small bear hug. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“Hello, Judy.” Caught just a little off guard and as she was bit of a loss as to what to do with her grocery sack and her purse, Bonnie was reduced to patting Judy awkwardly on the back.

The two rabbits were certainly enthusiastic in their belated greetings to each other, Hugo noted, and while that was sweet, it was also raising the twitter-pation level in the class. Since the session was almost over anyway, he beckoned Nurse Manchas over. “Ranato, could you please gather up the rest of the class, and take them down to lunch?”

“Certainly, Doctor.” Nurse Manchas walked over the wall, and run a small bell hanging against the wall. He called out in a steady voice pitched low, “Come on mammals, it’s time for lunch.” The rest of the students put their art supplies down, and started to clean up their work areas.

Hugo walked over to Bonnie, and offered to take her grocery bag. “Welcome to the our Art classroom, Mrs. Hopps. May I take your bag?” He held out his paw.

“Oh, yes, please – here.” She handed the bag to Hugo, and wrapped that free arm back around Judy to squeeze her back.

“We’ll be emptying the room here of the other students in just a few moments, so we may want to clear the door.” Hugo started walking back to the table where Judy had been working, hefting the
bag full of what looked like farm fresh fruits and vegetables.

Bonnie responded, “Alright.” She looked down at her daughter, still holding her fiercely and added, “Judy, dear, I’m happy to see you too, but I can’t walk with you holding me like that.” She smiled down at her daughter, stroking her paw over Judy’s head fur.

Judy popped her head up and squeaked, “Sorry! I’ll move!” She switched her grip to her mother’s arm, and looked back at Dr Weidii. ARGHHH! He’s touching them! I’m not done yet!, Judy fumed as she watched Hugo start to gather up her drawings. She pulled her mother over to the table, frown plastered to her face. She scowled at Hugo, and when he noticed her standing there, she dropped her eyes to her artwork.

Hugo took the subtle hint, and let her latest master pieces lay back down upon the table.

Judy let go of her mother, and started to spread her drawings out again so that she could show them off.

“Oh my, is that Gideon?” Bonnie asked her. “It’s quite good.”

Judy smiled, “Yuppers! I was trying show what he would look like, all grown up.”

“Yes, he’s all grown now. I don’t think we told you, but I believe that he told one of your brothers that he is going to culinary school next fall.”

“Oooo! He can make pies! Blueberry pies!” Judy sniffed the air, and pulled down the grocery bag so she could search inside. “I smell blueberries! Are they ours?” she asked as she rummaged around the bag.

“Yes, yes, I brought a couple of Hopps’ Certified Organic Blueberry Baskets with me. Hang on, Judy, you’re spilling everything out. Let me unpack it, please.” Bonnie laughed as she rescued her bag from her excited offspring.

Hugo pulled out chairs for both rabbits as Bonnie unpacked a lunch for two from the bag. Judy, alert to the possibility of special privileges, stood up straighter and her eyes snapped over to Hugo’s. He nodded in affirmation, and gestured to the spread.
“Judy, I thought that you might enjoy having lunch with your mother today, and your mother certainly agreed.” He nodded to Bonnie, “I’ll be at my desk if you need me.” He wandered off to collect today’s artwork pieces from the other students’ work stations so that he could grade them.

Thanking Bonnie profusely, Judy dug into the lunch her mother had brought her. In between mouthfuls of home grown vegetables, she fired off questions like machine gun fire about her family and friends back home. Bonnie struggled just to keep up.

Finished with the lunch, they moved on to the blueberries. Judy’s energetic face dissolved into a blissful smile upon chewing her first mouthful. She helped herself to another pawful and stuffed that in. As she chewed on those, she looked up at Hugo sitting at his desk. She had to thank him for this visit. Does he like blueberries? she wondered. She hopped down from her chair, and grabbed the other blueberry package. She skipped over to his desk and asked, “Dr Weidii, would you like some blueberries?”

“Oh, why thank you, Judy. I certainly would.” Hugo reached down, and took a small handful, and put them on his tea saucer. He smiled back at her.

Seeing that he only took a little bit, she was concerned that he didn’t know how good they were. She frowned at his little collection on the saucer. After the carrots, they were the product her family farm was most famous for. So she gave him another couple of pawfuls, and after seeing how small the result of that pile was, she poured half of the remaining blueberries in the container onto his saucer. The excess blueberries that didn’t fit on top went spilling off the pile and ran around his desk like drunken beetles. She beamed back up at him, and after giving his arm a quick hug, she dashed back to her mother.

He stared at the pile in dismay. He couldn’t possible eat that many, not without really upsetting his stomach. He looked up to catch Bonnie’s glance, her eyes twinkling, as she took in the result of her daughter’s gratitude. He swept up the escaped blueberries, and piled them next to his saucer.

Judy sat back down and placed the basket back on the table. Seeing that her mother was still eating blueberries, she grabbed her sketchbook, and started to furiously sketch her mother eating them, trying to finish her sketch before her mother stopped eating.

The remains of the lunch hour passed in silence, with only the scratch of Judy’s pencils upon the paper heard. Two sets of eyes watched Judy work in furious concentration, one bemused and another hopeful.
There was a knock at the door. Looking up, Hugo saw that it was Ranato returning to the room to pick up Judy for ‘recess’. He buzzed in Ranato, and turned to their table. “Judy,” he spoke up, “Nurse Manchas is here to take you to your outside time period.”

Ranato stuck his head in the door. Judy turned quickly to spot him, and swiveled back to Hugo. “Can I stay here instead? I’m drawing Mom, and I don’t want to stop now!”

Hugo, for while he was sympathetic to her desires, was also cognizant of the rules that Swineton had laid down for him in granting him these privileges. His students still had to conform to the schedule that the administration had laid out. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but you have to go with the rest of your group.”

Her face down-turned, she set her pad and pencils back on the table.

Seeing her dejection, he promised her, “There will be other opportunities to draw her. Right now, you need to go with your group, and I need to meet with your mother.” He smiled at her, trying to take away the sting of his rebuke. “There will be other visits, I promise.”

“Really?!!?” Judy’s face lit and she perked back up. She slid back out of her chair, and after giving her mother a brief squeeze she bounded over to Ranato and slipped out the door. He closed it behind them as they left for the river-side courtyard.

Hugo walked back over to sit with Bonnie, picking up Judy’s sketchbook to review her latest work. She smiled her thanks at him, and patted his paw.

“Thank you. This means so much to me.” She sat back in her chair, “Two letters a month don’t really leave much space to say the really important things in life, certainly not like a little lunch date does.” She gestured at his twin blue piles sitting on his desk. “I can see that she is certainly grateful to you as well. She was always generous as a child, almost to a fault, so that little display wasn’t a surprise to me.”

“Yes, well I appreciate the thought, I don’t quite have the heart to tell her what that much fruit will do to my poor stomach. Maybe I can save some of it?” He stared at the blueberries wistfully.

Bonnie looked at the containers, and gestured to the pile. “If you like, I’ll write her a little note, and explain the situation. Do you have a place to keep them for later?”
He nodded over at a small refrigerator, used to keep art supplies cool. “In there. Maybe she won’t mind if she shares them with the rest of her table tomorrow? Maybe spread some of the Hopps love and generosity around a bit? It might help her make some more friends.”

“She’s still having trouble making friends?” Bonnie was saddened by this news. Her daughter has always been an outsider, friendly on the surface, but loath to share her deeper self with others. Bonnie didn’t understand her daughter, but she did love her and wanted her to have some joy in life.

“No, and that is a concern for me. I’d like her to work on her social skills, and while she does okay here in the class room with her table group, outside of it she still doesn’t fit in.” Hugo grimaced at the floor.

Bonnie shook her head, “Stu and I have tried to get her moved to a better place, but even hiring lawyers from Zootopia didn’t help. Isn’t there anything left that we can do?” she pleaded with Hugo.

He took a deep breath before answering. “Well, with her adult conviction and the records from the two other facilities that she’s escaped from, including the one in Bunny Burrow, it’s going to be a problem to get her moved out of Cliffside. It’s kind of the last place a troubled patient goes before they get shipped off to the general prison population.”

He paused before continuing, “Honestly, in my opinion her conviction as an adult was a travesty of justice. While I understand that the judge was trying to send a message, I think they went too far. But without further evidence, or some way of getting her guilty statements struck from the record, I don’t see a path to get her conviction overturned, or even getting her out of here at the least. Certainly not before she turns 18 at the earliest. The bi-weekly escape attempts from her room certainly didn’t help her record either. Luckily those have tapered off since she started coming here to this class.”

Bonnie tilted her head, “Isn’t there anything you can do to help her?”

“I don’t know. I’m just doing my post-doc work for the department. I don’t have a lot of pull with the department yet, being the youngest member on staff.” Hugo tried to temporize.

Bonnie just continued to gaze at him with a familiar air of slight disapproval at his efforts. *Diosa, she’s just like Abuela when she does that.*
Guilty, he raised his paws in supplication, “I will try, for her sake, I will try.”

“Thank you,” Bonnie replied, “that’s all this desperate mother can ask for.”
Tuesday Morning: Good News

Chapter Summary

Hugo returns to the Clinic, where Roberto gives him the diet plan and some advice. Judy confesses a secret to Meredith. Bonnie gets some news.

Writers Note: This chapter was hard to finish.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday morning in Tundra Town at the Free Clinic

Hugo stepped back into the clinic's waiting room. He had left Amanda downstairs to look after her patient while he came back to check on Judy. He checked with the front desk to see which room Sally had taken them to, and wandered down the hall in slow pursuit, but before he got there Roberto stopped him.

“Hello, Hugo. I understand that the rabbit that came in this morning is going to be staying with you. And while I am pleased to note that she will recovering in a safe environment, I would appreciate it if you don’t endanger that recovery with inappropriate actions on your part!” Roberto put his paws on his hips, leaned over, and stared down at the smaller cat with a touch of menace.

“Um… Uh… Roberto, I assure you...” Hugo stammered.

Smirking, Roberto pointed down at him and added, “That means no hot peppers! Her digestive track is very sensitive as it is, and the richer caloric food that we will be introducing will cause some upsets. Adding the caustic oils in peppers will definitely push it over the edge. So keep your cooking mild!”

He handed Hugo the diet plan, “Here’s my preliminary dietary workup for her, at least for the first few days. If she encounters any problems, like queasines, vomiting, or difficulty with passing stool, contact me immediately. My contact info is on the top of the sheet. Otherwise, we will take it slow, and make any changes to that diet plan if warranted on her follow up visits.”

Hugo looked down at the sheet in confusion. After managing to get a dig in under his skin, Roberto took just a little pity on the poor cat. He asked Hugo, “Never done shopping for a
Hugo scowled up at him, still annoyed at Roberto’s insinuations and double entendres, “No. Not in a long time. My last girlfriend was an insectivore.”

Roberto directed him, “Just look for the local ‘The Hungry Goat’ locations on your smart phone. I know that there is at least one at the base of the alpine district that you should be able to visit on your way back home. They should have everything you need.”

He turned to look down the hall, “Sally should be finished with the blood draw by now. I’ll head down to the kitchen and fetch Judy something to eat. I will be back up in a minute, Hugo.” He passed Hugo, heading for the stairs.

“Ciertamente, Roberto.” Hugo continued on the examination room. He walked in as Sally was walking out with the blood vials, already prepacked in their Styrofoam container for their trip to the lab. He stood the side and let her pass. As he walked in, Meredith noticed his scowl and commented, “Is there something wrong?”

“Ah? No, no. Not wrong, really. Roberto was just using this as another opportunity to harass me. He still hasn’t forgiven me for introducing him to my Abuela’s empanada recipe last month. I told him they were hot, but he didn’t believe me. He considers himself the local southern continent food expert, so I suppose it’s ironic when he can’t handle a local dish from my hometown. Anyway, I digress, poorly. How fares our noble rabbit?”

Judy, leaning on Meredith, waved at him and let her paw drop down, frowning at the floor. Hugo took the opportunity to take a photo of the scene with his phone. Judy rolled her head up, squinted at him and asked, “Why did you take a photo now? I feel like crap, and probably look even worse.” You jerk!

“Perhaps you do, but I took it as a reference, as I didn’t take one last night. But I assure you, as each day goes by, you will feel distinctly better than how you felt the previous day. And by the end of the week, you will be amazed at how well you are doing.” He gestured to her current state, "As for how you are right now, you will start to feel much better once Sally comes in to start the IV. Also, I know that Roberto’s gone downstairs to get your something to eat, so that will also help.” Hugo assured the suffering rabbit.

“Uh, huh.” It didn’t look she quite believed him.
Sally walked in with the IV bag, and started to set it up. To get out of the way, Hugo excused himself. “I will be back in a bit, I just need to follow up on something.” He handed the meal plan to Meredith and walked out the open door.

Sally hooked up Judy to the IV line, “Here you go, doe. This will help you perk right up.” She cleaned up her left over plastic pieces, and turned back to Judy, “Bob’s bringing you a sandwich, I believe. He’ll be back up in just a minute.” She followed Hugo out the door, and turned to shut it behind her.

“Leave it open, please.” Judy called out to her. Sally just nodded, and left down the hall.

Judy squeezed Meredith’s paw, causing Meredith to look up from reading the meal plan and over at Judy who expressed her gratitude, “Thank you for staying with me. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, dear.” Meredith assured her.

Judy struggled to collect her thoughts and then just let out a long sigh, “I get really bad panic attacks if I get stuck someplace where I feel trapped,” she finally confessed to Meredith.

“Oh.” Meredith took in the scene around her and the mixture of scents she could smell. She leaned her head down and sniffed in Judy’s scent.

“Can you smell it, my fear?” Judy asked her, the shame she felt coloring her voice. She buried her face in Meredith’s side.

“Yes. I’m sorry, I didn’t notice it before, with all the mammals coming and going. Are you having a panic attack right now?” Meredith was very concerned about her little charge.

Judy nodded, “I’m barely hanging on, honestly. If it wasn’t for you and Hugo, I could never been able to do this.” Judy shook her head and continued, “Since I’ve been homeless, I’ve not been able to visit a doctor, or go to a shelter, or anyplace where the doors lock behind me and I can’t get out. Weird, right?”

“I don’t know. Why do you say that you think that it is weird?” Meredith was a bit confused by her statement.
“A rabbit who doesn’t like small, secure spaces? That’s what’s weird. Me.” Judy sniffed, and wiped away the beginnings of tears.

“Well, Hugo has told me a bit about your past, and I can certainly understand about how you wouldn’t like to be locked up, not after spending 9 years in Cliffside. Most of your childhood, in fact.” Meredith started to stroke her paw down Judy’s head and back, trying to soothe her. Just like Mom used to do...

“Yeah, that’s a big part of it,” Judy allowed that but kept the rest of what she was feeling to herself.

*I’m sorry Meredith, but new found trust only goes so far.*

* * * * *

Hugo leaned against the brick wall, and pulled out his phone. This next call was going to be really hard, but not because he was delivering bad news. Quite the opposite, in fact. Good news can carry it’s own explosive emotional shrapnel into someone’s life, and sometimes it is best to give someone a little warning before dropping the bomb. Especially when one’s faith and hope has been all that sustained them in the long years of pain and loss while they searched for that which could not be found.

He sent a simple question first: “Do you have a moment?”

The reply, “Absolutely, dear. I’m in the root cellar, taking stock. What do you need?”

Hugo pulled up the picture of he just took. Judy look so vulnerable and broken, leaning there on Meredith’s shoulder, but it absolutely beat the alternative. He always preferred to give hope, not pain, to the family and friends who held on to their faith that their loved ones would eventually be found, hale and whole.

He pasted the photo into a text message, and underneath it he typed “I found her!”

It was a message, in truth, that he had hoped that he would the chance to send to her one day. He had also, in truth, feared that he would never get that chance.
He hit the send button, and slid down the wall to the floor to wait for what would certainly come next.

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Bonnie Hopps was in the root cellar, cleaning out old tubers. Beth had taken a load of wrinkled and moldy radishes out to the compost pile, and that left her alone with the dusty shelves of pickled vegetables and dried onions. She was using her phone to take notes of what was left to toss and what was still edible when a new message popped.

“Do you have a moment?”, she read off the screen. Oh, it was Hugo. It’s been several months since he last chatted with them. And while she had to be realistic, and acknowledge that her lost headstrong daughter had finally passed on somewhere in the past ten years, she still appreciated that others outside of their family held out hope against the odds that she would be found.

She pulled up the message and replied, “Absolutely, dear. I’m in the root cellar, taking stock. What do you need?”

The message he sent back contained an attachment. She kicked up her ears in query and her brows furrowed. She never gotten an attachment in a text from him before. She clicked on the button, and it started to download. 3… 2… 1… Pop.

The picture that came up momentarily confused her. It looked like a doctor’s examining room, complete with that uncomfortable examining bed. On the bed was a large white hare, dressed in an older more conservative feminine style than Bonnie usually saw in Bunny Burrow. And next to her was a smaller figure, dressed in a polka-dotted white examination gown, their lower paws dangling off the bed. It looked like it was a much smaller gray and white hare, leaning on the larger doe. Maybe one of the doe's kits? Were they sick?

Gray and white. That thought caused Bonnie's breath to catch in her throat. No. It couldn't be that, she thought. She zoomed into the picture, and scrolled up to their face. The face was drawn and hollow, the ears fallen down the back, and the muzzle turned into a frown. But then her gaze locked onto the kit's eyes. Oh, Blessed Creator!

Bonnie's paw flew to her lips as she started to sob, her heart beating a thunderous pace in counterpoint to the catch in her breath. She had all but lost hope in the past decade, reduced to nursing a small faint spark in a secret corner of her heart against the pressures of reality, and now
that forlorn faith was rewarded with great peals of glad clarion note! She didn't even need to read the note below to know what those three simple words said. She knew!

Like fields of wind swept lavender after a summer thunderstorm, those amethyst eyes swept up Bonnie's heart in rapturous joy.

She rushed out the root cellar, passing a confused Beth, running to the fields where he toiled under the warm sun.

"STU!!!!"

Chapter End Notes

We are moving right along, making good time. Be sure to stay tuned though as Important character introductions are coming up!

In chapter 9's flashback scene we're introducing Doctor Donny Pahin, Hugo's boss at Zootopia Health and Wellness, and Hugo talks to Judy's little sister Beth in chapter 10.

Finally, in chapter 11's flashback scene we have our long awaited guest star of the show, Officer Nick Wilde! Yayyyyyy! Let's have a round of applause for the dashing young tod on his first major case since graduating from ZPD Parking Duty!

Please note: In Debts Unpaid, Nick was filling out the ZPD entrance form at the age of 17 in preparation to attend Zootopia's Police Academy. Judy's murder trial was playing out on the television at his mother's house. In this AU, he has been a police officer his entire adult career.
Flashback: The Review

Chapter Summary

Hugo meets with his boss and post-doc advisor, Doctor Donny Pahin. They discuss the current status of Hugo's project at Cliffside and the 15 patients that Hugo is recommending for transfer. Judy is the 16th patient that Hugo wants to transfer, but Donny feels that is going to be a harder sell. As their meeting progresses, Donny is concerned when he sees discrepancies between Hugo's reports and the reports from Administrator Swineton.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13 years ago at the Zootopia Health and Welfare department

“Morning, Helen. Is Doctor Pahin available?” Hugo bent over to set his box of files down on the floor next to the receptionist’s desk, and turned back up to address the older snow hare doe, “I do believe I have an appointment with him this morning.”

“Oh, hello, Doctor Weidii! Yes, he’s just on a call right now. He should be off of it in just a couple of minutes more. Would you like to take a seat while you wait?”

Hugo turned back to view the chairs in the sparsely styled waiting room. They were styled in a gray and chrome corporate chic twenty years out of date, all evenly sized for large mammals to sit upon. The fading cushions, the wear of years of restless mammals showing upon the fabric, mocked him by placing the seat at his chest height. It would be rather undignified to try to boost himself into those chairs, he thought to himself. He could do it, he knew, but he would look ridiculous doing it.

They were leftovers from the previous administrator, who was of rather larger stature then the current occupant of this office. He was sure that Donny, being perpetually nearsighted and absentminded about his environment, hadn’t even noticed that the chairs were all too large to be comfortably used by his clientele.

“That’s quite alright, I’ve been sitting in traffic all morning. I’d rather stand for a bit before I meet with the director.” Hugo assured her.

Doctor Donny Pahin was the newly minted director of Counseling Services, for the Zootopia
department of Mammal Health and Welfare, and Hugo’s boss and advisor for the duration of his post-doc work. One of Donny’s first objectives in his new job had been to reduce the workload and overhead that his department was experiencing. They simply could not retain the experienced medical professionals needed to meet the physical and mental health needs of a very diverse city of mammals.

Donny hoped that by trying less conventional approaches to mammal mental health he might be able to reduce the number of patients still stuck in the system. So when Hugo had initially applied for the post-doc grant at his department, he was intrigued by the possibilities that Hugo’s experimental program might have at the perpetually overcrowded Cliffside, and took Hugo under his arm personally.

Hugo had come in at Donny’s request for a mid-project review, and while he was there, he hopped to get some advice from Donny on how he might possibly get his star pupil moved to a more amiable program for her. He didn’t hold out much hope.

He passed the time while he waited by chatting with Helen about her favorite topic, her kits. “And how are your kits doing?”

“Oh splendid! The oldest three are off at college right now and enjoying the social life that affords them. My oldest doe has even picked up a new boyfriend there. He’s training to become a mechie.”

“A mechie? What’s that?” Hugo hadn’t ever heard that term before.

“Oh, I’m sorry, that’s not a medical term, is it.” She laughed, “He’s studying to become a mechanical engineer. It looks like he’s going to be roped into his father’s company, and they sent to get him educated on the subject. Have you ever of Macleod Excavation?”

“Um.. I think so? Aren’t they the company that took over the new water tunnel for the city that’s supposed to bring in lake water from the north?” The project, true of most government public works projects, was way over budget and massively behind schedule. The Macleod’s had a reputation for fast and efficient work and as result the city had hired them to fix the problems with the tunnel that the last company, Acme Tunnel Rats, had bodged. Hugo did appreciate the Zootopian government actually tried to do something about public project waste and corruption here, unlike some of the governents on the southern continents. Most of the politicians back home acted like the public coffers were their own personal accounts, and tended to raid them dry.

“That’s the same. Anyway, she’s excited to have finally found a strong buck who’s just as nerdy as she is.” Her desk phone buzzed. She pushed the intercom button, and leaned into the mic, “Yes,
“Helen, is Hugo in yet?” Donny’s voice crackled over the cheap intercom. She pushed the button again and responded, “Yes, sir. I’ll send him right in.” She turned to Hugo and motioned him to go in. “He’ll see you now.” He nodded and smiled, “Thank you,” as he picked up his box and walked into Donny’s office.

“Hugo, my cub, how are you?” Donny stood up from his stool and reached his paw across the low-slung desk, clad in cheap oak vernier. Hugo took it and shook it. “Quite well, Director. I thank you for taking the time to meet with me.” He set his box down next to his chair and flipped off the lid. “May I sit?”

“Certainly! What have you got for me today?” While Donny liked to consider himself a progressive mammal, he usually still felt a shiver of fear when in the presence of a predator. But he didn’t experience that unease when he met with Hugo. Donny was enough of a psychologist to hypothesize that the lack of reaction was probably due to the cat’s smaller size combined with his formal speech.

Hugo was also enough of a neurologist to relish the fact that Donny wasn’t expressing any fear responses to his feline presence. What Donny didn’t probably realize was that his grandmother had trained him well on how to put anxious and grieving mammals at ease. It was always difficult for smaller mammals to meet with such a large predator like a jaguar; so she endeavored to make sure that they felt safe and unthreatened whenever they arrived to meet with her. While he was nowhere near her size, her lessons still bore fruit in his interpersonal approach. Now if he could only figure out how to consistently relate to Administrator Swineton. She still bore him a measure of distrust that he couldn’t reconcile, and it made their professional relationship somewhat unstable.

“Well, sir, I wanted to report that I have been meeting with some success with my alternative treatment programs, particularly with the art-therapy classes. I’ve got fifteen, maybe sixteen, patients there that show real promise that I would like to recommend for transfers out of Cliffside.” Hugo handed the thick file with his recommendations over to Donny, who sat back down and put on his glasses to read it.

Donny pawed down through the list at the front, but could only count fifteen names. He turned his attention back to Hugo, “Who’s the sixteenth patient you’re thinking off? I don’t see them listed here.”

Hugo sighed, and handed Judy’s smaller personal file over to Donny, “The only rabbit in our group, and probably the best artist of them all: Judy Hopps.”
Donny squinted and racked his brain for a moment, “Hopps, Hopps, where do I know that name?” He shook his head, “Wait, wait, you mean Carl Latrans’ murderer? The Bunny Burrow Predator Killer? That’s her?” Donny asked Hugo incredulously as he gestured at the file.

“Judy was nine when she did that, and she has never tried to deflect or deny her guilt. I know that she’s had discipline issues in other facilities, but since starting my program her behavior has improved dramatically.” Hugo defended his charge.

Donny took off his glasses, folded them, and pointed at Hugo, “She’s going to be a hard sell to some of the other programs due to her record, Hugo, to be honest. Though it might be easier if...” He put his glasses back on to read again, “Did you ever figure out if there were any underling psychological issues in her case, or perhaps come up with a preliminary diagnosis for her? Her file is pretty bare on that, other than her problems with authority figures.” Donny leafed through the file, but he didn’t find any further notes to that effect, which was really strange. She had been in system for six years – somebody should have come up with a diagnosis by now. Even a vague diagnosis picked from the DSM that was close to her psychological presentation would justify keeping her in the system.

“Actually sir, I do not. Other than exhibiting an religious conviction that has survived even in the face of her incarceration at Cliffside, I believe that she is as sane as anyone can be growing up in there.” Hugo just shook his head. He didn’t understand it either.

“Religious? How so? Does she exhibit a messianic complex, or some kind of religious delusion?” Donny peered over his glasses at Hugo.

“She prays to the Divines every night, according to the orderlies. I’ve manage to listen in a couple of times, but she never has any complains about her situation or how she feels she is being treated unfairly. She plainly admits her guilt during the prayers, and feels that her crime was a sin. It was a necessary act, she believes, but still a sinful one.”

Hugo continued, “As for her problems with authority, she is pretty respectful at this point with most of the adults in her life, my nurse and I included. Most of those previous authority problems were expressed as escape attempts, which I believe had more to do with boredom due to a lack of meaningful diversions at that facility than actual criminal intent. She’s since found that diversion that she craves in the art that she expresses in my classes, and she hasn’t tried an escape attempt in months.”

Donny’s head snapped up, “None? Really, no escape attempts? Isn’t that’s what got her sent to Cliffside in the first place?” Donny put down her file, and pulled another folder out of his desk’s file drawer. It was the latest patient update from Horizons, the private company that managed Cliffside. He flipped through it until he came to the entry for Judy Hopps. He read to himself,
‘patient continues to exhibit emotional instability and problems with authority, as expressed by continued escape attempts 2-3 times a month, as well as a complete lack of remorse for her past criminal actions. Further chemical treatment regimes are recommended.’ The diagnosis field was blank, he also noted.

“None since that first classroom session, and she didn’t even make it out of the room before Manchas caught her. And since she didn’t make it past the door, I didn’t report it to Administrator Swineton. I figured it was an internal classroom issue, and I have enough problems with the administration as it is without calling more attention to my program.”

“Swineton, eh? What is that corporate windbag up to?” Donny smiled over at Hugo.

“She’s been alternatively supportive and aggressively antagonistic. It’s almost like she’s got in her brain that I am secretly a government inspector come to observe her operations, and she can’t decide if she should suck up to me or kick me out. Honestly, and I say this with a grain of salt as it is not the most flattering of observations, but she lends credence to the old notion that the insane asylum warden has to be crazier than the inmates to be there.” Hugo grimaced a bit as he bit that admission out. He knew that it’s not a good career practice to make observations like that to departmental directors. But since she wasn’t Donny’s employee, being employed by Horizons directly, he wasn’t as protective of her as he might be otherwise be of one his employees.

Donny quirked an ear at that observation, and he looked back at the report in his paws. He flipped to the end, and there it was, Swineton’s signature, clear as day. Frowning a bit, he flipped back into the report, and chose one of Hugo’s patients at random. “Have you been having trouble with Riccio?”

“Rizzo? Not really. While he’s not a stellar student, like Judy or Mork our budding manga artist, Rizzo’s pretty diligent about his artwork. I’ve not had any discipline issues with him since the first two weeks, once I got them settled into their separate groups. His artwork is fairly chaotic, but I think that is actually helps him to calm his ADHD down by scribbling randomly.”

“Have you observed any patterns of self-destructive behavior.” Donny looked up over the report at Hugo.

“Well, he’s not acting out in class in front of me or Manchas. Honestly, I think that he and his buddy Shakes are pretty normal for hyperactive teenage rats. The worst behavior issue I’ve had with them recently was when they tried to gargle the water color paints last month. It was stupid and made a mess, but that was it. They couldn’t hurt themselves with it – it was non-toxic. They stopped doing that once they figured out that the paint tasted awful.”

Donny raised his eyebrow at that little story. “I see.” He turned to Riccio’s section in the Cliffside
Donny started working through Hugo’s recommendation list, and compared that to Swineton’s submitted report. Every patient that Hugo recommended for transfer due to improvement was shown to be problematic in Swineton’s report. The phrase ‘Further chemical treatment regimes are recommended.’ also cropped up rather extensively, like somebody was cutting and pasting it into every patient synopsis.

He frowned. Somebody was lying to him and to his department, but he didn’t quite know who. He hadn’t ever dealt with Cliffside, as he had spent most of his service career dealing with the homeless and family housing programs in Zootopia, so he didn’t know if this feeling was accurate or not. He didn’t believe it was Hugo that was lying to him. It would damage Hugo’s chances at finishing his post-doc work, and the stories he had just told about his patients rang true. But something in these files still wasn’t right, and the quickest way for him to find out was to move those fifteen patients out of Cliffside and into another program where he could monitor their progress personally.

Hugo was concerned with the frown and asked apologetically, “I’m sorry, sir, have I erred in some fashion?”

Donny slapped the file shut and smiled at Hugo, “Nope. Your work is exemplary, in my opinion. I agree with your recommendations on the first fifteen, and I’ll get started on their transfers right away.”

“And my sixteenth?” Hugo held out.

Donny scowled, “That will be a harder sell. She’s burned some bridges by escaping from all the likely programs that I know about. You’re going to have to call around and contact some programs that are further away from Zootopia, who would be less familiar with her reputation, and see if they would be interested. If you can get a nibble, let me know, and I’ll contact them and try to convince them to take her. How does that sound?”

“Thank you, that sounds much better, sir. Cliffside isn’t working for her.” Hugo thanked him.

Donny laid his paws on the Cliffside report sitting in his lap, “I know. I can see that.” He smiled back at Hugo, “Why don’t you leave me your box of patient records right there so I can go through them tonight, and you go back to your office and see if you can find a program that would be
interested in taking Ms. Hopps?” He put Horizons’ Cliffside report back in his desk drawer, and stood to shake Hugo’s paw.

Hugo stood, and took the offered paw, “Thank you sir, I’ll get right on it.” He shook the paw, and walked out of Donny’s office with a bit of a spring to his step. There was hope after all!

Donny waited until he heard the door to the hall close behind Hugo, and picked up the phone.

“Mrs. Snow, do you know if we have a departmental lawyer on staff?”

* * * * *

Buzzzzzzzz....

Hugo sat at his departmental desk and stared at the phone in disbelief, Diosa!

It couldn’t be that hard to find a facility that had never heard of Judy Hopps! He’s worked through twenty so far on, working farther and farther away from Zootopia, and none of the program directors he had contacted expressed any interest in talking about taking her. The last call he made had been to the Bunny Burrows’ diversion program, but they hung up on him as soon as he mentioned her name.

He was going to have a hard time fulfilling his promise to Bonnie at this rate!

Chapter End Notes

Dr Pahin's title of "Director of Counseling Services for the Zootopia department of Mammal Health and Welfare" is just a fancy way of saying he's in charge of the Mental Health division of Zootopia's public health system. He's inherited an overworked and understaffed department that is constantly loosing it's best mammals to private practice, lured away by larger paychecks and more amiable work hours. He's also inherited larger problems to solve, like the stinking cesspool that is Cliffside. As a result, he's willing to take a risk or two on a hot new doctor with big ideas, on the off chance that they can really start to change things in the darker corners of Zootopia,
for every mammal deserves their chance in the light... Even the damned.
Tuesday Morning: Lost But Never Forgotten

Chapter Summary

Beth has come over to help her mother clean out the root cellar, a less than pleasant task that her siblings like to avoid. But her mother runs off, and Beth has to search all over the Hopps farm for her. She finds her and the rest of her family consoling a sobbing Stu, and Beth discovers why.

Chapter Notes

In the fan fictions that I have read so far, Beth is described as a pure white rabbit, almost snow white. She often exhibits a bit of hero worship towards her older sister, and tries to emulate her behavior. One wonders if this is why Beth decided to go into social work, perhaps as a means of honoring what Judy could have become?

As this is a new Hopps character, I decided to try a slightly different writing style - more introspective and descriptive. I'm not sure what to think of it yet...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Current Day: Tuesday morning in Bunny Burrow

The day at the Hopps family farm, like any other day, had started normally – calm, peaceful, and full of chores. Beth Hopps had taken the day off from her job at the Bunny Burrows Social Services Department to help her mom, Bonnie, clean out the root cellar. It was among the least favorite of family chores, full of mold and spiders, vile enough that most every other of her siblings found some excuse to be almost anywhere else instead, which annoyed Beth to no end. So when their Mother announced it was time to clean the cellar out, Beth offered to help immediately.

It had to be done, and if so, it was best done quickly. It shouldn’t be left to her poor old mother, who was getting on in her years. Beth made arrangements to cover her shift with her work supervisor, took the day off, and made sure to arrive at the crack of dawn dressed in her worst grubby chores clothes. Even then, her mother still managed to beat her down there, where she was already hard at work sorting through old roots and vegetables.

Beth had stooped down under the storm door frame, and had barely stepped a paw onto the dirt floor before her mother had stood up and shoved a steaming mug of coffee into her hands with a flourish and a bright smile. No recriminations, no complaints, just pleasure that her daughter had arrived to help.
They both set to work and after a couple of hours they had cleared most of it away. Beth was in the process of cleaning out some rather nasty radishes – they weren’t supposed to be that shade of green, not after sitting underground for a year – and she had just dumped a basket load on the compost pile by the tractor shed. As she was coming back for another load she was nearly run over by her mother who came surging out of the root cellar, waving her paw phone, and screaming at the top of her lungs.

“STU!!!!”

Beth quickly stepped to the side, out of the way, as her mother went tearing by. She could swear that Bonnie hadn’t even seen her standing there. How could she, what with all that standing water in her eyes, tears coursing down her mother’s cheeks like rivulets of storm driven rain on a window pane.

She tried to call out to her mom, but there was no return answer. It was if her mother was so focused on finding her husband that nothing else even intruded into her thoughts. Bonnie went racing up to the edge of the fields and leapt over the old wood fence in a single bound, landing on the other side, and she raced off through the rows of heritage carrots.

Whoa. Beth hadn’t seen her mother move like that in years, not since that time that Bobby fell down into the old well and broke his leg. Bonnie was a fit doe, even with her advancing years, but she was never really as athletic as her other daughters had been, especially Judy. Beth smiled to herself with that thought. Now that was a bunny she hadn’t thought of in years - her long long sister Judy. Funny that she should think of her lost sibling now.

Well, she wasn’t gonna get anything done just standing there, and since Mom had the to-do list on her phone, she might as well follow her out to find Dad. At least she could get an explanation as to what all the yelling and fussing was about. She put the cleaning basket down and climbed over the split log fence her mother had just jumped over.

* * * * *

Well, her parents weren’t in the carrot fields, nor were they in the blueberry patches down by the stream. She continued down along the stream, passing green alfalfa fields on the high side and the young shoots of cat-tails down along the other bank. Her only company for a spell was the buzzing of dragon-flies, who tickled her ears as they competed for landing space on the vertical appendages, like little manic commuter helicopters competing for fares.
She came to the end of the fields, and she as started into the apple and pecan orchards, there was a low murmur to be heard. Her ears, swiveling to and fro, led her to a small gathering of her siblings under the apple trees who were in turn ringed about her parents. Her father was on his knees before Bonnie, his coveralls stained with mud and apple juice, sobbing as if he were begging her for forgiveness. Bonnie held his head to her belly, stroking his head and ears, a smile upon her muzzle even as tears coursed down her own cheeks. She looked up at the sound of paw steps upon the fallen apple leaves, and tilted her head toward the approaching white doe.

“Oh, Beth...”, she whispered in a hoarse voice and held out her phone to her. Beth picked a way through her kneeling siblings, as they talked in muted whispers, and reached out her paw to take the phone from her mother. Bonnie turned back to Stu, and sank to her knees to join him in expressing what he liked to call the waterworks.

Beth was still confused, though. Her siblings were all here; nobody was missing, so what where they all grieving over? Who had died? She turned her gaze to the phone itself, and looked at the picture that was still displayed on the screen.

*That’s weird, she thought, who is that?* She didn’t recognize the large white hare in the photo, but who was the little gray kit? She used her paw and zoomed into the picture. The kit looked surprisingly nondescript, clad in the standard bunny colors of white and gray, and nothing appeared out of the ordinary until she looked at the eyes.

*Oh. My. God.*

Those eyes. Beth put her own paw to her mouth as she gazed at those lavender eyes; eyes she hadn’t seen in ten long years.

Her long lost sister.

**Judy.**

* * * * *

Beth took a deep breath, and looked back up at the rest of her family. They had gathered around her parents, coming together in a Hopps family group hug. Grand-kits and cousins stood outside the group, not realizing what exactly going on, just knowing that it was important. That left Beth as the odd bunny out. She wanted to join in with everybody else, but she also understood that she had
been handed a duty by her mother, who had to console her father.

Okay, Beth, pull it together. You're a professional social worker. You've dealt with missing loved ones before. You can do this, she admonished herself. She hit the back button and saw where the message came from. Oh, it's Hugo. It had been a few years since she last talked him. The last time was at her college graduation, she remembered.

She took a deep breath, and stepped a few yards away from the huddle. She pressed the little phone icon to send him a call. Putting the phone up to her ears, she silently sent up a prayer for good news while she waited for it to connect.

* * * * *

Hugo’s phone buzzed in his paw. That had taken longer than he expected, although he did imagine that his message might have lead to tears and no small amount of carrying on. He accepted the call, and put the phone to his ear as he voiced a greeting.

“Hello, Bonnie.”

“Actually, it’s Beth. You remember who I am, right?” He heard from her.

“Um, yes, I do believe so. You’re Judy’s younger sister, correct? I believe I went to your graduation a few years back, where you had been studying for social work?”

“Yeah, I work for the Bunny Burrow Social Services division these days.” Beth took a deep breath before continuing, “I have to ask – is this photo really her? Is it really my sister?”

“Yes, it’s Judy, in the flesh. And I also have to ask, where is Bonnie? I’d expected to talk to her about all this.”

“She’s currently on her knees, trying to comfort Dad who’s kinda incoherent right now. So you get to deal with me, and I get to ask the questions. Who’s the doe, and why is my sister in a hospital examination room?”
Hugo smiled to himself. He had expected that he would be dealing with overjoyed and incoherent parents, not the calm voice of one of Judy’s siblings. This might go faster than I expected, he realized.

“The doe is my neighbor, Meredith, who is a registered nurse. She has been helping me since last night, when I found your sister. We are currently in a Zootopia clinic, not a hospital.”

“Is she sick?” Beth’s voice quavered on the other end.

“The doctor thinks its probably just pneumonia, as a result of a case of hypothermia from wandering around Tundratown soaking wet last night, but they need to make sure, so they are running some tests right now.”

“Tundratown? What was she doing in Tundratown?” Beth sounded confused and concerned at the same time.

“Actually, I don’t know. I do know that she had been living homeless in the Rainforest District most recently, but I don’t yet know why. And I have not pressed her for an answer yet.” Hugo pointed out to her.

“Okay.. Continue, please.” Beth held her breath.

“Your sister has been homeless on the streets of Zootopia for the past three years, apparently, and she has studiously managed to avoid going to any of the shelters, public kitchens, or social services in those three years. You work in social services; I believe you might be able to imagine why?”

“She didn’t want to be found.” Beth concluded.

“Yes. That is my belief as well. She could have walked into any shelter and asked for help, but she never did. You’ve worked with the homeless before; the reasons why they never ask for help can vary for individual to individual: pride, arrogance, substance abuse, or not even having anybody left to turn to. But I think there was something else going on.”

“Okay...” Beth encouraged him to continue.
“She alluded to hiding in the Rain Forest district, and that she didn’t want to go to the hospital because somebody would ‘catch her’. She’s been acting paranoid about something, and I haven’t discovered what yet.”

“Can I talk to her? Maybe she’ll tell me?” Beth offered to Hugo.

“Actually, I don’t think that is a good idea for the immediate moment. She’s just had a blood draw done, and it’s made her rather cranky. And like you said before, she didn’t want to be found. She was hiding for a reason. She could have called home at anytime, but she would rather die of malnutrition and hypothermia hiding out on the streets of Zootopia than involve her family in whatever she was dealing with. Your sister could be stubborn that way.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Hugo could imagine Beth nodding on the other end as she agreed.

Hugo continued, “I also know that I can’t push her. I learned that at Cliffside. When your sister is good and ready to talk to me, she will. And not a moment sooner.”

“Oh yeah. That’s Judy, alright.” Beth wryly agreed.

“The other thing your sister was known for at Cliffside, before I met her, was escape attempts. If she feels trapped here in this situation, she might bolt, and I don’t know if I could ever find her if she disappeared again. So if she hasn’t talked to you in ten years, would you be willing to wait a little longer? At least until we can figure out who she is hiding from, and why she is so scared?” he asked her.

“I might, and I’m pretty sure I can talk Mom into it, but Dad’s gonna be a hard sell on that. He’d be willing to drive all night non-stop to Zootopia in his truck to pick her up! He’s misses her terribly, even after ten years.”

Hugo considered his next words for a moment and then offered her, “Tell you what – I will make your family a bargain for the moment. I think she would be willing to stay with me until she recovers. If so, I’ll endeavor to send Bonnie a daily picture of her as she heals, so that your family can have a record of her progress, and I’ll make an evening phone call to your parents so that I can tell them about her day. Nothing that would make Judy feel compromised, mind you, but enough that they should feel reassured. And when Judy is ready to talk, I’ll encourage her to talk to you all. Would that hold off your father?”

“Yeah, maybe. For a week or so, tops. He’s pretty protective of her, even after she stole all that money from him. He wants her back.”
“I know. I find it amazing that he can forgive her for that, and the fact that your mother worked so hard with me to help me find her.”

“We’re Hopps. We love each other, no questions asked.” Beth repeated one of Bonnie’s favorite family mantras. It was never so more important than now. Even Beth had forgiven her, Hugo knew.

“Thank you. I know that, truly I do. I should be getting back to her now.” Hugo reiterated to her, “Please, if you have any further questions, please text me them, and I will call tonight and try to answer them for you.”

“Yeah, thank you. I’ll do that.” Beth assured him. “I don’t think my parents will want to – Mom will understand when I talk to her about it, and Dad will probably have to take a tranquilizer to calm down tonight. A little chamomile tea and he will be right out until morning. Once he wakes up, Mom and I will talk to him. It should be okay.”

Hugo expressed to her, “Thank you for being understanding.”

“Hey, we’re the professionals here, ya know? We should act like it!” She knew they were both feeling anything but professional right now, but that was the nature of the job. Keep what you feel inside, and do the job you need to do, so that you can help others. “Talk to you tonight, Dr Wiedii?”

“Most certainly, Ms. Hopps. I look forward to it.”

The line went dead as Beth disconnected. Hugo stood up against the wall, put a paw out to steady himself as he collected his thoughts. He smiled a bit and wandered back down the hall toward the clinic.

* * * * * *

Beth stared at the phone, smiled to herself for a moment, and put it away in her pocket. She made her way back to the family huddle and stood a moment watching them. Her mother must have been checking up on her phone call, because she looked back up and caught Beth standing there. Beth locked her gaze with her mother, and smiling as she nodded, she mouthed the word Later to Bonnie. Her mother just sighed, and bent her head back her husband’s as the rest of the family joined in their relief.
That which had been lost, has been found once more.

Chapter End Notes

Finally appearing in the next flashback chapter is Officer Nick Wilde! Yeay!!!! (yelling like Kermit from the Muppet show) Let's give him a round of applause!

After that, Judy starts opening up to Hugo in chapter 12, and he learns a thing or two about her! Oh My!

Upcoming character introductions include Fennick in chapter 18, and Skye Winters in chapter 19! Stay tuned, it's exciting stuff!
Flashback: The Briefing

Chapter Summary

Hugo shows up to the door at Cliffside the next day only to be shown the door on his way back out by Swinton. He goes back to talk to Donny about being kicked out like a stray cat, and his boss brings in the ZPD’s first fox officer, Officer Nick Wilde, to help.

Chapter Notes

I borrowed the mouse attorney character Roxanne Field from Kulkum's most excellent story Sunderance. He is a far better writer than I could hope to be, and I drew a fair amount of courage and inspiration for this project from his works. Go Read His Stuff!

In other news, this is the longest chapter I have written for this story- 6390 words! Wow! Talk about streams of consciousness.

13 years ago at Cliffside Psych Ward: A Cold Wind Blows

The day had dawned clear and cold, with just a whisper of autumn winds rustling the dying summer leaves as they danced down through the broad leaf trees clinging to the alpine slopes. Hugo shivered as he stood at the bus stop, contemplating life and the cold air nibbling on his tail. If he had been his mother, he would have taken the morning’s cold weather as a sign of bad luck, and performed some ritual or another to appease Karma, maybe even light a candle. But he wasn’t superstitious, certainly not anymore, not since he was a child. No, he was a mammal of science and medicine, trained in the scientific method and rigorous testing. A professional! He didn’t believe in bad luck and bad karma.

He probably should have lit that candle.

The beginning of the morning had been fine. He had woken up on time, groggy and scratching his way to the shower, letting the blast of steaming water batter his foggy brain into a semi-state of clarity. He dressed without catching his belly fur in the zipper, grabbed his coffee without spilling it on himself, even found his keys right where they should have been, hanging on the hook next to the kitchen door.

The day had been going so well, he thought. Traffic was light, speeds were great, and the bus had even arrived right on time. In fact, everything was going just fine, sailing right along, right up until
he tried to walk through the front lobby door at Cliffside. He swiped his security badge against the
door pad and nothing happened. The little red lights on the pad stayed red. Not even a flicker.

He swiped again. Nothing. The lights just stared back at him, mocking him, again. What was it, the
third time this month, that these damn things stopped working? It must be the cold air, making the
electronic slow or maybe the door stick. He didn’t understand how these things worked. He held
the card up to the pad and waited. The pad buzzed for a second, but the lights stayed red and the
door stayed locked.

He stalked over to the white courtesy phone in it’s little kiosk, and called the security desk to ask
for some mammal to please come and admit him into the building, like he was somehow too feeble
brained to make a simple swipe and go security pad work. He waited outside, his whiskers and tail
twitching in annoyance, for one of the wolf security guards to take pity on him and let him in.

“Yo, Doc.” One of the security wolves, it looked like Steelhair, held the door open for him, “Your
card not working again?” He held out his paw to Hugo.

“Yes. The thing hates me today.” Hugo handed him the badge, scowling.

“Probably just the cold, causing the moisture in the air to condense on the electronics. We’ll check
it out.” Steelhair walked back over to his circular security desk, while Hugo followed behind him.

He ran the card through his reader, but the security pad just bleated at him. That was certainly
strange, so he checked the computer screen for an error message. “Not Valid? That’s weird.” He
clicked past the error message, and pulled up Hugo’s security profile. The authorization check
boxes were all grayed out, and he couldn’t clear them. “Hang on, Doc, I gotta call up on this one.”
Steelhair picked up his phone and called upstairs for assistance.

“Revoked? What do you mean, revoked? He’s from ZMHW, he can’t be revoked!” Steelhair tried
to argue with the voice on other end. Hugo was watching him with increasing concern. Something
was not right here. A motion out of the corner of his eye caught his attention; ah, it was Swinton,
striding towards the security desk. Steelhair, hearing her coming with his other ear, turned and put
the phone to his chest, “Administrator Swinton, Doctor Wiedii….”

She didn’t let him finish. She held up a finger to silence him, and then pointed it at Hugo. Angrily,
she bit out, “You were only here to observe and make recommendations, NOT to interfere with our
operations! I want you GONE!” She fixed her hot eyes on Steelhair, who tried to submissively
shrink back into his desk, “You are to escort this mammal off of the Cliffside facility grounds
immediately. If he resists, you are authorized to tranq him and carry him off in a stretcher!” She
flashed her eyes back to Hugo and snarled, “If you ever try to come back here again, I will have you arrested for trespassing!” With that threat delivered, she spun on her hoof and strode back across the lobby.

Hugo just stood there, his jaw hanging down. He had no idea what that was all about. Steelhair watched Swinton disappear down the hall, and with a sigh he hung up the phone. He turned back to Hugo and offered, “Come on, Doc. I’ll give you a ride down to the bus stop.” He put his paw behind Hugo’s back, and gently steered him through the lobby doors and out to the security cart. Hugo numbly climbed into the passenger seat while the wolf, sympathy clearly etched in his eyes, slid into the driver’s side. The ride down the lane was completed in silence, as neither had an explanation to offer the other.

Steelhair left Hugo just outside the gates at the little bus shelter, and drove away. Hugo watched him go, still trying to process what had just happened. He was upset, as just yesterday Swinton had grudgingly admitted that he was making real progress with his patients. He didn’t know what could have possible changed her mind this morning.

The bus wouldn’t be back for another hour, and it would take another hour-long bus ride after that for Hugo to get back to the ZMHW department and talk to his boss.

Hugo had until then to figure out what had gone so very wrong.

* * * * *

Two hours of stewing hadn’t helped. Hugo had come up with wilder and wilder theories for his dismissal, but he had to discard them all as nothing made any sense. Nor did he have anything he could defend himself with if Donny chose to take issue with him on this. Hugo had left all of his notes by Donny’s desk, and his backup copies were back in his classroom at Cliffside.

Filled with a sense of trepidation and dread, he slowly opened the door to the Director’s office. Helen looked up from her computer where she was typing to see him, and she held up a paw as he started to speak. She turned her head and pointed to her head set. Ah, she’s on a conference call, Hugo realized. She gestured to the waiting room, and turned her attention back to the computer.

Hugo, at a loss as to what do next, numbly turned and started to walk to the back of the waiting room. Staring down at his feet, he missed the other mammal that was already sitting in the back. Brought up by a quite cough, Hugo looked up and saw a red fox dressed in blue, maybe a head taller than him, sitting in the chair that Hugo had been aiming for. Hugo mumbled an apology, and being that he didn’t really want to be alone with his own thoughts right now, he climbed up in the
next chair over.

“Wow. You make that look easy. I had to jump to get up here. I swear these things were made for polar bears.” The fox turned to Hugo and extended his paw, “Officer Nick Wilde, ZPD. Pleased to meet you, Mr…?” he left the question hanging.

Hugo took his paw and shook it, replying “Doctor Hugo Wiedii, ZMHW. A pleasure to meet you, Officer Wilde.” A red fox? In a blue officer’s uniform? Hugo was a bit surprised, as most of the ZPD officers he had seen had been large, tough mammals. He had certainly not seen any small officers before. As for the foxes’ popular reputation in Zootopia as being sly and untrustworthy mammals, Hugo wasn’t really surprised to see one as a police officer. Hugo, being biased by the rampant government corruption from his home country, considered all police officers to be untrustworthy, regardless of species. He hoped it was different here, but he would reserve his judgment on that.

Officer Wilde pulled back, and cocked his head. “Do I know you? Have we met before? Maybe had a discussion about a parking ticket or two? Yelled at me over a wheel boot?”

Hugo, who’s day had already been one giant mystery, couldn’t fathom how, “I am sorry, Officer Wilde, I don’t believe so? I have never talked to any ZPD law enforcement officers before, other the Custom and Immigration officers at the airport when I travel. I don’t see how you could know me.”

“Please, call me Nick, Doctor.” Nick could tell that this mammal was nervous. Taking his accent and species into account, he figured that the cat had to be from Amazonia. He knew that as bad as a cop’s reputation could be in Zootopia, it was far worse down there. The civil unrest and constant corruption made trust of authority figures a tenuous thing.

“No, I’ve met you before. I’m sure of it. I never forget a face.” Nick squinted as he tried to remember. Hugo squinted back. Suddenly Nick had it! “Wait a second! Have you ever worn a green tropical shirt with shorts before? Maybe as a bartender or a waiter?”

Taken aback, Hugo replied, “Well, yes, I was a bartender at a casino bar at the Palms Resort a few years ago, in between semesters at medical school. The tacky shirt and shorts were part of the Palm’s uniform for bartenders. Why, Were you employed there? I certainly don’t remember you specifically. I am sure I had served quite a lot of foxes during that time.” Hugo scowled, and then stared at Nick again. He tried to imagine the officer dress, not in a blue uniform, but in something more appropriate for a casino. Perhaps a tuxedo?
Nick chuckled, “It was about 4 years ago. I was at the casino for a friend’s wedding reception. It was late, and the staff had packed up the wet bar in the room to make room for the band and a dancing floor, so I went looking for a drink elsewhere. I found your bar over behind the atrium, and what can I say? You make a really good coffee.”

“Coffee? Of course I do, it’s traditional Maracaibo’s coffee, from my father’s family coffee plantations on the Orinoco Delta. Wait, I only served coffee to the drunks, the designated drivers, and underage mammals.” He stared back at Nick, “Wait a minute, I think I do remember you. You were that young Tod with the fake ID that I confiscated since it was peeling apart. What would a police officer be doing with a fake ID? Were you trying to do some sort of set up?” His opinion of this police officer was dropping lower and lower.

Nick waved his hand back and forth in denial, “No, No… sorry. No, I wasn’t a cop yet, and it wasn’t a sting operation. I was just a college student and thought I could use it to get a drink.” Nick smiled, “I wasn’t very successful, it seemed.”

“Hugo?” Donny stuck his head out his office door, “Where is he?” He asked Helen. She just pointed to the back.

“I’m here, sir.” Hugo replied to Donny’s call. He scowled at the officer one last time before he slide off the chair, and walked to the Directors office.

* * * * * *

“Take a seat,” Donny gestured for Hugo. Hugo did as he was directed, taking a moment to take in the settings before him. This might be the last time he would in this office. He didn’t know if Donny would kick him out of the post-doc research program because of what happened at Cliffside. If that happened, Hugo didn’t know what he would do next. He saw that his box of notes was right where he left it yesterday, but it was completely empty. Half of the files that had been in it seem to be spread randomly across Donny’s desk, open and spilling their contents across the space. Standing on the desk, reading one of the pages was a small white field mouse dressed in a gray pant-suit.

Donny walked behind his desk and sat down on his stool. He began with, “Hugo, this Roxanne Field, the departmental lawyer. She’s not with the District Attorney’s office; she’s a private lawyer. Ms. Field, please meet Doctor Hugo Wiedii. Hugo, Ms. Field.” Donny gesture to both of them.

Donny set his arms on the desk and clasped his paws together before explaining, “We like to keep a lawyer on staff who isn’t going to pipeline our private conversations up the city command chain. One of the problems we have with the our patients is that some of their behaviors could be considered to be illegal, and we were concerned that if we used a lawyer from the DA’s office for help, it might result in arrest warrants for those patients before we can help them. Hence the need for an outside opinion on the law – Ms. Field here.”

Hugo nodded. That did make sense, in that it helped to prevent a conflict of interest between the missions of the two departments.

“Anyway, Ms. Field and I just got off a very interesting conference call with Administrator Swinton and her Horizons’ senior management. Very interesting. So on that note, Hugo, could you please tell me what happened this morning? From your point of view.” Donny waited for Hugo to respond.

Hugo took a deep breath, and he was sudden struck by an observation: Donny wasn’t angry. He didn’t act angry, he didn’t smell angry, and he didn’t sound angry. If anything, he was acting like he was pleased with himself. As if some joke that only he understood had just been played, and he could barely contain the laughter. This has been a very strange day, Hugo thought. Well, best to be honest and direct, especially if he’s not angry.

“Sir, it had been an unremarkable morning in almost all respects, right up until I tried to get in the front door. My badge didn’t work, which was the third time this month that had happened, so I called the security desk for help. The watch-wolf, Steelhair, let me in and he tried to fix my badge. The system kept beeping at him and telling him that my badge was invalid. He called upstairs for help, and he was told that my clearances had been revoked. While he was arguing with who ever was on the other end, Administrator Swinton came storming up and starting yelling at us both. She accused me of interfering in her operations when I was only supposed to be observing, and that she wanted me thrown out of Cliffside, which she ordered Steelhair to do. If I resisted he was to tranquilize me, and if I tried to come back she would have me arrested. Then Steelhair just drove me back down the the bus stop where I had to wait for the bus to come back. Then I can here. I don’t understand why she thought I was interfering? The only thing I had been doing was observing and making recommendations.” Hugo threw his paws up in the air, “She had admitted yesterday, grudgingly, that I was making progress and that I should continue. I don’t understand why she felt differently this morning.”

Donny ducked his head down to conceal a little smile before looking up at Hugo, “There was interference, Hugo, just not on your part.” Hugo cocked his head at that admission, his attention now trained on Donny. “I was the one who interfered. I went ahead and transferred those 15 patients that you recommended out and put them over in the Savannah Central psych-ward for evaluation.”
That confused Hugo so he questioned Donny, “Isn’t that what we were supposed to be doing? I’m fairly certain that Swinton understood that was what was supposed to happen – move viable patients out of Cliffside.”

“Ah, yeah… I transferred them out this morning, very early. 2 am to be precise.” Donny was smiling now.

Plainly something was going on, and Hugo wasn’t in on the joke. He fired back with, “2 am? Why so early?”

“I didn’t want any last minute interference from Swinton or her corporate overlords, so I had them moved when everybody who could say no was soundly asleep.” Danny was quite pleased now.

“What? Why?” Hugo felt like he was completely in the dark, lost in a cave.

Donny chortled then sighed, “It’s okay Hugo. I did it because I didn’t want to give them a chance to stuff their inconvenient witnesses in a hole somewhere. You remember that report I was reading yesterday while you were talking, right? Here, take a look at it, and tell me what you think.” Donny pulled the Horizons’ quarterly patient report from the pile on his desk and pawed it over to Hugo, which Hugo took with a frown to his ears.

Donny leaned over to his phone, and pressed the intercom button as he spoke, “Helen, could you send in the ZPD officer, please?” As he let go of the button, he also tapped another button on his phone which changed from red to green.

They waited for a few moments for the officer to arrive, the only sound being from the report Hugo was flipping through.

The door clicked open and Office Nick Wilde strode in. Donny directed him to the other chair in front of his desk, next to a concerned looking Hugo.

Roxanne turned to Donny, and put her little paws on her tiny hips, “A fox?” She clearly didn’t approve.
Donny just smiled and replied, “Yes, a fox. I think he will be perfect for this. I had asked for a small junior officer, and I think Captain Bogo took my request quiet literally.”

Nick spoke up, “You know my Captain, Sir?”

“Bogo? Yes, I do the crisis prevention training for his department over in the Meadowlands.” He cocked his head and asked Nick, “Speaking of training, just how junior are you?” He knew the answer of course, having talked to Bogo last night, but the other three didn’t.

Taken a bit aback, Nick responded with, “Um… Well, I’ve been on parking duty for the past year out at the Meadowlands. Bogo was making noises that I might just be worth a trainee billet, but nothing’s happened yet. And at the briefing this morning, he waited to the last minute like he normally does before telling me where to go, but instead of parking duty again, he sent me here. Said something about somebody stealing pencils or something, and told me to go look into it. So, here I am.”

“Parking Duty. Your sole qualification is a year on Parking Duty?” Roxanne just stared at Nick, and then spun back to Donny, “This is your idea of a perfect officer for this problem?”

“Absolutely. Tell me, Officer Wilde, what did you think about said Parking Duty?” Donny slightly emphasized the words, just like Roxanne had, “And please be honest. This isn’t the ZPD, you don’t have to defend your opinions here.”

Hugo perked his head back up at Donny’s choice of words, putting the Horizons report back down in his lap.

“Ugh...” Nick put his head back before leaning forward and continuing with, “It was awful. Out on the streets all day, by my self with nobody to talk to, except for all the really wonderful, usually very angry, mammals I got to give tickets too. Everybody hated me. It was a joy.” He shrugged, “I eventually learned to wait until they were inside a shop or something before slipping the tickets on to their windshield. Cause if I didn’t, and I got caught doing it, I would have to talk really fast to keep my tail from getting creamed by some irate mammal.” Nick made little squishing motions with his paws like he was crumpling up a piece of trash before throwing it away.

Donny nodded, “So, there you were, alone and without backup, in a hostile situation where you had to think tactically about the environment, and when presented with aggression you had to de-escalate the confrontation to maintain control of the situation.” He held his paw out to Nick, “Does that sound about right?”
“Um, yeah,” Nick raised an eyebrow, “How….?”

“Who do you think created that program with Bogo? I told you I did crisis prevention training with him.”

“But… Why parking duty?” Nick was at a loss.

“Captain Bogo had a problem. He knew that there was going to be a need for smaller officers on the force, both as a representation of the greater public population, and for the advantages that they presented to both investigations and tactical situations. But as they couldn’t depend on their size or ferocity to intimidate a large hostile mammal, they would instead need some other edge. So before he started to accept new academy graduates, he needed a training program designed especially for them to learn those needed skills. A program where by he could monitor them in a hostile training environment, without them in turn thinking they were being trained or watched. Mammals tend to behave differently when they are being observed then when they’re not, so he needed a real world situation that was safe for the officer, realistic enough that the officers didn’t believe it was training exercise, and close enough to his office that he could personally monitor them via discreet surveillance and provide backup if needed. Parking duty is what we came up with.”

“Is that what was going on? I thought he just hated me.” Nick looked down at his paws.

“Oh, Bogo doesn’t like anybody, and the jury is still out on whether or not Bogo likes Bogo. But he respects the badge, and the mammals who wear that badge. Remember that. He’s not going to put you into a situation that he doesn’t think you are ready for yet. Not because he wants to hold you back, but because he wants you to succeed, as an officer. As for why he kept you on it for a year, I suspect it’s because he doesn’t have any officer your size to pair you up with yet. You were the first fox officer, after all.” Donny gently reminded him.

Roxanne piped up, “You knew all this already?”

Donny nodded, “Yup. Okay, back to business.” He smacked his paws back on the desk and turned to Hugo. “What do you think of that report there, Doctor?” He pointed to the papers Hugo held.

“This is a bizarre report. It lists a series of continuous problems with the Cliffside patients that I certainly didn’t see, and not just with the patients I was dealing with directly. I would say that half of these patients aren’t getting the pharmaceuticals that the report says they are, nor are the patients nearly as dangerous as Swinton says they are. I’m sorry, I can’t reconcile this report with
my personal observations.” Hugo held out his paws in disbelief.

“I don’t think Swinton wrote that report. Or if she did, she’s being a moron who wants to be caught in a lie by putting her signature on it. I might not put that past her.” Donny shook his head, and turned to back to Nick. “You thought you were being sent out to investigate petty theft, and you are right, it’s just not petty.”

Donny swept his paw over the files spread on the desk. “Roxanne and I have been going over the reports that Swinton submitted over the past year this morning and we’ve comparing them to the invoices that Horizon sends every month for payment to this department, and we believe we might be seeing a pattern of medical fraud and potentially even patient abuse. That pattern may indeed be rampant through out the entire Cliffside facility. But we are going to need an inside investigator to go in and verify this pattern we are seeing.”

Hugo sat up and raised his paw, “I’ll go, Sir! I know exactly what to look for.”

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell, Hugo. I’m sorry.” He waved Hugo’s paw down, “And before you start arguing with me, remember they just kicked you out. They don’t trust you, and I think they worked hard to keep you in the dark about these reports. The other thing is that they’ve tried to anticipate you potentially being sent back in as an inspector. That conference call this morning with Swinton and Horizons was chock full of enough allegations and innuendo about your professional behavior at Cliffside that their implied meaning was crystal clear. If I try to start an investigation about Cliffside with you at the center of it all, they would turn it into a legal shell game of you-said/they-said. They even threatened to pursue a counter investigation into your ethics, which could in turn endanger your medical license. You loose that, you loose your H1 visa card, and you get shipped back home. And they will have wrapped up a loose end all neat and tidy, completely legally while making me look like an absolute idiot, further discrediting me.”

“No, I need you as far away from Cliffside and any related fallout as is mammally possible. I want them to think they won this little round, that you are exiled in disgrace, and I am a cowed little bureaucrat afraid to take them on. No, for the next step of this investigations we need something completely different. An outsider, some mammal they haven’t gotten to yet.” He turned to point at Nick. “That would be you.”

Nick started upright. He hadn’t expected this.

Donny carried on, “We’re going to conduct a quiet little investigation right here in my own department to see why this game was never caught. Horizons can’t possible object to that. I need to know who was getting paid, who was just being lazy, and who was committing crimes. And if we can figure that all of that out, we could put the squeeze on those mammals, and see what pops out the other side. But we can’t do that legally, as we have no enforcement powers to investigate
ourselves. It’s not in our charter to do so nor do I have the budget for it and Horizons knows that, so we are going to need use the ZPD. Discreetly.”

“The ZPD has a dedicated anti-corruption unit back at District One. Why not put them on this? This is certainly their bread and margarine.” Nick asked.

“We may have to, except that I don’t have anything right now but suspicions. And besides, that unit is designed to take a department like mine apart looking for internal corruption, which isn’t what I want. We’re barely functional as it. Imagine what happens to all of our outreach programs and shelters if we get shutdown for an investigation? Who will take up the slack? Housing and Urban Development? Law enforcement? Hell no, I don’t think so! Nobody wants to own the homeless or mental illness problems that Zootopia has, and they want to fund them even less, which is how something like this kind of corruption can grow unseen.”

“No, I want that unit to go after Horizons and Cliffside themselves, but that’s not going to happen even if I scream at the top of my little lungs right now. Horizons has tied up at least two of the city council mammals, the two that got the Horizons contract renewed last year for both Cliffside and the prisons. If I go up the internal government ladder for help, those two politicians will get word of it, and rig a vote to shut me down. The city council put me in this office and they can take me out.” Donny made a throw away gesture with his paw, like somebody just throwing lint away.

He steeple his paws and leaned forward on his desk, “I need Horizons to do something stupid, something criminal, that will justify sending that anti-corruption unit after them. That corporation’s got plenty of money to throw around, having bought at least two of the council mammals, and probably bought off my predecessor too. He had to know; he approved all of their reports and invoices. And If he wasn’t reading them, he was an incompetent idiot. But since he died of advanced liver failure, we can’t ask the polar bear what the hell he was doing.”

“What we need is for them to do something stupid, like try to bribe our investigator. They don’t need to bribe me; the council can just shut me down with a vote. They don’t need to bribe Hugo; they can get him kicked out of Zootopia. And we don’t want them bribing Roxanne, because that’s not a crime.”

“Objection! I resent the implications that I don’t have the ethics to resist being bribed by scumbags!” She snapped at him.

“Fine, Sustained. I will withdraw the statement. Does that make the counsel happy?” He gazed over his glasses at her.
“Humph!” She pouted.

He turned back to Nick and said, “That leaves us with you, Officer Wilde. We need to figure out a way to get Horizons to try to bribe you, at which point we will have a way into their corporation that the city council can’t stop. We need you to visibly help us with our internal investigation, running around delivering subpoenas, shuttling documents, and arresting just enough two-bit players that you gain their attention. Mind you, not enough attention for them to fear your competence, rather just enough for them to feel you out for greediness, you being a sly and untrustworthy fox and all.”

Nick looked a little sick at the implications, “Sir, I’ve worked hard to over come that reputation, and I don’t feel comfortable at all using that same reputation to set myself up as the stalking goat in this little adventure of yours. Bogo would have my hide if I agreed to what you were planning. That’s an unsanctioned undercover operation, without backup, and I could loose my badge if he found out.”

“Really? Well, lets ask him.” Donny turned to his phone and turned up the speaker volume. “What do you think about all of this, Captain Bogo?”

Bogo’s voice rumbled out over the speaker, “What do I think? I think that you make an economic professor delivering a lecture on governmental fiscal policy look like the epitome of brevity and clarity. Good God, mammal, don’t you know when to shut it? Briefings are supposed to be short and sweet, so that they can leave and I can get back to my coffee without distractions!”

“I’m a shrink, Bogo. I’m paid to talk.” Donny just laughed.

“And talk, and talk, and talk. I don’t care. WILDE!” Bogo roared over the phone.

“Sir!” Wilde responded. Why the hell did I just sit up straight in the chair? Bogo wasn’t here, he wondered to himself.

“The director and I need you to play a crooked junior cop, looking for a payout. It’s not undercover, because you will be wearing your uniform at all times, but the mission will be undercover. Can I trust you to be a conniving, tricky, con-mammal in uniform?” Bogo demanded.

“Yes, sir!” Well, this was certainly a change of pace from parking duty, he thought.
“Good! I know it will be an act, because I have been watching you for the past year, and I’ve not seen you slip up once. And as for the backup you just requested, I’ll ask to have Officer Wolfard transferred over from Precinct One. His partner is out on maternity leave, so he is temporarily available. Try to get along with him!”

“I’ll try, sir. Thank you.”

“He’s a good enough actor to play the dumb wolf, but it remains to be seen if you can play the con-mammal convincingly.”

“I won’t let you down there, sir.” Nick promised, a giant grin on his face that he was glad Bogo couldn’t see, and the rest of the mammals wouldn’t understand.

“I’ll brief IA on this investigation later this afternoon, which will cover your tail and mine. Anything else, Director?”

“No, I think that about covers it.” Donny smirked at the phone.

“Good! You see, that is how a briefing is supposed to be handled. Short, sweet, and to the point!” Bogo pontificated.

“I’ll try to remember the additional bit about the yelling...”

“Whatever.” With a click, Bogo hung up.

Danny held the receiver in his paw, “I swear, that mammal must be deaf or something, he yells so much.”

“Actually sir, I think he just likes to hear himself yell. Makes him feel that he’s the big dominant bull in the room.” Nick snarked, and then he suddenly looked fearful. “Did he hang up?”

“Yes, Officer Wilde, he’s gone. Your snark is safe with us. And you might be right too, about the dominance games.” Donny hung up the phone.
“What is the next step in this investigation?” Hugo asked him.

“The next step? The next step is that you’re not involved; that’s what the next step is.” Donny held up his paw to stay Hugo’s response. “Hugo, I meant it when I said I want you to stay the hell away from this. You’re vulnerable, and Horizons knows it. And I know that I still need you and your ideas in my department, so while the three of us discuss what to do next, you will be going down to the Youth Diversion Center to meet a mammal.”

“YDC? Youth counseling?” Hugo handed the Horizons report back to Danny, since he wouldn’t be needing it anymore.

“Yes, we recently hired a youth counselor down there, an older fellow, who has some good ideas, I think. He’s got the street experience but not the scientific background. You’ve shown me that you work well with disadvantaged youth and that you can successfully implement a program structured around their needs. I was hoping you could go down there and help him set up his program. It would still be in keeping with your post-doc proposal of using non-mainstream techniques to reach disadvantaged and marginalized youth. Would you be willing to do that for me?” Donny gently steered him away from the disappointing experience at Cliffside he just had, and onto something more positive and productive. He wanted to keep this cat, because Donny knew he could make a difference and was willing to do the job.

“Yes, sir. I would be delighted to.” Hugo took a breath and asked, “What about my Cliffside patients, the fifteen you got out this morning? Will I be able to see them?”

Donny counseled patience on that request, “Let’s let them settle in their new home for a couple of weeks before you go knocking on the door. The added downtime will help convince Horizons that you are no longer actively involved with Cliffside, and have instead been shuffled off to a desk job somewhere.”

“Okay. And my sixteenth patient?”

“Did you find her a home?” His boss asked him.

Hugo just shook his head, “No, I tried over twenty different programs that could take her case, but no mammal wanted to touch it.”
Danny turned his paws up, “Then I am sorry, Hugo, she's stuck there. Maybe, when this investigation is over, we can do something about that, but for right now she stays.”

“Yes sir. I am sorry too. I don’t like to fail.” Hugo hung his head.

“I know that, but it is going to happen. Actually, I think the fellow you are going to see might know a thing or two about failure. You could talk to him about it and see what he has to say.”

“I will, sir. What is his name, by the way?” Hugo took his phone out to take down notes.

“Mr. Zerda, and his office is A113 in the YD building downtown. Do you know how to get there?”

“Yes sir, and if I don’t my phone will.” Hugo assured him, but was distracted by Nick, who appeared to be having a seizure. “Are you alright?” he asked the fox.

Nick laughed and exclaimed, “Fennick? You hired Fennick? Oh this is too good!”

“Yes, I believed that was the name that he preferred to be called. Do you know him?” Donny asked the laughing fox.

Nick nodded emphatically, “Yeah, I know him. I used to run with him and a bunch of other troublemakers back in my youth. He taught me everything I know about being a sly conniving fox. He’s gonna be perfect for you.”

That statement left Donny with some doubt expressed on his face, “Officer Wilde, you are not filling me with confidence, either about my hiring him or including you in this investigation.”

“Nah, we weren’t criminals. If I was, I would have never made it past the background checks to get into the Academy. We were just stupid kids doing stupid things is all.” Nick smiled at the memories, “And I mean it, about him being perfect. He knows what it’s like to live and sleep on the street, and still come out of it caring about other mammals. You’ll see.” Nick assured him.

Donny eyed him doubtfully, and then turned to Hugo, “You know where you are going?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Okay then, I’ll give you a call tonight to see how things go.”

“Sounds good, sir.” Hugo rose, and shook the directors paw. He nodded to the lawyer and the police officer, and took his leave of them, striding out the office door and closing it behind himself.

As the door clicked behind him, he heard the fox ask in a worried tone, "Was Captain Bogo on the phone the whole time?"
Tuesday morning: The Next Step

Chapter Summary

Hugo returns to the party and Judy greets him with a display. Now that they have finished up at the clinic, Hugo prepares to survive his trip to the herbivore grocery store with Judy as his native guide. After surviving the Hungry Goat, they have a chat about why he left Cliffside. Once they get home, Judy takes a nap, and Hugo discovers something he never knew about his little charge.

Chapter Notes

Awww! So many typos!!!! 8q39tefgh 3rl;fjkfjla 43lvfuew4f - the author pounds his head into the keyboard...

Current Day: Tuesday afternoon in Tundratown

Hugo wandered back into the examination room just as the pika nurse finished taking out the IV. Judy was sitting up on the bed, absentmindedly eating a sandwich and rubbing her IV bandage while Meredith sat in the chair and watched. The sandwich smelled like peanut butter and banana on rye to Hugo, an odd combination, probably chosen by Roberto for it’s mysterious nutritional content. Or maybe it had been what ever was what ever was lying around in the downstairs kitchen at the time. Hugo had to caution himself from assigning so much significance to Roberto’s actions, especially when he was annoyed with the rodent. After all, when was the last time he had eaten a peanut butter and banana sandwich? Who was he to judge what a herbivore nutritionist deemed healthy for rabbits?

“There you go, dear. All set.” The pika beamed up at Judy, “You look like you're doing much better now! Just needed a pick-me-up and some food! Now, you do need to wait for Dr Longs to come back, as she'll be back in here very shortly to go over the treatment plan with you. But you can get dressed if you want to.” The pika patted Judy on the knee, and walked back out.

Judy looked up at him and breathed a sigh of relief, “Hey, you came back.” She sat up straighter.

“Yes, sorry about that. I got a call from a social worker, and I had to talk to her about a patient. I’m done now. How are you felling?” He asked her.
She finished off her sandwich, and put the plate on the paper covering the bed. “Better now,” she smiled at him, “Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.” He smiled back at her.

Meredith watched them, and she was positive she saw something pass unsaid between the two of them in that interchange. Oh! Before she could put more meaning to what happened, Judy hopped to the floor.

She was only a little shaky on the landing, putting a paw out to the cabinet to steady herself, but she regained her composure. Squaring her shoulders, and giving her head a little shake, she strode over to the chair to where her folded pink outfit was. She stripped off her gown over her head and tossed it back on the bed. Standing naked before the two of them, without a backwards glance, she began to dress herself.

Nudity bothered Meredith very little, both as a medical professional and as a hare, so she had a bit of trouble trying to discern why this display was bothering her. It was almost as if Judy was subconsciously angry. Aggressive, even. Yes, that was what was bothering Meredith; this little rabbit was being aggressive, yet she had turned her back to Hugo. Turned her back on the only predator in the room. Even in a sick and weakened state, she stood with her back to a predator while radiating aggression. What the bloody hell?

She flicked her eyes over to see what Hugo made of this display, and saw that he was watching Judy dress herself intently. His head had dropped down and his ears had swiveled forward. His paws were hanging loose at his side while his legs were spread slightly with the right leg slightly behind. He’s in a ready stance…, she realized, just like a martial artist would use. Is he reacting to her as a predator would to a weakened prey mammal?

She looked up to his eyes, expecting them to be squinted, but no. They were wide open and relaxed, just like his muzzle was. Only his whiskers were moving, sweeping forward and back ever so slowly. He’s not hunting, he’s not aroused, he’s not angry, he’s just… ready. Ready for what, she wondered? Escape? Did he expect Judy to run away? She was having trouble just standing up steady. No, it was more as if he stood with purpose. That was it! He stood ready and with purpose! But to do what?

Judy was standing back up, having finished dressing, but she hadn’t turned around yet. She rolled her shoulders and stood straight with her feet slightly spread, still facing the wall. Her head dropped down, as her ears came slowly up, her body so taunt it was almost humming.
It was like those awful boxing matches she used to go to with Dale in their youth, with two prize fighters squaring off in a ring, ready to pummel each other into meat paste. She almost expected the cat and the rabbit to start fighting each other or go charging off into battle side by side.

Just a suddenly as it had started, it was over. Hugo turned and put his back to the wall, crossing his paws, his whiskers relaxed and forward. Judy turned about halfway back around, and started to try to rearrange her bedraggled head fur with her claws.

*What. The. Bloody. Hell. Was that?* Meredith wanted to know. What did she just witnessed? They hadn’t seen each other in over a decade, yet here they were communicating non-verbally like they knew each other all their lives. What happened to them last night, in that alleyway?

Plainly they trusted her enough to show her that, unless they were both completely unaware of what just transpired. If she hadn’t been watching them, she probably would have missed it too, especially since Judy had been so vulnerable and meek earlier, when it had been just Meredith and her. Then Hugo walked in and Judy’s mood just as quickly changed into something else. Something more… Dangerous.

Who was this rabbit?

* * * * * *

“Are we ready to go?” Victoria stood in the doorway.

Hugo turned to Judy, and quirked an ear in her direction. She nodded, “Yeah. We are.”

“Alright. Well, I don’t think you suffered any permanent damage last night, Judy. You probably do have pneumonia, and the blood work will tell us for sure, but that is easy to recover from, if you are sensible about it. Eat and sleep properly, take your Az-pak daily, and try to limit your cardiovascular exercise for the next week. Your lungs will appreciate that.” She turned to Hugo, “I’ll call you when the blood work comes in, and let you know if we find anything else? Is that okay?” Hugo nodded.

“Okay, then I think you can go, and we will see you in about a week for a follow up, if that’s okay?”
“Sure,” Judy said.

Victoria turned to address Meredith, “I do believe your husband is in the waiting room. Large brown hare, goes by the name of Dale?”

She nodded, “That’s my boy. He must have gotten tired of wood shops.”

They walked back up the front office. Hugo thanked Victoria for taking the time to see Judy, and went over to the front desk to schedule a return visit.

Meredith walked over her husband, who appeared to be sleeping in the chair, his paws shoved into his coat, his ears down his back, and his eyes closed. She kicked him in the shin, “Get up, you lazy lout!”

He open one eye and cocked it up to meet her gaze evenly without moving his head, “Took you long enough. I was almost ready to go into hibernation.”

Meredith leaned over to Judy, “Told you. He got bored.”

Dale stood and stretched, but didn’t deny his wife’s keen observation. He pulled his case of chew sticks from his pocket and handed it to Judy. “Here, keep it. I refilled it for you with an assortment of sticks that you should like.”

Judy shyly took them, “Thank you!” She smiled back up at him. He nodded back, “You are certainly welcome.”

Meredith hugged him, since he was being a sweet old buck. He was spoiling the little rabbit, just like he did with his grand-kits.

“Ready to go? We need to get some groceries, according to this diet plan.” Hugo held the plan up to his face, trying to pronounce some of the vegetables listed. He had never heard of them before.

“Yeah. See you two later?” Judy turned to Dale and Meredith.
“Certainly dear. We are neighbors, after all” Meredith assured her.

Hugo held the clinic door open for Judy, as she walked out, her paws shoved into her hoodie pockets. Meredith watched them walk away as she held her husband. She wondered if there was any mammal she could talk to about what she had witnessed in that examination room. She didn’t understand what had happened and she desperately needed some perspective about two mammals she cared deeply about – one old and one new.

* * * * * *

Threading through the aisles at the Hungry Goat, Hugo looked around in confusion. “I have no idea where any of this stuff is!” he complained as he looked at the list that Roberto had given them.

Judy smiled up at him “Never been shopping at a herbivore store before?”

“No really, no. Not my diet. I usually go to one of the carnicerias downtown – they have more selections for protein eaters like me. Plus they have all the stuff I miss from back home, like my arapas.” Hugo just shook his head.

“Hum… Let’s swing by the pharmacy – at least we can get your prescriptions filled.” He turned the cart toward the back, and started pushing it at an easy pace for Judy. Pneumonia is a bitch to work through, so he made sure she was okay with walking. She held on to the side of the cart, and aside for just a little bit of wheezing, she muscled onwards. Just as well, he thought, she’d probably punch him if he tried to pick her up and put her in the cart.

He handed her prescription from Longs to the pharmacist, along with his medical ID and credit card. At least that way he could get his hospital discount. The stripped pharmacist looked at him a bit in confusion, as he plainly didn’t look like a Jessica. Hugo smiled, and pointed down at the rabbit, who waved at the zebra. Smiling, the pharmacist nodded as he turned to fill the order of antibiotics and medicated bodywash for her. Hugo paid, and Judy took her first pill with a cup water provided by the pharmacist.

They continued with their shopping expedition. He had tried to work through the rest of the list, but he was all rather confused by the layout of the store. Judy tried to help him, but she soon started to limp as she pulled the cart around the store. He stopped the cart.
“Judy, I know this may sound silly, but do you want to ride inside the cart for the rest of the way?” He asked her. Inwardly, he cringed. He wasn’t implying that she ride in the child seat at the back, and he hoped she didn't think that.

He didn’t have to worry, though. Judy felt exhausted, even as she tried to prove how healthy she still was, and her right leg was starting to throb. She need to sit down. She look up at him and nodded, “Sure.”

He breathed in relief, and moved the various veggies, snacks, and toiletries to the back of the cart. She tried to climb up herself, but he caught her under the arms and lifted her slight frame effortlessly into the front of the cart.

Her light weight barely affected the steering cart, and up front at least she could still point him in the right direction. They finished up the rest of the shopping in short order, paid and left the store. He picked her up out of the cart as she frowned at him; plainly she had want to get out herself.

Taking that into consideration, he decided against trying to help her get into the car door, and instead went to the hatchback to load the groceries. He put the cart away, and got back into the SUV, where Judy had just finished buckling herself in.

* * * * *

Judy waited until he sat down, buckled himself in, and started the SUV before she asked him, “Dr. Wiedii, sir? Why did you leave Cliffside?”

“Cliffside?” Hugo responded as he pulled out of the parking log, “I didn’t leave, not voluntarily at least. I was locked out after just a few months of being there, and was told never to return. I didn't know who ordered me banned from there, but my boss had his own suspicions. I didn't find out the exact reasons why until after the investigation that he had launched eventually led to Cliffside being shut down.”

“Oh...” Judy responded, looking down at her paws.

“Mind you, the program you were in at the time was successful, or so I thought. I had managed to get half of my experimental working group transferred out to other programs by that point, and most of them went on to be released, eventually.”
“Why didn’t you get me out with the others? Or could you have?” She looked back up at him out of the corner of her eye.

He sighed, “I tried to get you out, I really did try, conejita, but to no avail. Since you were still a teenager at the time, none of the juvenile mental health programs I could find that were qualified to handle you would accept your case. Most of them classified you to be a ‘violent repeat offender’ due to your murder conviction and your prior escape attempts from other facilities, and wouldn’t accept you even with my recommendations. I even tried Bunny Burrow’s original program, but they hung up on me as soon as I mentioned your name.”

Hugo wrinkled his muzzle, and then continued, “Then Cliffside’s management kicked me out and wouldn’t even let Bonnie back in to see you. She said that they kept making up excuses on why she couldn’t visit you: you were in group therapy, and couldn’t be seen, or you were eating with the other patients, etc. That continued for three years, and then they just sent you home with no explanation. I could only guess at the time that you had made significant progress, enough for them to parole you.”

Judy snorted, “They sent me home because they were getting shut down and couldn’t be bothered to find another psych ward to take me. No, I spent those three years drugged up to my ears and drooling, for the most part, in between the paw painting and group screaming sessions.”

“Painting and screaming?” He asked her.

“Breakfast and dinner time, respectively.” She told him wryly.

“Okay, you will have to explain that one to me. Later, though. Please, continue as you were saying before. So, they sent you home?” He prompted her.

“Yeah. Anyway, they shoved me up on a bus, and the next thing I knew was waking up at the Bunny Burrow train station with no idea of how I got there.”

“They didn’t have a van drive you home, or contact your parents to come pick you up?” Hugo was shocked.

Judy threw up her hands, “Ha! No. Hell, they didn’t even give me change for the pay phone. Just the clothes on my back, and a day’s worth of pills. I walked home from there. I must have
wandered around Bunny Burrow about a bit, cause it certainly took me a while to get there. I don’t quite remember most of that day.”

“Yes, Bonnie had called me to tell me about your homecoming. I had gone down south to visit my parents, and to assist with some brain trauma cases at the local hospitals. I couldn’t get back up north for another two weeks, and by the time I did you were gone.”

Judy pulled down her ear, and twisted it in her paw, “I had left home because I was having trouble coping with the whole situation, and didn’t really feel like I fit with Bunny Burrow or the family farm anymore. And doing the whole drug withdrawal thing cold tufu didn’t help.”

“Withdrawal? What, with no support?” Hugo dropped his jaw in amazement.

“Nope. No prescriptions, no referrals to a local shrink, no instructions, no phone calls to my parents. Nothing. Nada. Hell, Mom even tried calling Cliffside again after I got home, but nobody answered. They had just announced me cured, and kicked me out.” Judy responded bitterly.

“What? I’m surprised it didn’t kill you!”

“Yeah, it felt like it would for while, although I think they were weaning us off the hard meds for awhile before they got around to sending me home. Maybe they were running out of money for the good stuff, and just didn’t have enough to go around? That was all they really cared about at that place, getting paid.” She scowled at the floor mats. “Hell, that’s probably part of why they canned you. They lost money with every patient you sent out. They couldn’t turn a profit on your successes.” She turned and gave him a grimace. “Sorry.”

He gave her a grimace in return, “No, no, that is okay. Which is to say that it is horrible. Not for me, but for you and everybody else who got stuck there.”

“Oh it wasn’t totally horrible, for me at least. I was drugged most of the time. They didn’t beat me or use electro-shock on me, so it didn’t really hurt, per se...” Judy trailed off with melancholy on her voice.

Hugo looked back at her with concern, “Well, I think I may have played a small part in what happened to you. I learned later that I was banned by the company managing Cliffside as a power play with the ZMHW. They had thought at first that I was a roving inspector, conducting an investigation of Horizons’ management of Cliffside, and that I was going to recommend changing
Horizons’ contract with ZMHW. Once they figured out that I was exactly what I said I was, a researcher working on his post-doc, they wasted no time in booting me to the curb. I don’t think Swinton actually wanted me to go, since I kept making her life easier by taking her trouble making patients off her paws, but her management forced her to.”

“Ultimately that move backfired on them, because my dismissal did end up leading to an internal investigation by the ZMHW, ZDJ, and ZPD departments, which in turn resulted in charges of medical fraud, gross medical mismanagement, and criminal negligence of the Cliffside facility by Horizons’ corporate management. It turns out that they had been billing Zootopia for their patients very expensive treatments, but the doctors weren’t actually applying any of those treatments, so the administration in turn never released any them, since they weren’t ‘cured’. They had thought they had a perfect money making system running, right up until they pissed off my boss.”

“Oh… So that’s why they were shutting down, and sent me home instead of to another psych-ward. They couldn’t justify keeping me anymore?”

“Probably. Honestly, I don’t think any of the other facilities in the country wanted to inherit any of Cliffside’s problems. Maybe the other facilities in the country thought they would end up getting investigated too if they accepted Cliffside patients? Or maybe just paranoia about bad luck? I don’t know. I was only at the first initial meeting between the ZMHW and the ZPD before I got sent out to complete my post-doc with the Youth Diversion program downtown. After that, my boss forbade me from having any further contact with Cliffside or it’s patients, mostly to protect me from retaliation by Horizons. Since he was my boss and mentor for the post-doc and my residency, I had to do what he said.”

“Oh…” Judy frowned, and turned to stare out the window.

They rode the rest of the way home in silence, each lost in their own bitter memories.

* * * * *

He drove back into his driveway and parked his SUV in the garage. Judy was fading fast, so he slipped out and around to her door to help her into the house. He guided her to the couch, where she promptly collapsed on the pillows. He pulled the blanket back up over her, and she batted him on the arm and softly said, “Thank you.”

He replied back to her, “Certainly.” He left her there to rest, while he returned to his car to pick up the groceries and pack them away in his kitchen. He finished that up and went back out to check on her. Seeing that she was already asleep, but breathing normally, he left her there and returned to the
kitchen to prepare her a snack for when she woke back up. He left the snack and a bottle of water on the coffee table beside her. Remembering his promise to Beth, he stepped back and took a picture of her sleeping. He turned down the lights and went back to his office.

He sent the photo in a text to Bonnie’s phone. He got a message back from Beth stating that her dad had taken the tranquilizer early and finally conked out, and that her mother had also passed out exhausted on the couch.

Beth suggested that since everybody was sleeping, that maybe they could just let sleeping logs lie, and maybe talk tomorrow? She was cooking for the rest of the family anyway, and didn’t have enough paws to cook and talk at the same time. Hugo agreed, and he set his phone back down.

He sat his desk and pulled out Judy’s file folder. He leafed through the notes, scanning them absentmindedly until he got to her drawings. He flipped them over one by one. A crayon picture with lots little stick figure bunnies. A more recognizable picture of her parents done in charcoal and colored pencils. A pencil drawing of two foxes eating blueberries – one labeled “Gideon” and the other labeled “Slick”. Those must be local foxes she knew from Bunny Burrow. He gazed down at the one labeled “Slick,” thinking that he looked slightly familiar. Hum… He must have seen that fox when he went to visit Bonnie and Stu that last time he was in Bunny Burrows.

He looked up from his files. What was the name she gave at the clinic? Jessica Lapin? Was that a family name? He didn’t see it in his files. Out of curiosity, he turned to his computer, and typed that name in the Zoople search field. The search results were all over the board; apparently that was a really common rabbit name. He switched to the picture option, and again there were pictures of every kind of rabbit, most of whom he didn’t recognize. But about halfway down, he spotted an odd picture of a black rhino with a rabbit perched on his shoulders. He was dressed in a tux, and she in long red dress. They were both flexing their biceps, clowning around for the cameras. In the background were some letters on the wall that he couldn’t make out.

He clicked on the image to blow it up, and in the larger image he recognized that the rabbit on top of the rhino was indeed a very fit and firm Judy Hopps, her gray fur shaved and dyed with stripes of neon red, in a long red dress covered with red sequins. The visual effect was quite striking. They both had large grins plastered on their faces, plainly having a good time for the paparazzi. And he could finally read the logos in the background – “AVA”, with “Adult Video Awards” in smaller text underneath that logo.

AVA? Adult Videos? Curious, he scrolled back up the top, turned off the safe search, and hit refresh. The screen blanked white, and then began to fill with more pictures of Judy. A lot more! She was wearing the name Jessica Lapin in most of the photos and, except for that grin on her muzzle, she wasn’t wearing much of anything else. He stared at the screen...
Oh My!
Flashback: Dandelions

Chapter Summary

Judy celebrates her 18th birthday at Cliffside. Being sent someplace against her will, she panics and is drugged to unconsciousness. Waking up in Bunny Burrow, she has to figure out if this is real or just a hallucination.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings!

This chapter includes topics like: dealing with depression, exceedingly foul language, forced intoxication, and manic episodes. If you are triggered by these subjects, please read this chapter with caution.

Author's note, from a comment I made below:

Love and Fluff is coming, I promise. Just two more chapters of heavy emotional stuff, and then the tone will get lighter. New friends will be made, old friendships renewed, jokes will be laughed at, food and drink will be shared, and new wardrobes will be purchased. All things to make a lost bunny feel safe, wanted, and loved. I promise all the Judy fans that she will find her center and recover. She has to. Too much depends on her for her to fail.

On another note: We are 1/3 of the way through the Measure of a Mammal story arc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

10 Years Earlier At Cliffside psych ward: Judy's big day!

Judy awoke to the sound of rabid howling. Beaver howling to be precise. God, he was like a fucking clock! The stupid doctors could have cured his wolf delusion by now, but no, they had to torture the rest of her floor with a stupid beaver who thought he was a wolf. She pulled her pillow up over her head and pulled it down, grinding her teeth in frustration.

There was a clatter at her door, and she peered from under the pillow at it. It was just her breakfast – some wilted greens that looked like three day old grass clippings, dark green and soggy, on a cheap paper plate. The kitchen service really declined in the past year, not that it was ever stellar
by asylum standards, ever since Horizons got into financial troubles defending their stupid contracts with the city.

There was a distant muted thunk, and the howling stopped. Oh fucking grand, the orderlies had managed to gag Millpond. Again. You would have thought it would occur to the administration to snip his goddamn vocal cords instead of just using the cheap disposable plastic gags that Swinton managed to find on special at some cheap-ass dollar store somewhere. He’d chew through that in a few hours, she knew, but that meant at least she’ll have some peace and quiet to choke her breakfast down in.

Actually, she couldn’t blame Swinton anymore for how things were run around here, the damn bitch. The stupid pig had managed to find herself a golden parachute and jumped over to the Zootopia Super-Max to take the Warden job. Now they had this stupid sheep ewe who was running things, some piece of work appointee from the city council, which just ignited the rumor mill at Cliffside, of course.

The most common rumor floating among the other patients that the ewe was here to shut things down permanently, transferring most of the patients to other facilities, and the hard core patients that were left over would get sent to prison. Other, more outrageous rumors, said that she was setting up a special chemical testing lab in the basement where she was going to test shampoos and perfumes on the rodents and rabbits still left at the facility. Certain asshole patients like to use that one to harass Judy. Most of the time she just ignored it, but if the orderlies weren’t watching, she’d kick her tormentors in the groin, and spit on their writhing bodies.

Actually, Cliffside had been shipping patients out of here for the past six months. At first, most of the transfers had gone out in bunches, but now they’ve slowed down to just one to two a day. Not that Judy was ever gonna transfer out. Not with her luck, and certainly not today. No, today was her 18th birthday, and it promised to be an absolute shit-storm, just like the rest of her birthdays were, full of horrible singing by the staff and pharmaceutical cupcakes for all patients, except without the cake.

She got up and made her bed, not that they punished patients for failing to do that any more. It was just habit for her, one of the sole controls she had over her life. No, discipline at Cliffside had really slipped in the past 6 months, mostly because the new administrator who, feeling that she was an enlightened soul, had fired off most of the previous orderlies and replaced them with mall-cop level security types. They were fucking worthless pieces of shit, but they carried tasers, so she tried not to piss them off. She didn’t mind the pain of being tased; it was the pissing her pants part that really annoyed her. It just wasn’t worth the smell to sit in soiled pants for the rest of the day, tied up in a straitjacket.

She walked over to the door and pick up her food, and took it back to the steel table bolted to the wall. Plunking it down, she stared at the moldy mass in front of her. God, it wasn’t worth the
puke later to eat this crap now. She pushed it back up against the wall, and just sat at the table, waited for group to start.

Remedial Art is what she like to call it. Scribbling on construction paper with crayons, while the stupid intern tells them to draw whatever makes them happy. She’d pick it up, say it was beautiful, and go hang it on the wall with all the other shit that her fellow morons had turned out. At least Dr. Weidii would actually critique the work, and make suggestions on how to make it better. Those sessions had been the happiest times she’s ever had in this miserable place. But then all of a sudden he’s gone and no body ever told her why.

Well, except for Swinton, who told her that he had been shipped back to his home country. Not that she believed anything that lying sack of chicharrones told her. No, she figured he had graduated from his post-doc, whatever that was, with flying honors and had left Cliffside behind to do what all doctors do best, which was get really rich, leaving her behind to rot in a concrete cell. *The fucker. I’d like to kick him in the groin.*

Manchas had tried to run the class for a while, but he just didn’t understand what art had meant to Judy. Not that it mattered anyway, cause Swinton canned him six months later for talking to some ZPD investigator. After that, the instruction quality slipped and slipped in art group until it was just like any other Cliffside group session when she first got here, before that damn cat had come along and fooled her into thinking he cared.

There was another muted clunk at her door, and an orange package slid through the grate. The watch-hole snapped open, and a voice snarled, “The patient will put the jumpsuit on now. You have five minutes to complete this task before we come in the door.” *Goddamn wolves. Always barking orders. Bark, bark, bark. Go howl at your own moon!*

Did she want singed fur on her birthday, or would she comply? *Oh, maybe they were doing grounds cleaning duty today?* She perked up. The new administration had cut so far back on staff that they had taken to using patients to clean up the grounds around the Cliffside entrance. That would be worth it on her birthday, to experience fresh air and sunshine, and maybe she could even find a dandelion or two to munch on while she worked. Filled with an excitement, she jumped down from her chair, and hurried over to pick up the orange coveralls. She pulled the coveralls up over her Cliffside uniform and zipped up the front. That way she wouldn’t chafe in the wrong places, and wouldn’t get the uniform on the inside all muddy. *There, all done.*

She marched to the center of her room and announced that she was ready. The door opened and beyond it she saw two wolves, paws on their tasers. She smiled, impressed that they would consider little ol’ her to be dangerous enough to rate two wolves with tasers. They marched her down the hall, past the stairs leading to the group rooms, and over to the elevators. Judy experienced a momentary twinge of panic; maybe there was some truth to the rumors of mammal testing going on in the basements. But no, the lead wolf just pressed the button for the lobby. No
perfume testing for her today. She was going out into the sunshine!

Once they got to the ground floor, she was lead over to stand with a group of patients while the leader went over to another wolf in a suit sitting at a desk. Judy strained her ear to listen in. “Judy Hopps, as ordered, sir.” He announced to the suit, who opened up a file. Judy couldn’t see what was in the file, but the two wolves could. Midway down her patient file was a post-it-note with the words *Expedite* written on it along with a signature: Dr D. Pahin, ZMHW.

“Does this mean she gets a hearing?” the standing wolf asked. “No. No, just send her out with the others.” the seated wolf responded. The standing wolf just nodded. He marched over to join the other wolf guard, who gave him some small leg shackles. He took them back to Judy and ordered her to stand still. He snapped the shackles around her ankles, and he moved back to the front of the group, leading them to the door.

Yup, grounds duty. They only put on the leg shackles to keep the patients from trying to run away. They left the hands free to do the lawn and garden work that grounds duty required. She hadn’t been this excited in a long time, and that feeling lasted right up until they actually went outside.

It was raining; pouring, in point of fact. *Goddammit! And on my birthday too. Yup, it's gonna be a shit storm of a day,* she thought.

She stood just apart from the other prisoners, who huddled together for warmth. Judy sneered at them. *Wimps,* she thought. She’d show them how to tough it out today. *God Damn, at least she was outside.*

She saw two headlights appear in the gloom across a bridge; it looked like the guards were bringing a Cliffside bus across to ferry the work gang out. That made sense to her. They would keep the rain ponchos on the bus along with the gardening tools. They just had to stand here until the little bus got here.

Except that as it pulled up, she saw that it wasn’t the stupid little white Cliffside bus with balloons painted on the side. *No, shit, NO! It was a goddamn gray prisoner transport bus! They were sending her to PRISON! NO, nonononon o! She was due a hearing before they sent her away!* She turned to sprint away, any direction looking better than that bus, but in her panic she completely forgot that she was wearing shackles. She took a leap, caught her foot in the chains, and crashed back down into a rain puddle on the pavement.

She struggle to right herself, and it was at that moment that she discovered a painful and unfortunate truth. She found that tasers work just fine through two layers of clothing and fur,
especially if the cloth is wet. As she lay there twitching in the puddle, she looked up at the muzzle of the wolf who had been leading them out.

“Sorry, sweetheart, there’s no escape for you that way. You are getting on that bus, and that’s all there is to it.” The security guard had read this one’s file. She was an escape artist extraordinaire, and if he gave her half a chance she would be gone. He couldn’t take that chance, not if he wanted to keep his job. He looked around, but didn’t see any senior officers watching him. He leaned back to Judy as he pulled a long cylindrical object from his pocket.

Judy struggled to escape from him, but he wasn’t taking any chances with her. He knelt over her leg, pinning her to the ground. He grabbed her flailing arm, and with his free paw, he rammed the object into her other thigh. She heard a small pop, a loud hiss, and suddenly cold fire flooded through her veins. As she struggled against the encroaching dark filling her vision, he leaned in and whispered, “Night, Night, little bunny.”

Darkness took her, and all she could think of as her vision faded was that she wasn’t going to get to have that dandelion after all today.

* * * * * *

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

Judy twitched as she listened to the damn cricket chirping away. Somehow it had managed to sneak inside Cliffside, probably inside some damn guard’s lunch. And now she had to listen to damn thing, until one of the insectivore patients chased it down. And another thing, the lights were on too damn early. One of the rent-a-guards must have hit the cell lights with his elbow. She reached for her pillow, but it wasn’t at her head. *Did it fall on the floor?* She rolled over, and opened her eyes to look at the floor. Nope it’s not on the tiled floor with the leaves. It must be on the other side. She rolled back up, dragging her arm across her eyes to block out the sun. *Damn, this bed is getting lumpy,* she thought.

Leaves.

Sun.

She whipped her arm down, and stared straight up. Instead of a ceiling of painted concrete with a single bare florescent bulb hanging from it, she was staring up at white painted wooden slats. And
holding those slats up, standing next her, was this large carrot pillar, loudly painted in green and orange. She looked down at her bed, which wasn’t a bed at all but a blue park bench. She sat up in a lurch and stared out across the far concrete platform, bathed in the golden light of dawn.

_Sweet Cheese and Crackers!_

_This is the Bunny Burrow Train Station!_ Her mind screamed at her.

_How the hell did I get here?_

* * * * * *

It had to be a drug reaction; it just had to be. That was it, she was reacting to what ever that damn wolf had injected her with, she thought to herself. She’s experienced drug induced hallucinations before, but never this vividly. This one is chock full of sights, and sounds, and smells! Oh God, the smells! Fresh plowed dirt in the fields! Wild roses growing on the fences. The smell of fresh morning porridge drifting down the farmhouse lanes.

She walked down a street, kicking at the dandelion puffs with her feet. That’s how she knew this had to be a hallucination, since that was her last conscious thought right before she conked out on the Cliffside courtyard. She had been thinking about dandelions.

She was also dry in this dream. She should be soaking wet, since she went down in a rain puddle after being tased. Nope, not here. Here, everything was sun bright and cloud free. It was wonderful. Too wonderful. She was waiting for the other spat to drop. Normally, at this point in her hallucinations she should be having invasions of pink death metal elephants giving a free concert in her skull or visits by professionally dressed cockroach doctors arguing about the ethics of lobotomies. Nope. Just sunshine, flowers, and farm fields as far as the eyes could see.

She wandered about for what seemed like hours, lost in this vision of normalcy, her only companion was the occasional rabbit farmer on a tractor, or a passing pickup. _Ah, here comes the other spat_, she thought. A middle sized delivery van, painted pink and yellow, was pulling up the road in front of her, driven by a middle aged looking fox. _A fox, diving a delivery van in Bunny Burrow. Who would have thunk it!_

The fox, who looked like a male, parked the van in front of her and got out the door. Coming around the door, she saw that he was a bit of a portly fellow, dressed in a plain plaid shirt and
wearing a pink apron with a baked pie on the front. He walked up to her, staring at her like he just seen a ghost. “Juuu… Judy?” he stammered.

"OH! It’s Gideon! He looks just like her drawings that she used to do of him, she excitedly thought. She waved at him, “Hi, Gideon! Yup, It’s me! I see you are a baker of pies! A pastry Chef, right?” Just like he was in her picture!

Taken back, he turned back to look at his truck, “Um, yeah? I make all kinds of pies.”

“That’s great! I never knew hallucinations could be so detailed!” She exclaimed.

“Hallucinations?” Gideon's weirdo-meter was going ding-ding-ding! She said she was Judy Hopps. Wasn’t she in a mental institution?

“Oh, yes, but usually they aren’t this organized. It must be a result of what ever the wolf injected me with. Any minute now, they’re gonna inject me with the counter-agent, and I’m gonna wake up in the hospital ER foaming at the mouth! It’s gonna be GREAT!” Judy was feeling a little manic right now, maybe from the over stimulation she was experiencing, maybe from the drugs she was injected with.

“Foaming at the mouth? Judy, are you rabid?” Gideon was a bit worried. He didn’t think she was rabid, since she was talking, but he wasn’t a doctor.

Judy pointed at her mouth, as she pulled her lips back and showed him her teeth. He pulled back from the display.

“Look Gideon, no foam! I’m not rabid, I’m drugged! There’s a difference. A hallucination should know that, since I know that! Oh, look at all the pies.” Judy climbed into his van.

Gideon didn’t know what to do. He could call the Bunny Burrow sheriff, but he was worried they might just laugh at him cause he felt weirded out by an excited bunny who liked his pies. Those deputy bucks could be jerks at time, but he was a jerk once too, until Stu and Bonnie helped him out, so he could relate.

Stu and Bonnie! Maybe they just hadn’t told him Judy had come home yet. He pulled out his phone, and dialed Stu.
“Hello, Gideon, how’s baking?” Stu asked him.

“Um, baking’s okay. Um, listen Stu, I think I’ve got your daughter here in my van. She’s admiring all my pies!” In hindsight, Gideon thought that was probably the weirdest thing he could ever say to Stu. Maybe it would be better if he called the Sheriff’s department after all. It would be less embarrassing. Caught up in that train of thought, he missed most of what Stu said next.

“Cotton? Is she playing hooky from school again? I swear, higher education is wasted on the rascal! What’s she doing, again?” Stu asked him.

“What? I told ya, she’s on the floor admiring my pies. It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen.” Gideon moved around to the rear of his van, and opened the twin doors. Judy sat on the floor, counting all the pies.

“Oooo! This is making me sooooo hungry! I haven't had anything to eat all day, since I didn’t want to eat the moldy left-over lawn clippings this morning. Can I have some, please Gideon?” Judy rolled over onto her back in the middle of the carpeted aisle, and stretched her arms out over her head to Gideon.

“What do you mean, admiring your pies? Is she high, Gideon?” Stu sternly demanded to know.

“Yeah, I think so. She said she’s having a hallucination and that she’s gonna be foaming at the mouth soon. She also said she didn’t know what the wolf injected her with. So yeah, I think she’s on drugs or something.” Gideon batted Judy’s greedy paws away from his fresh pies. Wait, there, that one. His sampler pie pan, with half a raspberry pie in it. He could give her that one, maybe she’ll leave his other pies alone. He needed those for his deliveries. She dug in with gusto, ignoring the fork he held out for her, using her bare paws instead to shovel the gooey mess straight into her mouth.

“Well, you keep her there in one place. Bonnie and I will be right over to sort this out. Where are you at again?” Stu directed him.

“Over in front of the Thumper’s farm house, pulled off off the main road. Ya can’t miss me; It's the only pink van fer miles.”

“We are on our way! See you soon, Gideon!” Stu hung up.
Oh, Blueberries and Burning Biscuits, thought Gideon, this is turning out to be a really strange day!

* * * * * *

“I’m on hold with the school, they’re said they’ll get right back to me.” Bonnie, looking at her phone, told Stu as they bounced down the road in his truck.

“This drug problem is getting out of hand! Now it’s in middle schools? I didn't think this was gonna have to be a discussion that we were going to have with her for a least a couple more years. We need to do something!” Stu fumed.

“She’s our granddaughter, not our daughter. It’s our eldest’s job to raise her, not yours.” Bonnie pointed out to her husband.

“Well, when we get home, I am going to find that buck and give him a piece of my mind, just you wait and see!” Stu barked back.

“Yes, dear.” Bonnie said soothingly. “Oh, look, there’s Gideon’s van.” She pointed down the road for Stu.

Stu pulled his truck up nose to nose to Gideon’s van, who popped his head around the back doors before ambling over to their truck. “Hello, stranger.” Stu said by way of greeting as he got out of the truck, “How is she?”

“Fine, except that she’s hungry as all get out. I know that some drugs give ya the munchies, but I didn’t think it was this bad. She’s eating all of my raspberry tarts. I didn’t think a little bunny could eat that much.” Gideon complained to them as they walked together back to rear of his van.

Bonnie patted him on the arm, “It’s okay, Gid, we’ll make it up to you.” Stu nodded in agreement, and then raised his voice, “Alright, young doe! What’s your excuse this time?” as he walked around the doors.

They came around the end of the van to a most peculiar sight. Judy was digging out the last crumbs
of the raspberry tart she was working on with her paws. Her arms were stained bright red from paw tips to the sleeves of her gray Cliffside tunic, as if she were some kind of trauma surgeon doing emergency surgery in the field. And her muzzle… It was a horror show, Bunnicula come to life in the back of Gideon’s van. Crimson stained her face, and cascaded down her throat and chest to pool in her lap. She looked up at the three of them standing there, and enthusiastically waved, splattering them all with droplets of ruby ichor.

“Hi Mom, Hi Dad! Want some pie?!” Judy offered them.

Gideon could swear he heard Stu’s jaw hit the cement with an audible thunk as the rabbit just stared incredulously. Not to be outdone, Bonnie neatly upstaged her husband by fainting dead away.

Judy let out a belch and answered her own question, “I guess not!” She picked up the tart pan to lick it clean.

* * * * * *

“Judy, dear, you’re not making any sense.” Back at the Hopps family home, Bonnie test the water running into the bathroom tub, making sure that it was hot enough to soak the berry juice out her very colorful daughter’s fur, but not enough injure her. “What do you mean Cliffside was closing down?” She turned around to help Judy take off her stained uniform.

“They had been shipping patients out for months, whittling away at the easy cases, and shipping the hard cases like me off to prison. Anyway, after giving us orange jumpers, they marched us all down to the courtyard to wait for the bus. Except that we didn’t know it was the bus. I thought we gonna go do yard work, but it was too rainy for that.” Judy prattled on, not even noticing her mother’s confused expression, as she slipped into the hot water. “Aaaaaaahhh. I missed baths.”

Bonnie was concerned. Judy seemed rather manic, on top of all the sugar she had consumed in Gideon’s van, and she still hadn’t given a decent explanation for how she had gotten to Bunny Burrow, other than to offer up the theory that it was all one big long running hallucination on her part. Frustrated, Bonnie tried to crumple up Judy’s sticky outfit so she could throw it away in the trash can when she felt paper crinkling in a pocket. Curious, she turned the outfit over until she found the pants pocket, and extracted a letter envelope. Stained in one corner with berry juice, Bonnie shook out the envelope out and opened it. A small plastic bag with what looked like white powder slipped out along with a letter. Bonnie opened the letter up and started to read.

Attention: Judy Laverne Hopps
It is the finding of the Cliffside Transition Committee that on this date, having reached your majority and successfully completed all relevant therapies, you are now deemed cured of your delusions and psychotic episodes. It is therefore the conclusion of this committee that you are to be discharged immediately and returned to your original jurisdiction of record.

This finding will be recorded at the Cliffside archives on this date, and will be available for further review upon request.

If you require additional information, please contact your designated Cliffside case officer.

Thank you.

What a bunch of weaselly worded bunny pellets, Bonnie thought, Short, to the point, and total useless. Other than the part about discharged immediately. That was totally relevant to the situation at hand.

Judy was back to babbling her story again, “The wolf jumped on me and tased me in the back, and I dropped like a puddle of goo. Did you know you can be tased through two layers of clothing? I didn’t. Of course it helps if you’re wet…”

Bonnie leaned in closer to look at Judy’s back. There, below her shoulder blades, were two little burn marks. Bonnie reached out and felt them with her fingers.

“OWWWW!” Judy yelled. “What did you do that for? That hurt!”

“Judy, there are two burn marks on your back.” Bonnie pointed out to her.

“Of course there are! That’s where the wolf got me. But I didn’t think they’d hurt like that still…” Judy’s face started to fall as the implications really started to sink in.

“Judy, they’re real. And so is this.” Bonnie held the letter up for Judy to read.

Judy leaned over the tub side, the lips on her muzzle moving in time with the sweep of her eyes as she read the letter that her mother held up. When she finished, she slowly turned her shocked face
up to look at her mother’s eyes.

“Yes, it’s real. You are really here. This isn’t a hallucination.” Bonnie paused, tears leaking out of her eyes, and she finally got to speak the words she had waited nine years to say.

“Judy, you’re home.”

Chapter End Notes

The bunnicula scene I blame firmly on my girlfriend, who insists that I should have petting zoo just for her. In pursuit of this noble goal, she likes to send me videos of cute animals doing cute things; for example rabbits eating raspberrys like they were some sort of furry piranhas. It's a horror show, and it's all her fault.
Tuesday Night: Demons and Decisions

Chapter Summary

Hugo struggles to understand the enigma that is Judy Hopps and to reconcile what little data he has about her life. Lacking clarity, he seeks focus downstairs. Judy wakes from her nap, and thrust into a strange locale, she wrestles with her own terrible demons. At an impasse in her own mind, she follows a tantalizing scent she hasn't experienced in years and it leads her to witness something wondrously new. On the basis of her new experience, she comes to a fateful decision.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been very difficult for me to write, and if it comes off as confusing, I do apologize. I struggled with describing how Judy’s conscious mind would communicate with her inner demons (mania, depression, anxiety, paranoia, rage, self-hatred, etc...), and this was the best I could come up with:

1) Judy’s inner demons’ dialog would start and end with three asterisks (***) and talk in the third-person (she/her) past tense.

2) Her inner conscious dialog would talk in the first-person (I/me) present tense, and would refer to her inner demons in the second-person (you/Judy) present tense.

3) All distinct thought processes are italicized. Indistinct thought processes are normal text.

I know it’s a bit confusing and that I might lose some readers with the way I did it (I confused the heck out of my proof readers), but I am trying to show the internal dialog of someone who is not entirely sane by our standards.

Judy has spent half of her childhood in a horrible mental institution drugged up to her eyeballs, several years as a street prostitute, a year as Dawn Bellwether’s special friend, and three more years on the streets as a homeless mammal prone to panic attacks. Not to mention dying a horribly painful fiery death in a previous life only to then get “rebooted” and sent on her merry way by a trickster god on what amounts to be a suicide mission for a nine year old child.

She has come out of these life experiences damaged, to say the least.

But do not despair, as all is not lost, for with time, courage, and the steadfast love of family and friends, recovery is possible. She just needs to take the first step, and admit to herself that she still needs help.

There are other very significant factors that also contribute to this particular equation, but as River Song would say: “Spoilers!”

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Hugo sat back in his office chair and considered the images on the screen in front of his eyes. While such images may not be as titillating to a mule like himself as they would be to some mammal more sexually active or perhaps more rabbit than he was, he did understood the appeal from a biological point of view. The images before him also gave him a data point into her life that he hadn’t had before, he wryly acknowledged.

What he knew of her thirteen years ago when she had been a skinny hyperactive teenager and what he knew of her now, half starved and homeless, had left him with a sizable data gap. Those images before him painted a far different picture of what Judy Hopps could be, in contrast to the homeless rabbit that currently slept in his couch.

Painted. Painted, indeed. She had shaved bold patterns in her fur, and dyed those patterns in bold colors that proclaimed her existence with courageous voice and furious pride. She certainly wasn’t being subtle or shy about being noticed. The patterns changed haphazardly, as did the colors. He supposed that the resulting images didn’t present her in any logically consistent time line or order, being that it was just a basic web search. But they did declare that she was unafraid of the attention applied to her. “Look at me, world, for here I am!”

*Good for her! A far cry from the shy awkwardness of her youth.*

The pictures showed her physique, fit and limber, her musculature strong and well defined. Her stance spoke of a healthy skeletal system, and her face and teeth indicated a healthy diet. He didn’t see any evidence of drug use or the scars of self harm. What coat she had that wasn’t shaved shined with the vitality and vigor of youthful health.

Now, some of the other images were of more concern to him, at least from a medical stand-point. He would not have thought a rabbit doe capable of shoving such a variety of objects, most rather large, into herself and still be grinning like a lunatic instead of screaming in pain. Or in turn accommodating the various well endowed male mammals that she so enthusiastically rode upon, being that artificial lube only took you so far.

He understood that porn was a fantasy and that the participants were just actors upon a stage, but he also understood body language better than most, as most mammals only bothered to learn the languages of their own species. As a doctor, and as a stranger in a strange land, he endeavored to know more, and not to be limited by his own ignorance.
Judy’s body spoke of a carefree joy, a pride in her existence, and a power in her presence. Had this perhaps been where she had learned to emote like she had in the Clinic? She was certainly projecting, and not faking, the sincerity of her feelings through her actions in the photos that he could see.

_Hum…. It gave him pause to wonder._

He had been surprised at first at her display in the examination room today, both by the raw power of her projection, and the skill she displayed in doing so. By stripping in front of him, showing him her weakened body, she showed him that she was not afraid of him, prey declaring defiance to predator. The corresponding tension in her stance had bespoke of a fury that she could barely contain.

He supposed that it was him she was angry with, and not Meredith or the staff, since Judy kept her back to him the entire time. It was a message intended for him and him alone. Perhaps he had failed to notice something, or perhaps he should have stayed by her side during the time at the clinic. So he prepared himself and stood ready for when she turned on him. But as powerful as it had been, it passed just as quickly, and suddenly she was as meek and as shy as she had been as a teenager. What had she been feeling?

From what she said in the car, he could image that she felt betrayed and abandoned by him, when she had been left behind at Cliffside. She had been; those feelings were perfectly valid. He did feel that he had betrayed her, by promising her a freedom that he could not deliver. That had been part of the guilt that drove his sense of duty, that and a promise made to desperate parents with no other recourse left to them to assuage their loss. He would find her, no matter what; find her and bring her home. But time moved on and he never did.

Ten years had passed in the blink of an eye and in that time his faith had been sorely tested. Despair had given way to grudging admission that he had failed, as his search had dwindled, running out of places to look, and he had to come to terms with finality.

Then his grandmother had to butt in and turn his faith upside down. One family phone call taken, one promise lightly given, and a path he had never really intend to walk that night had turned into a miracle under the light of a lonely street lamp, where at long last the impossible was made true.

Hugo was now firmly of the opinion that he didn’t find Judy that night, nor that she had simply blundered into him, but they had instead been guided to each other, to the right place at the right time, right when they were supposed to be.
What he couldn’t figure out was why? Why now? Why not 5 or even 10 years ago? What was so important about this very moment? What was he missing?

Abuela, me haces doler la cabeza. (*Grandma, you make my head hurt.)

Argh!

So many thoughts, and so little clarity. I need focus…

Hugo turned off his computer, and stood up and stretched. Focus.

He would to seek focus.

* * * * * *

Judy awoke in the dark with a start. For a brief moment, she didn’t know where she was, and the fear of being trapped in a strange place caused her anxiety to flare up. ***Run! Hide!*** She had to stamp down hard on that reaction, gritting her teeth in frustration. *This is Hugo’s place, up in the Snowy Hills, damn it.* She lay on his couch in his living room, his scent awash in the old blankets that covered her, right where she had laid down after they had gotten back from shopping.

*You’re safe, you dumb bunny! You’re not trapped, he didn’t lock the doors, he’s not going to give you injections, and he certainly isn’t going to eat you. Gah!* Judy yelled back at the runaway freight train that was her anxiety. *Stupid brain.*

She rolled over with a sigh. She hadn’t sleep inside a house in over three years and realized, *Yeah, this was definitely a weird way to wake up.* Yesterday morning didn’t count, because she had been recovering from hypothermia then and everything had been confusing.

One would would think that waking up on soft cushions, comfortably warm, without cockroaches for bed companions, would be a grand experience for an street mammal. Nope, not for the valiant Judy Hopps it ain’t! It’s cause for an automatic panic attack, that’s what it is, just because it’s strange! She groaned, clutching her paws to her temples, trying to rub her palms into her skull.
With a sigh, she sat back up, the blanket slipping off of her shoulders. It wasn’t dark, not really, just dim. Hugo must have turned the lights down low so she could sleep, not knowing that she might have an anxiety attack in the dark.

***And how could he know? She hadn’t told him yet. She had told Meredith, but she hadn’t told Hugo. Why the hell not? She had plenty of time in the car. No, no, she had to use that time to interrogate him about why he abandoned her at Cliffside. That was stupid.***

Yeah, it was stupid. Why haven’t I told him about my panic attacks? It’s not like he wouldn’t understand what it was like. Even back at Cliffside, in the group art room, he had been OCD, lining up the students pencils and crayons in perfectly aligned rows by color and length. His house is spotless, his car immaculate, and his clothes perfect. And if they weren’t, he’d probably have a meltdown. He knows exactly what it’s like to live with something you can’t turn off. Why don’t I talk to him?

I was so happy to see him when he got back to the examination room, even relieved, but as soon as I started getting dressed it just morphed into anger. Why did I stripe naked right in front of him? Was I really thinking that he didn’t want to see me?

***He had abandoned her at the clinic! He left her alone! She had striped naked in front of him just to spite him, and he never even noticed that! He didn’t bother to say anything or do anything. He probably didn’t even care, the bastard. Who would? Not about a scrawny slip of a rabbit like her. No, he up and disappeared during her entire examination, popping in only once to grab a stupid photo and then jetting off again, only to return at the very end to pay the bills. Where the hell did he go? Why couldn’t he stay? She should have yelled at him! He deserved it!***

Judy, he said that was going to happen as soon as he showed up; that the other doctors would come get him! He even went as far as pointing it out again while you were filling out the forms in the waiting room. You know that! That’s even why they brought Meredith along, to stay with you while he did what he needed to do for the other clinic doctors. That’s what doctors do when they’re at the doctors office – they see other patients!

Once she had remember that in the examination room, she had been so embarrassed by her display of anger. She tried to do some composure grooming on her head fur while standing in front of Hugo and Meredith, but she had been sure her ears were burning so hot that they were going to catch fire.

He has never abandoned you! He had even said so, over the phone when he was talking to Meredith last night. He had been searching for you for over a decade before he finally found you; found his Judy Hopps. He had desperately wanted to find you. He wasn’t gonna abandon you now that he had found you.
He didn’t abandon you at Cliffside, either. Swinton had locked him out, which sounded exactly like something that stupid sow would do, and his boss wouldn’t let him go back. It wasn’t his fault that you never saw him again. Hugo even helped to get that evil place shutdown, which was probably what got you out in the end!

***He had been trying to find her for ten years, and she gets mad at him for not being there during a doctor’s visit? She really was just a dumb bunny. Stupid, stupid, bunny. Who would really want a failure like her? She was an ex-con! A mental patient turned prostitute who topped it all off by living like a crazy shrieking homeless lady on the streets of Zootopia. Was she trying to project a facade of sane normalcy for him so that he wouldn’t reject her as soon as he figured out just how crazy she really was? That’s why she was so mad at him, because he wasn’t there for her act! Like he couldn’t see right through it, dumb bunny. He’s a neurologist who deals with the homeless all the time, for God’s sake. He knows exactly what to look for: neurosis, delusions, anger management issues… Yup, she had it all, and it was just a matter of time before he figured it all out anyway.***

Gah! This was all so stupid. She opened her eyes and stared across the room, trying to pick some detail to focus on other than her own self-doubt. Oh, look, he left her a snack on the coffee table. She could see that he had sliced up a plate load of the vegetables that he bought today, covering it in clear wrap. To compliment that he had also set out another plate with crackers and nuts right next to it.

She slide to the floor in front of the plates, and tore the wrap off. She bit into a slice of fresh sweet pepper, and with a little moan, she marveled at the crisp, clean taste. She had been eating moldy and rotting vegetables for so long that she forgotten what fresh vegetables actually tasted like. She was soon stuffing her muzzle with slices of zucchini and squash, cramming the food into her muzzle like it was going to get stolen before she finished. Slow down, you greedy squirrel, ain’t nobody here but you. Take your time, and enjoy it. He made it just for you. For you!

***He did, he really did. He was so nice to her and she was so ungrateful. She had been ready to say so many really mean things to him, and he didn’t deserve any of them. If she stuck around too long, she’d find some stupid reason to get mad at him again and explode, and then he’d know how crazy she was. He didn’t need that. He had his choice of females, like that stout Doctor Victoria. She was so pretty, graceful, and caring. Where as Judy Hopps was plain, scrawny, and crazier than a bag full of bats. What was she doing here? Why was she staying? He’s gonna get tired of her soon, so maybe she should just leave before he kicks her out.***

AAAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGGGGHNNNNNNH! Judy started to thump her forehead against the coffee table top, trying to pound the latest round of self destruction out of her head. HE ALREADY KNOWS YOU’RE NUTSO AND HE STILL WANTS YOU TO STAY, JUDY! She yelled back at her brain.
Why was this so hard? She asked herself, as she took a deep breath.

Wait, was something burning? She sniffed the air and breathed in the scent, Sandalwood? She slide out from behind the coffee table, and after standing upright, she traced the soft smell across the room and down the hall to the stairwell. Pausing at the top, she didn’t see any smoke wafting up. Breathing slowly in through her nose, trying not irritate her annoyed lungs, she caught the scent of magnolia.

Nag Champa? Is he burning incense?

The stairwell was a dim shaft, the only light along it’s entire length coming from the light switch at the end. The railing was positioned for a mammal like her, and thick carpeting covered the stairs. She gripped the railing, and by feel, slowly descended into the darkness.

Why am I doing this? This was really weird, following the scent of incense down into a dark well. I should be terrified doing this!

But she wasn’t. Maybe it was because the stairway just reminded her of the root cellar back at her family home, and how she used to hide down among the shelves of jars and bulbs during childhood games of hide-and-seek. And the incense scent was so familiar, so calming. She had always used Nag Champa when she did her yoga, an art she had not practiced in such a long time.

No time like the present! The excited thought came unbidden. She smiled at that little thought trickle, so upbeat and positive. So unlike the dark moods that plagued her current existence.

She finally came to the bottom of the stair, the light from the switch strong enough to see the runner on the floor. She stepped lightly upon the runner, and peeked around the corner to her right. It was an inky pit, but she could smell tire rubber and motor oil in it. The garage lay that way, she knew, but not him. He must be down the other way, in a room that she hadn’t been in yet.

She slide to the other side of the stairwell, her torso covering up the light switch with it’s merry little orange spark and leaning around the corner she peeked down the other way. At the end of the short hall to her left an open doorway stood facing her, warm gentle light spilling out, the glow cast by the flickering flames of half a dozen beeswax candles. They were lined up in a row upon a fireplace mantle made from a dark stone flecked with mica. They smelled so good, mixed in with the smell of sandalwood and magnolia from the incense.
She could see a little white ceramic tray set right in front of the fireplace hearth, a lit stick of incense stuck in the side, smoldering slowly, a little wisp of smoke drifting upwards. A small brass gong sat to one side of the incense tray, and on the other a small china teapot clad in gold trim on a pot warmer.

She contemplated moving further down the hallway, closer to the light, when a shadow fell across the door frame. It was Hugo. He moved across the open portal, clad only in loose white pants, leaving the fur on his chest and arms bare. He slowly slide across the floor, carefully placing his feet down as he moved his arms and paws in a smooth progression of poses.

_That’s Tai-ji_, she realized. She would be able to recognize those moves anywhere; it was a really popular martial art in Angels City. There had even been classes at her yoga studio in Angels City, taught by this crusty old mongoose. She never attended any of the classes, being that they had mostly been filled with older mammals, as her yoga classes along with running fulfilled most of her daily physical fitness program, but it was still a beautiful art form.

He looks so graceful. Controlled yet fluid. He turned back to the fireplace, and she marveled at the definition of his back, the thick muscles rolling under his fur as he moved his arms and torso through the forms.

_Sweet cheese and crackers, he’s ripped! He looks like one of those tiger dancers at a Gazelle concert, except in miniature. Where the hell had he been hiding all that muscle?_

She knew he was strong, especially after the way he had lifted her up without effort in the Tundratown alleyway, but that night she had been more concerned with the thickness of his fur and his warmth radiating underneath her cold paws than the feel of his muscles beneath his skin. The rest of him had been hidden under a dark sports jacket and slacks, like the outfit he wore today. It must be his standard duty doctor uniform.

_I wouldn’t mind waking up next to that every morning! Rawr!_

***What??!!! Where the hell did that come from? Is her libido seriously finding him attractive? He’s not a bunny; hell’s bells, he’s not even a fox! He’s a cat, a pure carnivore! He’s a killing machine in a fur tuxedo. Powerful teeth, really sharp claws, and don’t forget the feline nightmare hiding in his pants. Remember that stupid bobcat that fucked her up and gave her gonorrhea? She couldn’t sit down without pain for a week! Felines! Never again!***
***Besides, she’s not 15 anymore, going gaga in a teenage crush over the only doctor at Cliffside that ever said nice things to her. She was an adult now, experienced in the foibles and follies of males. Just because he’s beautiful didn’t mean he wasn’t also an egotistical douchbag who just wanted to get into her pants. Hump her and dump her, just like every other male who had ever used her and left her bleeding body and soul on a lonely street corner.***

*That’s not true, Judy, and you know that. I know that. He isn’t trying to use me. He’s taking care of me, being exceedingly gentle despite his strength, and very considerate of my feelings. So very few males in my adult life have been so considerate…*

Her grip tightened on the railing.

*I just want to be held.*

She closed her eyes.

*Loved.*

She sighed.

*Believed.*

She had held on to her secret for so long that it had spread through her existence like a cancer, rotting her life away like leprosy, bits falling off of her by the way side with every step she took. She had sacrificed nearly everything important to her to keep it: her family, her career, her freedom, and her fox. What little she had been left with she was slowly loosing too: her body, her dignity, her sanity, and her faith. If she wasn’t careful, soon she would loose herself too, reduced to nothingness, yesterday’s dust blown away in the wind.

*Nothing left of Judy Hopps but pain and bad memories, a sad echo upon the world’s tapestry, she sadly acknowledged to herself.*

But now, at Death’s very doorstep, somebody had stepped in and said to her: “Stay. Please stay. I want you to stay. We have so much to talk about.”
Please...

***Was that enough? That somebody valued her? That against all odds, somebody would reach out to her and say: You are worth the fight to me.***

Say...

***Might he be that someone who would take the time to stop and listen, and maybe, just maybe, be able to believe her? Was he worth that chance?***

Yes...

***She could stay. He could help her heal, and she could help him. How, she honestly had not idea, but something told her that in time she could. Perhaps it was faith? After all, he had found her, lost and dying, against all odds after a decade’s long search that had born so little fruit. He had kept that faith solid to his core and maybe she could learn from him how he did that.***

Okay, I’ll take it on faith, she decided, relieved that her inner demons finally agreed with her on this.

She’ll stay, and maybe, if he learns to trust her, and she learns to trust him, maybe then she will be able to tell him her deepest and most darkest secret, the secret she risked sanity itself to keep.

She will finally tell him why she had to kill Carl Latrans 19 years ago.

* * * * *

Hugo finished his forms, and stood in the center of the room, slowly breathing in and out, letting the peace help center his chi. As he did that, he heard a soft sound behind him; a scrape or a swish. He slowly turned his head back to look down the hall, but blinded by the candle light, he saw nothing but darkness.

Maybe it was Judy, up and moving around. He walked back down the hall to the stairs, but he didn’t see anything. He could only smell the Nag Champa, the woody scent clinging to him like a
second skin. The incense vapors could get heavy in that back room, especially if he didn’t open the fireplace flue to vent the smoke, but he had wanted to keep the house warm for Judy’s sake so he had left it closed.

He softly padded back to the top of the stairs and made his way through the gloom to the couch. She lay on the couch, one arm thrown across her face and the other clutching a blanket to her chest. He turned to look at the table, and saw that she had opened up the veggies, and half the slices were gone. Oh, good. She had eaten something, at least.

He picked up the veggie plate to put them away, but left the crackers and nuts behind in case she woke up again and wanted a snack. Placing the plate in the refrigerator, he padded back downstairs to finish out his meditations, leaving Judy to her slumbers.

Chapter End Notes

For those who made it through this, Thank you. It is part of her journey, and sometimes before one can seek the light, one has to first face the darkness within.

And for those who could not, It will get better. I promise.

Next Flashback: Homecoming
Judy has come back to the farm, and her family strives to make the transition as painless as possible. Struggling with the nightmares of her past, Judy has to face the fact that home isn't what it used to be.

Next Current Day: Contributions
Judy and Hugo will experience a day filled with normal tasks and quiet joys, and Judy will be invited to make a contribution of her own to Hugo's life.
Flashback: Reptile Reality

Chapter Summary

Judy receives a Cotton wake up visit. Bonnie and Stu meet with the Bunny Burrow Sheriff. Later that night, their Doctor swings by to check up on Judy. Waking from a fevered dream, Judy has something she has to do, if she could only remember what it was.

Chapter Notes

This is the second chapter of three in Judy's Bunny Burrow homecoming after her release from Cliffside. Originally, this chapter was supposed to cover the next two weeks of Judy's homecoming, but once I realized that I had hit 3700 words after writing just the first few parts that this chapter was going to be huge. So I split this chapter in two and rearranged some of the other chapters, so that now the rest of Judy's homecoming will take place in chapter 17.

The next chapter is full of FLUFF, I promise!

And for those who have stuck with me on this very slow buildup, I thank you. Things are going to start picking up very rapidly in the next 5 chapters or so, so please stay tuned.

Flashback: 10 Years earlier In Bunny Burrow

Judy slowly awoke to the eerie sound of silence. It was the weirdest thing; Mr Millpond wasn’t howling, so either the orderlies got to him first thing this morning, or he was dead - not that she would be so lucky.

The ever present fan hum was absent too. Usually the fans blew cold air all night long, through vents directly over her bed, keeping her room at a cool 70 degrees at all time. But the fans must have either shutdown, which can never happen because there where multiple redundant circuits to keep them running, or the electrical power must have been switched off, which wasn’t likely either since Cliffside had it’s own backup electrical generators powered by the river falls.
The other thing she noticed was a warmth bathing her face and ears. She blinked her eyes, and all she could see was a warm golden light flowing from a giant window. The light wasn’t some cold, flickering florescent that would make everything look sterile and sickly at the same time. There really wasn’t anything like this golden cascade in Cliffside. Nor was there a giant window in her cell, just solid walls of concrete covered with peeling institutional beige paint.

* * * * * *

"SHRRRRRRRIIIIEEEEEEIEEEEEEKKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!!!!!!!"
A scream echoed through out the Hopps family residence.

Bonnie raced down the hall from the breakfast table, followed by half of her descendants toward a terrible cry of absolute primal terror. Judy must have woken up, most likely out of another nightmare, and she was probably couldn’t figure out where she was. Oh Dear, she was still having trouble last night accepting that all this wasn’t a hallucination, and she must be so confused right now!

Bonnie skidded to a stop at the doorway and shocked by what she saw, she peered into the room on a most particular scene. Judy had backed herself up on the bed and into the room’s corner, staring at her little nine year old niece, Cotton Hopps, who happen to be standing by the bed holding what appeared be a long black snake in her paws. It was as long as she was tall, and was coiled loosely along her arms and shoulders. She was excitedly talking to Judy, “It’s okay, he’s really friendly! He won’t bite you. You can pet him, if you want.”

Bonnie, aghast, demanded “COTTON HOPPS, what are you doing? What is that? Where did you get it?!!!!!”

Cotton turned around and greeted her with a big Cotton smile, “Hi Grandma! I was introducing Benjamin to Aunt Judy. He’s my friend!”

Bonnie brought her paws to her muzzle, “What? That? Is it poisonous?” she screeched as she pointed at the snake.

Cotton frowned as she corrected her clearly ignorant Grandma, “Of course not! Benjamin is a ring neck snake, so he’s only poisonous to newts and earthworms. I suppose if you shove your finger into his mouth, he might try to gum you to death.” Cotton, squinting with concentration and her tongue in her teeth, tried to lever open Benjamin’s jaws with a claw. The snake however wasn’t having any of that and he squirmed out of her grip to drop to the floor. Seeing his escape route blocked, the snake chose the only other option available to him – hide! He quickly slithered under the quickest available hiding spot to him which was, completely coincidentally, just under Judy’s bed.

As soon as he disappeared underneath it, Judy shot out of the bed corner and over to her mother’s arms. Bonnie gripped her daughter, who shook like a leaf in a high wind. As she comforted her terrified daughter, Bonnie was struck at that moment by the irony of the situation. This was precisely the kind of behavior that used to get Judy in trouble when she was Cotton’s age, although Judy tended to be more injury prone in her adventures. She shook her head, and shaking off the horror of the experience she turned around and guided her terrified daughter out through the masses of rabbits crowded around the door. As she passed her eldest son, she fixed an eye on the buck, “Manny, deal with your offspring, if you please!” To everybody else she raised her voice, “Back to
the table and finish your breakfast, you lot! You all still have morning chores to do!” She shooed them all away.

Looking back into the room, Manny thought he would much rather hide under the bed with the snake than to try to deal with his crestfallen daughter.

* * * * * *

Bonnie wiped her paws on her apron, contemplating the events of this morning. Thankfully, the rest of breakfast had been a tranquil affair. Bonnie had sat Judy down next to her, and offered her a breakfast of dried fruits and hay, but Judy just nibbled on a fruit slice. She begged off eating anything more, complaining that she felt a bit of nausea. After her experience this morning, Bonnie couldn’t really fault Judy for that.

Manny, holding a squirming pillow sack in one paw and a contrite bunny kit in the other, had brought Cotton over to apologize to Judy. Judy had thanked her for the apology, and told her that while she thought snakes were cool too, she just didn’t want to wake up to one. Since Manny was going to make Cotton let the poor snake go in the woods, and her niece looked so saddened by the prospect, Judy offered to go with them. Bonnie fixed her eye on Beth who quickly took the hint. Manny was going to have his paws full with a rambunctious kit and her pet snake, so Bonnie wanted Beth to be backup out there for Judy just in case something happened.

Bonnie watched them head out the yard, and down the path to the woods. Just in time too, since there was a white sedan driving down the lane. She looked over at her husband, still finishing his tea, and said, “Stu? He’s here.”

Looking up and then out the window, Stu squinted a moment and then just nodded. He stood up, setting his paper and tea cup aside, and joined his wife at the door. They walked out to the center of their driveway, quietly waiting for the Bunny Burrow Sheriff to arrive, apprehension etched on their faces.

The older steel gray buck, clad in a khaki uniform and a ten-pint hat, pulled the police cruiser up next to them and parked. He arrived alone and without backup, appearing introspective but calm to Bonnie. She breathed a sigh of relief. The Sheriff was pretty easy to read, as far as bunnies went, being an honest buck given to plain speech with an avid dislike for the politics that his position sometimes required of him. Had he arrived looking apprehensive and with a backup deputy, he would probably have come to arrest her daughter for escaping Cliffside. She tried to ease a pleasant smile onto her face as the uniformed buck got out.

“Sheriff Harvey,” Stu announced by way of greeting, “What’s the word?”
He tipped his hat at the two of them by way of greeting, “Stu, Bonnie, Morning.”

He faced Stu and replied, “The word is a right mess, that’s what it is, Stu. This Cliffside thing is all gone sideways, according to my contacts over at the ZPD. Apparently Cliffside has been shipping the last of their patients out willy-nilly all over the countryside, without any warning to their families or the local authorities. Judy’s just one case among many in this regard. May I please see the letter that they sent with her?” he asked the two of them.

Bonnie reached into the pocket on the front of her apron, and pulled the letter out. She handed it over to the sheriff, who opened it to read. He pursed his lips as he read down, nodding as he went. “Yeah, this is basically what the ZPD said. As far as they’re concerned, she finished the conditions of her sentence and was legally released.” He folded the paper up and handed back to Bonnie.

“And how is the Bunny Burrow Sheriff’s department concerned?” asked a nervous Stu.

Sheriff Harvey took a deep breath and replied, “Honestly Stu, I don’t know what to think. But, if she keeps out of trouble, and nothing further comes out of this whole Cliffside mess, she’s a free bunny as far as my department is concerned.” He nodded in affirmation.

Bonnie and Stu shared a look of relief, as the Sheriff continued, “She is a felon though, so she can’t be around firearms, especially considering the conditions of her conviction. If you have any, Stu, you best to be keeping them locked up.”

Stu just shook his head, “I never replaced my pistol after the trial. I couldn’t stomach the thought of one of my other kits getting a hold of it and doing something stupid. The only thing we have left is a break open pellet rifle for snakes and a few bb guns for the older kits. Is that a problem?”

“Nah, airguns are fine. It’s just firearms that gets the federal prosecutors all in a tizzy. I’d rather not deal with them on this issue, if I can avoid it. Judy’s gonna have enough problems as it is without local law enforcement breathing down her neck.” Sheriff Harvey just shook his head.

“Problems?” Bonnie and Stu echoed each other, looking at each other in concern.

“Yeah, the standard crap that ex-cons have to deal with when they try to reintegrate into mammal society, especially those who spent time in mental institutions. Folks will avoid her, thinking she’s gonna get crazy violent on them, or some mammals will take what she says all out of context and
get all offended. Ya’ll might want to have somebody go with her, at least until folks round here settle down, just to make sure she has somebody on her side during social interactions.”

He turned to back his cruiser. He sat down, but before he shut the door he added, “If you folks have any problems with her being back, either with her or with other folks, you let me know, ok?”

Bonnie and Stu nodded together. The sheriff touched the brim of his hat in farewell, and drove off, leaving the two of them to watch.

“Oh, Stu. I don’t know what to do. What are we going to do?” Bonnie asked her husband.

“I don’t know either. Take it one day at a time; that’s all I can think off. Don’t know what else we can do, you know?” He gathered her in his arms, and held her fast, as much for his comfort as for hers.

The past nine years had be a nightmare for them and their daughter, and while Stu hoped and prayed that it was all going to be alright now, he was afraid.

Afraid that the nightmare could somehow get even worse.

Later that Night

Her parents stood in the doorway while Judy thrashed back and forth on the bed, moaning in time to her twitches, Bonnie and Stu feeling helpless as they watched their daughter suffer.

Stu turned to the older buck standing next to him and pleaded, “Isn’t there something we can do for her, Doc?”

Doctor Hansel Hase, the Hopps family Doctor, just shook his head, “Not really. We could hospitalize her, but since we still don’t know what they were giving her, she would still be going through withdrawal symptoms there too. It’s been a few days since she got back, and most of what they had her on will have been flushed out by her body already. Trying to guess at which pharmaceutical to give her might end up just being worse that the withdrawal she’s currently going through, especially since we don’t know what dosage to give her. Are you sure she didn’t have any instructions with her when you found her? Anything at all?” He asked them.
Bonnie frowned, “Just that letter in the envelope that you already read. And a little bag of white powder, which fell out of the envelope. I didn’t know what it was, so I put it back in the envelope.”

Hansel perked his ears up, “White powder? Can I see it, please?” He held out his paw to Bonnie expectantly.

She held up a paw, “Just a minute, I’ll need to fetch it.” She scampered down the hall to the bathroom, and disappeared within. They could hear her rummaging around in the room before she came back down the hall with a little plastic package in her paw. She handed it to Hansel.

“Thank you,” he said as he took it from her. He held it up to the hall light, turning it over. Most of it was just white powder, but there were some detectable bits of color scattered throughout the bag. Maybe enough for him to identify what the pills were? “Hum. At first glance, I don’t know what this is. It might be a daily dosage, since there isn’t a lot here, but I don’t know off-paw what the drugs were. I’ll have to have it tested at the Tri-Burrows Medical University tomorrow morning. They have a really good chem lab there.”

“Tomorrow? What about tonight?” Stu wanted to know.

“As long as she isn’t vomiting or having violent seizures, she’ll survive this. It will be really unpleasant tonight, but she will pull through, I think. And once I get this tested, we will have some idea of what to give her for tomorrow night to help her sleep better.” Hansel put his paw on Stu’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze to reassure the worried buck.

Bonnie turned to Hansel, “What about Cliffside? Shouldn’t they have records on her treatment?”

Hansel twitched his nose and responded, “I tried calling them earlier, but I got shunted to voicemail. You can try yourself, if you want to, Bonnie. They should release those records to you, being that you are her parents and next of kin.” Bonnie nodded.

“But I don’t know how accurate those records will be.” Hansel pointed out to them, “According to the news, Cliffside got shut down because they were falsifying patient treatment plans as part of a medical fraud scheme. Drug treatments that they said they were applying to the patients didn’t actually happen for the most part. I warn you that what those records say they gave Judy and what they actually gave her might be two completely different things. I’d be very careful believing anything you might be able to get from them.” Hansel cautioned Bonnie.
She nodded again, “Okay. What about tonight? Might there be any other symptoms that show up that we should be concerned about?”

Hansel thought about it a bit and then replied, “If it was psychotropic drugs that they had her on, like Thorazine, you can expect more of what you are seeing now. She might also be delusional, irrational, or prone to hallucinations like the one she thought she was experiencing on the first day back. If that happens, just treat her like she was sleepwalking – be gentle and try not to startle her. Best thing to do is just keep checking in on her through out the night, and let me know if she starts to do anything else, okay?”

They nodded, and turned back to watch their daughter trash in her bed.

* * * * * *

Judy woke with a gasp, trembling as she sucked in a fevered breath. She’d been having such trouble sleeping the past couple of nights, and the lack of meaningful rest was really starting to eat at her sanity. Her insomnia was caused, she was sure, by these damn nightmares she kept having where nothing made any sense, like this last one that had been filled with flashes of howling beavers, disemboweled foxes eating pawsicles, and a cat playing pickup sticks with mammal bones in the nude. Thank God that was over. She breathed in deep. Wait a minute! As she lay there sweating in her bed, Judy knew that she was forgetting something really important, but she couldn’t figure out for the life of her what it was. She was all done with high school, she had graduated from college, and now she needed to do something else, but what? If she didn’t figure it out soon, Dad would make her work on the farm, and then she’d never get to Zootopia.

Zootopia. Zootopia? ZOOTOPIA! The ZPD! You forgot to fill out the ZPD application, you dumb bunny! How could she forget that! But, but... was there still time to make the deadline? Yes, yes, there was! She could do it online. Where’s the computer?

Judy bolted out of bed and ran down the hall to the family office, clutching the blanket around her as she crashed down in the seat at the family computer. She touched the mouse, and the screen came on. Oh thank you, Dad. He always forgets to log out of the computer when he’s done for the day.

She pulled the Firesocks browser, and tried to type in the address to the ZPD website, but she couldn’t remember it all. Gah! That was too hard, so she tried Zoogle instead. Except that she couldn’t find the letter ‘Z’ to type in for ZPD. I just had it, damn it, I had it to type in the Zoogle address. Did it move? Cause I certainly can’t find it now!
She tried looking at the keyboard with one eye, and then the other. Nope, nothing. What, there on the right side, on the bottom! There it was; it had turned on it’s side. Sneaky little bastard, trying to hide from her in plain sight.

Alright, NPD, here I come! Wait, what? Narcissistic Personality Disorder? No, no, no! I don’t want a psych evaluation, I want the ZPD! She hit the back button and got back to the Zoogle, and there she stopped in a panic. Wait, if she goes to the ZPD website now, will they see her back web history, she wondered? Better to be safe than sorry! She shutdown the Firesocks browser, and opened up the Concert browser instead. Ha! Now they won’t thinks she needs a psych evaluation based on her search history! Whew!

Oh, there that key is, the little devil, it had been hiding by the left shift key! No wonder I couldn’t find it! Having found the ‘Z’ key again, she looked up the ZPD. Employment, employment, employment…. Rookies? Wait, no, it’s the Online Employment Application. There it is, I found it!

K’…

Full name: Judy Hopps L.

Are you a citizen of Zootopia: Uh, no she’s a citizen of Bunny Burrow, so it’s a no there.

Height: Short. She snorted a laugh. Wait, does that include her ears or not? She could never remember.

Weight: Never ask a gal that question! Oops! She had better backspace those snarky answers out, cause Chief Bogo doesn’t like snark. She shouldn’t shoot herself down before she even started, should she?

Type: was definitely prey, that she was sure of, even if some of the other questions were confusing.

Species: Eastern Cotton Tail cause she was gray and really didn’t look like Daddy.

Position applying for: Police Officer Well, duh! She didn’t want to be a ‘correctional guard, cause she would have to work for Swinton, that stupid sow! And that Parking Duty sucked bunny butt, it
really did!

**Describe any special abilities:** She could run fast, and scamper really well. Her hearing was excellent. And she was good at drawing, cause Dr Wiedii says so.

**Was she ever arrested, yada yah, etc, or plead guilty to a crime, so on and so forth:** Nope! She’s always been careful to be a good and pious bunny! She really has, honest!

Although it was a bit of a struggle, she managed to fill out the rest of the online form, and clicked on the send button. Whew. Now she could go back to bed and sleep easier knowing that her life was going the way it was supposed to be.
Wednesday Morning: Field Trip

Chapter Summary

Judy wakes up, takes a shower, and has an excellent breakfast with Hugo. Afterwards, they go clothes shopping - every male's favorite task. Along the way, they struggle with how they are reacting to each other. Afterwards, they go to lunch, and he takes her to visit Fennick.

Chapter Notes

It's a long one, 6837 words in this chapter! And it's filled with bits of Fluff! Lots of Fluff. After the mental torture of the past two chapters, this one was a lot more fun to write. Enjoy!

Oops - One of my proof readers pointed out that she had smelled "happy" to him before, while he was toweling her dry on Monday night. I've added just a little to correct for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Current Day: Wednesday morning in Snowy Hills

Judy woke to the smell of simmering oat porridge and baking apples drifting through the living room. The light streaming in from the large window meant that the sun was already high in the morning sky. She blearily sat up, and stretched. And scratched. And sniffed. Sweet cheese and crackers! She was rank. She needed a shower. Funny, that thought hadn't really occurred to me in three years. She slide off the couch, and wandered toward the source of those wonderful scents, into the kitchen.

“Buenos dias, conejita! How are you?” Hugo inquired of her.

“Hungry… Soooo hungry,” she moaned. She slide up to the stove to stare longingly at the bubbling pots that he stirred with the wooden spoon he held in his paw.

“Ah, well, breakfast should be done in about 10 minutes. If you can’t wait, I do have the apple core left over if you want something to nibble on.”
“Actually, can I take a shower? Please?” She looked at him almost desperately. It had been such a really, really, long time since she had enjoyed a hot shower.

“Certainly, go right ahead, you know where the bathroom is. I put your body wash and other toiletries back there on the sink.” He pointed down the hall at the door, and then turned back to the stove to stir the porridge before it burned.

She walked back to the bathroom and closed the door. She was going to enjoy this, even as her tummy grumbled in counter-protest. She ran the water to her liking, stripped off her pink sweats, and stepped into the shower. Luckily, he wasn’t that much taller than her, just a head or so higher, so the controls and shower head were at an easy height for her frame.

As the hot water coursed over her fur, she twitched and shuddered, almost like she was having an orgasm. *Oooo, crackers, this is sooo good,* she admitted to herself as she rubbed the hot water slowly through her fur. She couldn’t remember the last time she had a shower this good. Wait, when was the last time, anyway? She had been homeless for years, and bathed in the rivers and swamps of the Rain Forest district when she could. But before that? The last time she had showered... had been in Bellwether’s casino suite. Her eyes popped open as she scowled at the wall. *Well, that sure ruined the mood.* Her stomach then chose that moment to declare it’s undying desire to be fed, *thank you so very much.* She hurried along by picking up her body wash, squirted out a daloop, and scrubbed away at the accumulated dirt and grime in her body fur.

She turned off the water, got out, and mostly dried off with one of his towels. She spent a moment trying to puzzle out the controls of the body blower, which was probably set for drying Hugo’s longer feline fur, but she wasn’t sure. She solved that problem by turning the timer to half and switching it on.

*Oh Sweet Cheeses!* She had thought she had only missed the hot showers. She had completely forgotten what a body blower felt like, the air enveloping her, surrounding her, holding her, and finally overwhelming her. When it finished up she was left sobbing on the floor. *Okay, pull it together Judy. It was just a body blower,* she acknowledged, *Yeah... But it’s been so long....*

She wiped off her tears, and shakily tried to stand back up. She could do this, she really could. It really wouldn’t do for Hugo to come find her here like this. It would be so embarrassing if he thought she couldn’t bath or dress herself, like she was an invalid or a little kit.

She reached over to grab Meredith’s duffle bag and fishing through it she pulled out a faded jean jumper, one much like what she would have worn back at the farm when she was a little kit. It stirred up a childhood memory of her dad, Stu, standing in the fields wearing his overalls, leaning on a hoe, while she raced around him, chasing butterflies. It was very happy memory, so unlike the ones she had made more recently.
Daddy ... I miss you... I'm sorry..., she apologized to him in her mind as she folded the jumper in her paws.

She knew she was going to have to talk her parents soon. Hugo would insist on it, in his own quiet and polite way. He would never demand it of her as a condition of her care, but instead just gently suggest that she might actually like it. It was how he operated his class at Cliffside, and she really couldn’t imagine that he’s changed his approach all that much since. But after avoiding them for all that time, she had no idea what to say. The thought of facing them after over a decade of being away while she was lost in the world honestly scared her more than she could could adequately express.

She took a deep breath. That was a problem to be solved later, because now she needed to eat. She stood up, slipped the dress over her head, smoothed out her head fur the best she could, and headed out to the kitchen. She saw him placing dishes on the little table in the kitchen corner, so she waited until he had turned to back around and saw her standing there. She spun a quick little pirouette in front of him, her dress kicking up in a swirl around her, showing off just a little bit. She beamed up at him.

He grinned back at her, “Me gusta mucho ese vestida, señorita encantadora!" (*I really like that dress, young lady!)

She really was doing better already, Hugo thought. True, her fur was a bit clumpy even after the shower and really needed grooming, and she still looked very thin, but there was a sparkle in her eye and a bit of spring in her step now.

Judy had no idea what he just said, but she did like the way he was smiling at her. He gestured to the kitchen nook table, “Hungry?” he asked her. She nodded.

She hopped up to the chair he held out for her, and picked up her spoon as he served her a helping of oat porridge in cashew milk, with a baked apple stuffed with buckwheat in a small plate next to her bowl. She dug in with gusto. Far, far better than garbage and weeds, she thought.

He picked up a tea pot and poured two cups of what looked and smelled like chamomile tea for both of them. Pulling out his own seat, he sat down at his plate and started snacking on what looked like long pieces of fried okra. “What's that?” She point to his food with her spoon.

“Toast grasshoppers, a traditional breakfast from my youth,” he replied.
She held out her paw to him expectantly. He twitched an ear, but gave her one. Rabbits don't usually like animal protein, so he was curious to see what she thought of it. She bit into it, and chewed thoughtfully. “I like them better toasted!” She declared.

“Oh, you've had them before?”

“Yeah, a couple of times. You can't be too picky as to where your next meal is coming from sometimes, and insects can be a good source of protein. Just not roaches. They're icky. Anyway, grasshoppers are tasty enough, but I can't eat too many or my stomach will get upset.”

“Okay,” he said and handed her another one. He watched as she finished chewing on the second grasshopper. “Alright. Well, we are in no hurry, but when you finish your breakfast, we do have some errands to run this morning.”

“Errands? We got groceries already, didn't we?” She was puzzled.

“Well, I was thinking that you might like some clothes that fit more your sense of style? Or are you currently content with pre-teen hand-me-downs from my neighbors?” He cocked an ear at her.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, clothes would be great. Yes, please.” Her ears lifted back up, and she smiled a shy little smile for him.

* * * *

“I asked Meredith where she would shop for a bunny in Tundra Town, and she said that she wouldn’t recommend anything in TT. Instead, she suggested we go down to Acorn Heights instead. Apparently there are a couple of shops there that her kits really like.” Hugo explained as they drove down the Downtown Beltway. “I know exactly zero about Zootopian fashions, so I took her at her word.”

“I think you dress very nicely,” Judy pointed out to him, as she gestured to his black sports coat and slacks ensemble. “Very stylish!”

“This? This is what Leah suggest that I wear for meeting with patients.”
“Who is Leah?” Judy asked, a little bit confused. Is Leah his girlfriend? Was she going to be upset that Judy was staying at his place? That’s just what she would need right now, some jealous feline thinking she was trying to muscle into their territory.

“Leah? Ah, Doctor Leah Muskat is Doctor Emmanuel Muskat’s wife. We three have been partners in our own neuro-medical office for about seven years now. He does the neurosurgery, she handles the psychiatry patients, and I address the more generalized neurology needs. And when he does surgery, I’m usually in there with him. He likes to have a second set of trained eyes looking in when he is working on some mammal’s brain, as brain surgery can be very unforgiving of mistakes. As a result of that, I’ve become something of an expert in dealing with brain trauma, both pre and post op.” Hugo modestly explained.

“Ewwww,” Judy made a face. “I couldn’t ever do surgery, much less on brains.”

“Yes, it’s not for everyone, even other doctors. It can be very trying physically and emotionally for the medical professionals who practice it on daily basis.”

“Yeah… Anyway, back to your sense of fashion. Why all black?” Judy was quite done with discussing that other subject. The less she thought about her brain and what might be wrong with it, the better.

“Ah, Leah says that it is the color of authority and it also helps minimizes my body’s bulk, making me appear both knowledgeable and less threatening at the same time. She is the expert on these things, so I take her at her word.” Hugo offhandedly observed. “Ah! Here is our exit.” He pulled the SUV off the beltway and down the off-ramp.

“Meredith recommends this first shop for daily wear stuff, like jeans or work out clothes. The second shop is more of a consignment shop with a much more eclectic selection.” Hugo explained as they pulled into a little strip mall’s parking lot. His SUV’s center console announced that they have arrived, which was thoroughly redundant considering the large logo painted on the shop window in front of them, “Flopsy Fashions” emblazoned over a stylized rabbit.

_Oh shit, oh shit!_ Judy’s brain went into overdrive, as she realized they were actually here. _I thought we were going to a thrift store! This place looks expensive! I’ve got, what, $6.75 in my shorts? She unbuckled herself, and turned to look on the floor the back seat. Her shorts weren’t there anymore. He had cleaned up his car, of course. She sat back down with an anxious expression on her muzzle.
He noticed her looking back there. “What are you looking for?”

“My shorts. I had my money in my shorts. Did you throw them out?”

“No, the only thing I threw out was the blouse, since it was all ripped up anyway. I washed the jacket and the shorts, and they are hanging up in the laundry room. I didn’t think you needed them. As for the money, I only found a few dollars and some change in the pockets. Was that all you had?”

“Yes! I can’t afford this place!”

“I wouldn’t think so. No, this is Meredith’s treat. I’m covering your room and board as well as your medical needs, they’re covering the other rabbit specific stuff. She’s on day shift at her maternity wing for the rest of the week, so she couldn’t be here, but this was her idea. Their kits all live out of state, so they don’t have any family locally to spoil. Since Dale’s taken a liking to you, Meredith figures he won’t object if they spring for a new wardrobe for you. This is their homecoming gift to you.” Hugo turned back to gesture at the store. “She figures that you need at least a week of the bunny basics: underwear, blouses, pants, and a parka.”

Tears started to well up in Judy’s eyes, and she scrambled out of her seat. Hugo looked back from the store window in time to see a blinded bunny launch herself into his chest. “Oof,” he said as the wind was knocked out him. His arms came up almost reflexively, his paws settling on her hips as she sobbed into his chest. It’s good thing I didn’t put on the tie, he thought, it would be soaking right now.

She whispered, “Thank you, thank you,” in between the sobs.

“Hey, it is actually Meredith and Dale you should thank for this, not me. I’m just the driver.”

“Yeah, maybe. But you’re here now, and I’m still grateful to you too. Thank you.” She reached into his jacket, trying to wrap her arms around his torso so that she could hug him, but she only got about half way. It’s like trying to hug a tree trunk, she thought, amazed at the amount of muscle that he hid under the jacket.

“You are most welcome,” as he slid his wide paws up her back to hug her in return.
It was at that moment that Judy was struck by a particular and fascinating insight. Here she was in his lap, feeling completely safe and well cared for. She was warm, well fed, and relaxed. She didn’t feel trapped or abandoned, so her anxiety was absolutely silent. She was being held by the strong muscular arms and wide paws of a powerful predator, which was one of her absolute favorite fetishes, both professionally and personally. It was just like Monday night, where she had also been sitting astride his lap, except now it was without the delirium of hypothermia. And just like Monday night, she realized that she’s not wearing any underwear under her dress.

*Crap! I forgot to see if Meredith had put any in the bag!* She had been going commando for so long, as a homeless bunny, that she completely forgot to put on any this morning. Underwear was really useless when a mammal was homeless, just one more thing to get filthy, so she habitually went without.

Except now, with her emotional state heightened and the fact that she really liked this male, her brain took all of that into account and kicked her libido into high gear.

*High gear, hell, it’s in turbocharged overdrive,* she realized. *Oh God!*

A colder and more professionally detached part of her brain observed, ***That'll be $200 for the full package. Or is she gonna give him a discount for good behavior?*** Another more enthusiastic thought chimed in with, ***Discount, Hell! It’s been 3 years since she last had that field plowed! Let’s hitch up that tractor!***

*We’re in public, he's my doctor, he’s a lot older than me,* she tried to yell back, *and don’t forget that he’s a cat!* She didn’t do cats!

***Who Cares!*** Her libido responded. *Uh oh…*

* * *

Hugo held her gently as she sobbed into his chest, stroking her back with one paw and holding her head with the other. She needed to get this out, and he was glad that she trusted him enough show him this. She could be so tightly wound, even for a rabbit, that it was amazing her spring didn’t snap more often. She was starting to calm down, so he figure that a minute or two more, and she’ll be ready to go shopping.
As he stroked her, he became aware of a particular scent, rich and earthy, that she was giving off and the meaning of it he wasn't particularly familiar with. While he certainly the nose of a predator, his feline sense of smell had only one-third the sensitivity of that of a canine’s, so his expertise lay more with observing body language and social clues than those transmitted by scent.

* * *

“Judy...Judy? Are you ready to go shopping now?” Hugo bent his head down to look at her.

She just nodded her head, and looked over at her seat, like she was trying figure out how to gracefully slide back over. Trying be efficient, Hugo just popped his door open and lifted her off his lap with both paws, setting her down on the parking lot pavement. She gave him the most particular look when he did that, and then turned to walk to the store doors.

*Mierda,* he thought, *I am going to have to remember stop doing that.* Plainly she appreciates her independence, and doesn’t like being paw-handled by him. He knew that he was starting to have a problem with the way he behaved around Judy, mostly in that he was reverting to a family caretaker role with her. His mixed species family was a very touch orientated family, more so than most of the cats he had observed, and they primarily expressed affection for each other via strong touch and grooming tongue baths.

He had fortunately managed to avoid giving her any tongue baths so far, as he had no idea what a rabbit might think of that. It would be hard to convince her that it wasn’t a sexual act, but rather an affectionate and care giving act that felines like to do with each other.

She had looked so mangy and matted that first night that it took all he had not to gather her into his arms and start grooming her. He didn’t want her to have a heart attack, waking up to a predator like himself holding her down with his paws and running his tongue all over her body. That would not do!
And this morning, when she had come out of the shower? He had so wanted to take her head in both his paws and smooth out her clumpy head fur with his tongue. It was good thing he had his paws full cooking, otherwise they would probably have been flexing. He didn’t want her to think he wanted to eat her.

No, he was going to have to be very careful around her.

He got out and closed the SUV door behind him, locking it and walking into the store after Judy.

* * * * * *

He found her over by the coats section, looking at parkas. He slid up beside he and asked the truly important question.

“What size are you?”

“What?” She looked up at him confusion, and then she glanced back down before looking at the parka sleeve she held in her paw. “Um.. Small to medium adult rabbit. It depends...”

Small to Medium? Well, they weren’t in the right section for that. Maybe she just liked the style of coat she was looking at. He moved down the rack to see if he could find her one like it in her size.

She watched him walk away out of the corner of her eye. She was still a bit mortified by her reaction in the car. Not the fact that she was finding him attractive, not that in the least. She had slept with mammals with far less going for them then he did, both professionally and personally. No, what she had been surprised by was how fast it had came on.

In her experience, the only reason it came on this fast with somebody she barely knew was if there was some form of artificial help, like those horrible aphrodisiac injections that Dawn used to give her. But that awful bitch of a ewe was stone cold dead three years now, so unless something she gave Judy then was still affecting her biology, she shouldn’t be responding like this.

It couldn’t be the IVs she had. That was just been a glucose and vitamin pack, and besides which that had happened yesterday. It must be something that had happened to her in the past three years.
Hugo walked up to her, with three parkas in his paws. “Here, try these on. See which one you like.”

“Um.. none of them, actually.” She shook her head.

“Really? They’re just like the one you been examining since you came it.” Hugo pointed out.

She looked at the sleeve in front of her in confusion, “Oh… Sorry. I haven’t been into a place this nice in a long time. I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all.” she confessed.

“Okay, I didn’t mean to push you. I’ll put them back.”

“I’ll help,” She held out her paw, “here, give me one.”

He handed her a coat, and she reexamined it. Nope, it was hideous, so she hung it back up. She reached past two more, and found one in a rich navy blue which she pulled of the rack to try on. It resembled the coats that ZPD SWAT wore in Tundra Town. Ah, much more my style, she thought, and it fits!

“This one works,” taking it back off and handing it to Hugo.

“Are you sure?” She hadn’t tried on all of the ones on the rack in her size. Wasn’t that what females did when they shopped? Well, at least his mother did it that way. Grandma tended to sew her own clothes, and his last girlfriend never took him clothes shopping, so he had to admit his sample size was pretty small.

She nodded and moved off to the blouses, leaving him to put the rest of the parkas he had pulled out away. He picked up the one she had picked and dwaddled after her at the speed most males used while clothes shopping with their females: slow.

Judy had found her size section in the blouses, and was duly unimpressed with the fashions expressed there. A whole lot of dull sameness, like so much of rabbit culture. How depressing. She had found a good parka, so why did the blouses suck? Maybe because you were supposed to hide in a parka, but stand out with a blouse? I suppose if I had grown up in Bunny Burrow instead of in a mental institution, I’d want to fit in. But the institutional sameness makes them look like a uniform, like a Cliffside uniform, and that just rubs me wrong. She admitted to herself.
Oh, wait, here’s one. She found herself looking a little black half-halter top fringed with lace along the bottom. Ooo that’s pretty, she thought. Will Hugo like it? It gives lots of paw access to the belly….

Oh boy, yeah, her libido still hadn’t died down, not if she was thinking like that. Just like that, a sales-doe chose that perfect moment to pop in and offer to help. Caught flat footed, Judy tried to be polite and shoo her away with the standard “I’m just browsing” comment when the sales-doe’s eyes went wide, and she apologized for interrupting before scampering off.

Judy was confused for a moment before she heard the clink of a clothes hanger behind her. It was just Hugo, hanging up the parka on the blouse rack. She turned to watch the sales-doe beat a hasty retreat while looking back over her shoulder at them. Judy grinned evilly – that’s one way to get rid of pesky sales-mammals. Taking that as a sign to get the halter top, she handed it to him and announced that they were moving over to the teenage section, as this section was all for rabbits her mom’s age. Hugo just twitched an ear at this proclamation.

She guided him over to the teenage section. Luckily, since she was so skinny, she could wear most of the teenage selections, in both the male and female styles. Tee-shirts with teenage heart-throbs, screaming metal mice, or transforming robot trucks, they were all there. Much better! She sort through the tee-shirts, and picked out a selection of them to try on. Handing them to Hugo, she dragged him over to the bottoms section.

Sorting through the jeans and setting aside the ones she liked, she discarded the more fashionable choices. She wasn’t going to have Hugo pay more for the pre-ripped ones. Live on the street for any length of time, and very quickly clothes without holes become the rare commodity. If she wanted them ripped, which was stupid by the way, she would do it herself. So, out of what she had pulled out, what did she really need: maybe three pairs of jeans, and three pairs of shorts? ***She didn’t want to be greedy, cause Meredith’s generosity might run out, and if she had to go back to the street, she only wanted to take what she could carry.***

ARGH! Stupid bunny brain…, Judy yelled back at her anxiety, Stop it, we already agreed we were gonna stay here. ***Until he kicks us out*** DOUBLE ARGH! She beat her head ineffectually against the racks of pants, causing them to sway back and forth on the pole, until a broad paw reached in and caught her forehead.

“Hey, hey. What going on, conejita?” Hugo gently held her head. It didn’t look like a seizure, but he wasn’t taking any chances. She had been acting today like she hadn’t almost died of hypothermia 36 hours ago, and maybe in his efforts make the situation appear as normal as possible he was in turn pushing her too hard. She couldn’t talk to him if she was convulsing.
She stopped, and without moving her head, turned her eye up to look at him, “Doc, if I tell you, promise me that you won’t kick me out? I don’t want to go back to the street, I really don’t.”

“I’m not going to kick you out, I promise. I want you to stay, please. Now, what has you so worked up you would beat your head against pants?” he removed his paw to gesture at the rack.

“Even if it’s really horrible?” She turned to face him, but stared at his feet.

***She couldn’t tell him her secret now, could she, but maybe she could sound him out, see what his promises were really worth?***

_Diosa, she looks just like a wayward bunny kit right now._ He got down on one knee, and lifted her chin with one paw so that she could look him right in the eye. “I remember meeting you when you were serving an indeterminate sentence for first degree murder in a maximum security mental institution, and even then I knew you were worth saving. You still are, as far as I am concerned. So, tell me, what has you beating you head against these poor jeans? Can’t you see they are distressed enough already?” He pointed to the pre-ripped jeans.

She snorted a bit of a laugh at his bad pun, but it and the promise he gave her lifted her spirits just enough for her to take the next step. She took a deep breath, and let her anxiety come spilling out her mouth.

“I have really bad anxiety almost all the time, and sometimes it can even morph into full on panic attacks. And I know I’ve got some abandonment issues, some of it still left over from my years at Cliffside. I’m terrified you’re gonna get tired of me, or find out how bad I am, and kick me out.” She trailed off after managing to babble all that out.

She looked into his eyes, looking for the condemnation she had always feared, but all she saw was a gentle concern for her and a desire to know more. It almost broke her down right then and there.

He pulled her into his arms again and gently squeezed her. “Never.”

“Promise?” She spoke into his shoulder.

“I promise,” he assured her.
He gently pushed her way, but held on to both her shoulders with his paws. He gestured around the shop with his chin, “I want to hear more from you on this, but I don’t think this is place to have this discussion, do you?”

Judy wiped her tears away, “No shit!” *This was what, the third time I’ve cried today? It’s got to be a record. You Bunnies, so emotional…*

He nodded and continued, “I would suggest that we complete our shopping and then discuss this in more detail later this afternoon. Would you be amenable to this course of action?”

He was so formal when he was in doctor mode, except that she had never encountered a doc who hugs you while talking like that, so this was all Hugo, she knew. She nodded, “Okay.”

“Good.” He gestured at the clothes racks, “Is there anything else we need to get from here besides what you have already picked out?”

“Just the pants, and some underwear. I think I can get that myself.” She wasn’t sure she wanted him to help her pick her panties out. There was no telling what puns he might try to use to lighten the mood, nor how her libido, which still hadn’t settled down yet, might take them.

Hugo just nodded. “Alright. I think I shall stand up now. The poor sales staff is probably running around right now thinking I’m eating you.”

***Out!***

**SNERK!** Judy bit down hard on that laugh, and it came out her nose. *Damn it Judy!* She had just warned herself about that, and now it appeared that he didn’t even need to make puns for her libido to go haring off with whatever he just said.

As he stood up he asked her, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. It was just that visual, it, it kinda got away from me.” She grinned up at him.
“Okay, then… I’ll just take the rest of this stuff over to the dressing room.” He walked off.

She grabbed her pant choices, and what looked like some black combat pants to try on as well. As she head over to the fitting room to meet him, she passed by the underwear section. Looking over the selection, she was sorely tempted to try some of the more frilly kind, but eventually just settled on taking a pack of boxer briefs. They could double as sleeping ware as well as yoga workout wear. She promise her libido that she would be back later to look at the nicer stuff, but with a female in tow. Not Hugo. Any mammal but Hugo, for that matter. She’d probably self combust if he was standing next to her while she picked something sexy out.

*Good Gravy, it’s like I’m fifteen again. What the Hell? Why was she so reserved around him?*

* * * * *

After they had paid for her selections at Flopsys Fashions and left, they then stopped over at the other store - Cottontail Consignments. True to Meredith’s description, it was rather more eclectic in it’s selection. Judy did find a wonderful old trench coat that was covered in patches that had been stitched on by paw. Some mammal had spent a lot of time and love on that coat, and Judy just had to honor that. They also offered brand new heavy duty combat spats for rabbits, and she got a black pair to help protect her feet.

As they were checking out, she asked Hugo if she could get one last thing. He looked at where she pointed, and nodded. It was a little thing, really, almost ornamental, but it would complete her look, she knew.

* * * * *

For lunch, he drove them over to an all-you-can eat salad bar and told her to eat her fill. Which she did, setting three plates in front of herself to just his one, and they munched away in silence. She only managed 2 and half plates, but who’s counting, she triumphantly crowed to herself. As he got up to get coffee for them, she reflected on how much her life had changed in just two days. A week ago, she was eating spoiled melons out of dumpsters behind neighborhood grocery stores and chasing roaches out of her bedding. Damn it, she was getting introspective again. Next would come the waterworks, as Dad liked to call them.

Clink. Hugo set the coffee down in front of her, and sat down in his chair. He pulled out his phone, scowled at the screen, and then set it down on the table. He picked up his coffee, and blew on it to cool it. Sensing the mood had just gotten serious, she mirrored his actions.
Pointing to his phone, “I just got a text from my partner Emmanuel, who would like me to come in and consult on a trauma case he just worked on. Seems he is treating a male goat who decided to have an argument with a concrete column, and the column won the debate, decisively.”

“Okay?” She acknowledged this, as goats could be great company when they were peaceful, but get them riled up and they would charge anything that they saw as a threat.

“Anyway, Emmanuel has just finished putting a shunt in the goats skull, and he would like me to come in to take a second look. He says they found something weird, and they don’t understand what it means.”

“You have to go in, don’t you?” Judy gathered that to be what he really meant.

“Yes, and there is a complication.” He pointed at her.

“Me?” What was wrong with her that he couldn’t have her with him? Wait, he was going to a hospital, right? She didn’t want to go to a hospital!

“Not you, conijta, it’s your pneumonia that is at issue. This is a critical trauma ward I have to go to, and they guard jealously against infections, especially for brain trauma patients. If you go with me, you would have to either stay in the SUV or in the emergency waiting room. I don’t image either would appeal to you, not after what you told me in the shop.”

“Not really, no.” She grabbed an ear and nervously began to tug on it.

“And I don’t have enough time to run you all the way home and back. So I would like to offer an alternative, if you will, one that may or may not appeal to you.”

“I’m listening.” She stopped tugging on her ear.

“After Swinton kicked me out of Cliffside, my boss at the ZMHW office sent me over to the Youth Diversions Center to help a new youth counselor set up his outreach program for homeless youth. That program is still running strong after ten years. He’s been a long time friend of mine as a result, I trust him, and I would hope that you would be able to trust him in turn. He goes by the name of...
Counselor Zerda, Fe….”

She excitedly interrupted him, “Fennick? Finnick!”, almost dropping her coffee on her lap in the process.

“Yes, that’s his name, Fennick Zerda. I trust you have heard of him?”

“Yeaah… I’ve heard of him, out on the streets. I hear his bark is worse than his bite!” She almost giggled that last bit out.

“Yes, that sounds exactly like Fennick. Would you be willing to stay with him while I visit with my partner and we examine our argumentative goat?”

Turning serious, Judy pondered his request. She had avoided almost everybody in her former life, perhaps out a sense that she was protecting them, but now, three years after Dawn Bellwether’s death, she had no idea who she was protecting: them or her? It’s not like Fennick would even know who she was before hand. Nobody knew, not her parents, not Hugo, not even Nick. Oh, Nick. It would finally allow her to ask somebody about Nick, somebody who knew him well, and wouldn’t think the request strange coming from an ordinary street rabbit. Nobody would ever understand why she still thought of him as ‘her fox’, but she could still love him, even if she could never be with him again. Yeah, she could visit with Fennick. But not dressed like this.

“Okay, but I’ll have to change first.”

“Um, okay, may I ask why?” Hugo was confused. He thought she looked very cute in that dress.

“I got no street cred in this dress! If I’m gonna meet Fennick Zerda, I gotta have street cred! Otherwise he won’t take me seriously!” She waggled a claw at him, and chugged down the last of her coffee.

Hugo could only stare at the rabbit before him. Had she been a gang member before, before she started living on the street? Had he missed something? But before he could answer those thoughts, or even finish his own coffee, she had bounded from the table.

“Come on! Let’s go!” She urged his aging carcass away from his comfortable chair and pointed him toward the door.
Okay, this was new. He had be sure that she would have raised quite a few more objections to this 
diversionary trip, but if she was this eager to go he wasn’t going to stop her. *If she wants to meet 
Fennick, than Fennick she can meet!*

* * * * * *

After arriving at the Youth Center, she had kicked him out of the SUV while she changed. Why, he 
didn’t understand; he had already seen her completely naked twice. He couldn’t imagine that she 
had changed all that much in just two days. But when he tried to point this out to her, she just 
shrieked at him. Something about ‘ruining her mojo’, so he just shut the door behind him.

He was a gifted neurologist, and could handily diagnosis and treat a mammal’s brain that was 
malfunctioning due to sever trauma. What he couldn’t understand was WHY a female’s brain 
would work the way it did, especially when he was trying to reason with them.

He had tried asking his Abuela why this was at some point, but she had been no help at all. She 
just cackled until she fell over. It was the last time he ever asked for her help with females.

The door behind opened, and Judy stepped out onto the parking lot pavement. She shoved her paws 
in her pants pocket and asked him, “What do you think?”

He stopped for a moment to marvel at the transformation from sunny farm rabbit to dark street 
rabbit. *Okay, he admitted to himself, this outfit does look like it belongs on the street. Even more 
so, it looked like it belongs on her.*

“It suits you.” She had put on the halter top along with the combat pants, combat spats, and the 
trench coat. She completed the look by adding the military Id tag choker. It made her look care 
worn, world weary, and wise all at the same time. It most definitely suited her.

She beamed at him, and stepping up she socked him in the arm, “Told ya!”

“Was that a punch?” He asked her.

“Was a punch? I just hit you as hard as I could!” She was indignant! How dare he mock her efforts!
“Oh? Okay, I guess so.” He carefully allowed.

“What! You guess?” She wound up, and without thinking it completely through, she punched him in the stomach. Owwwwww… Did she just break her paw? It was like punching a rock.

“Do I need to take you to the hospital now?” He mildly asked her.

“Noooooo. I’m fine!” Biting her words through clenched teeth, she wiggled her paw. Not broken, just very sore. Okay, Judy, don’t do that again! “Let’s just go meet Fennick, okay?”

“Yes, let’s.” Hugo grinned down at the feisty rabbit.

Chapter End Notes

Judy’s after lunch outfit is inspired by a goth-new wave illustration of Judy Hopps done by Shiromiya posted on Twitter 08/30/18 – I feel it speaks well to the darkness that lives in Judy’s soul.

It has also been pointed out that Hugo was a canceled character. Bryon Howard later morphed him into Clawhauser. Link To Bryon Howard's Twitter With a Picture of Hugo
Flashback: Setting the Stage

Chapter Summary

Judy spend the morning helping her mother clean the house. Afterwards, Judy, Beth, and Cotton all hike to the Carrot Days festival. There Judy stands up for herself, hears a story about Gideon, and beats up some bullies. Along the way she makes a mistake that will haunt her for the rest of her life. Later, finding herself at odds with her father and mother, she decides to leave. Her sister Beth tries to get her to stay, but their encounter with each other only leads to pain and recrimination. After Judy leaves Bunny Burrow, Bonnie asks the rest of the family what they intend to do.

Chapter Notes

I’ve got some ret-con issues with my characters ages, and I’ve JUST realized this. So for this AU vs the ZOU (Zootopia Original Universe), let’s settle some age issues:

* Cotton is nine in this AU, oldest kit of Judy’s oldest brother, but in the ZOU she would have been about one vs Judy’s age of eighteen. As a result she’s Manny’s oldest kit.
* Gideon Gray is 21, three years older than Judy in this AU, but in the ZOU they appear to be the same age, just different sizes.

This puppy is my longest one yet - 8,007 words! I keep saying those words like this was some kind of surprise or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flashback: 10 Years earlier In Bunny Burrow

It was a quiet mid-morning in the Hopps family farm house, a week after Judy’s return to the fold. Rain was forecast for the next day, so the kits were all out with their hoes helping Stu deal with the budding weeds before the dry fields were turned into mud flats. Bonnie was finishing up drying the last few dishes left over from breakfast when she heard a slight sound behind her; a slow shuffle coming down the hallway. Ah, Judy is finally up, she thought as she smiled to herself.

She had been afraid a few days ago that they might have to hospitalize their poor daughter, but Doc Hase had managed to chart out a course of medications to help her, based in part on the bag of powder included with her release papers, some help from his fellow doctors at the Tri-Burrows Medical University, and no small bit of luck.
He had also prescribed plenty of rest for Judy, not to push her too much, and eventually she should recover physically. Mentally and emotionally, though, he wasn’t yet ready to hazard a guess as to that timeline to that recovery. It was left to her parents to chart that course.

The current problem lay in the two different paths her parents were inclined to take in dealing with their daughter. Stu was still having trouble dealing with the fact she was back after nine years of being away, and his solution was to pretend that it never happened. This solution, being that it was in truth actually no solution, lead to a certain amount of friction between Judy and her father. Judy couldn’t forget her years at Cliffside that easily and she absolutely wasn’t nine anymore. Stu’s solution of giving her a hoe and ordering her outside with the rest of the kits to do chores by the third day, all the while suffering psychotropic drug withdrawal, had not gone over well with her. Bonnie sighed. Her husband meant well, believing that hard work would distract Judy from her troubles, but his approach left a bit to be desired.

Bonnie chose instead to take a different route. The house was her domain, and as long as Judy stayed inside, she was Bonnie’s responsibility, not Stu’s. She had talked at length with Doc Hase, and she decided that a slow and steady reintroduction to normal life was in order for Judy. He believed that Judy’s life at Cliffside would been very structured and regimented by the staff, with very little room for independent thought or true dynamic social interaction, so expecting her to think for herself without any prior experience simply wasn’t going to work.

Bonnie worked on providing her daughter that structure, and at the same time allowing her the time she needed to recover mentally and physically. She also knew that Judy also wasn’t a kit anymore; she was a young doe who was trying to find her place in a world that had been turned on it’s side with very little explanation or warning.

“Morning, mom.” Judy stood in the kitchen doorway, rubbing her forehead. Her headache was tolerable this morning, she decided. She blearily looked up at her mother’s back and asked, “Where is everyone?”

“They’re outside hoeing before the rains come tomorrow,” Bonnie turned her head to glance at her daughter and responded in a matter-of-fact tone before offering, “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Yes, please.” Bonnie just pointed head of the table where a plate and cup still sat, and Judy sat down in the indicated chair. Bonnie reached into the sink beside her, and pulled out a handful of carrot-tops left over from breakfast, and put them on the plate in front of Judy. Her other kits would have turned their noses up at the bitter greens, but Judy happily enjoyed munching on them, with the little orange and purple bits of the roots at the end a pleasant treat.

Bonnie had been dismayed at what Judy had described as a typical breakfast at Cliffside, being regularly fed there what she would considered to be garbage scraps fit only for the compost pile.
But when she had tried giving her daughter a hearty Bunny Burrow breakfast on the second day back, Judy had barely been able to hold it down before excusing herself to run to the bathroom and empty her protesting stomach. Since that time, Bonnie had been sure to keep the left over scraps from the breakfast prep for Judy when she eventually woke up.

Bonnie sat down next to her daughter with a cup of tea, and silent sat sipping it while Judy finished her leftover greens. “I have some chores to do today before the Carrot Days Festival this afternoon, including laundry and mopping the halls. Would you like to help me?”

“Yes, please,” Judy nodded, pleased to be offered something to do out of the sunlight. She was finding she was prone to migraines in the bright Bunny Burrow sunlight after years spent indoors at Cliffside, so a chance to work inside with her mother was wonderful.

The mother and daughter spend the rest of the morning sweeping and mopping the extensive hallways in the Hopps family warren in comparative silence. Judy didn’t have the cognition capacity in the morning for extensive dialog, usually because she was waiting for her post sleep headache to wear off, so her mother left her be during that time. But around lunch time, Bonnie could tell Judy was feeling better by the questions she started to ask about family and friends. Bonnie hoped that would be the case today as well, because today was going to be a bit different. The Carrot-Day festival was today, and since it was supposed to rain tomorrow, the clouds should roll in in the afternoon and cut down the bright sunshine that Judy had trouble dealing with. Today would be a test of Judy’s ability to handle socializing in a public surrounding while in the care and company of family, while at the same time giving her a quick escape route back home to safety should she become overwhelmed, particularly since she had an assigned lifeguard in the form of her younger sister.

Judy had bonded well with her fourteen year old sister Beth, who was patient beyond her years in dealing with a sister who was still have trouble coping emotionally with the stress of the daily life that Beth took for granted. Sometimes it was Judy who played the sage to a younger sister’s impulses, and other times it was Beth who took that role, trading back and forth as needed. Usually accompanying them on their daily afternoon adventures, usually with some poor captured reptile in her little paws, was their niece Cotton, who had decided that Judy was now “Cool!” and therefore worthy of her attentions.

Later, after their chores were done, Beth and Cotton had stopped by the house to collect Judy for this afternoon’s adventure. Together, the three female Hopps set off down the path by the river leading to the Bunny Burrow Fairgrounds. Cotton spent most of the time and a large portion of her energy trying to capture dragonflies with her bare paws, and mostly coming away frustrated, which amused Judy to no end, perhaps because she too had been that way at nine. Beth breathed a prayer of thanks for the presence of her little cousin, because her antics successfully distracted Judy from her usually maudlin moods as they approached the fairgrounds.
“AUNT JUDY,” Cotton belted out her name from the end of the path, “THEY’VE GOT A GIANT WHEEL!” She came careening down the path to slam into her older aunt, “Can we ride it, please!!!!???” she begged without a shred of dignity or poise.

“Maybe later, after dinner.” Beth interjected, “We’ve got to go help set up the Hopps Farm Booth, and then we can play.” She led her two female family members down the rows to find the booth.

As Judy walked behind her sister, she became aware of whispering voices all around her. Her ears began swiveling back and forth, as she sought to identify what was being said. The snippets she overheard had began innocently enough, but soon enough the meanings had became far uglier.

...is that her? ...Oh My God! ...when did she get out? ...what are the Hopps’ thinking, bringing her here? ...hid the kits! ...it’s the Bunny Burrow Predator Killer!

The last one stopped her in her tracks. Is that what they truly think of her, here? While she admitted to herself that on the surface that it was true, she had never actually considered that she would singled out socially, to become the latest gossip buzzword. It certainly was never her plan to be shipped home so precipitously. But the gossip about her was inevitable, as rabbit society was built on the constraints of conformity, and any deviancy was to be excised before it threatened the strength and unity of the community.

Not actively, no, that’s not how rabbits work. It would begin with the whispers, the innuendo, the gossip, rude stares, and eventually, social shunning. In many ways rabbit society was similar to certain very archaic religious orders that depended on a rigidly set structure of rules to maintain a narrowly defined social order.

And her parents had just shoved her into this. No... That’s not fair. This isn’t their fault. This was hers. She had chosen this path, and in doing so she had chosen the consequences. Just as she had faced justice, face forward and head on, so would she face the condemnation of her social order for the sin of doing something they couldn’t comprehend and that in turn she could never adequately explain.

She lifted her head, and turned to face her accusers, her slanderers, her gossipers, daring them to make eye contact with her. None could, for that too was a constraint of their social order. They were not a society that met their problems head on. They were prey. They hid. And when challenged, they ran. They only fought when cornered, and only as a means to escape. To face down that which threatened them, armed only with the courage of their conviction, was not a social expression that most rabbits could understood. They understood only fear, and cowering before running and hiding.
They didn’t understand that courage was standing your ground against all dangers even when you were afraid. Especially when you were afraid. She turned in a slow circle, making eye contact with every rabbit who looked her way. They all turned away, as the whispers died, turning away and hiding from the intensity of her gaze. All save one.

Her mother. She stood like a rock, strong and tall against the flow of the river, other rabbits flowing down the path around her, none daring to stay long enough to block the gaze of pride she held for her wayward daughter, lest they be caught in between the set of those eyes.

_She knew, Judy realized. She knew I could do this. This wasn’t a test. This was a declaration! I am no Victim! I am the Victor! I survived the Hell that was Cliffside – face me if you dare!_

She smiled and holding her head and ears high, she strode to stand before her mother. “Hello, Mother.”

“Hello, Judy. I see you have arrived.” Bonnie looked her shorter daughter up and down, a brief ironic smile playing across her features.

“I have.” Judy stood with her mother, like they were the only two mammals upon an empty field. Nothing else mattered to her, nothing but that look in Bonnie’s eyes.

“Good!” She turned to Beth, “Beth, dear, Gideon needs some help setting up his pie racks. Could you please lend him a paw?” She inquired of her daughter.

“I’ll help, I’ll help!” Cotton waved her paw in the air, immediately volunteering herself. Beth just lifted her eyes heavenward, but she held out her paw for Cotton anyway. She headed back behind the Hopps’ booth, a bouncing Cotton at her side.

“Gideon, huh! When did this happen?” Judy twitched an ear at her sisters’ departing backs.

“Oh, well, it should be your father’s tale to tell, but I’m afraid he’s wimped out. He’s probably hiding behind the booth, trying to avoid your wrath.”

“Gah! That was 4 days ago, and I’ve gotten better since then. It’s just what did he honestly expect
to happen if he marched into my room at the crack of dawn, yanked off my covers, and ordered me out into the fields? I haven’t hoed a field in nine years! He deserved to get screamed at for that.”

“I know, dear, I know.” Bonnie reached down to grab Judy’s paw, and gripped with both of hers. “He just doesn’t know how to relate, so he’s regressing. Falling back on what he knows. He really doesn’t understand what happened to you.” She soothed her daughter’s indignation.

Judy just grunted, “Humph… Well, if he had ever visited me at Cliffside, maybe he would know, instead ordering me around half the time and the other half avoiding me like the coward that he is.” She wildly gestured with her other paw.

Bonnie gazed down at her agitated daughter, concern and sadness creeping back into her face. The irony of this situation was that father and daughter hadn’t figured out how to communicate even before she had been sent away. Now they completely lacked the tools to do so.

Maybe if she told her daughter Gideon’s story, Judy might soften her stance towards her father a bit. Bonnie waited a moment for Judy to finish her rant and look back at her before starting.

“Well, Gideon came to us about a year ago. He had just finished up his culinary school in Zootopia, earning an A.A. as a pastry chef, and he was trying to find a job in Bunny Burrow. His family is all here, so he wants to stay here, but he was having difficulty since nobody really wanted to hire a predator for what was traditionally a herbivore’s job.”

“Did he come to you for a job?” Judy was confused. The Hopps didn’t own any bakeries or restaurants, did they?

“Oh, no. No, dear heart, he came to apologize to us. You see, he felt awful about the way he was as a kit, and about how he bullied and hit you when you were nine. He had convinced himself, over the years he had to stew on it, that you murdered Mr Latrans because of what he had done to you.”

“Oh, Mom, no. I’m sorry, no. It’s not his fault!” Her paws flew to her lips as Judy shook her vigorously.

“I know that, dear. So does your father. We might not completely understand why you killed Mr Latrans, but we do know you. Stu just pointed out to Gideon that you are a rabbit given to direct thoughts and direct actions. If you had been mad at Gideon, and wanted to kill him, you would have. It was as simple as that.”
“I’m sorry, Mom, that I can’t really give you a better answer. I shot Carl because I saw him as a threat to me and our family, and that’s what made sense to me at the time.” There was far more to the story, but Judy knew her mother could never understand or believe that part, about the Nighthowlers and a black magic ritual leading to global genocide. Carl had to die, and her paw had been the only one that could bring that about.

“I know.” Bonnie patted Judy’s paw, “Anyway, Stu and I accepted his apology, not because we found him at fault, but because he needed to say it. He got up to leave, and as we were walking him to the door, Stu started to ask him about his plans, now that he had graduated. Imagine that, your father engaging in small talk with a large fox predator, inside his own warren. Instead of trying to shoo him out the door like you would expect, your father was trying to reach out to Gideon. It was precious to watch, so I hung back and didn’t interfere.” Bonnie smiled in memory, “Our pastor had been preaching at the time about need, about how when someone comes to your door with unspoken need that only you could answer, that you should know that it was the Creator that had shown them that door, and it was up to you to open it or not. It was your choice to help or not. And your father chose to help.”

“Dad? I thought he hated predators.”

“Hate? No, never hate. Fear them, yes, but never hate. Your father took Gideon’s apology, and his unspoken need for acceptance, and offered him a chance. Your Aunt Bettie needed a part time delivery driver for her Bagels and Breads business, and somebody tall who could help her with the maintenance on her ovens. It wasn’t precisely a chef’s job, but it was a foot in the door. Stu helped set them up together. She was hesitant at first, but after giving Gideon a trial run, she was impressed with his work ethic, and after a couple of months she had him baking pastries for her business as well. Her current agreement with him is that he can bake his pies before the bakery opens, and deliver them in the afternoon when his shift is done. That’s how you came to meet him earlier this week, while he was out on his delivery rounds.”

“That so neat, mom! Imagine Dad, getting a predator a job. Who would have thought of it?” Judy smiled at the thought of her Dad being so brave and kind.

Bonnie nodded, “Gideon puts in a lot of hours, but they are hours filled with the love of what he does and it shows, especially to your father. Stu goes in often to visit him at work, and the two of them have been talking with your older brother about expanding the pie baking business, making it a joint business with the Hopps’ berry farms and Manny’s fruit orchards.”

“Oh, wow!” Judy couldn’t believe that her father could be that flexible, even to the point of considering a partnership with a fox. Good for him! Maybe she had miss judged him?

Bonnie watched the play of emotions across her daughter’s face, the sense of joy and wonder
chasing across her features. *Good, it’s a start.*

* * *

“**AIIIIEEEEE!**” A kit’s scream of pain echoed across the grounds, and every adult rabbit in earshot came to an immediate halt, their ears locking in on the sound.

“**COTTON!**” Bonnie yelled, recognizing that voice. Judy was already moving, down on all fours, sprinting around the Hopps’ stand towards the sound of the scream. It came from Gideon’s deliver van. On the ground beside it was Cotton, her arms raised to protect herself as a larger rabbit pulled back his fist to deliver another punch. Behind him were two more rabbits, teenage bucks by the looks of it, their arms filled with stolen pies, and stupid grins on their muzzles. They were slow, too slow to realize the danger that they were in. Judy wasn’t about to point out their mistake to them. *Vermin… NO ONE threatened her family!*

The buck standing over Cotton turned his head barely in time to catch Judy running full tilt at him. But instead of tackling him, she planted both fore paws in the dirt before her as a pivot and swung her hips around in an arc towards him. Kicking out with both rear legs, she delivered a thunderous blow to his rib cage, knocking him back into his fellow thieves, causing them and their ill gotten pies to go flying backwards.

She landed over Cotton, covering her protectively while other adults came running. Looking down, she assessed Cotton’s injuries. It looked like she had taken a punch to the face, cutting her cheek, and her eye was beginning to swell shut. It would probably turn into a black eye, and she might even need stitches for the cut, but knowing Cotton as Judy did, she knew that wouldn’t even slow her niece down. She’d wear the scar with pride. Since Cotton wasn’t in danger, and the adults would soon be here to take care of her, Judy turned her stony gaze to the other two bucks picking themselves up.

The one she had hit was out for the count, holding onto his side and wheezing. He might complain later that she fought dirty, but she had no compassion for a buck who would hit a kit. Cliffside had taught her far dirtier ways to fight, so he should count his blessings she only cracked his ribs. She could have kicked him in the head.

But the other two, they were still a danger to her family and she couldn’t let that stand. They stood up and caught sight of her furious face, rage mounting by the moment, and they choose to run rather than stand and face a rabbit that they knew killed to protect her own. They bolted, down on all fours, trusting their greater stride and strength would win out against the smaller female.
“What are you doing to my pies! Y’all stop that!” Gideon yelled as he came running up being the wave of rabbits closing in.

Gideon was here? He could protect his pies. She was going after those bucks, and she was going to teach them the meaning of pain. She took off after them and as she did she could hear Beth yelling her name.

* * *

They were being hunted. There was no other word for what was happening, thought the two bucks as they charged through the Carrot-Days fairgrounds trying to escape an enraged Judy. But it was true. Every turn they made, she cut faster and gained ground on them, and eventually they knew she would catch them. They couldn’t even stop and gang up on her to buy themselves time to escape, because behind her they could see a second white doe, smaller but just as fast, gaining on them as well. If they stopped, they knew they would face the Bunny Burrow Predator Killer and her teenage sidekick. It was looking grim for them.

No, they would have to cut through the barns, and try to loose the does in the parked cars out the fields.

They didn’t make it.

Judy saw them try to cut between the barns. Idiots! They would have been better off just giving themselves up to the Sheriff. He would have just sent them off to juvie. But Judy? Not her! When she caught them, she was going to break bones. Threaten her niece, will they! Stand over her laughing while another buck punched her? Oh, no, Judy could not let such an insult stand! They were going down and going down hard.

She cut in through the barn, knowing that it should have a door open on the side that she could use as a shortcut. She was right, as she came charging through the door and body slammed them both up against the other barn. They tried to right themselves so they could turn and fight the smaller doe, but they were exhausted. They had just tried to outrun Cliffside’s resident escape artist. Judy stood up and was ready to fight long before they were, prepared by years of fighting the Cliffside orderlies, mammals far larger and meaner than these two idiots.

But before Judy could kick both of them repeatedly in their laughing faces, Beth came up behind her gasping out her name, “Judy, stop!” Judy turned, and distracted for a spit second by her winded sister, she took her eyes off the bucks. They used that moment to their advantage, one kicking dirt and dust into Judy’s face, while the other took a small metal object from his back pocket and hurl
it with all his might at her head.

Momentarily blinded by the dust, her ears turned to pick up the sound of the strange object as it sped through the air causing her her head to turn as well, and she caught the object square between her eyes with a muted thunk.

“OWW!” She sat back and held her forehead and muzzle in pain. She tried to shake it off and get her eyes to focus, but between the dust and the migraine level pain in her face, she couldn’t concentrate.

“Judy, everybody saw who they are, and they’re covered in berry juice anyway. They can’t hide. It’s okay, you don’t have to chase them. The deputies will find them.” Even as she panted and tried to get her breath back, Beth tried to calm her older sister down. She lay in the dirt on her back, and patted her older sister’s leg, “It’s okay. Cotton’s okay, you’re okay, and I’m wiped out. Damn it, sis, you’re hard to keep up with.” Beth pointed out.

Judy just grimaced in pain, pinching the bridge of her muzzle, as she nodded. Yeah, she was. Nine years of practicing escape tactics at a mental asylum, and years of police evasion training in another life, yeah, she knew how to run. What she didn’t know was what she was going to do with all the rage that she was feeling. It was all bottled up inside of her, and something like this, just three juvie delinquents being thieves and jerks, had caused her to go almost savage with rage. She was going have to think about this. Maybe everybody else in Bunny Burrow was right, and she didn’t belong her after all.

But as she looked back down at her sister, as Beth patted her leg, Judy knew that she couldn’t just betray Beth or Cotton’s trust by running away. She had to stay and try to work this out.

“Okay,” she told her sister. She stood up, and helped Beth stand as well. Beth stood with her hands on her knees, still trying catch her breath while Judy stretched and blinked. The pain was finally starting to fade into a dull throb. Maybe, if she was lucky, she’d end up with a matching shiner to compliment Cotton’s. Judy knew that her niece would like that.

Beth looked down at their feed, and saw a curved metal square laying in the dirt. She picked up, and held it out to Judy, “What’s this?” It sloshed with a hollow, tinny sound.

Judy took it from her grasp, “It’s a hip flask. That must be what they threw at me.” She shook it, and it gurgled. Opening the cap, she took a sniff. Odd, the scent of it reminded her of something else, something familiar, tickling at the back of her brain. Trying to figure that out, she sipped a mouthful and sloshed it around a couple of times, carefully considering the tastes and feel of the liquid when it hit her.
**OH GOD - THE BURNING!** She spit out her mouthful on to the ground, and wiped her muzzle with the back of her paw. “Oh, that’s awful!”

“What is it?” Beth scrunched her brows together as she tried to smell.

“Don’t! It’s moonshine. Really bad home brewed moonshine. Nasty shit.” Judy took the flask, and upended it over the dirt, draining out the rest of the fluid. “Manny used to brew something like this when I was a kit, and he called it ‘Liquid Courage’ back then. I swallowed a mouth-full when I was a kit on a dare during one of my cousins birthday parties, and God did it make me sick.” She turned and looked down the alley way that the bucks had disappeared down, “No wonder those idiots were being stupid, if they were drunk on this stuff.” She tossed the flask back onto the puddle melting into the dirt. She certainly didn’t want to keep it, but it never occurred to her to give it to the deputies.

She turned back to Beth, “Come on, let’s go check up on Cotton. She’s probably already embellishing the story. We need to make sure the facts get told correctly.” They walked back down the alley, back towards the fair, leaving the flask behind in the mud, it’s poisonous contents leaching into the dirt.

* * *

All the lessons that Judy had learned this afternoon had just been undone by a simple mouthful of drink that she should never have taken. A mouthful of a substance poorly named ‘Liquid Courage’. For it wasn’t that, not even to the bucks that deceived themselves into brewing and consuming it. Poorly brewed, for they had little understanding of the poisons that they added in their masculine potion of strength: ethanol, death’s cap, wormwood, ergot, and most insidious of all, the dried flower petals of an innocent little plant called *Midnicampum holicithias*.

Night-howler.

Judy had thought herself safe from any toxic effects by spiting the noxious brew out, but she failed to understand that her body was already under assault the moment the liquid had come into contact with the soft tissues of her mouth, clinging and coating the surfaces, remaining bonded even after she had spit the rest out. What remained wasn’t enough to kill her, that was true. Not even enough to drive her truly mad, not as she understood madness as no other rabbit in Bunny Burrow could.

But what was left was enough. Enough remained to work it’s dark, ancient, and evil magic upon
her soul and her psyche, worming it’s way into her mind. While she had faced this evil before and won and would face it again in her future, each time she had, it in turn had exacted a terrible price upon her being, just as it did now, for in what should be the moment of her greatest triumph, she had already lost the battle.

For Night-howler had claimed her once more.

* * * * * *

A week later, Judy sat alone in the dark of night, sobbing her heart out. She tried, oh dear God, she tried, but it was so hard. She still couldn’t cope with being home. She had dreamed for 9 years of coming home, coming home to escape the nightmare of asylum life, only to discover that coming home was the beginning of the true nightmare. At least at Cliffside she had drugs to numb the pain. But here, at home, she had nothing to hold on to. Everything grated against her, like steel on a live nerve.

She still fought every day with her father. He couldn’t accept that she had grown up without him, and she couldn’t accept that he just wanted his kit back. Nor had she forgiven him for abandoning her at Cliffside, while he still refused to talk to her about that time. She didn’t understand what he was afraid of. Neither of them could accept the other, and their fights were leading to further tension in the household.

If the tension rose to the point that rest of the household couldn’t function, Bonnie would step in and put her foot down. Rabbit families were matrilineal, ruled by the oldest female, and they decided who stayed in the family and who had to go. While Judy loathed the thought of loosing her mother as her principle ally, Bonnie would never take Judy’s side in any argument with her father. Stu was her husband, and he was here to stay, as this was his farm and his family. Judy was just the kit who grew up and didn’t belong anymore.

She had to leave before Bonnie kicked her out. If it came to that, she would be exiled from the Hopps Warren and never be allowed to return. No rabbit family in Bunny Burrow would take her in, not even as an adopted bride. Not that any buck in his right mind would take a murderous ex-mental patient with rage issues. What kind of mother would she make? Could she even trust herself with kits?

She had tried to find a job outside of the farm, one that would get her father off her back, and make her mother feel like she was contributing, but no one would hire her. She had applied at a dozen places, but nobody returned her messages. She even went to two of the shops that had ‘Now Hiring’ signs in the windows only to be told that they weren’t actually hiring. What they meant was that they weren’t hiring her.
No, she had to leave, before she had no other choice. Go some place where no one knew her name; she accepted that. That wasn’t what was making her sob tonight, alone in the dark of a strange bedroom not her own. It was the letter she was holding in her paw. The final straw that broke her back and crushed what dreams she had left. What she didn’t understand was how she had gotten it.

She had gotten it in the mail, that was obvious to even her, but she couldn’t recall actually applying for the position. But by looking at the post-date, and the dates at the top of the letter, she worked out that it had to have been on the second or third day she had been back, when she had been in the height of her drug withdrawal delirium. Somehow, she must have found their website, and successfully filled out their form. That would have been ordinarily been a cause for celebration, except that she had lied in the process of doing it.

The mammals that sent her the letter acknowledging her request would have held that to be the far greater sin, more so than all the sins of her past combined. Because for them, once you accepted their terms and they accepted you, it was your integrity that mattered most. Not your strength, not your speed, not your wit or brilliance or dogged determination. No, it was integrity that was their benchmark. With out that, you were nothing in their eyes.

She could image the pudgy cheetah sitting at his terminal, filling out the form, and clicking on which rejection was to be included in the letter that he got to send out on a regularly depressing basis. He hated doing that, telling somebody that they weren’t worthy of the same organization that had taken him in, but it was his duty, even as that duty tore his heart in two.

Just as he had, when he created the letter she held in her paw. And what had it cost him, seeing the reason for the rejection? Sending a notice to a felon that they couldn’t be trusted to uphold the very laws that they had run afoul of.

That hurt. But it was sufficiently distant that it didn’t break her down. What reduced her to tears was the written note that graced the back of the form letter. She could just imagining the big black water buffalo staring at the sheet, forming his reply in his mind before committing to it, and then taking the time to actually write it out.

Miss Hopps,

It is with great reluctance that I write to you, but I must be honest. I am afraid there can be no place for you here. Not because of what you did so many years ago, for no matter how heinous your crime, you have served you time, and have been legally released. You have paid your debt, in time, blood, and all honor, as far as I am concerned.
It is about honesty that I write. Had you been honest with me, I too would have been honest with you. While there might not have been a place here under my auspices for you, a place would have been found where you could serve, for there is no greater penance than to serve, body and soul, the mammals that make up our great city. You would have found purpose and honor, but that cannot be now.

You lied, Miss Hopps. You lied to the system, you lied to the society, and you lied to me. And I cannot forgive that lie.

Your petition for consideration of employment with the ZPD is hereby denied, and should you petition again, you will face charges of perjury. Please don’t make me do that. You have survived an experience that no mammal should have endured, and that alone stays my hand in this. But I am a mammal of the law, bound to uphold my oath no matter my feelings on those laws. So while I can be lenient once, I cannot be twice.

With Regret,

Acting Chief of Police,

Bogo

What broke her completely down was that he actually took the time to write all that for her, and had she not done something that she actually couldn’t remember doing, she might have had a slice of her dream. Not a big piece, but a piece none the less. She could have had a chance to serve a city she loved more that anything else, save a single red fox, and even that she might have had a chance with as well. She knew he was a cop, as she had seen him on the news, his contributions to the ZPD in the Cliffside debacle well televised even in Bunny Burrow. It had afforded him a promotion to Corporal, and had set him on the ZPD career path. But it couldn’t be, now.

No, that future was denied to her as well. Zootopia could not be her home anymore than Bunny Burrow could. She had to go elsewhere, but where?

And with what money? She knew little of the greater world outside of Bunny Burrow, having spent the last 9 years in a mental institution, but she knew that she still needed money. Since she couldn’t work for it, she would have to steal it, which was a particularly loathsome thought to her.
She knew of one source of cash she could steal, and while it would come with additional consequences by making the mammal owning that cash very angry with her, she really didn’t know how her father could get any angrier with her. So she stood up from her bed, gathered her backpack and her coat, and leaving the letter on the bed, she slipped out of a room that wasn’t hers and into the night.

Her passage did not go unnoticed.

* * * * * *

Under the glow of an ancient overhead florescent lamp in the tractor shop, Judy rummaged around back of her dad’s beer fridge. She knew he kept a tall can of project tractor money in the back, where he would save his spare cash from the week. He could have used a bank’s savings account, but that’s not what he chose to do. She could only guess why that was, cause he never said, but it was the largest source of cash she could get her paws on tonight.

*Where was it? Ah, found it!* She pulled out the old can of potato chips, and popped off the lid. She shook the contents out on the bench, and started to count the bundle of bills. *Damn, Dad! This isn’t pocket change, this is some serious money. Nearly $17,000 worth. What were you keeping this for?*

She had another momentary pang of guilt. She could could put it back, and nobody would be the wiser right? She could go back to bed, and what? Get up in the morning and have another fight with Dad? Drive Mom to tears? What future did she have here, anyway?

*Screw it!* She dumped the money back into the can, and shoved it into her backpack. *Time to leave.* She turned off the work light, and turned to walk out the shed, except that she couldn’t. Her way was blocked by a white rabbit, standing in the door, dressed only in her shorts and a frown.

Beth.

Dammit! Judy didn’t have time for this. She had to get away before sunrise, or her family might come looking for her, or even worse, sic the sheriff on her. She tried to push past her sister, but she simply pushed back.

“It’s not yours! Put it back!” Beth ordered.
“No shit, it’s not mine. That’s why it’s called stealing, you dumb bunny.” Judy tried to make her mad, because a level headed Beth might just break down her resolve, and prevent her from going. She couldn’t have that.

“What did you call me?”

“Dumb bunny. Would you prefer stupid bunny? Now get out of my way!”

“No! And calling me names won’t make me move either! Put it back!”

“Dammit Beth, I can’t stay, so move!”

“NO! Mom says we’re Hopps, and that we love each other, no questions asked! Put that back, and lets talk about this.”

“Talk about what? You mean scream about it, like the happy little family that we are? That’s all that ever happens around here, yelling and screaming. And I’ve had enough, and I’m leaving!” Judy finally pushed past her little sister, who instead of pushing against Judy’s chest latched onto the backpack.

“Goddamn it, Beth! Let go!”

“Never!”

“I said LET GO!” Judy screamed at her.

“NO!” Beth screamed back.

What happened next was the oddest thing, at least in Judy’s mind. She watched as her right fist appeared in her peripheral vision and accelerated towards Beth’s muzzle. She hadn’t given that command to her arm or her paw. Beth wouldn’t see it coming, as she had her eyes closed as she to pulled with all her might on the backpack. So it was equally surprising to both of them when Judy’s fist connected with her sister’s face with a loud WOCK sound.
Beth went flying back to land on her rump, her paw going up to her eye, as she bit back tears of pain. Judy hadn’t held back on that punch, and it really hurt.

*SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT!!!* Judy was struck immediately by the juxtaposition of Cotton and Beth in her mind’s eye. *I just involuntarily punched my SISTER! Shit!* She was now as much a danger to her own family as that bully had been to Cotton. She had to leave now.

Beth looked up from where she lay on the ground at the look of horror on her sister’s face. Judy hadn’t meant to do that, she knew, and if she stayed they could talk it out, and forgive each other… *No, no, no, don’t run!*

Judy ran into the night as her sister screamed out her name.

“**JUDY!”**

* * *

They found her sobbing on the dirt in front of the tractor shed, holding on to her swelling eye. Bonnie rushed over to her asking, “Who did this to you, sweetheart?”

Beth, in between sobs, answered, “Judy.”

“What?!?” An indignant Stu puffed himself up, “Where is she? I’ll give her a piece of my mind!” He spun around, trying to spot where she might be hiding.

Bonnie and Beth both turned to stare at him. Giving Judy a piece of his mind was all he had been doing for the past two weeks. They turned to look at each other before Beth dropped her gaze. Bonnie gently asked her daughter the next question, already knowing the answer, “Beth, where is Judy?”

“Gone.” Beth waved off into the darkness with a despondent paw. The tears had stopped, but the anguish would continue for a long time to come.
“Gone? What do you mean gone?” Stu was flabbergasted.

“I mean she ran away, and with your tractor money too. That’s what we were fighting about. I tried to stop her from stealing it, and she popped me one.”

“My tractor money?”

Bonnie rolled her eyes. She loved her husband, she really did, but sometimes he could be denser than a rabbit shaped lump of lead his height.

“Yes, she gone, and she took your tractor project money. She’s going to need it if she’s going to survive on the road. The real question, Stu, is what you are going to do about it?” Bonnie stood before him, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders. His next answers would determine the course for this family, so she couldn’t force him. He had to arrive at this himself.

“Why, go after her, of course!” He sputtered indignantly.

Manny, late to this party, let down his daughter Cotton so that she could rush over to her other favorite aunt. With a look at his mother and the expression on her face, he decided to played his part in this little drama, turning back to his father, “Why? She just stole your money. Call the sheriff if you want the money back.”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT THE MONEY!” Stu hollered! “Don’t you understand that?”

“No, Stu, we don’t.” Bonnie replied, and then asked him again, “What do you want?”

“I want my daughter back! Can’t you all see that?” Stu started to beg.

“You had a funny way of showing it, dear.” Bonnie played hardball, regretting not doing this a week ago.

“Don’t you understand, she’s my daughter! What happened to her was because of me! It was my gun! It was my responsibility!” Stu was fully worked up now, tears streaming down his face, “She was just a kit, and Cliffside broke her! It should have been me, in that awful place, not her!” He fell
to his knees before his wife, clutching her skirt and sobbing, “It should have been me…”

Manny met his mother’s eyes, “We weren’t prepared for this, were we?”

She met his gaze, and replied, “No, we were not. But that doesn’t absolve us our responsibilities, as your father has just pointed out. We’re Hopps…”

“We love each other, no questions asked.” Beth finished as she stood.

Bonnie held her sobbing husband’s head to her chest and nodded, “When she runs out of money, and comes back, what will we do?” She looked at each one in turn.

“Forgive,” Manny stated for the record, not that he had anything to forgive. Judy’s defense of his daughter had set all those doubts aside.

“Forgive,” said Beth, nodding, having already forgiven her sister after seeing the look of horror on her face after she had completed the punch.

Bonnie turned to down to gaze at her husband, “Stu?”

“Forgive.” He nodded as he answered.

“Forgive.” And in so stating, Bonnie set the position of the Hopps Family on their errant daughter. When she returned home, after running out of money, she would be welcomed. And they would try this again.

“Manny, help your father up.” Bonnie directed her eldest son. As he did so, she directed her next question at Stu, “Stu, honey, have much money was in that can, anyway?”

“Oh, I don’t know? Maybe a thousand or so? It can’t be that much.” Stu actually had no idea. He just stuffed the money in, but never counted it.

“Well, that should last her a month or so. We’ll see her in a few weeks then.”
What Bonnie couldn’t realize at the time is that her optimistic estimate of just a few weeks would stretch to over a decade of waiting before they would hear from their lost daughter Judy again.

* * * * * *

Somewhere else

And so it begins...
The stage is set...
She has crossed the Threshold...
And thus begins her Road of Trials…
…
Will it be enough?

* * * * * *

Outside Bunny Burrow

Judy walked alongside a quiet country road as the sun rose behind her, a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

Chapter End Notes

It was going to be a much longer chapter originally. The near four thousand words in chapter 15 would have part of this, and there are several more scenes that got cut for brevity’s sake. Stu was going to expound at length on his guilt, the bunny bullies were going to have a long drawn out conversation with Judy about her views on predator rights, and the story on Gideon was going to be twice as long since Stu was narrating it.

Luckily, for my poor aching wrists, I managed to get it cut down to only eight thousand words. God, I have the Writer's Disease: brevity is now lost to me - gone are
the days of three thousand word long chapters!

Oh, there was going to be a scene at the very end where Judy hitched a ride with some long haired friends of Panda in a chartreuse micro-bus, but I didn't think my audience would get the joke, so I cut it.
Wednesday Afternoon: Soap Opera

Chapter Summary

Judy Meets Fennick the Fennec again, for the very first time! After an awkward introduction, Judy tries to explain things to Fennick. Then he invites her to attend group, and Judy over-shares with everybody. Afterwards Fennick tries to explain Hugo to Judy, he finally makes a connection, and then they go out to dinner.

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back? Fennick's back, Fennick's back, woooooooo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Current Day: Wednesday afternoon in Savanah Center

“He’s a fennec fox, which leads to problems with stairs and elevators, so they put his office on the first floor,” Hugo explained as he led the way down the halls.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that.” Judy smiled as she followed. I’d bet he’d love hopping up five flights of stairs to his office!

Hugo paused at a hall corner, a question forming on his muzzle, “Judy, how do you want me to introduce you? I mean, to Fennick? He’s been my colleague for thirteen years; I’ve talked to him extensively about you, especially in the early years, when we were building up his outreach program. I’m fairly sure he still remembers your name and description. I don’t know if I ever showed him a photo of you, but I wouldn’t know if he had ever looked you up either. He could have, being that he has access to all the Zootopia databases that I do.”

“You talked to him about me?” Judy squeaked, as her mind switched into overdrive as the panic set in. SHIT! What did you say? What does he know? ***Run! Hide!*** ***No! Shut Up! SHUT UP!*** She managed to keep most of that internal dialog of her face, instead just looking slightly sick. She swallowed. ***Maybe this wasn’t a good idea after all? She should just wait in the SUV.*** She pulled one of her ears around to the front, and started to tug on it.

That’s an interesting tic, thought Hugo, or is it a stim? Does it calm the anxiety that storms through her mind? It looked like it hurt, so maybe a bit of self harm? That’s not good. Almost without a
conscious thought, Hugo reached out and caught her shoulder in his paw, squeezing gently. “Hey, talk to me, please?” He asked as he slid down to one knee before her. “What’s wrong? You were so gung-ho to meet him just minutes ago. What’s changed?” He slid his paw up her neck to cup her check and bent his head to look into her eyes.

***Trust***

She swallowed before answering, “Judy Hopps is a murderer. A violent psychotic mammal that no one trusts. She’s dangerous.” She took a deep breath before continuing, “I’ve spent most of my adult life trying to hide what I’ve done; trying to hide Judy Hopps from the world. Trying to get mammals to know who I am before they judge me for what I was. So I don’t use that name anymore. It died at Cliffside.” She grimaced as she let go of her ear, and raised her eyes to met his, “You’re the first mammal to call me Judy in three years.”

“I’m sorry, I really am. Judy is what I knew you as, and what you will always be to me. Do you want me to call you something else?” He asked her, his voice quiet, stillness radiating from his form as he used his grandmother’s arts to help calm a distraught mammal.

“It’s okay, you can call me Judy. You don’t hate me when you say it.” She gave him a slow, sad smile. She slide her paw up to hold on to his wrist.

“No, never.” He paused, curious, “Who last called you Judy, if I may ask?”

“A really bad girlfriend. The less that’s said about her, the better.” Judy shivered. She looked both disturbed and relieved at that prospect, so he imagined that their breakup had been rather painful.

“Just tell him my name is Jessica, or Jessica Lapin if you want to use my whole street-name.” She replied to his request. He made a face, and looked away. She dropped her paw from his wrist, and her muzzle fell open. “What?” She demanded to know.

He pulled his paw back, and made a fist which he set on his hip. He turned his gaze back to meet hers, and tried to figure out how to say the next few sentences diplomatically. “Well, I don’t think Fennick will have ever heard that name, but the street-kits that he counsels might have, being that most of them are teenagers and have access to the ZooNet. I am concerned that their reactions to that name may not be appropriate for the, um, venue that we currently find ourselves in.” He vaguely waved his other paw about the building.
Oh Sweet Cheese and Crackers! Judy smirked at him, planted both paws on her waist, and cocked her hips. He’s adorable when he’s embarrassed. “Doc, did you Zoogle ‘Jessica Lapin’?”

“Um… Yes…”

“When?” This was too much fun. Particularly considering how he had commented on her nudity while she had been trying to get dressed in the SUV. Did he like what he saw?

“After we came back from the clinic. I didn’t recognize the name, so I Zoogled it, but didn’t get very far. I finally found a picture of you sitting on a rhino’s shoulder, but nothing else.”

Oh, he found Lance. Poor Lance. She missed him so much. Judy’s smirk fell just a bit.

“So, based on that photo, I turned off the safe search parameters, and as a result I got a lot more pictures of Jessica Lapin. A whole lot more!”

He looks like a kit just caught stealing a cookie, she thought. “And what did you think of what you saw?” She mischievously prodded him.

“Owwww.” He honestly replied.

“Owwww?” Her smirk disappeared, as she became concerned. Did he think less of her now? She started to straighten back up, “Ow how?”

***That sounded stupid.***

“Yes, Ow. I don’t understand how you could shove all those things up inside yourself without splitting in half. I mean, you’re a rabbit. You’re really not that big. How did you make them fit, without hurting yourself?” He was making size gestures with his paws, but the confusion on his face was plainly evident. He wasn’t joking. He honestly didn’t understand.

Judy just lost it, and doubled over in laughter. He’s such a doofus! Giggling, she stood back up. She reached out with both her paws, and grabbed one of his waving paws. Her smirk back on her face, she blithely stated, “Where there is a will, there is a way, Doc.” She gazed into his face, No
condemnation, no judgment…

***Can she trust him?***

“Extreme insertions not your thing, Doc?” She gently asked him.

“No, not really.” His gaze dropped, but instead of confused, he now looked thoughtful.

Judy put off digging for what his ‘thing’ might be for later, for a time when she really wanted to embarrass him and really enjoy it. Right now it was important to her that he understand this was a part about her identity, and not to hate her for it. She didn’t think he did, but she still wanted to know what he really thought about it. “What else? What else did you see? What did you think of what you saw?”

“What did I think? I think it may have been the healthiest I have ever seen you.” He replied in complete honesty.

She cocked her head at that statement, her smirk falling from her muzzle.

“Your muscular tone looked strong, and your bearing was erect. I didn’t see any evidence of drug use, either in your eyes or in your voice. I didn’t see any scars or matting of your fur that would indicate self-harm. You appeared to me to be well rested, well fed, and happy.” He paused for a moment before continuing, “The shaving and dying of your fur was a bit disturbing, though. It was rather, um, rather loud, in my opinion.”

It was such a Hugo explanation, so direct. She smiled, relieved that he hadn’t gone moralistic on her. She had liked that time of her life, and liked who that bunny was. She had been everything Judy could wish to be: Strong, vibrant, and unafraid. Now, she was just broken, like a clock that could no longer tell time.

She lifted her head back up and nodded to him, “It was supposed to; it was something Judy Hopps would never be seen doing. It was part of my camouflage at the time, as Jessica Lapin the Porn Star. Hiding in plain sight. And it worked. No one ever guessed that wild dyed Jessica Lapin, porn queen, was meek little Judy Hopps, ex-mental patient.”

“Yeah, I was happy and healthy. I was independent. I paid my bills, owned my car, and paid my
groceries. I had friends and mammals who loved me. I was adored, even lusted after, and had my pick of lovers. I’m proud of what I had made of myself then. Even now, Jessica is the kind of rabbit I want to be: Strong, vibrant, and without fear.” With that last statement, her face fell just a little bit.

“Okay. I shall call you Jessica, then.” Hugo promised her.

* * * * *

Fennick sat at his low desk, sorting though his case files, and getting prepped for his next group session, which was supposed to start in half an hour. Nothing too exciting, assuming the skunk twins show up, of course. If they don’t show, well, he might have to go looking for them, and that might take up most of his evening.

A murmur reached his ears, and they twitched. Somebody was talking in the hall. A couple of somebodies. Hugo? What’s the Cat doing here today? It’s not gym day!

He appreciated that Hugo would come down on gym days and work out with his kits, he really did. He could hold up the Cat as an example of a mammal who had grown up in the barrio, and instead of becoming a gang banger and dying on the street, the Cat had made something of himself. It also helped that Hugo would talk gutter Amazonia as he pumped iron with the kits. They really respected that he wouldn’t talk down to them.

A squeal of feminine laughter pealed down the hall. Okay, what’s going on? He popped out of his chair, and slowly walked to his doorway. He stood in the open doorway and put on his ears, listening carefully.

Hugo was talking to some female, and Fennick couldn’t tell what just from the voice. The damn HVAC was blowing the wrong way, so he didn’t smell anything either.

Their talking about her health? Shaved? Why would any mammal shave themselves? That’s just wrong! Wear your fur with pride, mammal! Who’s Jessica Lapin? WAIT A MINUTE! JUDY HOPPS! The Cat finally found his bunny after all this time? And she was a porn star? Oh, Miki is going to throw a wild eyed fit if she ever finds out her husband named their daughter after a porn star! Fennick snickered quietly.

That snicker died as his ears picked up a depressing tone in the rabbit’s voice and he heard “Even
now, Jessica is the kind of rabbit I want to be: Strong, vibrant, and without fear.” _Shit! That was the voice of a mammal in need, not a joke for your amusement, asshole. Put your game face on, Fox, and behave like the professional you are!_

Needing an excuse to pop out of his office, he grabbed his coffee cup and walked across the hall. He walked over to the water fountain, and after pulling out the stool to climb up, he poured out his stale coffee into the drain and rinsed out the cup. Stepping back down, he looked up and saw the two of them standing down the hall. Pretending that he hadn’t just overheard everything they were talking about, he waltzed down the hall in true Fennick fashion, and addressed them. “Hugo, my Cat! What you doing in my neck of the woods?”

Fennick looked at the two of them standing there, and struggled not to laugh. Hugo was decked out in his usual dress blacks, looking for all the world like a preppy funeral director. His companion, a grey and white adult female rabbit, was dressed in true teen angst fashion, which, if Hugo had been a rabbit, Fennick would have believed. As it was, in comparison to him she kinda looked like a panhandler he just picked up from the bus station. That being said, he thought Judy was pretty, as rabbits go, if a bit skinny. Not his taste; he liked his females a lot bigger than him, mountain climbing being a favorite sport of his.

“Um, I’ve got to beg a favor of you, Fennick. I’ve got to go see a patient that Emmanuel is working on. But since they are in ICU, I can’t take my friend, um, Jessica here with me. She’s staying with me while she recovers from pneumonia, but I don’t have time to run back home to drop her off. I was wondering if she could stay with you while I run to the hospital?” He looked mildly dyspeptic as he finished, and the rabbit looked like she had just told a really good joke but nobody else had gotten the punchline yet.

_Um, Jessica? Cat, you need to learn to lie better._ “But of course! Any friend of Hugo’s is a friend of mine!” He held out his paw to her, “Jessica, is it?”

She took his paw and replied, “Yes, Jessica. Jessica Lapin.” She said the name smoothly, wearing it like an evening gown.

“Delighted. I’m Fennick Zerda. Please, just call me Fennick.” Instead of shaking her paw and releasing it, Fennick brought it to his muzzle to lay a quick kiss to the back. As he did, he inhaled and drew in all the scents that were there.

So many scents, one laid over another. Mostly female rabbit, some prescription mange body wash, and a whole lot of Hugo. Fennick has been a friend and a coworker with the Cat for over thirteen years. He knows exactly what that feline smelled like, and that musk is all over her. He stole a quick glance at Hugo’s black outfit. Yup, small grey and white hairs scattered about on his coat, on the shirt under that coat, and on the crotch of the black slacks. He quickly looked back at the
rabbit – she’s wearing black BDUs. She wasn’t obviously wasn’t wearing them when that fur got on his pants!

_Yo Cat, use a lint brush next time! ‘Friend, um, Jessica’, my tight little furry ass! If you’re gonna bang the rabbit, at least own up to it, Doctor ‘I’m A Master Of Reading Mammal Body Language’ Wiedii! Don’t insult my intelligence, Hugo. I might have only given you a tiny bit of shit for batting with a former patient! But now, now you are going to owe me, Cat, and I am going to collect! You don’t pull that kinda shit, it’s unethical! Fennick was a little mad about being lied to, but he’s always a little mad, so nothing showed on his face. “How long you gonna be, Cat?” as he let go of her paw._

Hugo looked at the messages on his phone and guessed, “A couple of hours, maybe? I’ll call you if it’s gonna be more. Is that all right with you?”

Fennick just grinned, “Sure, Cat. I’m sure Jessica and I can find ways to pass the time.” He kept his eyes on Hugo, to see if Hugo reacted to the dig in any way. Maybe show some possessiveness, at least a twitch of the tail or a bit of teeth. Nothing. He just turned to talk to the rabbit.

_What? There should have been some kind of reaction!_

“Are you sure you are okay with this?” He earnestly asked her.

“Yes! Go! I’ll be fine.” She made little shooing motions with her paws, a quirky smile on her muzzle. “Shoo, shoo!”

“Thank you, Fennick!” Hugo backed a few feet, and turned to jog back down the hall towards the door. Fennick observed Jessica as she watched Hugo disappear out the door. Her eyes narrowed, and the smile on her muzzle went flat, and just a slight change in her scent wafted over to him. The scent of fear. _Okay, I must be missing something here, _Fennick thought to himself. Putting on his best counselor’s face, he directed her to his office, “I’ve got some papers to organize before my next group session. Shall we step into my office?”

“Sure,” She followed him back to his office, and as she walked through the door she glanced down and saw the kick-stop was down. The door had been open the entire time! _Shit! He probably heard the whole thing! _She had forgotten about Fennick’s ears; his hearing was as good if not better than hers. Not that it was completely her fault; Hugo started the conversation just down the hall from this office. Had he wanted Fennick to overhear them? Why would he do that to her?
Fennick hopped up into his chair, and leaned on his desk. He pointed at the low chair across from him, “Take a seat, rabbit.” Looking up at her, and seeing the anxiety now clouding her features, he tried to reassure her, “I ain’t gonna bite ya, kit.” She looked up at him and just snorted, finally climbing into her chair. At least it made her laugh. “Why would you think I was gonna do that? What has Hugo been telling you about me?” He asked her with a grin on his muzzle.

Not much, just that you and he go way back. I didn’t think you were the biting type. I mean, I’ve heard that your bark is worse than your bite, that was what made me laugh.” She sank into her chair.

“HA HA HA HA HA!” Fennick laughed at that. “Yeah, I’ll bite if I have to, but never a client, and certainly never a colleague's lady friend. And you’re both! Hugo’d rip my tongue out if I did that!” He snickered as he pointed at her.

“Lady friend? I’m not his lady friend anything!” Judy was confused at the turn the conversation had taken. Where had he gotten that idea?

“His scent is all over you, and your fur is all over his black suit.” Fennick pointed out.

“What?” Why would he care? Wait, is he concerned that Hugo’s just using me for sex? She looked back at him, looking at his body language. He’s mad, not at me though, and he’s a bit embarrassed to be talking about this. But he has to know? Why? It’s important to him, that’s for sure. Wait, oh shit. Shit, shit, shit. I miscalculated. I dressed up like a street-mammal so that he would take me seriously, and he did! He takes me for one, and now he’s being all protective of me, thinking that Hugo might be abusing me. He probably wouldn’t have thought that if I was still wearing that silly kit’s dress!

Aw, Fennick. That’s sweet. Unnecessary, but sweet.

“No, it’s not like that.” She waved her paws, “I had just hugged him really hard earlier today in his SUV, to thank him for taking me shopping to get me new clothes.” Well, I almost humped him, but I didn’t, so does that still count against me? “I was wearing his neighbor’s hand-me down jumper at the time I did. That’s where the scent and fur came from. I mean, the dress was cute and all, but I haven’t worn something like that since I was six. This is more my style.” She gestured to what she was currently wearing.
He didn’t quite look like he was buying it, so she nervously babbled on, “I don’t know. Would I bang him? Maybe? If he wasn’t a cat. I mean, look at him. He’s ripped, like a miniature tiger dancer from a Gazelle concert, and really strong. He’s really handsome, even as old as he is, and he’s really nice. And regardless of what Roberto says, his cooking is really good too. He’s successful but not full of himself. And his friends are nice, too.” **Oops... Maybe that was a little too much sharing.**

He cocked his head, “A cat? What’s wrong with being a cat?” After that explanation Fennick was even more confused.

“A cat! Um,” and now she was really embarrassed. Damn it, she’s a former professional sex worker. She can talk about this without getting all flustered. “Yeah, a cat, right? They have those spines on the head of their penis?” She shook her head in time with her paws, “Nope! No way in hell! I had sex with a bobcat once, and he tore me up so bad I couldn’t sit for a week afterwards, it hurt so bad! And the gonorrhea he gave me didn’t help either! After that, I swore that I’d never do another feline again.” She rushed that explanation out.

***Yup, she’s embarrassed, alright - she’s babbling like an idiot.*** **That came out totally wrong! Shut Up Judy, for the love of Pete Shut Up!** She managed to stop her mouth by virtue of slapping her paw over her muzzle, but the damage was done. She tried to smooth things over by smiling, but it came out as a grimace. She just wanted to disappear into her chair. **So much for being professional!**

Fennick sat back like he had just been pole-axed between the eyes. That had been quite the spiel. **What a minute**, he thought as his eyes snapped back to hers. Spines, she said. **Margay males don’t have any penile spines. She doesn’t know that. If she was banging him, she would definitely know that. Ergo, they aren’t banging. Hugo, my Cat, it seems I don’t have to bite your head off.** He breathed a sigh of relief. Now he felt like a total putz for putting her on like that. Maybe he can smooth things over.

“Yeah, the Cat’s built. He likes to come over here on the weekends to work out with my street kits. He’ll strip down down to just those white pants that he wears, nothing else on top, and he’ll just start hitting the free weights. He’ll load up so much that you can almost see the bar bend, and then he’ll go pound out a set of reps without even breathing hard. I hate him.”

“What? Why?” She sat back up, grateful for the change in topic.

Yeah, maybe if he admitted to a bit of Hugo luvin’ himself, she wouldn’t feel so embarrassed, he thought. “Look at me! I’m this little pipsqueak of a fox! Ain’t got no guns!” He pointed to his little arms, “I can’t pick up a some little female like he can and be all protective of her. Hell, the only thing I got going for me is that the vixens and the she-wolves think I’m cute, and that makes
them want to cuddle.”

Judy closed her eyes and giggled at the mental image that he brought up. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, a wistful look on her face. Fennick knew she wasn’t looking at a picture of him in her mind just then. Yeah, they may not be banging, but she is crushing hard, Fennick saw. I hope this doesn’t end badly, for either of them. Especially considering who she really is. Damn it, Nick. Why did you have to tell me about her? I never expected to ever see her, and now here she is, right in front of me, brought to me by the damn Cat! The one and only mammal you told me never to tell about her and what she was doing here in Zootopia three years ago! Now what do I do? I’m supposed to be the big fucking dawg here, and I’ve got no clue.

His phone started beeping at him, reminding him of the time. Well, there’s always procrastination. “Hey, I’ve got group now.” He extended her an offer, “You want to come and meet my kits?”

She perked up in her seat, “Sure!” She slid down to the floor.

He grabbed his notepad and pen, and hopped down from his chair, “Come on! The kits will love to meet ya.”

He led her down the halls, talking as he went, “So, how long you staying with the Cat?”

“Why do you keep calling him the Cat?” Judy asked. It sounded kind of impersonal to her.

“He’s a cat.”

“Oh,” Judy said, her face screwing up in confusion.

“Look, rabbit, I call things like I see them. I ain’t got time for no rhino shit, or ring around the rosie, or what the Hell not. He’s the best cat I know, and that’s saying something, so he’s the Cat. It’s that simple. So, how long?” He pushed.

“I don’t know? I mean, I just ran into him on Monday, so at least until the pneumonia is cured? He wants me to stay longer, I think.” Judy temporized.
“Yeah, he likes his strays.” Fennick admitted. He pointed at a door, “Here we are.”

*Strays? What does that mean? He’s known Hugo for years, so is this something he knows that Hugo does? Bring random homeless mammals into his life?*

Judy was starting to admit that she really didn’t know all that much about her rescuer.

They walked into a small room with cheaply painted white walls, cheap carpet, and a ring of ten low stacking chairs. There were about half a dozen teenage mammals in the room already, all small mammals by the look of things. A female weasel, a badger, a ground hog, a couple of small deer with tusks, and an opossum. They were standing around a cooler that they were dispensing drinks from. The opossum came up to Fennick and handed him a small cup, “Here you go, boss.”

“Thanks, Pogo. Jessica, meet Pogo.” He pointed to the opossum, “Pogo, Jessica. She’s gonna be hanging with us today.” He pointed to Judy.

Pogo asked her, “Would you like some tea?”

“Um, sure” She looked over at Fennick, as Pogo shuffled off.

“He’s a sweet kit,” Fennick explained, as he tapped his head.

*Oh, he’s a little slow upstairs,* Judy figured out.

There was a bit of a commotion behind them, and a pair of male skunks barged in. Talking trash to each other, they shoved their way through the other mammals to grab some sodas. “Out of my way, slow poke,” one growled at Pogo, and shoved him aside, causing him to spill the tea he had just poured for Judy.

“Hey! That’s not nice! You apologize to him!” Judy, furious at the way they just treated poor Pogo, stomped over to stand in front of the offending mephit.

“Or what, rabbit? You gonna thump me?” He held up his paw to admire his claws. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen, sweet heart. So tell you what. How bout you, me, and my brother here go out
back and we show you just how nice we can be?” He licked his muzzle while his brother slid around behind her. The one behind slide his muzzle along side her neck. Judy didn’t flinch. They were teenage bullies just trying to intimidate her, and she wasn’t going to show them any fear, certainly not to any worm eaters like them. The nose by her neck slowly breathed out, slowly breathed back in, and stopped. Two quick sniffs, and suddenly the nose was gone. She had no idea what that was supposed to mean in skunk body language.

What Judy couldn’t see was the skunk behind her had stepped back quickly, and was trying to gesture to his brother with a frantic wave off sign. The skunk in front of her stood up, and looked over at his brother, “Dude, what’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with your brother Dan is simple, you jackass. He just realized who you two morons are picking on. That ain’t some street hussy you’re trying to hit on, Stan. That there is Hugo’s lady friend. You know what that means, don’t you, Stan?” Fennick put his pad down on a chair, and turned to give Stan his whole attention, “Hugo’s an Amazonia barrio cat. He don’t take kindly to any mammal who disrespects his lady. Or are you just feeling suicidal today, Stan?” Fennick quirked an ear at her, “Apologize to the lady, Stan.”

Stan wilted, “Um… Sorry. It won’t happen again.” He contritely tried to escape her stare. She glared at him, and pointed to Pogo. “Sorry, Pogo.” Stan shuffled around to the seat farthest from her and sat down, joined quickly by his brother who grabbed his ear and started urgently whispering in it.

Pogo came shuffling up to her, and handed her a new cup of tea. He smiled a happy smile at her. “Thank you, Pogo.” She took the cup from his paw, and laid her other paw over his, squeezing gently, “Thank you.”

Pogo just keep nodding his head and smiling at her. A voice piped up beside her, “Now you’ve done it. You just made a friend, lady. He’s gonna follow you around like a chick following a hen.” The weasel had moved over to stand next to her. “Hey, Pogo, can you find me a cola, please?” She asked him. Pogo bobbed his head, and shuffled off to the cooler.

“That was pretty cool, by the way, the way you stood up to those jerks. The name’s Emma, Emma Weaselton.” she said as she held her paw out to Judy.

Judy took it and replied, “Thanks. I’m Jessica Lapin.” She took a sip of her tea, and cocked her head, “Any relation to Duke Weaselton?” she asked the weasel.

“Ugh! He’s a cousin and an asshole.” She rolled her eyes.
Judy nodded in agreement, and took another sip of her tea. It was a fruity green tea, hot but not scalding, which didn’t surprise her. Judy couldn’t imagine that Fennick would leave these kits with anything that they could injure themselves with.

“So, how long have you and the Doc been dating?” Emma asked her as she swallowed her tea.

Judy, surprised by the question, choked on her tea, resulting in a coughing fit that made her poor lungs ache. “What???” She sputtered.

“You and the Doc? How long have you been seeing him? I’m not judging you, cause I like to think of myself as a progressive weasel. Interspecies relationships are starting to make a comeback, after that whole night howler thing, and I think that’s totally cool.” Emma assured her.

Judy struggled to figure out what to say. Fennick had set this up, hadn’t he, the little rodent? Um, what am I supposed to say, after all that? Do I deny it, and make Fennick look like a liar? Or would the kits even believe me? Shit, I need time to think! Deflect, Judy, deflect!

She pointed to the skunks and changed the subject, “Why are they afraid of Hugo? You know he’s a doctor, right? He’s not gonna hurt anybody, he really can’t.” Well, there was that one time he tackled you at Cliffside, remember? He was pretty aggressive then!, she mused.

Emma leaned over and in a low voice she explained the situation to Judy, “Stan and Dan, the moron twins? They like to talk tough, but they’re just cowards. Anyway, a few months back, they were clowning around at a gym session, talking trash like they always do. They did or said something, I don’t remember what it was, and it pissed the Doc right off. He quit doing his workout and walked over to the table where we keep the workout snacks. He picked out a blood orange, and walked right back over to Stan.”

“He just stared at Stan with those great green cat eyes of his until Stan shut up, and then he spoke in this horribly dead voice. He said, ‘Are you trying to make me angry, Stan? Why would you do that, Stan? That’s not very smart, Stan.’ He ended every sentence he spoke with Stan’s name, all the while holding that orange in his paw, slowly squeezing it in his paw. I swear, he didn’t even blink once while he stared the idiot down. All of a sudden, the orange exploded in his paw, sending sticky red juice everywhere! It was totally a gory looking mess, blown up all over Stan, his brother and the Doc. Especially the Doc, since he likes to wear those white workout pants. They were ruined.” Emma giggled.
“It was a horror show, and it completely freaked Stan out, especially since the Doc finished it by pointing at Stan and saying ‘You don’t want to do that, Stan.’ as he was covered what looked like blood! Stan tried to cringe, thinking the Doc was going to hit him or something, but he just shook off his paw, and went back to working out.” Emma mimed out him shaking his arm.

“Then Counselor Fennick made him clean up the mess. The idiot tried to say it was the Doc’s fault, but Counselor Fennick wouldn’t buy it. He told Stan that since he picked the fight, he got to clean up the mess. Or did he really want to argue with Hugo again? That shut the stupid skunk up, and he and his brother ran off to get a mop and bucket. It was the funniest thing.”

“Stan hasn’t tried to trash talk the Doc again.” Emma just shrugged, “I know that it was all a dominance display between males, and that the Doc wouldn’t actually turn Stan into pulp, but it looked real. And now, when ever Fennick needs to put Stan or Dan in their place, he just talks like Hugo did. It totally freaks them out.” She smiled shyly at Judy, and changed the subject 180 degrees. “Is he rough when he picks you up with those paws of his?”

What? Where is that coming from? “No, he’s really gentle.” Judy answered honestly. Actually, Hugo spent a lot of time picking her up and putting her down, and if it wasn’t for her libido firing off ever time those paws touched her she would be very annoyed with him. She was an independent bunny, thank you very much, and she was quiet capable of doing things herself, she grumped to herself. She certainly didn’t need a male to do it for her.

“Oh,” Emma acknowledged, turning away as she bit on her lower lip.

Is she crushing on him, Judy wondered. She furrowed her brows as she considered Emma, She’s what, 14 years old? She’s just a kit.

***Just like she was at Cliffside.***

Fennick interrupted that train of thought before it became too introspective by tapping his paw on the chair in front of Judy. He pointed at her, and then at the chair. He turned to Pogo and Emma, “Grab a chair, kits. It’s time to get started.”

Everybody sat down quietly, and even the skunk twins were subdued. Thank heavens for small miracles, thought Fennick, he might even make it through a session without having to yell at them.

He started with, “For those of you who missed the obvious, the rabbit’s name is Jessica, and she’s
visiting us for a while. Be nice to her, and Hugo will be nice you.”

With that comment Judy’s mind was off to the races, **She’d like it if Hugo was ‘nice’ to her!*** What, No! I am not CRUSHING ON THE CAT! He’s a Cat, Remember? Bad things always happen with cats! And he probably doesn’t even see her that way! She’s a former patient of his, and even Fennick thinks so! The little fox was upset even thinking about the two of them having sex. **It’s been sooooo long…** **Don’t tell me that! I know that! It’s been years! But I’m not going to go jump the bones of the first male that’s nice to me in years because I’m horny and I’m lonely and Nick isn’t available! ***Nick…*** Damn it, Judy, you just had to bring the fox into the equation, didn’t you. Now we’re all going to be depressed for the rest of the afternoon because we’re thinking about NICK and how much we miss him and can’t see him or touch him or have him to ourselves! Thank you so very much!

While Judy’s mind looped between screaming at her libido and her depression, her ears picked up on the conversation going on around her, and cut into her maudlin depressive spiral. One of the skunks, ***The Idiot Jerk!***, was boasting about something. What’s his name? Dan?

“… Why the hell shouldn’t we live out there on the streets? I mean, we’re free! Nobody telling us what to do, nobody yelling at us about our stupid grades or some stupid shit? It’s freedom, I tell you!” He sat back in his chair, looking triumphant at this proclamation.

It was a measure of how annoyed Judy was with the two skunks that she didn’t think about what she was about to do before she cut in, “Freedom? Really? Well, let’s see! I guess you have the freedom to pick which cockroaches you are going to snuggle with at night. There is that. Just keep in mind that if you roll over on them, they aren’t gonna get squished. They’re roaches – they’re pretty indestructible. They’re just gonna wiggle around in your fur, trying to get out.” She made a little wiggling motion with her paw,

“Now, if that doesn’t wake you in the night screaming, I suppose you will be able to put up with the rain that pours down on your face because the cardboard you have over your head has finally soaked through and fallen apart. But don’t worry, cause if that totally cramps your style, I suppose you can always find a free highway overpass for the night where you can be dry. Just watch out, cause if your night vision sucks like mine does, your feet are going to find every piece of broken glass, spent hypodermic needle, and puddle of piss that some other homeless mammal has left behind for you as a house warming gift!” Judy wound down her rant.

“It isn’t freedom, kit. It’s just another prison you can’t escape, where the bars are hopelessness, the walls are despair, and you’re the warden, stuck guarding yourself. If you got another legitimate option, use it! Cause it’s got to be better than the streets…” She finished up with that, and looked back up. The room was dead quiet, and every pair of eyes was on her. Oh, shit! She’s stepped in it now!
One of the tusked deer spoke up, “Did you do time, Jessica?” He asked the question with a measure of respect in his voice.

She thought about her answer, considered a lie, trying to hide who and what she is, but she glanced over at Fennick. He locked his gaze with hers, a little smirk playing over his muzzle, and he flicked his ears twice. *SHIT! He knows. He’s known all this time! Hell, Hugo had tried to warn me, but no, I wanted to pretend like I could get away with it, so I insisted on the whole Jessica charade. And the damn fox overheard it all anyway. Now what am I going to do?***

***run… run away… hide…***

No, I’m not. I’m done with running. I told Hugo I was gonna stay, and I meant it, cause with it came deciding to live. I had my chance to die, but he stepped in and asked me to stay, and I said yes. I’m here now, and I’ve made this choice. Live with it, Judy. She took a deep breath. Okay, Fennick, let’s play it your way, and see what happens.

“Yeah, nine years.” She replied with resignation.

The two deer looked at each other, “What for?” the other male deer asked.

“Involuntary Mammal Slaughter. My lawyers managed to get it pleaded way down from Murder One due to my age.” She shrugged, defeated. *There, you happy, Fennick? You happy you just destroyed a rabbit in front of these kits?* She closed her eyes, but no tears came. She was done with the tears.

The ground hog was the first to speak up, “Wow! That’s hardcore! Who’d you kill?” He eagerly asked.

Judy just stared at him. Admiration was the last thing she had ever expected to hear.

Fennick barked out, “Chuck! You haven’t earned that information! She’s been honest and shared with the group, and if you want more, you’re gonna have to share yourself!”

She looked back at Fennick, and he nodded back, pleased. It wasn’t the whole truth, but it was
enough to satisfy him, apparently. She looked around at the rest of the kits. The deer were nodding, Chuck the ground hog had the to grace to look embarrassed, the badger was watching her as she slowly rocked in her chair, and the two skunks looked absolutely terrified.

Emma spoke up, “Can I ask her a question?”

Judy held up her paw to forestall any objections from Fennick. She nodded to Emma, “Go on.”

“How long have you been on the street? Weeks? Months?” She leaned out on her chair, kicking her feet together.

“Years. Three long years.” Judy answered, tiredly.

The badger spoke up for the first time, nodding, “That’s bad…”

“Oh… So you know the Doc from the homeless shelters, then?” Emma tried to understand who this rabbit was.

“No, it was from my time in Juvie…” Judy chewed on her lower lip. How much can she say, and not loose Emma’s respect?

Luckily, Fennick cut in, “That’s a story for another time! Chuck! You opened your big mouth, so it’s now your turn to share!” Chuck look like he was caught in automobile headlights. “What, not so quick to speak up now? Who would have thunk it! Well, it don’t matter, cause Jessica shared, so now it’s your turn!”

They went around the room for an hour, and Judy learned quite a lot about these kits. They weren’t just street kits living hard, but they had all been in the trouble with the law at some point. Fennick’s group sessions were part of their juvie sentences.

It turned out Emma was a local tagger, so she swapped some tips with her on the use of negative space in her work. Fennick did not look amused by that particular discussion thread.

Afterwards, Emma came up to thank her for being there, and Pogo stopped for a hug. The two
skunks tried to slip out without her noticing, so Judy stomped her foot and glared at them. They took off running down the hall. She waved goodbye to the rest, and soon it was just Fennick and her in the room.

“I think you made a friend,” Fennick observed.

“Who? Emma, or Pogo?” Judy wanted to know.


“Speaking of which, why is Pogo here? Shouldn’t he be at some mental health facility?”

“Like you were? Not really. Pogo’s problem isn’t mental health, it’s arson. He likes the pretty flames. But his fires have a tendency to burn out of control, so eventually they just sent him to juvie. He did not like that at all, especially being picked on by the older inmates, so it had some mitigating effect on his desire to burn things.” Fennick explained.

“Oh. You know about my time, then?” Judy looked down at the chair she was leaning on.

“Cliffside? Well, yeah.” He pointed to his ears, “Even if I hadn’t overheard you two yabbering in the hall, I would have known. Hugo wouldn’t shut up about it for the first six months or so that we worked together. There aren’t any other grey and white female rabbits in his life that I know about, especially any he would let stay with him at his place up in the Snowy Hills. So as soon as I saw you, I knew who you were.”

He picked up his note pad and gestured to her, “Hey, I understand the need for anonymity. If you two wanted to keep Judy Hopps out of the air waves, all you had needed to do was ask. There was no need to insult my intelligence or my hearing.”

“Anonymity? What anonymity? You tricked me into blurtting out my sentence for them all to hear! Now what are they gonna think of me? They’re gonna figure it out!” She indignantly pointed out.

“I didn’t trick nobody, rabbit. This here is Group. You share what you want to in Group. And you shared plenty, and that’s your decision. As for what they think of you, best I can tell is that the kits think you’re a former gang-banger sent away for offing a rival gang member. That gives you street cred with them. There ain’t anything else for them to figure out, now is there?”
“Street Cred? What? I don’t want street cred! I’m not proud of being a mammal murderer! It was the worst decision of my life, personally.” Even if it had to be done…

“Exactly! That’s what we want to teach them. And you were great at that! Listen, rabbit. These kits don’t have what you would consider great role models in their lives. Most of their role models are negative ones. So when they see somebody they can respect, and that mammal tells them that murder is a stupid idea that they shouldn’t be proud of, or that sleeping on the street isn’t freedom at all, they believe them! They believed you! You connected with them in a way that they understood. And that, rabbit, is how a youth counselor is made! Connection. Meaningful connection.” Fennick held up his two paws and pressed them together.

“Oh…” Was this what Chief Bogo had been talking about in his letter, about her finding purpose and honor?

Fennick led her back down the hall.

“Fennick? Did you really mean that stuff you were saying about Hugo?”

“About him being a barrio cat? Yeah, it’s all true. It don’t look it, when you look at him, right?” Fennick asked her.

She just shook her head.

“Yeah, he grew up in the slums along the Orinoco river valley. You’ll have to get him to tell you the whole story, but basically his family were gleaners. You know what a gleaner is?” He inquired.

“No. Wait, that’s an agricultural term, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. He and his family would go to fields and orchards and pick the insects off the plants and eat them. It was hard work. They didn’t starve, but they didn’t make much. But eventually his dad was able to get a job as a postal worker in a small town, and they could settle down. They still lived a poor neighborhood for a few years, so he used to run with some of the local gangs as a kit. They eventually moved away from the barrio when his dad got promoted to postmaster, and the family moved into a middle class neighborhood. When he was twelve, his parents saved up and sent him to a university prep school. He did well enough there to earn scholarships to go to college and eventually from there to medical school.”
They walked into Fennick’s office. She took a seat in a chair, and he sat in his.

“Hugo been there and done that, Judy. And the kits know it. It allows him to make those same meaningful connections. Like when Emma thinks about what kinda of Dad he would make. Or maybe make the skunk twins rethink their stance on being bullies just to show how strong they think they are. Hugo isn’t strong because he looks like it. He’s strong because he knows it!” Fennick pointed out.

“So, Emma wasn’t crushing on him?” Judy mused.

“What? Feeling some relief, rabbit, that the little weasel isn’t muscling in on your Cat? Your jealousy finally calm down a bit, now that your Amazonia lover is safe from competition?” Fennick snickered as he mocked her.

“Har, Har!” Judy stuck her tongue out at him in return. If his was going to behave like a kit, she was going to treat him like one.

He waved his paw at her, “Nah, Emma isn’t really crushing on him like that. She’s just reconsidering what a ‘strong’ male actually is. Hopefully, that way, when she eventually does settle on a male to father her pups, she won’t go for one like her idiot cousin.”


“Yeah, Duke is a good example of what not to go for. Hugo is just a glimpse for her into her own future, and that some males will be worth her time.”

BUZZ! BUZZ! His paw phone vibrated across the desk. “Speak of the devil,” Fennick said as he picked up the phone, “It’s Hugo. Ah, he says ‘Fennick’? Why does he always put my name on a text to my phone? It ain’t going to anybody else but me!” He squinted theatrically across the desk at Judy, and she stifled a giggle behind her paw. “Anyway, he says, ‘Fennick – there has been a complication at the hospital. The patient went berserk and attacked the ZPD officer who came to talk to him, sending him into the wall...’”

Judy interrupted him as she blurted out, “Is Nick okay?” ***What? Why did she say that?*** She started to chew on a claw while she worried about his response.
“Nick? Who said anything about Nick, rabbit?” Fennick questioned her, and then continued the message by paraphrasing Hugo’s ebullience, “Naw, it’s Clawhauser that got creamed. They’ve got him down in ICU too now, and the ZPD brass is there now, all upset. So it looks like Hugo and his medical partner have to talk to them, and it’s going to be a while. He doesn’t know when he will be able to get out. Oh, and get this! He wants me to take you to dinner or something.” Fennick finished reading the rather long text.

“Why would Benjamin be at the hospital? Isn’t he the ZPD dispatch sergeant?” Judy was confused by this. He’s not really the kind of officer to send off to hospitals, being portly and all.

“Nah. He used to be, but he had a health scare back during the Night-howler stuff, and he’s since slimmed down and gotten sleek. He’s more of a detective these days, being that he’s really good with talking to mammals face to face. He is so annoyingly cheerful!” Fennick grumped.

Something went click in Fennick’s head. Wait a minute, why did she immediately ask if Nick was okay, and not Hugo? And how does she know that Clawhauser was the dispatch officer? Simple, you dumb fox. She knows them both. But how? Nick swears to me that he’s never met her, but she sure as hell cares about him. And she called Clawhauser by his first name, not as Officer Clawhauser or Detective Clawhauser, but as Benjamin. How does she know them?

Like falling dominoes, Fennick’s thoughts began to cascade. Hang on! Hugo lives and works in Tundra Town. He was working there Monday, all day. She said she’s been with Hugo since Monday, and that she has pneumonia. She has to have met Hugo in Tundra Town on Monday. And what is there a lot of in Tundra Town? Snow! Why the hell didn’t he see it?

He looked up from his phone, and chewed on his cheek as he considered those question. He turned to Judy and innocently asked, “Where in Tundra Town did you say you meet up with Hugo on Monday?”

Judy was grooming her ears with her claws, and didn’t really consider the nature of the questions before answering, “A couple of blocks from the Central Square. It was dark, so I don’t know exactly where.” ***Wait, when had she told him about Tundra Town?*** She frowned at him.

Fennick’s face froze. Cheryl’s dream, the one that has been bugging her repeatedly for over a month? The one where she had called to tell him all about it, because she couldn’t talk to her wife or Nick about it for some reason? What was it?
Snow.

A rabbit in snow.

A dead rabbit in snow.

A dead grey and white rabbit in snow.

A dead grey and white rabbit in snow, frozen solid, discovered by Clawhauser in the Tundra Town Central Square!

And Cheryl knew, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, that rabbit was none other than Judy Hopps!

And now he has that same grey and white rabbit in his office, alive and well, with nothing to show for it but a bout of pneumonia!

She didn’t die in the Tundra Town snow on Monday night!

She didn’t die because she was intercepted by Hugo, and he’s been taking care of her ever since!

Why the hell didn’t he see any of this before? Was he so mad at Hugo that he had idiot blinders on all afternoon?

She was supposed to die on Monday, but something caused Hugo to step in at the last minute and save her instead! And now he, Fennick Zerda, was stuck in the middle of all of it!

Fate, You FICKLE BITCH!, Fennick raged internally.

He needed some tea. Actually, he wanted a beer, but he didn’t have any here, so tea would have to
do for now. He turned to her, and politely asked, “Would you like some tea? I could use some tea, since it appears we are going to be here a while. Might as well stay hydrated.” He hopped down, and wandered over to his coffee pot.

“I’d love some tea.” Judy was confused by his body language. He had read the message, asked her the question, and then froze. Now he’s making tea. WTF?

“It’s just a friend’s green tea blend. She makes it for me, says it will keep me calm.” Cheryl’s been mixing the teas for him for years, but he’s never really felt any different after drinking them. He does tend to think better after a cup, though. It certainly wouldn’t hurt today.

BUZZ! BUZZ! Fennick’s phone vibrated again. Damn it Cat! Now What? He turned back to his desk, and hopped up on his chair to look at the message. Oh, hello, it’s Marilyn!

Long-Legs:
Hey, big dawg. I’m all done for the day. You up for dinner and a ride?

“Is it Hugo again?” Judy asked.

“No, it’s Marilyn. Hugo’s probably buried up to his ears in ZPD brass right now, so I don’t expect any further communications from him for a while.”

“Who’s Marilyn?” This was somebody new that Judy hadn’t heard of.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I forgot that the Cat didn’t tell you anything about me. Marilyn’s my lady friend. She just texted me. Seems she’s done with her appointments for the day, and wants to meet up for an early dinner, and maybe as sunset ride afterwards. You up for dinner and a sunset motorcycle ride? There’s plenty of room for you in our side car.”

“Is that where you ride?”

“Yeah, that way I can’t get bounced off the back when we hit a pot hole or a bump, cause landing your ass on pavement sucks, even with armor on.”
Oh, wow. She hadn’t ridden on a motorcycle in a long time. Just one question, “Do you have a helmet that would fit me?”

“No, but her motorcycle mechanic might. I’ll text her and ask.” Fennick sent her that question.

**Big-Ears:**

*I’m babysitting a rabbit for a friend, and she wants to come with. Does Skye have a small adult rabbit helmet handy at her shop?*

**Long-Legs:**

*Skye says that she has a spare rabbit helmet. And if we are going riding with a rabbit, she wants to come with. Is that okay?*

**Big-Ears:**

*Sure, as long as she doesn’t molest the rabbit or try to kidnap her. I’m only babysitting - I have to give her back tonight. Meet you at Crazy Steve’s in 20?*

**Long-Legs:**

*Will do, Daddy-O!*

He looked up at Judy, “Okay, her mechanic has a helmet, and will probably be joining us as well. You okay hanging with bikers tonight?”

“Sure, I suppose.” Judy answered. It’s not like she had anywhere else to go.

Fennick hopped down out of his chair, “Come on, let’s take a walk down to Crazy Steve’s. It’s this little omnivore place about five blocks away, and they’ve got this vegetarian lentil soup I think you’ll like.”

“Oh! I haven’t had lentils in a long time. That sounds good to me.” Judy hopped down herself and walked out to the hall. Fennick closed his door and guided Judy out of the building.

As they were walking towards the restaurant Fennick was thinking, *Hey, if Skye’s there, then she*
can entertain the rabbit while he talks to Marilyn about the cluster fuck he has just found himself in. Hummm... Should he warn Judy about Skye’s little rabbit fetish? Nah! He’ll let her find out herself! This should be fun to watch!

Chapter End Notes

Just to clear up some Reboot Confusion: In the original Debts Unpaid AU, chapters 1-18, everybody knows who Judy is. After the reboot, nobody in Zootopia would "remember" Judy Hopps the police officer. But they will still encounter her, and know who she is by this point in the story. Cheryl will have encountered her in a restaurant on the West Coast, and since it was a traumatic experience for her lover Catherine Latrans, Cheryl will remember Judy Hopps well. Fennick knows about her since Hugo wouldn't shut up about her when they first started working together 13 years ago. Nick would have studied high profile murder cases during his time at the Police Academy, and this murder was definitely that.

They all know who she is, just not who she was.
Flashback: A New Start

Chapter Summary

It's been a year since Judy left Bunny Burrow behind. She's taken on a new identity, a new job, and a new roommate. At her roommate's art showing, Judy has a fateful meeting with a photographer, and this gives her roommate some concerns.

Chapter Notes

It's a short one now: only 3,800 words. Well, short in relation to the last chapter, that is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Flashback: 9 years earlier in Gateway Bay City

“Order up on Six!” The cook behind the counter called out.

“I got it!” A small grey and white rabbit, clad in a pink plaid dress and a white apron with a small name tag with “Jessica” written, stood on her toes and pulled the two plates off the shelf and down to the counter in front of herself. She stuffed her order pad into the apron pocket, and picked up a plate in each paw. A grilled salmon sandwich with french fries and a shrimp salad with raspberry vinaigrette for the young dingo tourist couple on table six. They were wandering around Gateway Bay City doing the typical tourist things, and eating at a 50’s style diner was on their vacation bucket list.

She wed her way through the crowded restaurant to their table, sliding the sandwich in front of the male, and the salad in front of the female. “So I told the cook that you were from Down Under, and he said he’d wipe up some chicken salt for your fries; I think that’s what’s sprinkled on top of them. But if it doesn’t taste right, let me know, and the cook will fix it for you.”

“Ah, thank you!” The dingo took a bite, and with a smile on his muzzle he shook his head affirmatively.

“Alright, you enjoy your dinner, and I’ll be back to check on you both in a bit.” She made her way back to the counter and pulled out her order book, checking the entries against the computer screen, while the din and bustle of a busy restaurant continued in the background.
Judy had been lucky to find the waitressing job at Dee’s Kitchen. Gateway Bay City was a busy
city, with an active economy, so good jobs went fast. She had been concerned a year ago that the
fake ID that she had acquired from an underground counterfeiter wouldn’t stand up to scrutiny, but
the old anteater swore that it would pass easily; he had been indignant when she suggested that his
forgery skills were less than professional. She had never thought her former skills as a police
officer in another life would come in equally handy breaking the law. The irony was that it had
definitely helped her with understanding the counterfeiting lingo as well knowing who in the city
she should approach. It had taken most of her left over cash from her father’s tractor fund, but in
the end she had a set of working IDs identifying her as “Jessica Jumps” from Podunk.

It turned out that he was right. Most businesses in Gateway Bay were so desperate for employees
that they never even bothered with running a background check, figuring that losses from theft
were less than the losses from customers they couldn’t serve. Still, she had gotten a temp job as a
clerk at a donut counter, tucked inside a grimy truck stop, to start with. It wasn’t the cleanest place,
so they weren’t really fussy about her appearance, which was advantageous since she was living
out of a tent in the woods behind the truck stop.

That job gave her a start, and from there she had both found the waitressing job at Dee’s and a
roommate, an art student who needed help with the lease for her little attic apartment in an old row-
house. Her name was Moni, and she was a capybara from Amazonia who was finishing up her art
degree from the Gateway Bay Art Institute.

As for her job at Dee’s, it also helped that the Golden State didn’t collect income taxes. Too many
immigrants coming and going made enforcing those taxes difficult for the state and local
governments, so instead they had enacted sales and property taxes for all their fiscal needs. It made
the cost of living really high, but for somebody like Judy, who was desperately trying to fly under
the government’s radar, it was the perfect Northern Zoonia state to hide in, far, far away from her
past life on the east coast. Here nobody knew what the Cliffside Asylum even was, much less care
who the Bunny Burrow Predator Killer might be.

That was the plus side to working at Dee’s. The downside had been getting used to the smell and
appearance of cooked meat in an omnivore restaurant. But after a couple of trips on the first day to
empty her stomach in the commode, she bit back her bile, and toughed it out. Now, after a year, it
barely bothered her. She wondered what her family back home would think of that.
The evening dinner crowd had filtered out, and Judy was left with a smattering of regulars at the counter. She was serving coffee to a koala DJ on the way to his next gig when her roommate hurried in through the door. Moni slid onto a free stool and grabbed a menu. Judy filled her a glass of cola, and placed the beverage on a napkin in front of the capybara.

“Hey, roomie.” Judy greeted her. “You want food too, or just the soda?”

“Uh… I don’t know… Do we really have time?” Moni looked over the menu at her. She looked nervous to the rabbit.

“I’ve got ten more minutes before I can clock out, so yeah. Besides, it’s your showing we’re going to. You know when it starts. Tell you what, how about a simple quinoa and kale salad? Quick, easy, and you should be able to hold it down.” Judy grinned over at the agitated rodent. It was Moni’s first major exhibition of her paintings at the Institute, and she was definitely showing her nervousness.

“Jessica! I’m not going to vomit all over my paintings! I might all over Professor Rivers, but that’s only if he tries to complain again about my use of negative space.” Moni wagged her paw at Judy. “Estoy Bien!”

“Uh Huh.” Judy turned away, and reached under the counter into the salad chiller. She pulled out the salad, and put it up on the counter, where she dashed some vinegar, olive oil, and salt on the top before sliding it front of her roommate. “There you go. Enjoy. It’s on me tonight.” Judy dug through her tips, and pulled enough out to cover the salad and soda, and put it on the counter in front of Moni.

“Oh, Jessica, you don’t have too!” Moni assured her. “I can pay!”

Judy just shook her head, “No, not tonight. Tonight is special! It’s your first major public showing we’re going to. Now eat up, so I can go clock out.” Judy left her to bolt down the salad, and walked back down the counter to check on her other patrons.

They were outside the restaurant fifteen minutes later. Judy had quickly changed into a simple white halter top and blue jeans, certainly plainer attire then Moni’s fancy red dress, but Judy wasn’t trying to impress anybody tonight. She was just going to be moral support: either the designated sober person for her companion and her fellow students if the show went well, or the shoulder to cry on if it went poorly. Judy didn’t think it would, but she thought Moni was a wonderful painter, so maybe she was just biased.
They jumped on the 47 bus and passed the time it took to get to her school chatting about their day, Judy telling her about the tourists she met, and Moni told her about rushing to finish her master piece. She was really looking forward to seeing what Judy thought of it.

After getting off the bus, they walked the short way to the school’s main gallery. The exhibit was the result of Moni’s Visual Culture class, and the students and faculty were already there, milling around the exhibit. Judy stood back, and watched the bustle take place. She felt a little out of place, a stranger in a strange land, unable to really relate to the students around her. In a previous life, she had attend college for 4 years, and she knew that she had gotten a criminal justice degree. But 10 years after her “reboot”, she was finding it really difficult to remember details about her previously life.

*Good Gravy, it was almost 19 years ago that I was last in college. That’s a long time. And all the time that Cliffside spent mucking up my brain didn’t help my memories any.* Judy seethed.

She had gone to a party with Moni, a month or two after she had moved in with her, and they had gotten involved in a conversation with the females at the party about their first romantic kiss. They gone around the table, and by the time it got to be Judy’s turn she had been struggling to remember when her first kiss was. It wasn’t Nick, it couldn’t be. She had a girlfriend for a short time in high school, and that had been her first real relationship. But she could not, for the life of her, remember her girlfriend’s name or even her face. All she knew was that it had happened, but she couldn’t recall any details. She had gotten by her turn by telling it that it had been her girlfriend, but she didn’t tell them any more. Because she didn’t know, and that troubled her.

It had been a couple of days after that party that Judy finally had a day off from work, and she went to the UCGC medical campus to peruse the student library. She had spent the day researching what kind of drugs she might have been subjected to at Cliffside, and the only conclusion she could come up with was that it was a miracle that she had been able to escape that hellhole alive and somewhat sane. Almost every class of drug she could find that she might have been given, from benzodiazepine to thorazine, carried serious side effects individually. Taken in combination the side effects from the various drugs, especially on her memory formation and retention, had been disastrous.

She had gone into Cliffside as a perfectly sane eleven year old kit, and left a terribly broken eighteen year old adult. No wonder she was having rage issues, as well as bouts of anxiety and depression, episodes of excessive risk taking, and to top it all off, a memory as riddled with holes as a termite infested log. She knew that she could work on the emotional issues, but the memories she would never get back. They were gone with yesterday’s rains.

*Damn it. When the Divine had said that she would suffer, She hadn’t been kidding. Judy had*
expected to lose her freedom, her family, and her fox. She hadn’t expected to lose…herself.

Crap. Judy knew she was brooding, and if she let it go too long, she would start getting angry, and this really wasn’t the place for that. She had to find Moni, or maybe even raid the punch bowl. Why did I volunteer to be the sober one tonight? I need a drink! Screw the whole being nineteen thing again!

As she search through the gallery for her roommate, she passed by an absolutely striking painting. Oh, Moni. He’s beautiful! Moni had certainly done a superb job with the Visual Culture portion of her master piece.

It was a portrait of a tall jaguar, black as night, set against the background of an emerald green jungle. Judy leaned in, and the amount of detail she saw was absolutely exquisite. Each leaf in the jungle was individually painted, and peeking from between them were the colorful faces of the forest denizens. He was naked save for the crown of iridescent feathers adorning his head, and hidden in the blackness of his fur was a multitude of stars, comets, and galaxies. This Jaguar was regal, proud in his bearing, and assured in his power. He was a thing of pure beauty.

Judy wondered who Moni had used as a model.

“I don’t get it,” a voice spoke up from beside her. Judy turned her head, and her eyes fell on the third species from Down Under that she had encountered today, and perhaps their most famous of natives – a Red Kangaroo. He was dressed in a simple black kilt and a photographer’s vest, and he had a rugged DSLR hanging from a strap around his neck. He pointed at the painting, “Is this a cultural figure? Was he an important lord or something? The tag just says ‘Lord Jaguar’ with nothing else explaining who that was.”

“He is Death.” Judy explained. The kangaroo started a bit and stared down at her. She smiled back at him. “He is Lord Jaguar, Guardian of the Underworld. He is the portal through which all living things must pass on their way to the Infinite.” As she explained to the kangaroo, she pointed to the faces hiding in the jungle and at the stars in his fur. “Death is a terrible predator, from which there is no escape. But he is also gentle and unhurried, for all will come to him in their own time.”

Her smiled faded from her muzzle, but she continued, “He is an important religious figure in many of the mythologies found in the southern continent. The jaguar was the largest land carnivore there, and most of the prey species treated him with respect.”

“Most?” He inquired of her.
“Yeah, most. Except for the llamas. They were right bastards, and in the old days they would chase down any jaguar they could find and kill it. According to my roommate they are still bastards, so most predators avoid them and their mountain cities.” She shrugged.

“Oh, so you’re not the artist of this painting, I take it then?” He gestured at her and then at the painting.

“Nooo, that’s my roommate Moni. She does the painting thing. I’m just here for the moral support and what not.” Judy explained offhandedly as she waved her paw and shook her head. She looked up at him. “And you, what are you here for? I don’t take you to be a painter as well.” She pointed to his photo gear.

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, I’m a freelance photographer. I’m doing a piece for the Gateway Chronicle on the local art schools, and I saw this exhibit come up on the Institute’s website, so I came down to take a look. I don’t really know what I’m going to do with this, honestly. I’m probably just get some wide shots of the students interacting with the visitors. Mammals moving slowly really isn’t my area of expertise.”

“Oh?” Judy’s curiosity was piqued, “and what might you prefer? Mammals moving quickly?”

“Yeah. I do a lot of sports photography, as well as photos of cars and motorcycles. Anything that moves fast, or has the potential to move fast. Well, I take that back. Not everything I do is fast. I also do some studio photography of the local alt scene.”

“Alt scene? What’s that?” Judy had never heard that term before. Or at least, she thought she hadn’t. It was so difficult to be sure, and she didn’t want to be so obviously ignorant that she appeared out of place. She worked really hard to fit in here, which was ironic since she hardly fit in back home.

“The alternative culture scene? You’ve never heard of that?” He looked askance at her.

“Nope, Sorry. I’m a country yokel from Podunk, back east. We’re kinda backwater rabbits out there.” She grinned as she fibbed her way through her cover story.

“Oh, so what are you doing here? Are you going to school here too?” He asked her.
“Nope, I’m just out here, exploring the world. My Da wanted me to farm, and I thought that was a stupid idea, so here I am.” She had decided that it was probably best to keep her story as close to the truth as possible, including the family problems that had driven her away. Less to keep track of and expose her. As for Podunk, she had cousins out that way, so she knew how they lived.

“Ah, well before I try to explain that to you, I might want to have a drink. Is there a refreshment table around here?” He stood up on his toes to look around.

“Yeah, it’s over there,” Judy pointed behind a partition on the other side of the room. “And if you could get me a cup of the punch, I’ll be your friend forever,” she promised as she smiled up at him.

He quirked an ear at her, obviously asking why.

She responded by holding her paw up like she was trying to touch the top of her ears, “I’m too short. I can’t reach the ladle. I could probably jump up on the table, but I don’t imagine that ending very well.”

He leaned back on his tail, appraising her form. “Yeah, I could see that.” She had a lean and trim figure, not wide hipped like most of the adult female rabbits he had encountered previously. He wondered if she had ever done any modeling before. He had a project coming up where the client had specifically asked for a rabbit model, but he didn’t know any locally. Well, maybe after he got her some punch, he could ask her. He held out his paw, indicating that she should lead. As she walked away from the painting toward the refreshments table, he followed along, watching how her butt moved in her jeans. Yeah, his client would definitely like her. Now he just had to convince her to try it.

* * * * *

“WHAAAAATTTT??!!!”

Moni had been chatting with a couple of her fellow painters, complaining about deadlines as always. She was having a pretty good time, and since her professor hadn’t complained, she was feeling pretty mellow. So when Judy’s screech rang though the quiet burble of conversations, Moni’s heart jumped, and she ran toward the sound.

She turned a corner, and standing by the refreshment table were two long eared mammals, one
small and one tall, both looking very embarrassed. She walked up to the small one and asked, “Jessica, are you okay?”

Judy, her ears back in embarrassment, stood there holding a cup of punch in one paw and a business card. She bit out through her teeth, “I’m Fine! Just fine!” To the larger kangaroo who was trying to take the business card back she said, “No, I’ll Call You! I’ll call you.” She stuffed the card in her back pocket, and grabbing her larger roommate’s arm, she walked them both quickly out of the gallery and into the night air. She was so embarrassed at her outburst.

“Jessica, what happened?” Moni reached out and touched Judy’s shoulder. She was concerned about her little friend. Had the kangaroo tried to hit on her or something, maybe done something in appropriate?

“I’m sorry I yelled. I don’t know why I was so shocked.” Judy laid her paw on her friend’s paw. “He just asked me if I modeled, so I told him about the figure modeling I’ve done for your classes. Turns out he meant more like glamour modeling, in very skimpy bikinis. It kinda sounded interesting.”

Moni grabbed Judy’s paw, “Jessica, you have to be careful. He might be some pervert trying to do backroom pornos or something.” She didn’t want her friend to get hurt.

“Maybe, but most of what he was describing was going to auto and motorcycle show and taking pictures of the machines with me draped all over them. That part I don’t have a problem with; I love powerful cars and gnarly motorcycles. And the near nudity isn’t really a problem, not after I got past that first nude figure class I posed in for you last semester. What made me yell was his advice on how to ‘make love to the motorcycle’. It was kinda graphic.” Judy just shook her head, her embarrassment fading. “He was just as embarrassed to tell me as I was to hear it.” She smiled. She looked up at the capybara, “He invited me to go with him to the wharf this weekend for a chopper expo, just to try it out. It’s a paid gig just like I do for the school, in public, and he doesn’t mind if I bring a friend. Would you come with me? You could do some sketching too, so it won’t be down time for you.” Judy beseeched the larger rodent, “Plus I could really use the money. Please?”

“Jessica, I don’t know. It sounds kind of risky.” Moni just shook her head. Her roommate had a daredevil streak to her, one that Moni had trouble reining in at times. True, she had managed to learn to surf, which is probably what she wanted to spend the money on, but the first few times that her roommate took a spill Moni had been convinced that the rabbit was going to die out in the ocean waves.
“Tell you what, we’ll take a look at his website, and if it’s all crap, I’ll dump the card. But if it’s classy and not crassy, we could give it a try this weekend?” Judy offered by way of compromise.

Moni took a deep breath. *I’m going to regret this, I just know it!*

“Okay.”

* * * * * *

It turned out Moni’s initial fears were unfounded. Tony, the kangaroo photographer, had turned out to be a gentle-mammal of his word. The weekend Chopper Expo had been very public, so there weren’t any opportunities for him to steal Judy away for any hanky-panky. It had also been filled with powerful machines, covered in gleaming chrome and expensive crocodile leather, which Judy just drooled over when she wasn’t posing for Tony.

The only downside to the day, other than the noisy crowds and all the walking, had come late in the afternoon when her roommate injured herself. She accidentally burned her paw on a hot exhaust pipe. But it turned out there were quite a few doctors among the tough looking bikers roaming the expo who were more than willing to help with her burn. She had basked in their attentions while Moni just stood to the side and just shook her head. Nobody was paying that kind of attention to her.

Well, she wasn’t wearing a tiny black bikini either, but she would probably have died of embarrassment had the bold rabbit suggested it. She was the show-off, not poor Moni. She could just hear her mother lecturing her on the proper behavior for an Amazonia capybara.

Moni was concerned, though. What would happen to her friend when Moni went back to Amazonia after graduating in a year? She wouldn’t be here to moderate her friend’s impulses. What would she do if Moni wasn’t around?

She just hoped her little rabbit won’t get into any trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Judy as an overworked waitress!
Judy catching a wave! By Qalcove over on Deviant art.

Judy as a bike babe in daisy dukes! By Akiric over on Deviant art.

Working Demo of Lord Jaguar by this very poor artist - Me!
Chapter Summary

This is it. The midpoint of the story. This is where it all changes. Are you ready?

Hugo has been summoned to meet his partner to look at a patient. It's a goat who's brained himself, and they have to figure out why. Along the way, they will run into an old adversary of theirs, and his face has now changed.

Night Howler has returned. And Zootopia will never be the same again.

Chapter Notes

I struggled to write this chapter, because of it's importance in this story, and it is one of the few that I completed in chunks, starting with the last part first. I struggled with the humor of Hugo and Emmanuel's relationship. I struggled with dramatic timing. I struggled with the science. I struggled with all 7,247 words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday Afternoon: Tundra Town Central Hospital, Intensive Care Unit

Hugo walked into the Tundra Town Central Hospital’s ICU, pausing at the nursing station, “Which room is Doctor Muskat in?” he asked the nurse sitting there as she filled out paperwork.

The ibex doe pointed down the hall, “Room 113, sir.”

Hugo smiled, “Thank you, Isabella.” She nodded, turning back to fill out the myriad of medical forms in front of her.

He walked down to the room, and poked his head in. The darkened room had one occupant lying nude on the bed, covered with a white sheet, a middle age Hircus goat by the look of it. Sitting in the chair on the other side of the room was his friend and fellow medical partner, Doctor Emmanuel Muskat, sorting through a file under the light of a floor lamp. Hugo smiled at the muskrat in blue scrubs, “Hello, Emmanuel. What is going on with the patient?”

Doctor Muskat looked up from his paperwork. Ah! Good, he’s here. This case had him concerned,
and he hoped Hugo could shed some light on it.

“Shalom, Hugo.” He closed the folder, and used it to point at the goat while he stood up, “The patient is a Hircus goat, approximately 40 years of age, who was brought in the ER early this morning with severe cranial trauma and bleeding from several cuts and scrapes on his scalp. He was found in a parking garage in Tundra Town, by the parking attendant, adjacent to a support column. The attendant had heard banging noises from inside the garage, and when she went to investigate, she found him. She doesn’t know what he was doing or how he got in there. Hopefully, we’ll know more when the security company that monitors the garage sends us over the video footage.”

He pointed to the skull, “When the resident examined him in the ER, he found clear fluid mixed in with the blood seeping from the scalp wounds, so they called me in to examine him. While they waited, they also managed to get some cranial x-rays done, and based on that, they determined he had several severe fractures across the crown. As soon as I arrived, I had them put him into surgery where I went to work with my surgical team. I cleaned up the scrapes, and based on the clear fluid leaking out, I assessed there was at least one puncture in the meninges as well as a buildup of cranial pressure. I installed a temporary sigma shunt on top of his skull,” pointing to a wad of gauze in between the horns, “so that we could bring down the pressure, as well as test the fluid for infections. All pretty standard head trauma stuff.” He pulled out several pictures out of the folder, and laid on the bed next to the patient for Hugo to look at. “The reason I called you in were these,” pointing at the pictures.

Hugo picked them up, and took them over to the floor light. He was looking at the exposed crown of the skull, where Emmanuel had pulled back to the fur and skin to show the fractured bone surface. The skull bone surface was crisscrossed with a crazy quilt of prior fracture scars, some even recently healed. This goat had been exposed to multiple head traumas over his lifespan. Hugo also noticed something else in the photos.

“I know this goat.” He pointed at the right horn, “I can tell by the broken horn tip. I was at the Tundra Town Clinic yesterday, and I was called into consult on him. They must have discharged him after I left.” Hugo explained to his fellow doctor.

“You know who he is? Good, because we’ve got nothing on him. No identification, and no files that the nurses could find.” Emmanuel frowned, wrinkling his nose.

“I don’t know his name. Amanda just called him ‘the giggler’. He was sleeping at the time I saw him, so I didn’t get a chance to ask him his name. She probably has his current files. I can ask her,” Hugo promised him. “I didn’t see this level of fracturing in his x-rays when I was looking at them with her.” Hugo frowned, “Their machine doesn’t have the best resolution, and a goat’s skull is pretty thick anyway, so little details like this can get lost. I’m sorry, I didn’t see this damage earlier.”
Emmanuel assured him, “That’s okay, the free clinics aren’t really setup to handle severe cranial trauma anyway. That’s not their purpose, and I understand that. Anything in his blood work?” he asked.

Hugo just shook his head, “They have to send out for that, since they don’t have a dedicated lab.” He paused for a moment, “In fact, I think they send the blood samples here for testing. It’s probably up in Hematology right now.” Hugo handed the photos back to Emmanuel, and grabbed a pair of gloves to put on, “We can ask them, after I get a chance to examine the patient, if you don’t mind.” He turned back to Emmanuel, waiting for permission.

“By all means,” the muskrat gestured, smiling. The cat was always so very formal, even with his friends. Other than Hugo, only my mother still calls me Emmanuel. Everybody else, including my wife, calls me Emmi. But not the cat. Not Hugo.

Hugo stepped up to the beside. He peeled back an eye lid to examine the eye, “Pupils are blown, consistent with swelling in the brain.” As he pulled back to examine the rest of the skull, he glanced down at the chest and noticed something odd. He felt along the armpits of the goat and found what he was looking for. “The lymph nodes are swollen.”

Emmanuel frowned, “Meningitis?”

“Maybe,” Hugo allowed. “His skull is certainly been fractured enough that it might have allowed an external infection to set in. That doesn’t explain all the previous fractures, though.” Hugo felt along the rest of the body. Thin, so very thin. This goat was severely malnourished as well as traumatized. Maybe there was an underlying psychological reason for the injuries. “It could be schizophrenia. He’s the right age and definitely shows a lack of self-care. He could be self harming in an attempt to silence the voices or control the hallucinations.” Hugo pointed out.

“Self harming? By running into a concrete post?” Emmanuel twitched his ears.

“Maybe? Is the footage in yet?” Hugo asked.

“We’ll ask at the nurses’ station. Are you done?” He inquired.

“Almost.” Hugo returned to the skull for one last check. He lift the right ear to look for discharges from the ear canal, and saw something else. “He has a tattoo on the inside of the ear. It’s pretty old
and faded, but it looks like it might be a prison tattoo.” Hugo stepped back, and stripped off his
gloves, throwing them away in the bio-hazard bin. “Some of the conservative Zoonia states still do
that for their prison inmates. That might help us identify him.” He explained to Emmanuel while he
washed his paws.

“It’s a start,” Emmanuel agreed as they walked out of the room and down to the station. Emmanuel
asked the nurse, “Is the footage from the parking garage in yet?”

Isabella nodded, “Yes, Doctor. I’ll pull it up on the monitor.” She played the clip for them, as they
crowded around her workstation to watch.

The goat could be seen entering the garage by climbing over the exterior wall. He wandered
around the space in a furtive manner, looking over his shoulder often, as he checked between the
cars.

“Is he looking for a car to break in?” the nurse asked.

As he watched Hugo was struck by an idea as he observed the goat’s body language, “No, I think
he’s looking for a place to hide.”

“In a well lit garage?” Emmanuel was surprised at that idea.

Hugo just shrugged, turning back to watch the footage. The goat wandered around the vehicles,
and stopped at what appeared to be a large black pickup truck. He examined the door carefully
before suddenly drawing back and ramming the side panel with his head. After denting that door,
he wandered back out to the center lane, where he then rammed the grill work on another truck
with his head. Shaking himself off, he wandered along the center lane until he spotted a well lit
cement column. Drawing himself back, he appeared to give a scream and ran full tilt into the
column, hitting it and collapsing on the concrete.

Emmanuel was confused, “What was he doing? Was he drunk? No, that can’t be. I didn’t smell any
alcohol when I was treating him.”

Hugo stood back, holding his jaw with his paw, “Hum… Zoom in on the pole, please.” He asked
Isabella. She rewound the file, and zoomed in as it played. Hugo traced the outline of the column
on the screen with his claw as the goat hit it. “Oh! The column is sheathed in stainless steel
sheeting, to protect the paint! That’s why the patient is ramming it! He’s seeing his reflection, and
he thinks it’s a challenger. That’s probably why he rammed the trucks too. He could see himself.” Hugo excitedly explained.

“What would cause that?” The nurse curiously asked. This was fascinating, if not a bit funny as well. She had morbid sense of humor.

“Schizophrenia, definitely, if he’s having an hallucination fugue. Tumors can also cause dissociative vision effects, as well as drugs like magic mushrooms or LSD.” Hugo explained to them, “There are any number of disorders or drugs that could cause him to become dissociated from his own self image and aggressively territorial, and… and… Oh No!” Hugo grabbed the phone, and dialed the Hematology lab.

As soon as the line was picked up, Hugo was talking, “This is Doctor Wiedii from Neurology, and we have an emergency down here in ICU. We have a patient, a male goat, that you should have received a blood sample for already, as well a cranial fluid sample. I believe this patient is the same goat that the TTFC sent in for testing yesterday morning. I want all three samples found and tested immediately for the standard battery as well as four other tests: Caseous Lymphadenitis, Meningitis, Rabies, and,” Hugo paused for a moment, looking at the screen before continuing, “Night Howler bio-toxin. Do you understand me?” The voice on the other end affirmed the order, and read it back to him. “Yes, please. Right now. Doctor Muskat and I will be up there shortly. Thank you.” Hugo hung up the phone.

“Night howler? He’s a goat!” Emmanuel gestured at the screen, as he stood upright and faced his partner.

“Night howler, in low levels of toxicity can lead to a dissociative state, where by the mammal reverts to a more primitive behaviors, like increased fear, a desire to hide, and territorial displays. Not necessarily a full blown, fully disconnected savage event, mind you, but something much more mild. If our homeless goat here had wandered into some one’s garden and ate a Night Howler Crocus, for instance, it could account for his behavior.” Hugo explained to him.

“Isn’t night howler use tightly controlled?” the nurse asked Hugo.

“Yes, it is for new plants. If you went to a nursery and tried to order some midnicampum holicithias bulbs today, you wouldn’t be able to. But it’s been a popular ornamental in Zootopian gardens for many years because of it’s beneficial toxicity to marauding insects that could eat the other plants. It’s also a perennial that will slowly spread underground for years, so it can be very persistent and difficult to eradicate. The flower may be well recognized, but the plant itself isn’t. Without the flower, it looks like any other crocus.”
Hugo continued, “Which is ironic, since the leaves are actually more toxic than the flowers. If our intrepid goat had raided a garden where the crocus was growing but not flowering, he could have consumed them completely by accident, and not even noticed any difference in taste. Goats are notoriously indifferent consumers of vegetable materials, especially when they are hungry.”

Emmanuel just shook his head at that encyclopedic answer. So Hugo. Why tell a short answer when a really long will do instead? “If you’re done with the seminar, Hugo, shall we go on upstairs?” Emmanuel quirk his ear at Hugo, and grinned.

Hugo looked at him with a pinched expression, clearly not finding that funny, and strode out from behind the desk and down the hall. Emmanuel just rolled his eyes. *The cat is always so tachlis!* He hurried to catch up.

“Hugo, wait up. I don’t have your long legs.” Emmanuel admonished him.

Hugo stopped, and turned to face the slower muskrat. He gave the rodent his best ‘I’m mad at you’ cat stare. Emmanuel just smiled at the earnest feline, “I’m sorry. You were saying?”

“Education is important, Emmanuel, even for something as esoteric as night howler. These nurses will need to know what they could be dealing with, even if it’s not a common toxin.” Hugo wagged his finger at his shorter compatriot, and continued down the hall at a slower pace.

“I would agree! So what’s Caseous Lymphadenitis?” He had never heard of that particular disease before, and nothing made Hugo happier than a chance to educate the ignorant.

“It’s a highly infectious wasting disease that affects sheep and goats, and it has no cure. It forms large pus filled cysts on the skin and internal organs, including the brain. One of the first signs of infection are inflamed lymph nodes. If he were sick with that, it could also be causing some of the behaviors we saw, although it doesn’t explain the previous fractures on the skull. But I thought they should test for it anyway.” Having arrived at the elevators, Hugo pushed the up arrow.

“I see.” Emmanuel replied, “And the information on low level night howler? Where did you get that? I’ve not seen anything that anywhere in our neurology literature recently.”

“Ah. No. It’s not actually in the literature. When I was first called in to work on the Night Howler task force three years ago, I met a coyote there. Officer Nick Wilde had brought her in from Zootopia University, where she is a comparative religions professor, to assist in the case.”
The elevator opened up, and they stepped on to it. He turned and gave Hugo a look that said, *Really, a professor of religion from Zootopia’s notoriously liberal University. That must have been a joy!*

Hugo caught the look as he was pushing the button for the Hematology floor. He shook his head. “It’s not like that. Professor Silverheels was actually pretty good, both on the biological side and the cultural side of the problem. She’s a member of the Coyote Nation, and apparently they have legal dispensation to use midnicampum holicithias in their rituals. She’s even taken it herself during a ceremony. She said that if it’s prepared right, it can be a very transcendental experience. But she also warned us what could go wrong if it’s prepared incorrectly and what it’s side effects would be like. She was quite a valuable member of the task force, in my opinion.” He nodded.

DING! The elevator stopped at their floor. They stepped out, and walked down the hall to the lab at the far end. Hugo held the door open for his shorter companion, and following in after the muskrat he witnessed a scene of quiet pandemonium. Mammals in white lab coats were rushing back and forth from machine to machine, talking to each other in rushed whispers.

Emmanuel cleared his throat, and every mammal in the room froze. Doctor Uguduwa, director of the Hematology lab, hurried over to meet them. She quickly gestured for them to follow her into her office. She must be really upset, Hugo realized, since she was unconsciously releasing a little bit of her civet cat musk with every step she took.

She closed the door, and motioned them to be seated in front of her desk. As she climbed into her chair, the action released more musk, which made Hugo’s eyes water and caused Emmanuel to start sneezing.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” She repeated, and pulled a can of scent neutralizer out of her desk drawer and sprayed it around the room.

Hugo grabbed two tissues off her desk and hand one to Emmanuel while he used the other to wipe his eyes. He waved his paw at her, “It’s quiet alright, Asheni, it’s alright. I take it you found something? Night howler, perhaps?”

She nodded vigorously, “Oh, yes, we did. It’s chemical reaction markers are in both the blood sample and the cranial fluid sample from today. But that’s not what I’m worried about.” She shook her head, “No, night-howler has a perfectly good treatment now, one that is more than 95% effective, and as long as the patient has plenty of water during the treatment, they should make a full recovery. No.” She was typing on her keyboard. “No, what has me and my entire team concerned is this!” She turned her monitor around to face them.
Hugo and Emmanuel stared at the screen. Emmanuel asked her, “What is it?”

She sat back in her seat, “I don’t know. Nobody on my team has ever seen anything like it.”

Hugo slipped out of his seat so that he could take a closer look at the microscope picture on her monitor. It was a picture of mammal blood at high magnification, the red blood cells about the size of a dime on the screen. Scattered around the picture were also blue stained lymphocytes, probably T or B cells, from their size relative to the red blood cells. And in the center of the photo was an anomaly.

It was blue stained like the lymphocytes, but with regular triangular, almost teardrop shaped, lobes coming off the main body. The lobes were too regular in size to be pseudopods. It was too large to be a bacteria cell, and he had never heard of a bacterial colony of this size with radial organization.

“What size are we looking at here?” He asked her.

“It’s about 20 micrometers tip to tip.” She explained to Hugo.

“Is it mobile? Any visible flagella or cilia?” Hugo traced the outline of the cell with his claw.

“Nope. Here, let me pull up another picture.” She hit a key, and the screen changed to another photo, this one with three of these lobed objects in among the red blood cells. One of them even appeared to be laying flat, looking for all the world like a six sided starfish.

“Hum… Too large to be a virus, too small to be a multi-cellular parasite… It might be a cancer cell, except for the organization.” Hugo observed.

Asheni had gone quiet. Emmanuel spoke up first, “Talk to us, Asheni. What’s got you so concerned? What are Hugo and I missing here?”
She took a breath before answering, “The examples you see before you came from today’s blood sample. They are not evident anywhere in yesterday’s sample.”

“You mean that they appeared in our patient’s bloodstream inside 24 hours?” Emmanuel was taken aback by the speed of their appearance.

She nodded.

Hugo leaned around the monitor, “Have you asked Immunology what they think?”

She shook her head, “As soon as we found the first one, we fired off a query to them. They’ve never seen anything like it either. They’re reaching out to research departments across the Commonwealth to see if anyone can shed some light on this thing.” She gestured out at the lab, “They’re going to take a sample from us to run it through the S.E.M. in just a few minutes.”

“Any visible immune response?” Hugo was struggle to come to terms with the level of fear the civet cat was radiating.

“No, not really. The other lymphocytes seem to be ignoring it. We do have one photo of a macrophage investigating one, but after a few seconds time, it goes back to ignoring the starfish, just like all the others.” She gestured at the screen.

Starfish. Emmanuel and Hugo traded a look. Now it has a name.

“And this wasn’t in his system yesterday? No night howler in his system?” Emmanuel asked her one again, just to be sure.

She took a deep breath, before looking up at the muskrat and locking her gaze with his, “We didn’t find any starfish in yesterday’s sample, so far. That’s what everybody is running around looking for right now. But we did find night howler reaction markers, but at a much, much lower level; maybe ten, twelve percent of his levels from today, depending on the sample.” Emmanuel sat back, his face reflecting absolute shock.

CLICK! Hugo realized it sooner than his partner, who didn’t deal with the neurological diseases as much as he did. He spoke first, “It’s a payload delivery system. A microbial based, time delayed, night-howler delivery system. With no external evidence of infection until they ‘hatch’ and flood
the target system with bio-toxin. It could have been delivered as an aerosol, inhaled by the victim, and after it settled in his lungs it took less 24 hours to move into the blood stream, where by it eventually flooded his brain with night-howler.” Hugo’s muzzle was set and his eyes grim.

“Oh, come on, Hugo. That’s pure science fiction conjecture, if not outright comic book fantasy. You’re going directly from correlation to causation in one breath! It’s too damn small for that, and no mammal or group of mammals that we know of is capable of this kind of micro biotech. Beside which, the ZPD shut down Bellwether’s operation 3 year ago. She’s DEAD! Her organization is imprisoned, splintered, and scattered to the winds with hunter/killer teams on their tails for all we know!” Emmanuel indignantly replied. What’s got Hugo so rattled that he’d fire off a crackpot theory like that? He’s always concrete in his thinking!

Asheni’s phone rang. She picked up, and listened for a moment, “Damn, thank you. That was fast work.” She put her phone back, and swung her monitor back. “Somebody really light a fire under Immunology. They just finished the first micrograph, and sent it over to me.” She opened her email and froze, looking at the screen in pure shock. The two other doctors jumped to their feet and rushed around her desk to look.

What they saw could only be described as a miniature midnicampum holicithias flower, twenty micrometers across, frozen in black and white.

Hugo let out a sigh, and looked over at Emmanuel, “Still think I’m jumping to conclusions, Doctor Muskat? That isn’t science fiction.” He pointed at the picture, “That is some scientist mammal showing off!” He traced the outlines, “Look, six petals, 3 three stamen, and a pistil in the middle. Those structures aren’t even necessary for a payload delivery system. It’s a signature, written in proteins, screaming ‘Look at what I can do!’” Hugo waved his paws in the air in disgust.

Emmanuel chewed on his finger while staring at the picture. He quickly turned back to point that finger at Hugo. “Hugo, the ICU team still thinks they’re dealing with a trauma case, not a bio-hazard case.” he reminded his fellow doctor.

“Mierda!” Hugo yelled as he chastised himself, I had been so wrapped in arguing the point with Emmanuel that I forgot where I was! Imbécil!

“Go!” He gestured to Emmanuel, “I’ll call down!” Emmanuel waddled out of the room as fast as his short little muskrat legs would take him.

Grabbing the desk phone, Hugo called down to the ICU nurses station. “ICU, this is Head Nurse Isabella Monte, how may help you?” The ibex greeted him.
“Isabella, this is Doctor Wiedii! Is the patient awake?” Hugo quickly asked her.

“No, but the ZPD officer is trying to wake him. He said something about getting a statement about a garage incident from him. I told him that the patient was sleeping, but he insisted. He’s in there now.” Isabella explained to the clearly excited doctor.

“NO, NO, NO! Get him out of there, and get that patient locked down, now! The patient cracked his head on that concrete column while in a night-howler fueled fugue state! He’s gone fully SAVAGE!” Hugo nearly yelled at her.

“Yes, Doctor!” She disconnected from him. Hugo stared at the phone receiver in momentary disbelief, before he quickly dialed the security front desk. They should still have their riot shields, left over from the species riots three years ago, he hoped.

“Hello, Security Central, this is Director Rargyra, how may I help you?” A calm bovine voice rumbled out of the phone receiver.

“Director Rargyra, this is Doctor Wiedii, and I am issuing an immediate SAVAGE ONE alert. We have a male goat patient unconscious in ICU in the midst of a previously undiagnosed full savage state, and there is a ZPD officer in his room currently trying to wake him. We need your team down there with their riot shields to contain the patient if and when he wakes up. I also need a ZS-1 tranquilizer rifle loaded with enough juice to knock out an enraged goat!”

“Got it, Doc. We are moving!” The director assured him, and hung up.

He turned back to the civet cat, “Asheni, I’m sorry, but I had to use phone.” She just stared, wide eye, at him as he dashed from the room.

* * * * *

Detective Clawhauser shut the patient’s door behind him. He turned to look at the goat laying there, peaceful and quiet. He smiled, and put on his best mammal greeting smile. Walking quietly over to the bedside, he leaned over and whispered to the goat, “I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Goat, but my boss insisted. You’re in a bunch of trouble, Mr. Goat. Not with me, no, not me. You see, that truck door you dented with your head is on a truck that belongs to a very important person in Tundra Town. He’s a polar bear by the name of Raymond, and he works for a very powerful
mammal by the name of Mr. Big. Raymond isn’t happy with his dented door, so he’s complained to his cousin, Captain Snarlov of the Tundra Town Police Department. But since Captain Snarlov doesn’t want to appear like he’s doing favors for Mr. Big, he passed the problem on my Boss, Chief Bogo. Who passed it on to me. And here I am, talking to a sleeping goat. What a wonderful day. I hate Tundra Town. Which isn’t your fault, Mr. Goat. If you want to live here, that’s okay with me. It’s just too cold for my fur.”

Clawhauser stood up and pulled out his phone, “I just need to take a photo of you, Mr. Goat, for our files. The rest of the questions can wait until you wake up, okay?” The detective leaned over the goat, and tapped his camera icon. A quick bright flash in the room, and he had his picture. He turned around, and went to sit in the chair to wait.

After a few minutes, there was a knock at the door. Clawhauser looked up at the door. Oh, it’s the pretty Ibex nurse from the front station. What does she need?

He walked up and open the door, “Yes?” he asked her.

“You need to leave, now!” She whispered to him.

“Leave? Why? I just got here.” He was confused.

“Did you wake him?” She tried to peer into the room.

“No, I let him sleep. What’s wrong with waking him?” Hugo wanted to know.

“Doctor Wiedii just called, and said that he’s in a night howler induced savage state! You can’t wake him!” The ibex nurse insisted.

“Savage? He doesn’t look savage. He looks peaceful.” Clawhauser pointed back at the patient.

“No, You don’t understand! You have to leave!” She stomped her foot. Damn it! Male cops were always so obtuse when she tried to give them directions. Why couldn’t she have gotten a female police officer instead? They were always so much more reasonable.
“Listen. My boss, Chief Bogo of the ZPD, told me that I had to stay here until the patient wakes up.” He put his paw on her shoulder, trying to be as friendly and as calming as possible, “I know Doctor Wiedii, and he knows me. When he gets back down here, I can talk to him, and he can talk to Chief Bogo. I’m sure that we can get this all sorted out, and in the mean time we’ll just let the poor goat sleep, okay?” Clawhauser nodded at her.

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

* * *

The goat awoke to the sound of buzzing. He couldn’t understand what the sound was. His head hurt enough without having to listen to that sound.

***flies*** . ***buzzing***

They weren’t biting flies. That is good. Just annoying. He could sleep still. He was so tired.

***BRIGHT!*** . ***LIGHT!***

A bright light flashed through his eyelids. What was it? He kept his eyelids closed in case the light came again. He sniffed the air.

***CAT!*** . ***PREDATOR!*** . ***EAT!*** . ***SELF!***

He could smell the predator, a male cat. He was close, very close. No, now he is moving away. His ears could hear the cat walking away. No, he would stay right here, and hide from the cat.

***still*** . ***quieter*** . ***hide*** . ***safe***

He heard a sound on wood. The cat’s claws scrabbled on the floor, scratching as he moved. The cat was moving away from him. That was good. Another sound, and more buzzing. So much buzzing.
He sniffed again. A new scent mingled in the air, mixed in with the scent of the predator. A female! A doe’s scent! Their voices are raised! The cat is threatening her!

***PREDATOR!*** . ***EAT!*** . ***DOE!***

His eyes snapped open at the sound of her hoof striking the ground.

***DEFEND!*** . ***DOE!***

He sat up in bed, and he turned to look at the cat and the doe. The cat was putting his paw on her shoulder, and his jaws were close to her head. Too close. It’s the killing strike!

***DEFEND!*** . ***DOE!*** . ***NOW!***

He slid off the bed, but something grabbed his head. He felt behind his head. A long tail was attached to his head. A leech! He grabbed the tail and yanked.

***PAIN!!!***

That hurt! But the pain just fueled his rage! No cat would threaten his doe and live! He screamed his defiance!

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

He ran around the bed. The cat heard him, and pushed the doe down as he turned to face him. The cat had struck his doe! He will die!

***KILL!*** . ***CAT!*** . ***NOW!***
He slammed, head down, at full speed into the chest of the large blue predator, knocking the cat back across the floor. Pain exploded behind the goat’s eyes, and he staggered, gripping the doorway to hold himself upright.

***PAIN!!!***

He shook his head, trying to clear his vision. He sniffed. He could smell her! She was still here! His ear swiveled on the side of his skull, listening to the sound of her hooves scrambling to gain purchase on the slick floor. She was trying to run! No! She would be his!

***CLAIM!!***. ***DOE !***

He stood erect, tilted his head back, and screamed triumphantly!

“BBAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

[Thumpth…] A short cylinder with pink feather wadding at the end suddenly appeared on the side of the goat’s neck.

***FLY!!!***. ***BITE!!!***

He pawed at the cylinder, but it wouldn’t come out.

“Blllleeeaaaaatttt…..”

***COLD!!!***. ***BURN!!!***. ***tired***. ***hurt***

***sleeeeeepppppp***

The goat collapsed in a heap in the middle of the door to his room.
Hugo ran out of the Immunology lab at full speed, but rather than take the elevators like Emmanuel surely did, he opted for the stair well. He punched through the emergency door, and avoiding the oversized stairs altogether, he launched himself up and over the railing. Without letting go of the railing, he swung himself back down and around, aiming at the railing on the lower floor just across and down from him. He sailed over the 50 foot drop of the central stairwell, and landed on the next lower railing with a bang. Turning quickly, he launched himself for the next lower railing.

This is fun! I haven’t done this in years, not since I was a kit!

Climbing was one of the few games that he was better at than his brother growing up. He had his father’s flexibility and balance, but his brother didn’t. He could chase the flying lizards through the trees, and catch them before they escaped. Sometimes, to do that, he had to descend a tree very rapidly, leaping downwards from branch to branch. It was great fun, and made his father proud to watch him, but his mother would always fret and worry that he would fall to his death.

In a matter of seconds, Hugo had descended 50 feet, 5 stories from the Hematology lab. He pounded out the emergency door, adrenaline surging through his system, and ran on all fours down the ground level hall towards the ICU. He passed two slower security guards running down the hall, a rhino and a hippo, carrying their riot shields. Good. He hoped they wouldn’t be needed.

He slowed as he neared the nurses station, standing back up on his rear legs. Director Rargyra was there already, along with a wolf subordinate who was holding the ZS-1 rifle. They were talking in calm voices to the nurses, so everything seem to be okay. Maybe he had panicked and overreacted. But, it was better to be safe than sorry. He did need to talk to them, and make some changes for the patient in terms of security.

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!” The cry echoed down the hall.

Hugo didn’t waste a moment as he snatched the rifle from the wolf’s paws and swung around the nurse station just in time to see the ZPD officer push Isabella to safety before he himself was struck full in the chest by their patient. The yellow cat flew across the hall, and landed against the far wall in a crumpled heap. The goat staggered back into the doorway, grabbing the door frame.

Isabella was scrambling on the tile floor, trying to get away. She was also blocking his shot. *Maldito sea! Get out of the way, Isabella!* Luckily she looked up and saw him, and immediately dropped to the floor. His shot now clear, Hugo brought the rifle up just as the goat started to scream, and from a distance of 20 feet, fired the dart right into the goat’s carotid artery.
It was sad, really, Hugo realized, as the goat collapsed to the floor. That bleat had been so forlorn. The poor goat truly didn’t understand what had just happened to him.

“OFFICER CLAWHAUSER! FREEZE! KEEP YOUR PAWS AT YOUR SIDE AND AWAY FROM YOUR CHEST!” Emmanuel yelled at Clawhauser as he hurried up the hall toward him, his surgeon’s voice cutting through the cheetah’s confusion.

“Wha?” Clawhauser lay on his side against the hallway wall. He had been moving his paws toward his sternum, but froze when the surgeon had screamed at him.

Hugo turned and handed the tranq rifle and his phone to Director Rargyra, and rushed over to Emmanuel. He looked over first at Clawhauser, and holding out his paw without touching the officer, he said in a soothing voice, “It’s okay, Benjamin. You just lay there, and we’ll take of you. Are you in any pain?”

“uh… huh… It hurts to breath, Dr Wiedii, owww...” Clawhauser responded, struggling to draw in breath.

“Well, yeah, you just took a very angry goat to the chest. I expect you might have some cracked ribs. Did you wear your vest?” Hugo gently asked him.

“Always,” Clawhauser managed to gasp out.

“Alright, we are going to take care of you in just a minute, okay. You just stay right there.” Hugo directed Officer Clawhauser.

He turned back to Emmanuel, who was examining the goat laying in the door way without touching him. “What do you think?” Hugo asked his partner, as he held his paw up to prevent any of the other staff from approaching them.

“He’s leaking cranial fluid and blood out of his skull and onto the floor.” Emmanuel looked over at Officer Clawhauser and pointed, “His shirt is soaked with it too. I’m going to call it.” Emmanuel
grimly stated.

Hugo nodded, “I agree. Do it.” He stood back.

Emmanuel raised his voice again as he turned toward the crowded nursing station, “Alright! I am declaring this entire wing a **Level Four Biohazard Area.** Director Rargyra, **lock it down!**” He pointed at the large takin.

“Yes, Sir!” Rargyra barked, grabbing his key ring from his side and strode quickly over to the security station. Sticking his master key into the alarm panel, he turned it on, lighting up the buttons. He selected the button for option four and pushed it. Banging sounds echoed through out the floor as fire doors up and down the halls released and swung shut. The HVAC’s sounds changed as the system switched from general service to full isolation. The next thing he did was pick up the red alert phone so that he could issue an alert to all the relevant government agencies.

Emmanuel turned to face the nursing station. *Good.* They were already hopping, putting on masks and gloves. He pointed at them, “Shut the doors for every patient in this section! They’re stuck there until either I or Doctor Wiedii cancel the alert.” He pointed at a room midway between him and the nurses. “I want that room cleared and set up as a decontamination staging area. Nobody is to approach the patients until they have been decontaminated.” He drew in a deep breath, and settled himself down a bit, “Mammals, we may be dealing with a variant of Night Howler bio-toxin that is potentially delivered by microbial means. We don’t know it’s exact transmissibility, so I am going to assume it’s aerosol. I want you all to respond accordingly.” He turned to look Rargyra, “You’re former military, you know the drill.”

“Yes, sir.” He assured the doctor, “You want us to start setting up bio-seals?” he asked as he was putting on a mask.

“Yes, please.” Emmanuel ordered.

Meanwhile, Hugo had ducked into a supply closet. Grabbing a nursing cart, he loaded it up with disinfectant, and wheeled it back out and over to Clawhauser’s feet. He immediately started putting on a mask, gloves, and goggles. Once he was done with that, he prepared the same for Emmanuel.

Emmanuel turned to back to the injured cheetah. He held out his paws, and allowed Hugo to prep him. He knelt down by the injured cat and explained, “Officer Clawhauser, we need to get your uniform and necktie off of you. Since they are currently soaked with goat blood and cranial fluid, I’m just going to call them a complete loss and cut them off you. Sorry.” He held out his paw to Hugo, “I need rescue shears and a bucket.” Hugo gave him the shears, and set an empty plastic
waste bin next to the muskrat.

Leaving Clawhauser’s uniform buttoned, Emmanuel quickly cut a large circle out of the front of the officer’s blouse, severing the tie at the neck. He placed the disk of cloth carefully into the trash can, and turned back to his patient. He pointed for Hugo, “It soaked through to the vest. Give me a surgical pad and tape.” Hugo tore open a package, and handed it to him. Emmanuel quickly taped the pad over the vest, sealing in the fluids. Holding the vest straps away from Clawhauser’s body, Emmanuel quickly cut through them as well, and peeled the vest away, placing it in the trash can as well. Clawhauser gasped as his chest was released from the constriction.

Emmanuel nodded to Hugo, “Get him decontaminated, quickly. I’ll seal up the goat.” Emmanuel rocked to his feet and stood back. Hooking his paws under Clawhauser’s armpits, Hugo lifted the larger cheetah and started dragging him down the hall. Clawhauser’s scream of pain at being moved was cut short as he mercifully blacked out.

Hugo quickly dragged his patient into the decontamination area and slipped the poor cheetah into the shower. He slapped the shower controls on, and preceded to hose himself and his patient down thoroughly, completely soaking their clothes and hopefully washing any bio-contaminates away.

He turned off the water, and turned to the two masked nurses who had come into the room with an ambulance stretcher. He pointed to the soaked cheetah, “Tell the floor resident that he has cracked ribs and possibly a cracked sternum as well. I didn’t see any blood, so I don’t think there are any punctures, but he will need to be x-rayed all the same. We’ll check him for concussion once he wakes back up.”

“Yes, Doctor,” They replied, and wheeled the stretcher up to the shower.

Hugo stepped aside to let them work and quickly stripped off his wet clothes. Leaving them on the floor, he quickly towel dried but didn’t use the blowers. He walked out of the bathroom, and grabbed a set of scrubs and booties off the bed that had been laid there by the staff. Dressing quickly, he walked back out to the hall while donning a new mask.

Emmanuel looked like he had finished up with the goat and sterilized the area. He currently was directing two large nurses in isolation suits who were trying to pick up the unconscious mammal as he lay through the door. Good. That gave Hugo a few minutes. He walked over to the nurses station where his phone had been helpfully laid by the security staff. He asked the ibex nurse behind the desk, “Has Immunology and Hematology been alerted?”

“Yes, Doctor Wiedii. Do you need to speak to them?” Isabella offered. She had recovered from her
shock quickly, and was back to work.

“Yes, definitely, once Doctor Muskat is also finished decontaminating.” He nodded to her. Turning away, he looked at his phone. *Mierda!* There was no way he could be back in time to pick up Judy. He’s going to have to ask Fennick to keep her for longer, and probably get her some dinner. Oh, Fennick is going to be annoyed with him for forcing the little fox to babysit for him, that was for sure. No matter.

Red and blue lights started flashing through the windows, attracting his attention. Hugo looked up. The ZPD had arrived in response to Director Rargyra’s alerts. Great, now he was going to have to deal with Bogo and Wilde at the same time.

He quickly entered a bland message telling the fox what happened without possibly alarming him, and ask him to please feed Judy, because he didn’t think he was going to be able to leave the ICU any time soon.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm adding Clawhauser back as a tag! He's now prominent in the story now!

A **Lymphocyte** is a small immune cell prevalent in mammalian blood. A **micrometer (µm)** is pretty darn small - one million's of a meter long. Plastic cling wrap is 10 µm thick, so the object they are looking at is twice that thickness.
Flashback: The First Kiss

Chapter Summary

SKYEHOPPS Alert!

Judy goes to a photo shoot with Tony for a very special client: Skye Cycles! While she there, she meets a very special arctic fox, and extends her an invitation for a date. They go ridding, and experience a very magical moment together. A month later, Judy drops by for some dancing, and learns the fox's real name. Two months after that, Judy has a very bad dream, and she finds her vixen is far more understanding than she ever realized.

Flashback: 9 Years ago in Gateway Bay City

It was a quiet foggy evening at Dee’s Kitchen. The city had grown still as the ocean clouds had rolled in at sundown, and the number of customer’s at Dee’s had dwindled to just a pair of nocturnal kinkajou construction workers, clad in safety vests and hard hats, sitting at the counter eagerly awaiting their breakfast. Judy placed their orders in front of them, a pair of fruit salads, and topped off their iced teas. She flirted with them as a matter of course, since she was a social bunny, but they were anxious to eat and get on to their work, so she left them be with a smile.

She moved down the gray formica counter, wiping it down with a damp cloth. She paused for a moment to watch the fog tumble and roll down a nearly empty Loch Ness Street, the waves of faded combers lit ghostly white by the streetlamps. A sprinkle of disparate mammals hurried past the windows; workers headed home after a long day’s work or to the corner pub for a pint to ward off the evening’s chill.

A low rumble penetrated the gloom, and she turned her ears slightly to the left to listen as it approached. A single headlamp pierced the street’s gloom to shine in through the glass. She couldn’t see the motorcycle itself, as it drew up behind the newspaper dispensers that crowded along the curb next to the iron street lamp post, but she could see the slim vulpine form of the feminine rider. She was clad in a black alligator leather jacket and wore a forest green scarf wrapped around her throat to keep out the damp evening air.

She sat behind the newspaper boxes for a moment, before reaching forward and silencing the rumbling beast with a touch. Her torso rocked to the side, and she slid off the seat to stand along side her steed. Pulling off her half gloves, she walked around the street lamp and fully into Judy’s view. She paused for a moment, as she reached for the straps under her helmet. Judy took that opportunity to admire her muscular form under the black chaps that sheathed her legs, and the long lustrous white tail that was wound around her waist. The rider looked up as she was pulling on her
helmet straps, and saw Judy looking back at her through the plate glass window. She let go of the straps to wave a white paw at her, and reached the other down to unclip her tail, which unfurled around her waist like a fuzzy caterpillar dancing on a leaf, before shaking itself out to lay down those legs. Oh, those legs.

Judy had hoped she hadn’t been too forward at yesterday’s photo shoot with her invitation to the white fox. She thought she was reading the vixen’s signals right, but it had been so long since she had done this particular dance with another female that she wasn’t sure. She had gently hinted that a visit from the snowy female would be welcomed the next day at the end of her shift, especially if it involved the offer of a motorcycle ride. If she showed up, Judy would know that she was interested, and if she didn’t, well, Judy would have just gone home and eaten a pint of blueberry sherbet to console her crush.

It looked like the sherbet would have to wait.

* * *

[DING, DING…]

The door bells chimed as the biker walked in. She paused for a moment to finally pull off her helmet, shaking her head in relief, before taking her gloves and tucking them in her helmet. She raked a paw through her head fur, and flicked her ears, before she looked back up and caught Judy’s eye. Judy smiled, and gestured to the bar stool in front of her. The vixen took her up on her offer, and sat down, setting her helmet on the counter next to her. Judy cocked her head, and took a moment to consider the arctic fox in front of her.

When she had gone with Tony to yesterday’s shoot, all he had told her was the client was a fox who owned a custom motorcycle shop by the name of Skye Cycles, and that he was going to shoot promos with Judy for some of their latest creations. What he failed to mention was the fox was a vixen, an arctic fox vixen at that. She was adorable, Judy had thought, especially since she had been all awkward around Judy. She had stuck her paw out to Judy like her arm was a stick, and introduced herself as ‘Skye d’Hiver’, which was a pretty name for a pretty vixen as far as Judy was concerned. She had explained to them both that she was trying to break into the smaller mammal market with her custom electric motorcycles, which were more easily scalable than a custom gas chopper, and that they allowed the owners to avoid the heavy taxes that the Golden State enforced on gas motorcycles.

That reasoning for the photos was all cut and dry, as far Judy could see, but as Tony set up the lights and reflectors, she had tried to engage the awkward Skye in small talk. She had been confused with why the fox was so out of sorts at first, but as she watched Skye interact with Tony in setting up the shots, she progressively realized that Skye’s awkwardness was reserved strictly
It was later, when they were actually taking the shots, that Judy finally realized why. She had been trying to help Skye actually pose on her own bike, and had been in the process of posing Skye’s arms when she was struck by a change in the vixen’s scent every time she touched her. It was at that point that Judy’s gaydar started twitching in time with her nose; it was Judy herself that was causing these reactions in the vixen. That realization had finally lead to Judy’s invitation to Skye at the end of the shoot. It had been a risk to make the overture, but apparently a risk well spent.

She turned to the seated fox with the offer of a beverage, “Welcome to Dee’s Kitchen, Miss d’Hiver. Would you care for some hot tea?”

“Yes, please.” Skye bobbed her head up and down.

Judy set a saucer and a cup down with practiced easy, dropped in a teabag of chamomile, and with a smooth motion poured in the hot water. “Will you be needing a menu, to consider your options for the evening?” Judy put the pot back, and picked up a menu, “Our special tonight is the tuna fish sandwich, which I have on good authority is excellent, even through I’ve never tasted it.” As she was speaking to Skye, she heard snickering coming from down the counter.

She put one paw down on the counter, put the other paw with the menu on her cocked hip, and turned to face the two jokers down the counter with a scowl. The two kinkajous were trying to hide their laughter behind their paws.

What had set those two off? She wondered. She glanced over Skye, who had sudden gotten bashful, a red tint showing through the ivory fur on her ears. Judy took a quick sniff, and realized that she could smell the arousal in Skye quite easily. She turned back to frown at the construction workers, “Ignore the two fruit eaters at the end of the counter, Skye. They’re a pair of perverts, they are!” They mimed being stricken by her words, one even put his paws over heart and leaning back like he had been shot.

She turned her attention back to the fox, holding out the menu. Skye smiled as she spoke up, “The tuna fish sounds just fine, thank you. No fries, though, please.”

Judy stood back up, and put the menu away. “Roger, that! One tuna fish sandwich coming right up.” She sauntered down behind the counter to the computer to enter in the order, completely conscious of Skye’s gaze on her rump. She stopped in front of the kinkajous, and with a frown pointed two fingers at her eyes, and turned those two fingers to point at the two laughing honey bears. That just made them laugh even harder.

Her duty completed with Skye’s order entered, she wandered back to flirt with the vixen. By the time that the tuna sandwich was ready, the two construction workers had finished up and left, leaving money on the counter to cover their breakfast. Judy knew that they wouldn’t try to stiff
her, not if they knew what was good for them, but she didn’t know what kind of tip they would leave. Apparently, a very good one. Good. Now she didn’t need to spike their tea next time with laxatives.

[DING, DING…]

Judy looked up as the door rang. Was it customers? Judy wondered. Actually, it was just the night waitress, Ayan the aardwolf, coming in for her shift. That meant Judy could clock out, and maybe see where this ride with the vixen took her. As she ran to the back room to change, she considered what her course of action should be.

Am I doing the right thing here? She wondered as she took off her uniform. Skye’s definitely interested, and while I could hold out in the long run for Nick, why would I do that? Could I even find him and try to seduce him? That wouldn’t be fair to him, since he’s got Miki, and a promising career at the ZPD. He couldn’t be a cop and date me. Plus he doesn’t know me here and now. It took us months and months, and a major criminal crisis, for us to even grow close enough for him to admit that he loved me. And now he’s 3000 miles away. I’m sorry, Nick. I want you, but we can’t be together here in this life, and I won’t destroy you just so that I don’t have to be alone anymore.

As she put on what she like to call her fog outfit, heavy jeans, a tee-shirt, and a heavy jean jacket, she pondered that last thought. Is that why I’m doing this, just so I don’t have to be alone? Is that really fair to Skye? How fair is it to dump a crazy bunny like me on her lap and expect her to cope? I only had the one girlfriend in High School, and we kissed a few times, but we weren’t ever really serious. I really don’t know all that much about being lesbian. I know that they tend move faster getting into their relationships than heteros do, so what happens if we get too close too fast? I don’t want to break her heart because I can’t commit. Maybe I just want something light, a few dates, some cuddling, but no real commitment.

She finished dressing, and stared at the mirror. Gahhh! I have no idea what I’m doing! She took a deep breath, One thing a time, Judy! Flirt, then take a ride, and then see what Skye wants, and see whether or not you can accommodate that. Don’t get ahead of yourself here.

She strode out of the back room, seeking answers to those questions.

* * * * *

Judy hung on for dear life, not because Skye was going all that fast in the fog, but because the wet made her leather jacket slick. Judy shoved her paws deep in the pockets on Skye’s jacket, her cheek on the vixen’s spine. She had asked the fox where they were going, but Skye’s only reply had been
‘some place magical’. They had left the city behind and for the past few minutes they had been climbing up the side of the mountain. Judy was conscious of only the wet of the fog, and the steepness of the road as they climbed. She just hoped Skye didn’t run off the road.

They broke through the clouds near the top of the mountain. One minute they were in swirling grayness, and the next thing Judy knew was that they were bathed in starlight. She looked around in wonder, as the fog rolled past the mountain sides below them. It blanketed the city like multi-hued cotton candy, blurring the city lights together into patches of glowing fog. A full moon had rising the hour before, and it illuminated the mountain top in an otherworldly gray light, like they were on top of a moon, staring out over seas of billowing ammonia.

Sky pulled up to a park bench next to the road, and parked the bike. She waited until Judy hopped off before unmounting herself. She pulled off her helmet, and took off her wet jacket, shaking off the water, before draping it over the handle bars to dry. She turned back to watch Judy drink in the view like a kit who’s just seen snow for the first time, “Like what you see, Jessica?” She asked the rabbit.

“Oh Skye, it’s beautiful!” Judy exclaimed, as she unfastened her own helmet and passed it back to Skye, who secured it in a saddle bag. “I knew the fog covered the city, but I never knew that it looked like this!”

Skye smiled, pleased that her idea had been met with such joy. She reached into the other saddle bag, and pulled out a large flannel blanket. She shook it out, and draped it over the park bench. Walking around the bench, she sat down on one end of the blanket. She didn’t quite know how she was going to finagle the rabbit in sitting down next to her, but it turned out she didn’t even need to worry.

Judy turned and saw her sitting there, and before Skye could do or say anything else, she hopped up next to the vixen, snuggled into her side, and pulled the blanket across to cover them both.

Skye sat stiffly for a moment, completely floored by the rabbit’s actions. She had never had a rabbit this close to her, and she was at a loss as to what she was going to do next. Again, that was a problem that Judy solved by placing her paw on the vest covering Skye’s chest, and looking up at her.

“Are you okay? You’re really stiff. Am I making you uncomfortable, by being too forward?” She asked the snow fox.

Skye chuckled, as she started to relax, and draped an arm across Judy’s shoulders. “No, not really.
Not for a fellow lesbian, at least. I’ve just never managed to have a doe get this close before, much less one that did it all on her own volition. I’m kinda out of my element here.”

Judy smiled up at her, “Hit on a lot of rabbits, have you?”

Skye just shook her head, “I’ve tried. I’ve gone to the female only bars in town, and while I might get a doe to talk to me, I can’t approach any. They just look uncomfortable, if not downright terrified, when ever I get close, and then they make up some excuse and scamper off.” She looked back at Judy, “You’re the first one I’ve met that didn’t try to run away the moment I looked at them.”

“Well, that’s their loss.” Judy proclaimed, “I happen to like foxes, and I think you are very cuddly, even with all of your leather on.” Oops! Did I just imply that I want to get her naked? Whoa, Judy! Running away with your libido already? You just met this fox!

“I like rabbits, but I’ve never met one that also admitted to liking foxes,” Skye reached up, and with a tentative paw, she started to stroke Judy’s head fur.

Judy sighed. Somebody was touching her, finally. It wasn’t even sexual, or even playful. It was just touch. God, I’ve missed being touched. “Well, I’m not your average rabbit. Dad liked to say that I was a do-er, like it was some sort of insult, to know what you like and work to achieve it. He was always of the opinion that one should settle for the path of least resistance.”

“Is he the reason you left home? Did he not like you looking at the females?” Skye had heard that before, so she wondered what this rabbit’s life had been like.

“The does? No, he didn’t care about me dating does. It was more of an anti-predator bias. He was afraid of just about any strange predator: bears, weasels, wolves, and especially foxes. With the exception of Gideon, but that’s because Gid was a portly pastry chef. Not really a predator in Dad’s eyes.” Judy stroked the section of fur that peeked out of Skye’s vest. “No, he wanted me to be a farmer, and settle like he had, and I thought that was a stupid idea. So after a couple of weeks of him treating me like a kit and ordering me around the farm, I couldn’t take it anymore, and I packed up and left. It took me a few months, but I eventually ended up here, by dint of the fact that I couldn’t move any further west of him, since I had run into the ocean. I found a job, and a roommate, and interesting things to do that don’t involve farming in anyway, and I like it.” She reached her arm out to gesture at the fog covered city.

“I mean, look at this! Look at this view! We had fog back in the hills of Podunk, but it never looked like this! It’s beautiful…” She sighed.
“Yes, it is.” Skye moved her arm back to Judy’s shoulder and gave her a squeeze, “I think you are very beautiful too.” She stated in a low voice.

Judy turned up toward her and grinned, “Aw, you’re just trying to butter me up! I will have you know that I am very average for a bunny. Medium gray, medium height, medium build, all very average. Thank you, though, for the compliment.” She patted Skye on the chest, “You’re the one who’s beautiful, with your white fur and your two beautiful eyes. Oh, and don’t get me started on your tail! I love fox tails.” Judy stared up at Skye’s face, biting on her lower lip.

Skye was taken aback for just a moment. Her two eyes, blue and gold, had long been a source of embarrassment to her. They were a sign of her family’s poor genetic health, an indication of the centuries of inbreeding that her people had done, just to survive. They were part of the reason she had sworn off ever having kits of her own. She viewed them as a flaw.

But to this rabbit, this plain old rabbit, they just added to the exoticness of the vixen. Skye decided then and there that this one was a keeper, not that she had a lot of other rabbit does waiting in the wings, but still. For all that she considered herself an average rabbit physically, she was extraordinary in ever other regard.

Skye reached over with her free paw, and stroked Judy’s cheek gently, and wondered at the fact that she never even flinched at the touch of a fox’s paw. She traced her paw under the rabbit’s chin, and lifted her head slightly. Judy allowed the movement without resistance. Skye leaned in for a kiss, and as she had quickly come to expect of this extraordinary rabbit, Judy rose to meet her.

Two lonely females, each unique in their own ways, each far from home, kissed each other for the first time upon a tall mountain bathed in pale moonlight.

* * * * * *

“Skye! You in here, babe?” Judy called out as she scampered into the garage, “Where are you at?” She looked around the build bay, with bikes in various stages of completion. It was the end of the work day, so Skye’s two other employees must have gone home already. She could hear her girlfriend quietly cursing in the bay somewhere, but she just couldn’t see her.

They were supposed to go dancing tonight to celebrate a month of successful dating. Apparently these milestones were important to Skye, who apparently didn’t have the best of luck with her girlfriends. She wouldn’t tell Judy why she thought that, so Judy just left the subject alone, for
now. She didn’t think Skye was doing anything wrong, as far she could tell.

They were communicating well, they respected each other’s space, they went on plenty of dates, and the sex was fantastic. Judy had been thankful that Skye was willing to lead the first few times they slept together, since she didn’t really have a clue what she was supposed to do with a vixen. It was also helpful that Skye had a blatant fetish for rabbits, which Judy had discovered after her first night over. Skye’s bed sheets were even covered with pink and blue bunnies. That explained why Skye was so nervousness the first time they met; she didn’t want to scare the fascinating bunny off.

Judy looked down at her ensemble, and hoped that Skye approved. It was a simple enough get up of a black halter top, a black mini skirt, and some black jean shorts for the times when she need to be modest, like on the bus. She could ditch the shorts for dancing. She also brought her motorcycle jacket, in case the clouds rolled in and it got cold.

Skye popped her head out from around a motorcycle she had elevated up on a lift. She waved the crescent wrench in her paw to get the distracted rabbit’s attention. Judy skipped over to the lift and peeked at Skye’s work. “What’s up, doc?” she mischievously asked the vixen.

Skye sat up straight and stretched, then tipped her head back, looking of a kiss. Judy obliged, leaning to give her a quick peck on the lips while avoiding her greasy jump suit at the same time. Skye gestured at the bike, “I’m just trying to finish up the driveshaft’s bearing re-seat. The customer wants to pick up his ride tomorrow morning, so I need to get this done. I’ll just be a few more minutes, and then we can go.” She waved her wrench at a stool by her work space, “Grab a seat, and tell me about your day off.”

Judy Hopped up into the stool, and sat down. “It was just laundry day this morning. Three hours of watching the machines spin. At least this time nobody tried to steal my underwear.” Judy snorted and then continued, “Then, after a quick lunch with Moni at the Art Institute, I modeled for a couple hours for the sculpture class with a pronghorn model. They were doing quick little maquettes of dynamic posing in the class which kept us moving every few minutes, so I didn’t end up cramping so bad this time. The pronghorn did end up doing a lot of his poses on his knees though, since he was so much taller than me. Poor male.”

Skye smiled as she worked, “What is with you and males kneeling at your feet?” she chided the rabbit.

“Hey! We weren’t doing kink, we were doing art!” Judy indignantly replied, sitting up straight and placing her paw over her heart.
“Oh, art is it now? Is that what you call what you do with Tony?”

“Nah, that’s glamour photography. My dad would probably call it soft-core porn, but I don’t care. He’s a bit of a prude anyway.” Judy glanced over at the tool chest. There was an open letter there, with handwritten addresses on the envelope cover. She picked it up, and examined the addresses. “Who’s Adlartok?” She asked Skye.

Skye looked up at her and grinned, “That’s me, silly rabbit.”

“It is? I thought your name was Skye!” Judy was confused.

“It is.” Skye assured her, “Adlartok means ‘Clear Sky’ in my people’s language.”

Judy scowled for a moment, “Wait a minute. I know that Renard d’Hiver means ‘Foxes of Winter’, but what Old Country language is Adlartok from?”

“It’s not an Old Country word.” Sky pointed to the north with her wrench, “My people and their language come from Foxe Basin Island, far to the north.”

“Oh?! Okay!” Judy rocked back in the stool, “I didn’t know you were one of the Qayaq people!”

Skye put down her wrench, and furrowed her brow at the rabbit, “Jessica, qayaq is the name of our boats.” She continued, “We call ourselves Tirigianiarjuk, which means ‘The Little White People’. The Tirigianiarjuk have lived up on Foxe Basin Island for well over a thousand years.”

Judy put her paws to her lips in embarrassment, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I’m just a country rabbit from Podunk. I’m not the best educated bunny around.” Judy apologized.

“You keep saying that, but I’m not sure I believe that anymore.” Skye picked up her wrench again, and used it to point at Judy. “I think there is far more to you than meets the eye. You are ‘tukisinangitok’, a mystery to me.” She turned back to her work, so she missed the face that Judy made.

Skye continued as she worked, “Back when my mother was still a kit, my Grandfather moved his
family down to Mount Royal City, so that my Grandmother could get treatment for her tuberculosis, being that doctors were kind of hard to come by in their home village of Kinngait. Once they got to Mount Royal, they kind of stuck out, so Grandpa changed his last name to Renard d’Hiver so that they could fit in better. Mom grew up there, and she met my dad there too, while they were both in college.” Skye put down her tools, and stood up.

She turned to Judy, “I was born there on the river, born at the dawning of a clear blue sky. That’s why my mom named me Adlartok. It was also my great-Grandma’s name, even though I never met her. Mom said she was a very funny female, given to laughter and practical jokes.” She turned back to the bike, turned on the key, and gave the throttle a quick twist. The rear wheel revved up without a sound, as the motor bearing smoothly spun. She turned it back off.

“It was my grandmother who raised me, for the most part, while we lived in Mount Royal. Mom and Dad both worked, so I stayed home with her. She taught me our language and our history. She even taught me the names of all my maternal ancestors, going back over fifty generations. That’s how the Tiriganiarjuk keep the memory of our ancestors alive, by naming our children after those who came before us. They live on, in us.” Skye pointed at her chest.

Judy leaned forward on the stool, “That’s so beautiful...”

Skye stripped off her work gloves, and scratched her head fur, “Yeah, well, just don’t ask me to recite them now. There are a lot of repeats, and it can get kind of confusing trying to keep the names straight, and in the right order. I haven’t done it in years. Usually the family females would get together and chant the names, so that we could help correct each other.” She shrugged.

She pointed to the letter still in Judy’s paw, “Anyway, the letter is from my brother, Torngarsuk – he goes by the nickname Torn, by the way. He’s finally gotten his diesel mechanic’s certification, after years of working on my Dad’s fishing boat. He’s since moved down to Zootopia to work from my mother’s brother, who runs a mechanics and auto-body shop down there. I think he should get a mechanical engineering degree, like my electrical degree, but he’s not all that anxious to return to school. Maybe after a few years of taking orders from his uncle, he’ll be ready. Zootopia’s got a bunch of good schools.” She unzipped her jumpsuit to her waist. “You ready to go?” She asked the rabbit.

Judy jumped back down, “Yup! Let’s go dancing!” She bit her lip and shook her hips for the fox.

Skye just laughed, “Alright, let me go take a quick shower to wash the grime off, and I’ll be ready to go.”
“Oooo, A shower! I can help with that!” Judy offered, staring at the white fur peering out from under the jumpsuit.

“Help? Jessica, I said a quick shower. You jump in with me, and we’ll be there all night!” Skye just shook her head.

Judy just grinned up at her and shook her head, “Nah! I’m a rabbit - we’re known for our speed! I can finish you up real quick!” She assured the vixen.

Skye waggled a finger at her as she walked towards the front office, “Finished up three or four times, you mean. You do that to me, and I won’t even be able to walk, much less go dancing.”

Judy pouted, “Oh come on! It’s great cardio-vascular exercise, good for getting the old creaking bones working again!” She bounded in front of Skye to hold the office door open for her lover.

Skye turned to look down at the rabbit, “Jessica, I am not OLD!” Well, maybe a little, in comparison to the energy of this younger doe, she thought to herself.

Judy stood in the door way, and used both paws to gesture to Skye’s body, “Yes, you are! You have a thousand year’s worth of ancestors living in you! You said so! That’s positively ancient! You need the exercise!” She beamed up at the fox, knowing exactly what consequence her bratting was about to bring.

“Exercise?! I’ll show you exercise!” Skye boomed at her as she reached for the imputant rabbit. Judy turned and bounded up the apartment stairs, giggling and shrieking, with a growling Skye nipping close at her heels.

* * * * *

She was in the elevator, going down, all the way down. She tried to explain to the two wolves that stood like statues at her shoulders that she had completed her sentence, and they were supposed to release her from Cliffside, but they stood in silence, their over sized paws simply gripping her arms. The lights on the control panel slowly counted backwards – 3, 2, L, B, SB1, SB2, SB3.

Sub Basement Three. The place no patient in Cliffside ever wanted to go, and they were taking her
there again. She could kick and she could scream, but that would only invite a taser burn. And still she would be taken. The elevator slowed to a stop. “Last stop, little bunny.” one of the wolves breathed that into her ears.

The doors slide aside, and before her opened up an antechamber clad in lime green tile and moldy grout, a great big black vault door framed in steel standing at the far end. They dragged her bodily along the scummy floor, her toes scrabbling to gain some measure of traction on the slick porcelain. They stopped at the door, and the wolf on her right stepped forward to place his paw on the dial. 30...20...10… He threw the handle with a click, and gave the door a yank. It slid open with an oily moan, reveling an inky darkness beyond.

With no hesitation, they marched her down the well, lights coming on automatically as they progressed. She stole a quick glance back over her shoulder, and saw that the lights winked out as they passed beyond them. The vault door in the distance was slowly swinging shut of it own accord, moaning in time to the sinking feeling in her stomach. She was being swallowed alive in the bowels of Cliffside.

A light blossomed before her! Cold, pale, flickering light. She was dragged out of the esophageal corridor, and into a featureless concrete box. At the center was a rusted steel autopsy table. The two guards picked her up, flipped her around and dropped her flat onto the table. They attached her feet to stirrups at the end of the table, and her paws to manacles at the head. They pulled the chains taunt, stretching her rabbit frame to the point of searing pain. She opened her mouth… but no sound came out. Oh No! She had no voice here!

Squeek… Squeek… A vixen nurse, clad in a virgin white nurse’s uniform, pushed a steel cart to the side of the table. It was just outside of Judy’s view, but she could hear the instruments rattle on the tray top as the nurse arranged them. She picked up one, clicked a button to turn it on, and the room reverberated with the shriek that it made.

Judy strained to see what she was holding, and as she was distracted by the sound, a paw grabbed her face and forced her jaw open. She snapped her eyes back to see who was assaulting her, but she was blinded by the light they were shining down her throat.

The paw release her jaw and the light switched off. Judy tried to blink away the purple stain splashed across her vision, and as she did a shape before her resolved itself. A red vulpine head, in a white lab coat, holding two squeeze tubes in either paw. It leaned in and spoke.

“Heya, Carrots!”
Oh, Thank God, it was Nick! He held the two toothpaste tubes up before her. “Which one do you prefer? Wintergreen or Spearmint?”

She screamed!

* * *

“JESSICA!” Two strong arms held her, crushing her to a soft furry chest, “Sweetheart, it’s okay! You’re okay! You’re safe!” Skye crooned in her ears. Judy sat upright, gasping in terror. The nightmare faded, and she was left with the night time sepia tones of Skye’s upstairs bedroom before her. She shuddered inside Skye’s embrace, as she tried to get her breathing under control.

“Was it a bad one?” Skye asked, already knowing the answer. Judy just nodded. “Was it about Cliffside?” Skye asked next. Judy froze in her arms. “C.c.c.cliffside?” She stammered, her eyes wide in fear. How does she know about Cliffside? Judy had always been so careful to hide. Where had she slipped up?

“Baby, you talk in your sleep.” Skye nuzzled her head fur, and planted a kiss between the ears. “You’ve had a nightmare almost every night you’ve shared my bed. You even had one the first night you stayed over, three months ago. Most of the time, if they wake me, I can hold onto you, and that will calm you down enough that you settle down to sleep. This was the first time that you actually woke up after screaming.”

“I’ve screamed before?” Judy asked, as she started to sob.

She could feel Skye’s head move as she nodded. “Yes, and you would mostly be incoherent, thrashing, and crying, sometimes for hours. I would have to hold you, and sing to you, before you would calm down.”

“I… I’m sorry… I didn’t mean… You can’t… I’ll go now…” Tears streaming down her face, Judy tried to get off the bed, but Skye didn’t let her go.

“Skye, you can’t! I can’t stay! I’m dangerous! You have to let me go!” Judy begged her, in between her sobs.

“Judy, the only dangerous thing about you is the way you ride a motorcycle.” Skye let her go, but
slid around in front of her. She put a paw on Judy’s leg. “If you want to go, go. If you want to stay, stay. I’m not kicking you out of my bed. And if you want to talk, I am always here to listen. Always.” She pulled her paw back, and sat quietly, expectantly.

“So… You know…” Judy looked across the bed at her in abject misery.

“Yeah… Like I said, you talk in your sleep.” Skye just nodded, as she drew up her leg so that she could rest her head on her knee.

“When did you figure it out?” Judy asked the vixen, tears running down her cheeks.

Skye reached across the bed, lifted Judy’s chin, and wiped the tears away with a finger. “About the second week or so. You were mumbling something about Carl Latrans, so I looked up that name. After that, the Cliffside stuff that you would scream yourself hoarse about made a lot more sense.”

“But you never said anything! Why not!???” Judy couldn’t comprehend why she never said anything for two and a half months.

“It’s your story to tell, sweetheart.” Skye assured her, “When you were ready, you would let me know. Until then, I would simply love you.”

“Oh…” Judy looked down at her paws.

“Judy, Jessica, littlest rabbit, light of my heart…” Skye quietly stated. Judy looked back up at her. Skye continued, “You wander through life thinking you are alone, so alone. That no one can understand your journey, so you don’t share. But that isn’t so, sweetheart. You’re not alone.” Skye, too, looked at her paws. She realized that she too had a story to share as well.

“I’ve shared with you why my grandfather moved us to Mount Royal city?” Judy nodded, so Skye continued, “He couldn’t get medicine for grandmother on a consistent basis, and if it ever ran out, she would have died. It was an act of desperation, to leave everything he knew behind, and come to the big city. But even as he did, even as it ripped his heart in two, he did it to give his wife, his children, and his grandchildren a chance to survive.” Skye’s own eyes began to water.

“Judy, my people are dying. Slowly dying.”
She wiped her own tears away as she continued, “Diseases like TB are rampant throughout our communities, and we have little access to doctors or modern medicine to fight it. We are confined to permanent settlements, forbidden to hunt, and restricted in our wanderings. We are nomads no more. There are no jobs in these settlements, and everything costs more, so everyone stays poor. There is nothing for our young people to do, so they wander the settlements aimlessly. Once they get to where the road out of town ends, they turn around and just walk back the other direction. They’re only other choice is to sit in a cramped bedroom staring at a blank wall, and eventually that drives them to despair. Judy, we loose more of our teenagers to suicide than we do to disease and accidents.”

“Even the settlement in the big river where my parents live is pretty bleak. The only jobs are either on the fishing boats or at the canning factory, and all of those jobs are dangerous. My father may own his boat, but he still has to go out almost every day just to haul in enough to pay his bills. Both my brother and I have tried to help him, but it’s a hard, hard life. Harder still is the effect that cheap alcohol has had on our society. My father is a hard, bitter, mammal most days, but when he turns to the bottle, he is a raging tyrant. I don’t know how my mother stands him.” Skye looked off to the north.

“My brother and I got out, and we’ll probably never go back. I managed to find a scholarship, and went to the university. My brother wasn’t so lucky, and he had to work on my father’s boat for a few seasons before he found a job on a larger ship. From there, he trained as a diesel mechanic, and now he’s in Zootopia, far away from home.”

She turned back to Judy, “Speaking of far from home, have you ever heard of a residential school?” Judy just shook her head no. “Residential schools were part of an attempt by the Commonwealth to ‘civilize’ the native populations through force, by sending their kits to far away schools where the families could not reach them. There they tried to kill the kits’ culture, and replace it with the Commonwealth’s. Such noble goals, such noble failures. The kits endured forced indoctrination, beatings, sexual abuse, and even murders – all in the name of ‘civilization’. My grandfather had survived that, and he wanted to make sure his kits and grand kits were never taken from him, and that they never had to endure what he did. But he still made damn sure that we understood what had happened to him and his generation, so that we never forgot.”

“So when I read about what you went through at Cliffside as a kit, everything he taught us came roaring back. No kit, anywhere, should ever be sent to a place like that. They tossed you in, threw away the key, and laughed as you screamed.”

Judy reached out to Skye, and drew her muzzle down so she could kiss it. “Thank you.” She released it, and curled into the vixen’s lap. Skye slowly stroked her ears, laying them down her back. After a few minutes, Judy spoke again. Skye had thought she had gone to sleep.

“I don’t remember most of my time at Cliffside. They kept me drugged up to my eyeballs with
psychoactive drugs, to keep me quiet and compliant. It fucked with my memory.” She reached out with her own paw, and slid it down Skye’s leg, just for comfort and a reminder of her vixen’s reality.

“I didn’t even start at Cliffside.” She pointed out to the fox, “After my trial, they sent me to a mental health diversion program for rabbit kits in Bunny Burrow. That wasn’t so bad for the first few months. There were a lot of autistic kits there, so I ended up being the quiet one. I read a lot.” Judy rolled onto her back, cradled in Skye’s lap, “But at some point, toward the end of my first year there, I attracted the eye of this older sleazebag of a guard. The other kits said that he like to touch them. The buck must have thought I was an easy target, cause he pulled me into a supply closet one day.”

“What? He hurt you? I’m so sorry!” Skye’s paws came up to her muzzle, “You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.” She assured the rabbit.

“Huh?” Judy looked back up at her, “Oh! No, that didn’t happen. I’m pretty sure he wanted it to happen, but it didn’t. I just lay there like I was a scared little bunny until he dropped his pants, and then I kicked him hard, right into the end of his erection. Folded the whole thing right in half. He screamed and fell over, clutching himself in his paws.” Judy smirked.

She looked up at Skye’s shocked expression and explained further, “The technical term for what I did to him was penile fracture. Ever hear of it?”

Skye just shook her head, “I’m a lesbian. I don’t do much with penises.”

Judy grimaced as she continued, “Yeah, I can see that. Anyway, after my kick ruptured his shaft, he immediately started swelling down there and not in the good way. But to make sure he stayed down after I got up, I made sure to kick him hard in the balls. Twice. And then I pulled a shelving unit down on him, just to keep him pinned down. After that, I ran out and found a counselor, and told them what happened.”

“I mean, what did he expect was going to happen? I’m a country bunny; I know how these things work. Did he think I was some developmentally stunted rabbit kit with emotional processing issues or something? I shot a coyote six times my size at point blank range, for crying out loud! I’m not afraid of any stupid creep.”

Judy settled down and continued her tale, “Anyway, the police came and arrested him. Turns out he been kicked out of other treatment facilities for inappropriate behaviors, so they finally sent him to jail to await trial, after he got out of the hospital. His balls had swollen up so bad that they both
had to be amputated, and he couldn’t pee standing up any more. He lasted a grand total of three weeks in county jail before the other inmates figured out who and what he was, and beat him to death.”

“How do you know all of this?” Skye couldn’t fathom who would have told a nine year old kit all this.

“Oh, my mom told me, years later, during a visit at Cliffside.” Judy gestured vaguely off to the east.

Judy ranted on, “But you want to know what the truly stupid thing about all this was? This is an example of how fucked up rabbit society is. You want to know what they did to me after I defended myself from a creep, and told them about it?” Judy asked her.

Skye nodded, “Sure?”

“They threw me in solitary lockup for two weeks, just a nine year old kit, for being violent and striking a guard. Apparently they thought I should have just run away, and then find somebody to talk to about it. Or maybe just let him have his fun, and then complain about it afterwards. What the hell did they think would happen? I was in a room with a mammal who’s entire job was chasing after and running down kits who tried to flee. He was fast! Far faster than me!” She gritted her teeth as she scowled.

“So, when they finally let me out of solitary, I was so mad that I kicked the guard in the crotch, stole his keys, and took off. I managed to get out of the facility, and escaped into the Bunny Burrow fields behind it. I hid out there for about three weeks, sleeping during the day in a hiding spot, and coming out at night to eat vegetables I found in the fields and gardens. It took them so long to find me that they eventually had to bring in a wolf cop from the ZPD to track me down. I made them all look like idiots.” She grinned.

“After that, they transferred me to the Tri-Burrows Juvenile Detention facility, mostly cause they had no idea what to do with me. I was the youngest kit there in the whole facility. Now, the guards there were smart. They never laid a paw on me. No, that’s what the other prisoners were for. The guards thought they could just sit back, and let the other kits beat me up, and they wouldn’t have to do any work.” Judy shook her paw.

“And that worked for the first round of beatings. The kits beat me black and blue, which put me in the infirmary. After that, I went on the offensive. I had to, to survive. So I sought out the biggest, toughest, juvenile there, a wolverine, and broke his jaw with a single round house kick. The guards
had to take action then, so they put together a riot team to take down little ol’ me, and after they captured me, they put me in solitary for a whole month.” She tapped her paws on her chest.

“A month was all it took for the kits to figure out that I was in detention for armed murder one, and beating the junk off of a guard that tried to molest me. The smart ones left me alone after that. The dumb ones took more convincing.” She smacked her fist into her palm.

“Eventually every mammal there stopped fucking with me. Not just because I was willing to fight back, but because I was mean. I would go into a fight looking to break bone. I kinda got a reputation as a crazy fighter.” Judy explained with a grimace.

“That particular fight club lasted for another whole year before some enterprising correctional mammal finally got around to reading my sentencing requirements and realized I was supposed to be in a mental institution. Since none of the other local psych wards wanted to touch my case, what with my history of violence, they kinda ended up sending me to Cliffside in Zootopia by default.” Judy wound down.

“I don’t remember much of Cliffside. It kinda devolved into this cycle of escape attempts, followed by solitary, lots of drugs, and boredom. Rinse and repeat.” She tried to explain.

“Escape? Where would you go?” Sky wanted to know.

“Oh, nowhere. I mean, it was a maximum security mental asylum. There was only the one bridge to get to the place, and everything else was surrounded with a fast flowing river. I didn’t try to escape to get out; I did it mostly because I was bored. Plus it kept me in shape, so I didn’t turn into a couch potato. Not that the food there was particularly fattening, mind you. It was awful. It was a privately run institution, and they were always looking for ways to save money, so that they could maximize their profits, I guess. One of the ways that they did that was by serving us crappy food.”

“Didn’t they have you on expensive drugs? I read somewhere that they got in trouble for that?” Skye asked her.

“Yeah, well, they could bill Zootopia over and above for the expensive stuff, since they only got a small stipend for our basic care. No, they got in trouble because what they ‘said’ that they were giving us, those expensive individualized treatment programs that you read about, really weren’t. The truth is that they had just used a whole lot of bad quality generic shit on us patients equally. Just what ever worked best in keeping us quiet and compliant. The Zootopians were all upset about the fraud, and we patients were the ones that got our brains fried. Nobody cared about us.” Judy was quiet for a bit.
She looked thoughtfully and waggled a paw, “I take that back. I did have an art teacher for a couple of months. He was really nice. He got them to reduce my drugs; even got my mom into visit a few times. But eventually even he went away, and it was back to the same old Cliffside shit.”

“I mean, other than the drugs, they really didn’t abuse us. They didn’t beat us or molest us, so I don’t really know where all the Cliffside nightmares are coming from. Maybe it’s just my brain, trying to fill in the blanks or something.” Judy mused.

“What about the testing? You keep having nightmares about a testing lab or something.” Skye asked her.

“You mean like down in the subbasements? That was just a rumor that the older patients liked to pass around to frighten the younger ones. The one that they liked to use on me was the rumor that they were doing cosmetic testing on rabbits down in Sub-basement 3. But anybody who tried to tell me that would just end up getting kicked. Did I mention I had a reputation as a dirty fighter?” Skye nodded.

“Yeah, the other patients, the stupid ones, would try that line on me, and I’d kick them in the crotch. That stopped that.”

“But I guess my brain is still taking that rumor and running with it, even though it’s totally stupid. It’s like tonight’s dream. It’s all this awful build up, and I can’t escape, and the wolf guards are marching me off to my doom, and at the end you know what happens? TOOTHPASTE TESTING! Arrggghh!” Judy scrunched up her eyes and ground her palms into her eyelids. “Which do I prefer, Wintergreen or Spearmint? It’s totally stupid!” Judy just shook her paws.

Skye disagreed, “No, no it’s not. It was the isolation, and the inappropriate drugs, and the hopeless that scarred you. That’s what your brain is trying to make sense of. Because it doesn’t make sense.” Skye went back to stroking Judy’s head.

Judy was quiet for a few moments. “Thank you for listening to me. I’m sorry that I woke you up, with all my nightmares.” She tried to offer the vixen.

Skye wouldn’t have it, “I’m sorry that you have nightmares. And I’ll point out that I’m nocturnal, so you really didn’t wake me.”
“Skye, you have to sleep sometime, I mean, you can’t sleep during the day. You have to work! I can’t keep you up all the time!” Judy was still feeling guilty for waking her every night.

“You mean like the way you do with your incessant demands for sex?” Skye tried to lighten the depressed rabbit’s mood.

Judy answered hotly, “I am not incessant! I am enthusiastic! There’s a difference!” She huffed.

Skye gently slid the indignant rabbit off her lap. “I can see that,” she said as she bent her muzzle down to nuzzle along the rabbit’s fur. She slid down Judy’s torso until she dropped her head in between her bunny’s gray legs.

Judy whimpered to herself, *Sweet Cheese and Crackers! What is it about canines and their tongues, and their effect on my ability to think?*

Skye demonstrated just that skill for her, and Judy could think of nothing else.

* * *

As she lay in Skye’s arms afterwards, a thought occurred to Judy. “Skye, can I ask you a personal question? You don’t have to answer, if you don’t want to.”

“Yes.” Skye simply replied.

“Why did you break up with all your other girlfriends? I mean, you’re kind, and patient, and incredibly understanding. You love without reservation and forgive without consequence. I don’t understand why any other female would want to walk away from that.” Judy gestured with her paws before dropping them.

“Oh...” Skye sighed, “They’d all start out great, but I don’t know if this is a predator thing or a lesbian thing, but eventually the relationship would turn into a dominance game. Either they would want to be dominant, or they wanted me to be dominant, and then they would get mad when I didn’t. I don’t have the time or the interest to fight those kinds of battles, so I just wouldn’t. And eventually they would leave.” She shrugged.
“Oh, I see.” Judy stroked her paw along Skye’s arm. “You don’t have to worry about that with me.” She explained, as she turned her head to look back at her vixen.

Skye looked down at her, “How so?”

Judy smiled at her, “Rabbits are matrilineal. We always defer to the wisdom of the oldest female.”

“Well, I guess that is one plus to dating younger rabbits.” Skye considered that, “Wait, did you just call me old?”

Judy just smiled, and pulled her lover’s muzzle down for a kiss.
Wednesday Afternoon: Special Agent

Chapter Summary

Bogo has come to crash the party, and he's brought along a guest - Interpol Special Agent Daman. Daman's in a bit over his short rabbit ears, so Hugo's got to explain the gory medical details to him, while at the same time defuse an irate water buffalo, and to catch his disbelieving partner up on Bellwether's intricate plots!

It's video conference time with four alpha males!

Chapter Notes

This one took me a bit to write, since I was trying to take what was essentially an exposition chapter with four talking heads and make it interesting. This is what I got - let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday Afternoon at the Tundra Town Central Hospital

“Where is he! Where’s Clawhauser!” ZPD Chief Bogo demanded to know as he strode down the hall toward the Tundra Town ICU. A small gold and black rabbit hopped along beside him, trying to keep up with the water buffalo’s pace, a feat made difficult by the rabbits tailored tweed three piece suit.

At the end of the hallway, Bogo could see Captain McHorn, the head of ZPD’s unified S.W.A.T. command in conference with another rhino in the hospital’s security uniform. In the aftermath of the Species Riots disaster three years ago, Chief Bogo and the Police Commissioner had determined that the ZPD’s prior adhoc SWAT arrangements needed to streamlined, with a new emphasis on consistent unit training and communication. Too many officers had been injured by the rioters and even friendly fire, and that had left the ZPD dangerously understaffed during the raid on the Prey First headquarters that followed afterwards.

The previous practice of randomly assigning officers to SWAT on a daily basis was replaced with an actual duty assignment at SWAT on a rotating six week basis for all officers. Two weeks were spent in special training, and four weeks spent on alert, after which the officers were returned to their original duty precincts. Instructors were assigned for 4 month training slots, and a senior officer was chosen from their ranks to command the unit for a year. McHorn had held the position for the past year, and was in the running to take the position to take the Chief of ZPD when Bogo retired.
McHorn turned at the sound of his chief approaching. He put his large paws on his tactical belt and sauntered down the hall to meet Bogo. “Hey, Boss.” He said by way of greeting, as Bogo slowed to meet him. He jerked his thumb up over his shoulder, back at the ICU doors. “Clawhauser’s stuck in there. He’s okay I guess, just a bit banged up, but the docs won’t let him leave. Apparently the goat he was talking to has some strange disease the medicos have never seen before, and they aren’t taking any chances. They’ve got the entire wing in a level four lock down, and the only mammals they are letting right now are medical staff.” He looked down at the rabbit, and then back up at the bull. “I mean, they’ll probably let you in if you insist, but you’ll have to scrub down and dress in an isolation suit before you can talk to him.”

That option did not appeal to Bogo, who found his temper cooling as he watched through the ICU glass doors at the suited medical mammals moving around the halls, the walls of which were sheathed in plastic sheeting.

McHorn continued, “I’ve been coordinating with Officer Vifaru here, since his director is stuck inside. So far it’s just the goat that’s infected, but they’re not taking any chances. They’re prepping the entire wing for more patients. I figured I’d do the same, and I’ve got my teams setting up a command center in the parking garage, as well as deploying units around the hospital.” He gestured down the hall, “Even if this all turns out to be a false alarm, I thought it would be a good training exercise for my troops.”

The rabbit in a suit spoke up, “Why are you setting up a command center in the parking lot? Isn’t it cold out there? Why not use one of the conference rooms in here?”

McHorn looked over at Bogo, who just rolled his eyes. McHorn blinked at that display, but turned to answer the smaller rabbit anyway, “The cold air acts as barrier to most infectious agents, like bacteria or viruses; it tends kill them pretty quickly. Plus that keeps my officers out of the hospital’s staff’s way, but close by the hospital entrances if they are needed in a hurry.” McHorn didn’t know who the suit was, probably a governmental bureaucrat, but he wasn’t going to take a chance by being rude to him, even if Bogo was clearly irritated by the small mammal. The Species Riots had at least taught him that much; never judge a mammal’s capacity for petty and vindictive behavior based solely on their size.

He turned and pointed at a room of to the side, “Anyway, the docs’ had us set up a video conference room for face-to-face communication with them. It should be up and running right now.” He walked over and opened the door for the mismatched pair, and stood to the side, gesturing them to enter.

* * *
Hugo looked up at his screen at the sound of the door opening in the other conference room, having been warned by the shouting that Bogo was coming. He watched as the bull strode in to the room, and as the chief started to speak, Hugo just held up his paw. On the screen, Bogo closed his mouth as he frowned at the image of the smaller cat. Hugo just smiled, as he had learned that most of the dominance bluster that Bogo projected was pure bluff. The water buffalo actually cared deeply for his officers, even if he would never verbalize it in that manner.

He hastened to assure the bull anyway as he spoke into the microphone, “Hello, Chief Bogo. Sergent Clawhauser is fine, insofar as any cheetah can be for taking an enraged goat to the chest. His vest and trauma plate took most of the damage from the impact, but he still has some cracked ribs and a bruised sternum. Breathing will not be fun for a while. He also has a mild concussion from where he impacted the floor after being knocked down. He will recover, but I suspect that he’ll be out for at least six to eight weeks to heal. Cracked ribs take a while. He’s currently isolated for other reasons that have to do with the goat’s current infection, which is why we called the alert. I’m going to wait on that portion of the briefing until Emmanuel is done with his blood draw, and then we can bring you up to speed on what we discovered.” The trick to controlling a conversation with Bogo was to answer his questions before he asked them. That kept the glowering and sarcasm to a minimum.

Hugo pointed on his screen to the suited rabbit, “Is this one of your plain clothes officers?” Hugo hadn’t known that they were accepting smaller herbivores into the ZPD now. He also wondered where Wilde was, as he had expected the hard nosed fox to tag along. But if he wasn't here, Hugo wasn't going to inquire as to where he was.

Bogo looked over at the smaller rabbit, “No, this isn’t one of my officers. Doctor Wiedii, may I present Agent Daman? He’s come on board to help us with our Night Howler investigation.” Bogo waved a hoof in the rabbit’s general direction.

The agent arched an eyebrow as he looked at Bogo, who didn’t meet his gaze. The rabbit just twitched an ear as he got up into his chair. Hugo realized they were playing a dominance game with each other. How very interesting, he thought.

The gold and black rabbit pulled his black coat down, and addressed the screen, “Commonwealth Interpol Special Agent Justin Daman, Organized Crime division. I’ve been assigned to head up the Zootopia Night Howler Task Force, Doctor Wiedii.” He explained to Hugo. Bogo coughed into his paw. Agent Daman turned and glowered at the bull. Oh, this is most definitely a dominance game. Bogo hates it when any outside mammal butts into what he considers internal police matters! Hugo knew.

“Organized Crime? What does that have to do with Night Howlers?” Emmanuel asked as he came
up to sit beside Hugo, taking a swig of his water bottle as he did so.

“I’m a forensic accountant, Doctor...?” The agent replied, unsure who this new mammal on the screen was.

Hugo handled that response, “Agent Daman, may I present my medical partner, Doctor Emmanuel Muskat, neurosurgeon.” He pointed to Emmanuel, and continued for the muskrat, “Forensic accountants follow the money, Emmanuel.”

“Doctor Muskat,” the golden rabbit responded formally.

He just waved a paw at the rabbit, “Emmi, please. Only my patients call me Doctor Muskat.” The rabbit looked like he would rather gargle sand than be that informal with a neurosurgeon.

Bogo impatiently tapped his paw on the conference table in front of their screen as he sat down as well, “Can we move on, please? Why did you two declare an alert?” He asked the two doctors.

Hugo turned to Emmi, “Emmanuel can brief you on the first part, and then I can address the actual alert?”

Emmi took a deep breath before he explained what happened to the two law enforcement officers, “At approximately 8 am today, an attendant in a Tundra Town parking garage investigated banging noises coming from the parked cars. She found a Hircus goat lying nude and unconscious at the base of a support column. Fire rescue was called in, and they transported him to the ER here. While cleaning up his hear to ascertain the extent of the injuries, the resident noted additional clear fluid leaking from the skull along with the blood.” He paused, and expanded for the confused looking agent, “Clear cranial fluid is usually an indication of a rupture in the sac that contains the brain, Agent Daman.” He continued, “The ER resident immediately alerted me, and I hurried over from my office. I examined the patient, and based on the leakage and scalp trauma, I immediately had him transferred to surgery.” Hugo took a moment to split the conference screen, and pull up a picture of the goat in the ER.

Emmi continued, “While I was in transit, the Radiology department had managed to get several shots of the patient’s cranium, which clearly showed some fractures in the skull and what looked swelling in the brain. After reviewing those x-rays, I decided to go ahead and install a drainage shunt to help bring down the swelling. I was is the process of pulling the scalp back to install the shunt when we discovered evidence of multiple past fractures. Hugo, could you pull that up, please?” He asked his partner.
Hugo did so. Bogo was unmoved by the picture, but Agent Daman put his paw over his mouth and swallowed. Hugo continued, “I apologize for the gruesome nature of the photo. It’s necessary to peel back the scalp in cases like this so that we can visually identify any breaches in the skull, or missing shards of bone. It was after Emmanuel had found this damage that he contacted me and asked me to come in and consult on this.”

Bogo scowled as he spoke up, “That is a lot of fractures, but I have to ask what this here has to do with your bio-hazard alert.”

Hugo assured him as he cleared the screen, “Actually, quite a lot. Please bear with us as we walk you through it. I hadn’t seen the video footage when I had arrived, so I had examined the patient after Emmanuel had finished with his surgery. My initial thoughts were schizophrenia and the patient was self harming to quiet the voices, except that I noted his lymph nodes were swollen.”

The rabbit finally perked up, “He has a compromised immune system?”

“Maybe so, sir.” Hugo had hope for the agent after all, “At that point Emmanuel and I exited the patients room, and reviewed the security footage. I assume that you have seen it, Chief?” He asked the bull who just nodded, “The goat could be seen creeping around the cars and trucks as if he was searching for something. In the process of that doing that, he rammed two trucks and finally a concrete post, knocking himself unconscious. It was the final ramming that created his most recent fractures.” Hugo played a quick loop of the goat ramming the post for the rabbit’s benefit.

“What would cause this behavior?” Agent Daman asked. Bogo looked bored by the presentation, since he had seen countless mammals hurting themselves in a myriad of imaginative ways during his career, but for the accountant this was plainly something new.

Hugo shrugged, “Any number of factors, including schizophrenia, drugs, alcohol, or neural infections. In this particular case, Night-howler intoxication.” His face was grim.

That got Bogo’s attention. He quickly leaned forward and demanded, “Are you sure about that? This is a Savage event?”

Emmi just nodded, “Hematology confirmed that he has Night-howler bio-reaction markers in his blood. In both today’s sample and yesterday’s sample as well.”
That confused Bogo, “Yesterday?”

Hugo nodded, “As chance would have it, I had examined him separately at the Tundra Town Free Clinic yesterday morning. He wasn’t showing signs of savage behavior at the time; in fact he was sleeping when I saw him. The doctor who asked me to look at him was concerned about his uncontrolled giggling when she had seen him. She initially thought he was high, but she want to know if brain trauma could cause that. I wasn’t able to give her a diagnosis at the time, but it was possible. Last I knew, she was waiting for the blood work to come back from here. He must have left of his own volition.” He shrugged, “The clinic didn’t report anything to me about him leaving, so I have to assume he wasn’t savage at the time when he left.”

Hugo continued, “It was based on that initial examination as well as the events in the video that I saw that greatly concerned me, and I ordered the Hematology lab to test both samples immediately for several possibly relevant diseases as well as night-howler. The results that came back from the testing showed levels consistent with a full blown night-howler savage event for today, but that his levels from yesterday were maybe ten percent of the current level. Those lower levels may account for his giggling.”

Bogo spoke up again, “Giggling? I thought that when you were exposed to night-howler, the effect was almost instantaneous. You don’t have time for laughter.”

Hugo nodded, “When you are exposed to the concentrated toxin, like the one Bellwether prepared, certainly. Time from initial exposure to full savage could occur in a matter of seconds, especially if the marks-mammal who delivered it managed to get it on or near the carotid artery. The toxin is readily absorbed by the skin, and transferred to the blood stream, and from there directly into the brain.”

Hugo brought up a picture of the actual plant, “But if someone ate the base plant, it can take a while to fully affect them. For instance, if the patient had raided a local vegetable garden that had night-howler growing around it, he could have mistakenly eaten it while eating other plants. It can take about fifteen hours for food to be digested by a mature goat, so he could have ingested the Night-howler just prior to his visit to the TTFC, and then gone fully savage last night. After that, it should be one to two days for the savage effects to naturally wear off.”

The rabbit raised his arm and waved it to get Hugo’s attention. “I’m sorry, Agent Daman, you have a question?” Hugo paused.

“A couple actually, if I may. You keep referring to markers and levels. Are you talking about night-howler antibodies? And what do you mean that the effects wear off naturally? I was under the impression from the reports that the victims of Bellwether’s attacks were rendered permanently savage until treated with the antidote.”
“The night howler toxin is actually too small to see with optical microscopes. We can barely detect it even if we use an electron scanning microscope. So normally we detect the presence of night-howler by measuring the response of the body’s cells to the toxin; the toxin is a broad spectrum irritant, so many of the cells that encounter the toxin will release different chemical compounds in proportion to their level of irritation. We measure those different levels, analyze them, and then from there we can establish how much toxin is in a patient’s system. And depending on the establish levels from the testing versus the mammal’s actual body mass, we can predict how strong the savage response will be. The effects can range from anything from mild intoxication, like uncontrollable giggling, all the way up to full blown savage episodes.”

“Now, if the patient actually just ingested the plant as opposed to being shot with Bellwether’s variant, the length of intoxication time will differ because the toxin there is subtly different. In the natural plant, the toxin is bound to an alkaloid base, and it’s this alkaloid that the immune system responds to. So after a period of intoxication, usually a few days, the body is able to flush the toxin and it’s attached alkaloid out via the kidneys.”

“But in the case of Bellwether’s toxin, they had purified the toxin by distilling it from the plant matter, and in doing so they separated the toxin from the alkaloid. Without the alkaloid, the immune system doesn’t recognize the toxin, and doesn’t remove it from the body. In fact, most of the immune cells are equally irritated by the toxin, including the t-cells, b-cells, macrophages, and microglia in the brain itself. They just ignore the toxin as a result, and so it just remains in the body, much like heavy metal poisoning does.”

“The anti-toxin that we developed for Bellwether’s variant isn’t an antibody in the traditional sense, in that it doesn’t attaches to the toxin to identify it for the immune system to remove. It’s actually an enzyme that breaks up the toxin at it’s sulfur-sulfur bonds, rendering the pieces inert, allowing the kidneys to finally filter it out of the bloodstream.”

Emmi rolled his eyes after Hugo finished his explanation. The agent’s own eyes had glazed over half way through Hugo’s lecture, so Emmi gently asked him, “Did that make sense to you?”

“Sort of? Actually, not really.” He shook his head. “It’s all very confusing.”

“Good God, Mammal!” Bogo thundered, “Haven’t you read any of the briefing documentation?”

The indignant agent shot back, “I tried! Your officer Wilde gave me years and years worth of it to read, and a lot of it is filled with medical gobbledygook that I don’t understand.” the agent complained. He was rapidly feeling out of his element. He had never had to deal with bio-weapons in organized crime before. Recreation drugs certainly, but not bio weapons. This was much more of Anti-Terrorism’s bailiwick. He was starting to wonder if his superiors had assigned him to this task force as a means of setting him up to fail? If so, who did he piss off in the chain of command this
time, and who’s ass did he need to kiss to get out before he was ground into rabbit paste by this irate water buffalo and his conniving deputy of a fox?

“That’s quiet alright, Agent Daman. I’m sure that Doctor Wiedii would be happy to explain it all to you again, after we’re done here. Won’t you, Hugo?” Emmi smiled at the cat.

“Oh, certainly!” Hugo nodded. He loved educating the ignorant. The rabbit looked less certain of this.

While it was fun to watch the rabbit squirm in ignorance, this was all taking to long, in Bogo’s opinion. “Why do you even need to wait for the goat to finish digesting his poisoned meal? Why don’t you just use the anti-toxin? We need that goat conscious so we can question him!” Bogo roared on.

“Question him?” Emmi burst in, “Of all the stupid ideas! You can’t use the anti-toxin on him; he’s got advanced swelling on the brain! Which he wouldn’t have had if your shumck of an officer hadn’t set him off!” Emmi yelled across the video conference link.

Hugo reacted quickly, holding up his paw to forestall a counter explosion from Bogo, and placed his other paw on Emmi’s arm to calm him down. Bogo looked livid at the insult, but underneath it all Hugo could recognize a current of shame. Suddenly he understood, Bogo had sent Clawhauser! And now he feels guilty that the cheetah was injured, especially since he hadn’t known about the night-howler!

“Chief Bogo, the anti-toxin is toxic in it’s own right. It requires the ingestion a liter of water for every 30 kilos of mammal body mass to avoid damaging the kidneys when they filter it and the broken down night-howler from the blood stream. The patient already has swelling on his brain, and can not have even more fluid introduced into his body until that swelling subsides. He’s currently in surgery as we speak, having portions of his skull removed by a cranial reconstruction surgeon to allow room for that excess swelling. He will be in no condition to answer any question anytime soon, if ever.” Hugo took a breath, and took his paw off of Emmi before continuing, “Beside which, if the patient has been in night-howler induced fugue state since last night, he won’t remember why he was in the garage, much less his assault on Clawhauser. Even if he could talk to you now, he won’t be able to tell you why.” Bogo slowly sat back down as he chewed on that.

Agent Daman spoke up, “Why won’t he remember?”

Hugo turned to him, “Night-howler bio-toxin interferes with a great many different conscious brain functions, including the transfer of short-term memories to long-term memory. If a mammal is
exposed to the toxin, and then immediately cured, they will remember the experience. But if they sleep or are rendered unconscious, they will loose those short term memories. It is part of the whole savage effect; what the victims described as ‘being trapped in the now’ of savage thoughts, unable to break free, or remember distinctly what they did during the savage period. Past events will be very fuzzy and indistinct.”

Bogo leaned forward and asked with concern in his voice, “A liter of water per 30 kilos of mammal mass?”

Hugo nodded, “Yes.” Understanding dawned in Hugo’s mind, “You have been making sure that your officers have plenty to drink when you do your night-howler training with them?” Probably not.

Bogo scratched his head, “Well, we haven’t been restricting them from drinking...” he petered off.

Hugo sighed, “Chief, I’ll come by later this week to review your policies and procedures on the anti-toxin application with your officers, alright?”

Bogo nodded his head, “Yes, please.” He furrowed his brow, and then pointed at Hugo again, “Wait a minute. If Clawhauser just has cracked ribs, and you know the goat had night howler in his blood, why don’t you just give my officer the anti-toxin, with the right amount of water certainly, and be done with it? Why are you still holding him in isolation?” Bogo was looking thoroughly confused.

Hugo traded a look with Emmi and then leaned forward, “Because of this.” He hit a button on his keyboard, and a picture of the goat’s blood came up on the split screen, the little blue starfish featured predominately in the middle of all the red blood cells.

Both Bogo and Daman stood up to get a closer look at it. “What is it?” Bogo asked.

Emmi answer, “We don’t know. We’ve never seen anything like it, and neither have the pathologists at Hematology or Immunology. Nobody knows what it is.”

Hugo pointed to the picture, “That’s why we called the alert. The patient’s blood is filled with them, and we don’t know what they are. We do know that Clawhauser was potentially exposed to what ever they are, both from the time he spend in the patient’s room talking at him, and when he was assaulted. Emmanuel and I were potentially exposed because we treated him, both initially and
after he rammed Clawhauser. We are getting our blood tested now to see if these cells are in our systems as well.”

Emmi added, “What’s worse, Chief Bogo, is that Hematology can’t find these ‘Starfish’, as they are calling them, in the patient’s blood sample from yesterday.”

Bogo sat back down heavily, as he finally understood the reason for the alert, “They appeared in the past 24 hours?” Both doctors nodded.

Agent Daman asked, “Is that bad?” Bogo just nodded, too shocked to try to irritate the rabbit.

Hugo responded, “Yes, if this is a pathogen, and it appeared that quickly, then it is potentially either very contagious or very rapid in it’s onset.”

Bogo set his elbow on the table in front of him and pointed at Hugo, “Alright, Doctors. What’s it’s connection to night howler? What aren’t you telling us?”

Hugo took a deep breath, “After I saw this picture, I had leapt to a certain conclusion. Emmanuel had chastised me after I voiced that conclusion to for confusing correlation with causation, and I had to allow that this ‘Starfish’ may indeed simply be a reaction by the patient’s goat immune system to the presence of night-howler, but that thought was banished by the picture from the scanning electron microscope that we saw next.” He brought up the micro-graph of the Starfish for them to see.

* * *

“Is that a night howler flower?” The agent asked.

Bogo’s jaw dropped open, and he looked at Hugo again. “Yes, it’s real, Chief Bogo, that’s the ‘Starfish’.” Hugo nodded to Bogo. “But before I can continue with this discussion, I need your authorization to discuss the Bellwether case information freely with Emmanuel.” Bogo just raised an eyebrow. “I believe that it is entirely relevant to the events at hand, and you can’t really argue that Doctor Muskat isn’t involved with the night-howler case now.”

Bogo spoke, “No, you can’t.” He looked over at the rabbit.
Agent Daman looked back at him, until he understood what Bogo was waiting for. *Passing the buck, Bogo?* Agent Daman just shrugged, and gestured back at Emmi with his paw.

Bogo turned back to the screen, “Welcome to Zootopia’s Night-howler Task Force, Doctor Muskat.”

Emmi dryly responded, “Thanks.” He hadn’t missed that subtle interchange between the two law enforcement officers. *This was going to be a joy!*

* * *

Hugo turned to Emmi, “When I was brought on to the Task Force three years ago, to help in the development of a cure for the savage mammals, I was shown a scrubbed version of the data that the ZPD’s Confidential Informant was able to get out of Bellwether’s operation. I don’t know the identity of the CI, so I can’t evaluate their connection to the data...”

“Nor will you,” Bogo interrupted him. Hugo just nodded.

“Why not?” asked Emmi, “I would think you would want to pin a medal on that mammal!”

“Perhaps.” admitted Bogo, “But since my officers believe that the CI died in the process of getting that data out, there isn’t a compelling reason to release that information.” He scowled before continuing, “They were also concerned that the CI’s family would be at risk to retaliation by any of the members of the Bellwether’s gang that we were unable to find, convict, and incarcerate. As a result, we are keeping that information confidential on a need to know basis for the time being.”

Hugo just gestured his acquiescence to this requirement with a shrug.

Agent Daman was another matter, “Really? And am I on that need to know list, Chief Bogo?” he asked in a low and dangerous voice, “because I don’t know the CI’s identity either. And I will need to know that so that I can accurately evaluate my information.” He focused his attention squarely on the water buffalo.

Bogo realized that he had just trapped himself. Three years ago he had agreed with Sargent
Wilde’s reasoning on the subject, feeling that discretion was the better part of valor, as it pertained
to disclosing the extent that Judy Hopps had been involved in Bellwether’s operation. He had felt
that the rabbit had earned their respect with her actions on behalf of the city and as such he didn’t
see a need to draw her name into the public portion of the investigation, particularly since she was
most likely dead. She had suffered enough in her short life. But now he was starting to question the
eventual wisdom of that course of action. Sargent Wilde had argued that it would have hurt her
family, and Doctor Wiedii as well, to know the full extent of her involvement, and that they might
have sought further answers that would just have led them to harm. But some secrets can’t stay
secret forever, certainly not with this Interpol rabbit now in his lap.

The outgoing Zootopia police commissioner had made it clear to Bogo that if the Chief was going
to step into his shoes, the bull was going to have to let go of some of his personal control of the
ZPD’s day-to-day operations so that he could focus on the big picture. And the commissioner had
also expressed his concern that the Night-howl er investigation had stalled without measurable
results after three years, and that they still had unanswered questions about Bellwether and the
extent of her organization. It was the commissioner that had asked for the Interpol agent be
assigned to the Task Force, just so that Bogo could let it go. And since Sargent Wilde was still too
junior an officer to handle the national and political baggage that came with the subject, they
needed someone from the outside who could handle the shit-storm if it all blew up in their
collective faces.

The problem was that Bogo didn’t believe that the ignorant rabbit could handle the job, and he was
going to fuck it all up before he was done. But the bull could only stall the hand-over so long
before forcing the commissioner to step in, and if that happened he could kiss his next posting
goodbye. The commissioner’s faith in him would evaporate, and the post could end up going to
somebody more politically astute, like Captain Snarlov. Bogo couldn’t stand the thought of being
passed over in favor of that mob-connected polar bear.

Damn it! He raged internally, as he was forced to make this decision. Well, Sargent Wilde, you
convinc ed me to keep quiet, so let’s see if you can convince the rabbit as well! And with that
decision, he threw one of his best officers under Agent Daman’s bus.

“Ask Sargent Wilde when he gets back, since he was the CI’s point of contact with the ZPD. He’ll
be able to walk you through their qualifications better than I can.” Bogo assured the rabbit. And if
the fox couldn’t, well then he had better learn how to blow smoke up the rabbit’s ass and fast!

* * *

Hugo watched the interchange between the two of them. It was plain to him that Bogo resented the
rabbit’s presence, but that he couldn’t do anything about. And while the rabbit was completely in
the dark about the larger medical issues at play, he was in his element ordering larger and more
dangerous mammals around. Hugo was glad he wasn’t actually in the room with the two of them.
“Anyway,” he continued with his explanation to Emmi, “While I can’t verify the extent of the CI’s involvement in the actual Night-howler developments, the science portion of the data was relatively straightforward and well documented. Bellwether and her gang had worked through several iterations of the toxin as they developed a working model for their terror weapon.”

“What she referred to as Mark Zero was just the base plant. Not very useful as a weapon. Mark One was the distilled toxin extracted from the base plant, and enclosed in a paint ball capsule. This was the main variant that she used for most of the predator victims. But toward the end of her first year in office there was an incident at a Meadowlands pub, where by eight local predators all went savage simultaneously.”

Hugo pulled up a picture of the Meadowlands pub with police tape covering the door, “Five of the predators escaped the premises, after killing three of the smaller predators that had also gone savage, and those five then went on to kill several more mammals outside. That incident was what was considered the spark that ignited the species riots.” He pulled up footage of the destructive riots, with vehicles burning and shops being smashed.

“What the ZPD investigating team quickly realized from the bar incident was that there was no way that Bellwether’s main shooter, Doug Ramsey, could have entered the bar undetected, nor were there any open widows though which he could shoot. And if he had been inside, there was no way he could have been able to shoot all 8 of the varied predators there sequentially without the others noticing and taking defensive actions. The bar’s security footage confirmed that.” He pulled up photos from the crime scene unit trying to calculate shooting angles.

“From the Night-howler documents that were recovered from the CI, we learned that Bellwether had engineered the whole thing, including ordering the ZPD to cover up that attack in the name of public safety, while at the same time arranging to leak the bar security footage as well as releasing traffic cam footage of the more gruesome prey deaths. The incident, and the species riots that followed it, had been engineered by her so that she could move forward with an aggressive program of predator suppression, utilizing electric shock collars that all predators would be forced to wear.” He pulled up photos of the shock collars taken from a PF warehouse after a ZPD raid.

“Bellwether had set up the entire bar incident as a bio-weapon field test of what she called Night Howler Mark Two, an aerosolized variant of Night-howler whereby doses of the bio-toxin were encapsulated in microscopic ‘cages’ that dissolved as soon as they encounter a mammal’s mucus membranes. Those eight victims were intoxicated simultaneously by this means, piped into the ventilation system via a tank with a time delayed release system.” Hugo pulled up a diagram of the bio-toxin cage for Emmi from his secured files.

“But before she could get the shock collar program rammed through the city council, she fell to her
death from her hotel balcony after a night of drunken celebration. And after her death and the
destruction of her Prey First movement, the city held it’s breath, but there were no more cases of
random predators mysteriously going savage. It was done.” Hugo turned off the images, and
switched back to the conference. He leaned back.

“Or so I had believed, right up until I saw what happened today with that goat, and with what was
going on in his bloodstream.” Hugo took a deep breath, “There was at least one more variant that
she had been discussing, but we believed that it was never developed, and that variant was what
she referred to as Night Howler Mark Three. There were only a few documents available on it, but
from what we could gather, Bellwether was proposing to develop a microbe based variant of night-
howler. The host would be infected, either by injection or aerosol, the microbe would then replicate
in their body, and after a certain threshold was reached, the microbe would dump it’s payload and
the victim would go savage as result. It was an untraceable method, and would have been perfect
as a terror weapon, except that she died before it was even developed.”

“And now, it seems to me, that some mammal has succeeded in doing exactly that.”

* * *

“I still think you are leaping to conclusions, Doctor.” Emmi gently pointed out. Hugo just nodded.

“Why do you think that? Doctor Wiedii just outlined a series of technical advances that Bellwether
managed to make in the pursuit the perfect delivery system.” Agent Daman gestured across the
table at Emmi, “You don’t think some mammal could have done it?”

“Not in the past three years, I don’t. This sort of thing isn’t the work of a lone nutcase working out
of his mother’s basement. Bioengineering at this level is an extremely complicated process, and
takes a fair amount of resources to pull it off successfully. Either you have to have a team of cutting
dge geniuses or a whole lot of money, and usually both, to actually accomplish something like
this.” Emmi paused thoughtfully, “The Mark Two delivery method as he described is something
the medical field has been working on for years, as a method of delivering targeting drugs to lung
infections and cancers. The science is certainly there for that.”

“But to develop a microbe that could do what Bellwether had hoped it would, why the
development time alone would have been decades. Not to mention all the money needed for staff
and equipment, much less the kind of laboratory you would need to prepare and culture this for
mass deployment – that sort of thing can only be done by a governmental agency or a multinational
corporation.” Emmi paused for a moment before continuing, “I’m not a pathologist, and certainly
not a bio-weapons designer. I just know how long it takes to develop drugs and treatments for
neurological disorders. It’s not an easy or fast process.” He sat back in his chair.
Agent Daman looked over at Chief Bogo for a moment before reaching over to mute the microphone. He turned back to Chief Bogo and began speaking to him but the two doctors couldn’t hear him. “What are they arguing about?” Emmi asked Hugo.

Hugo watched their lips and body language, “They seem to be arguing about giving us increased clearance? Bogo’s against it, but Agent Daman seems to be adamant.” Hugo sat for a moment before he explained to Emmi, “I knew that when I was brought on to the task force for the first time that I wasn’t going to see all of the data. It wasn’t relevant to my job in helping to find an effective treatment for the victims. Even the data that I did see had names changed and dates blanked out, and even entire sections were redacted.” Hugo watched as the two other mammals of vastly different sizes argue with each other emphatically.

Bogo finally sat down heavily, giving Agent Daman a throwaway gesture, and leaned back with a resigned expression on his face. Agent Daman turned back to the microphone, a small triumphant smirk on his muzzle, and keyed it back on.

“There were millions for her to spend, Doctor Muskat. She diverted millions of bucks from the city departmental budgets to funnel into her pet projects, as well soliciting further funds from private corporations as well as other municipal governments. That’s what I’ve come on board for; to locate where that money came from and what she was spending it on.” Agent Daman explained to Emmi.

Bogo spoke up, “As for a laboratory, Doctor, development and deployment of Mark One was done out of an old subway car in the underground ZPT tunnels. We found that location three years ago during our investigation easily enough, but there was no evidence of any other programs being developed there. There simply wasn’t room in the car. No, Mark Two was developed someplace else entirely, a place Mayor Bellwether simply referred to as ‘The Vault’. We don’t know where that is.”

He took a deep breath before continuing, defeat sounding in his voice, “Nor do we have any information on the two mammals that were said to be running ‘The Vault’ other than their internal code-names of ‘The Chemist’ and ‘The Tailor’. Bellwether makes no mention of their names or even a description of their appearance in her emails or memos. Obviously she assumed that the receiver understood what she was talking about. We don’t.”

Emmi was sitting up, concern etched on his face, “You mean this could be real?”

Bogo nodded. Agent Daman spoke up, “It’s even worse than that, Doctor. After the ZPD searched the PF headquarters during their take-down raid, they discovered in among the captured documents a manifesto that Dawn had written for her followers. In that manifesto she stated that if she died
prematurely or at the hands of their enemies, that her ‘Heir’, or her ‘Favorite’ as she sometimes referred to them as, would step forward and make themselves known, providing incontrovertible proof that they were Dawn’s personal choice to lead the Prey First organization.”

Agent Daman shook his head, “There is no further explanation or description as to this heir in the manifesto, probably because the PF members would recognize them instantly, but we had assumed that either they died in the ZPD assault on the PF headquarters, or went totally underground and disappeared, or at worst, that they have been quietly and secretly working on Dawn’s agenda for the past three years.”

Bogo spoke up, his voice chilled, “We’ve never been able to identify who that mammal is.”

* * *

Emmi sat back, horror splashed across his face, “It is real. Mein Gott.” He leaned over, and placed his paw on Hugo’s arm, “Hugo, I so sorry for doubting you.”

Hugo reached up and patted Emmi’s paw, “It’s alright, Emmanuel.” He sat up, “And you may be right about me leaping to conclusions.”

Bogo turned to look at him incredulously, “You mean that you don’t believe this is evidence of Bellwether’s Mark Three?”

Hugo shook his head, “Actually, what I mean by that is we don’t actually know all that much about what we might be facing here. I’ve never seen any of the information you just told me, either about their capabilities or the political aspects. That information fundamentally changes my outlook on the events we just experienced. I am now left with many more questions than answers.”

Hugo looked down at the table and then back up at them, “Night-howler as developed by Bellwether was primarily a terror weapon, deployed for political gain. It’s not a mindless infectious agent seeking a host. So I have to wonder why the first evidence we have of this Mark Three program is found in a homeless goat. Is he a homeless mammal chosen for a test deployment because he is expendable? Were we supposed to discover him? Why not choose a homeless predator as target, which would have been totally in keeping with the PF political goals? Was he instead a former PF member who was infected accidentally, or as retaliation for some real or imagined sin? And that brings me to my next set of questions.”
“How long has he been infected? We know for the pattern of fractures in his skull that he has repeatedly battered himself. Is that self damage indicative of periods of intermittent or continuous savage states brought on by this new application? Or is he operating in a semi savage state, and under the right stimulus he switches to a full savage episode? How long can a mammal function under those conditions?”

Hugo placed his paw on his chin, and looked back at them, “One of the political considerations that occur to me is that this particular variant may not actually be designed to provide a full savage episode, but rather to keep the mammal on the unstable edge of semi-savageness. And if that were the case, then it would make sense, politically, to deploy it to both predators and prey. For predators it would make them unpredictable, verifying the PF arguments to the public. And for prey it would keep them frightened and easily manipulated by the PF, who would utilize that fear to stay in power.”

Hugo took a deep breath before he launched his appeal, “I’m sorry, but I need to see the raw Bellwether data, without redaction or analysis. I need to understand the PF’s political objectives, the scope of their funding, and the players involved before I can formulate what was the intended impact versus the actual result of the Mark Three variant would be on mammal neurological behavior.”

Bogo shot forward, “I don’t think...”

Agent Daman stood in his seat, “Agreed!” He turned to Bogo, and held up his paw to forestall Bogo next objection, “I need to understand the medical issues as well as the political, and Doctor Wiedii has just show that he can analysis both. I need him to advise me on this, so as of this moment he’s fully cleared.” Agent Daman pointed at Hugo, “Make it happen.”

Bogo froze for just a moment, his mind racing. He couldn’t protect his officer from what was coming, but in hindsight Bogo was starting to think that Wilde’s decision had created more problems than it solved. He sat back, considering the problem. Wilde was going to need to learn how to see past the long term consequences of his decisions if he was going to make Chief someday, and this might be the best way to do that. Besides, it’s not like the cat was going to murder the fox for not telling him that his favorite pet had gone savage and died. At least he didn’t the think the little doctor would do that.

“Alright, Agent Daman. I’ll have Sergeant Wilde brief you on Friday morning when he gets back. I’ll ask him to brief Doctor Wiedii after that. Is that soon enough?” Bogo temporized. He needed to at least warn Wilde about the avalanche that was about to land on his head.

Agent Daman turned to look back at Hugo. Hugo nodded, “Hematology and Immunology need to complete their analysis before we can be sure of what we are facing. And 24 hours will give us
time to see how our patient is going to fare. Friday is fine for our purposes.” He turned to look at Emmi, who nodded as well.

Emmi reached for the phone, and dialed a number. Hugo asked him, “Are you calling them?” Emmi just nodded. He spoke quickly into the phone, asking for an update. He nodded as he listened, only speaking an occasional ‘Ah’. He hung up, and stood to address them all, “Good news! I just spoke with Hematology, and they can’t find any trace of night-howler reaction markers in all three of our blood samples, nor do they find any evidence of the starfish pathogen either.”

Bogo stood, “Can I see my officer now?” Mani nodded, and watched as Bogo strode out of the conference room. He picked up the phone to warn the ICU that Bogo was coming, make sure he was adequately protected, and that they should stand down to bio-hazard level two for the time being.

Agent Daman lingered behind just long enough to speak to Hugo, “Doctor Wiedii, I’ll like to see you Friday as well, after you’re done with your briefing with Sargent Wilde, alright?” Hugo nodded, and Agent Daman turned and scampered out after the bull. Hugo made a grimace as he terminated the conference call.

* * *

Emmi laid his paw on Hugo’s arm, “What’s with the face?”

Hugo just answered, “Wilde.”

Emmi nodded, “Ah! Still can’t get along with him?”

Hugo shook his head, “No. I try, for Fennick’s sake, but it is hard. Wilde has gotten progressively harder and more abrupt whenever I try to talk to him, like he is trying to hide something from me. Fennick swears that he’s not been corrupted by his position, but I have to wonder. Nick knows that I don’t especially trust the badge he wears as it is, so his current tactic of playing the hardened cop isn’t really working to make me trust him more. Some mammals just can’t handle the pressures their position demand of them, I suppose.”

Emmi smiled, and patted his arm, “Well, you don’t have to deal with him today. Friday is soon enough.” He turned to leave the room, “Come, let us give the worried cheetah officer the good news. He’s got enough to worry about, what with his irritated police chief about to descend on
him. And maybe we can get some answers for ourselves from him at the same time.”

Hugo nodded, and followed him out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Commonwealth Interpol Special Agent Daman, or Chữ Dâman, if you must know his full birth name, is a Annamite Striped Rabbit from the Vietnam highlands. Look them up! They are beautiful gold rabbits with black markings.
Chapter Summary

For her 31st birthday, Skye takes Judy camping down along the Big Sur coast. While Judy surfs, Skye explores the beach, and encounters something sacred. Returning home, Skye is confronted with loss, and Judy must step up. In the end, their relationship changes, even as it defines their lives forever.

Chapter Notes

This one was... difficult. Sometimes the words just flow, and other times they are a struggle. This was one of the latter, even though it was a shorter chapter - not even 5000 words long. It took me two weeks to figure out how to write this one, with many starts and stops, fits and edits. But it is finally done, and I present it here for you. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flashback: 8 years ago on the Big Sur

Skye and Judy drove down the coast as the last pale red glimmers of the sunset faded over the ocean, unveiling the night’s parade of brilliant stars overhead. Judy, entranced, watched out the truck window as the surf, glowing a neon blue, crashed on the rocks below her. *Who would have thought this existed just three hours outside of town!* the excited rabbit thought to herself.

Skye drove the custom Hasenwagen truck down Route 1 like she rode her motorcycles, as an extension of herself. She shifted smoothly as she took the corners, the over-sized engine growling as she braked going in, and the turbocharger whining in anticipation as she accelerated going out. But even with all that power at her claw tips, the vixen carefully drove the speed limit, not tempting fate on the dark and curving coastal road. She wasn’t really a trill-seeker, certainly not the same way that her bunny was. For her, driving was an expression of mechanics and practiced control.

She glanced over at Judy, and smiled. *Yeah, keep it smooth and steady tonight.* Tomorrow was soon enough for adrenaline fueled terror. Judy planned to show Skye her surfing skills on her short surfboard she affectionately called “The Stump”, but Skye wasn’t really keen on the concept. While Judy absolutely loved the ocean, Skye was terrified of it, a legacy of nightmares earned working on her father’s fishing boat in the stormy northern seas. She avoided the open ocean as much as possible and could barely even swim without panicking. She planned on hunting for seashells while Judy rode the waves.
She understood, in part, the furious spirit that drove her rabbit, and while she loved the bunny for the way she expressed that spirit, at times she was also frightened by it’s strength. She knew that part of it came as a reaction to all the years that Judy had spent at Cliffside, but she also sensed that there was more to it, something hidden deep under the occasional nightmare that Judy still suffered from; nightmares that had waned in intensity since that night three months ago, when they had their late night confessional.

Skye patiently didn’t pry, knowing that in time her lover would come to trust her, and then she could finally discover just who this Nick character was, why he meant so much to the rabbit, and why Judy was so haunted by his death.

Skye pulled off Route 1 to spend the night in a beach side camp ground that ran along side Baskett Creek. Judy was nodding off as they pulled in, but she shook it off as they bumped off the pavement and on to the dirt road leading up to the camping site. Skye hunted about until she found their assigned pad, and pulled the truck into the spot. She turned off the key, and the rumbling engine died with a sigh. “We’re here!” she pointed out to the rabbit as she slid out off the door.

“Yay...” Judy exclaimed tiredly. It had been a long, busy shift at the restaurant, and this deep in the night all Judy could think about was a soft bed and a warm vixen to snuggle into. She slid out of her door, and stumbled back to the camper. Skye unlocked and opened the rear door, and boosted the smaller female into the portal before climbing in herself, closing it behind her. They both undressed as quickly a possible before climbing in the cab-over bed. Skye snuggled up to her little bunny as the big spoon, and kissed her on the back of her gray neck. Judy just mumbled as she batted at Skye’s questing nose, before curling up to sleep. The vixen smiled in the dark, and she laid her nose over her bunny’s ears as she too fell deep asleep. And dreamed.

She was cruising down a quiet country lane, the trees turned brilliant shades of gold and crimson, the sunlight dappling through their branches. But as she rode her rumbling beast, she was joined by weasels riding on chromed motorcycles. They whined, as they jostled in beside her, that her motorcycles were defective since they couldn’t reach the bike pegs with their weasel legs. Except that it wasn’t her bikes that were defective but that their weasel legs were too short.

As she pointed this out to them, the trees gave way to icebergs and she was suddenly paddling along in her sealskin kayak, while the weasels swam along side her. They complained and clutched at her, pulling on her oar as they climbed up onto her kayak. Their weight tipped her over and she fell into the cold dark sea. They drifted down with her, complaints bubbling out of their mouths as they sank, and as she fought with them she became wrapped up in the long tendrils of kelp that reached up from the bottom. Skye fought against the clutching dark fronds, trying to free herself so that she could swim to the surface, but a heavy paw with blunted fingers reached across her chest
and pulled her down into the crushing deep.

Skye awoke, gasping for air, her startled blue-gold eyes blinking in the dim moonlight streaming in through the camper’s skylights. She couldn’t move her arms, and there was a heavy weight across her right side. She fought to control her breathing, and looked down to take stock her situation. She found herself tangled up in the sheets with a sleeping Judy laid out over her chest and right arm, mumbling about being too short to reach the pedals.

Skye extracted her left arm from her cocoon, and used it to gently pry Judy off her chest, sliding her back down to the bed. Once she was freed of the lagomorphic embrace, she slide out of the tangled sheets, and off the bunk, dropping lightly to the camper floor. She padded quietly back to the bathroom, and closed door. Turning on the light, she stared into the mirror, seeking answers to her nameless fears in her reflection. Seeing that no answers were forth coming, she shook her head, and splashed some water over her muzzle. Breathing deeply, she calmed herself, and found her center.

She turned off the light, and left the bathroom. Looking back to the darkened alcove, she could see that Judy was starting to thrash. Not Good! she thought as she hurried back to the bed, gathering the rabbit into her arms and whispering into her long ears, “I’m here, babe. I’ve got you. You’re safe. You’re always safe. I’ll always be here for you.”

Judy mumbled as her arms and paws were captured in a strong embrace. She rooted her nose in the dense fur of Skye’s chest, and with a sigh she settled back to sleep. Skye breathed her own sigh, one of relief that there wouldn’t be any screaming tonight, and followed her rabbit into a dreamless slumber.

Skye woke an empty bunk, her bunny nowhere to be found. She sat up, confusion etched on her face. She quickly dressed and as she headed out the back door she saw the note stuck in the door frame. Opening the door, she stepped out into the morning light, and unfolded the note.

“Skye, I’m down at the beach with a couple of locals. The seas are glassy and the waves are peeling left, so I’ve gone to find me some barrels. I’ll be back before breakfast.”

Skye no idea what any of that meant, so she closed the door behind her, and walked out of the campground and across the road to the beach trail head. She walked along it until she reached a platform overlooking the beach. Looking down, she could see the beach spreading north and south, with rocky islands to the south. She turned back to look north, and in the distance she could see three small figures riding along the waves, the middle one wearing a pink suit. That had to be Judy.
With a sigh of relief, Skye turned to walk back down the stairs to the beach. Reaching the beach, she looked out over the sea as her love flitted in and out of the wave crests. She shivered, as her memories of waves crashing over her involved wildly pitching boats lost in stormy seas. It was not anything she could ever learn to love to do, she was sure. But that her rabbit did was simply a testament to Judy’s indomitable spirit. She smiled at that realization – that you don’t have to share someone’s passion to love them for the expression of their passion.

She turned south to, walking toward the rocks at the south end of the beach, and as she did she stubbed her toe. Hopping a few steps, she turned to search for the offending rock. Her toe still smarting, she knelt down and uncovered a large evergreen stone the size of her fist.

**Jade.**

She had come looking for seashells, but instead had found a green wonder. She examined the deep green stone, shot through with white occlusions, like a frozen droplet of storm driven seas. It was very pretty, so she put it in her pants pocket. She started casting about, looking for more. She spotted more green glints in a pile of rocks by cliff-side, and she moved in that direction.

Scrambling over the rock pile, she landed on the other side on all fours and froze, for staring back at her was a mammal skull. A shiver of fear rolled through her white fur, for at first she thought, based on it’s size, that it was a bear skull. But as she looked closer, she realized that it’s brain case was too small. It wasn’t the skull of a bear, but that of a seal, a very large seal. Remembering the stories her grandfather had taught her about the hunting he did in his youth, she guessed that it could be the skull an elephant seal, maybe that of a bull.

She stood up, and cast her gaze about the ring of boulders surrounding the skull, but she didn’t see any other bones, just the sun bleached skull of a giant seal, staring out to sea. It was a grave that she stood in, this ring of stone, she realized; a sacred place. She backed up, and climbed back up on the boulders to leave, and as she did, she spotted a small pink surfer in the distance. Judy, riding waves twice as tall as she was.

As she watched, Judy cut back and forth down the face of the wave, as the crest reached over her and crashed down behind her. But suddenly, the wave structure changed, and it all crashed over the diminutive rabbit, and she disappeared from view. Shocked, and filled with panic, Skye shot to her feet atop the boulder. She wanted to rush out there to save her rabbit, but she could barely swim.

But like a cork, a surfboard popped to the surface behind the wave, and emerging next to it was a small figure dressed in pink. The little rabbit climbed back on to the board, and started paddling back out, trying to position herself to catch the next big wave.
Skye stood on the rock, breathing in relief. She dropped her paws to her side, and as she did, she felt the jade still in her pocket. Looking down, she understood what she was supposed to do. She turned back into the ring of stone, and knelt before the skull. She pulled the stone from her pocket, and placed the jade stone atop the skull. Sitting back, she sang in Qikiqtani, her people’s tongue, a song that her grandmother had taught her long ago.

I think over again my small adventures, my fears,
These small ones that seemed so big.
For all the vital things I had to get and to reach.
And yet there is only one great thing,
The only thing.
To live to see the great day that dawns
And the light that fills the world.

Remembering her nightmare from last night, she prayed to Sedna, the Goddess of the Sea.

O Sedna, please accept this offering and be appeased. She is the light of my heart, she who is my littlest rabbit. I had not thought to ever find one like her, willing to face me without fear. Please, do not take her from me, for she is the light that fills my world.

She bowed before the skull, stood, and after climbing over the boulder she left the ring of stone behind her, walking back up the beach.

Later that evening they sat before the campfire, sharing a camp chair while Judy nestled into Skye’s lap. Judy idly munched on some cucumber slices while the vixen stroked her paws down her bunny’s belly. Judy shivered in delight and then responded to the touch by stretching her muzzle upwards and nuzzling into the underside of her vixen’s throat.

Whoops, Skye thought, I better ask my question before she gets going. Again. Skye pulled her paws away, and cleared her throat.
“Aww...” Judy complained, “Put those paws back. I was liking that!”

“In a minute,” Skye promised the impatient bunny, “I was going to tell you what I wanted for my 31st birthday.”

Judy perked, and she turned to face her vixen. “Yes, please tell me!” She bounced a bit on the fox’s lap.

Skye laughed at her excitement, and caught Judy’s paws in hers, “Light of my heart, will you move in with me?”

Judy didn’t even hesitate when she belted out, “YES!” She launched herself up and out of the fox’s lap and wrapped her arms around Skye’s neck, crushed her muzzle against Skye’s. Skye responded by opening her mouth and accepting Judy’s questing tongue, but her inner ear issued an immediate alert, breaking through her enjoyment of the moment. Judy’s momentum had changed Skye’s balance in the chair, and the white fox found that they were tipping backwards.

She didn’t hesitate or try to compensate, as she reacted by pulling her bunny into a ball of gray and white fur and cradled her in her chest as they fell backwards and landed with a thump, the breath being knocked out of Skye’s lungs with a slight ‘oof!’ as Judy’s weight landed on her. But it was a short chair, and they were small mammals, so the fall didn’t generated any significant force other than to startle them both.

“Oh my God! Oh my God, are you okay?” Judy frantically queried a gasping Skye. Skye’s gasps of surprise quickly turned into laughter, as she squeezed her bunny to her chest, “Ha ha ha... Yes, yes... I’m fine, I’m fine.” She laughed. She turned to look at Judy’s concerned face, “I take it that was an enthusiastic yes?”

Judy sat up, her paws resting on Skye’s chest, “Most definitely, yes.” Judy sat for a moment, as she screwed up her muzzle, and then sat up straight, straddling Skye’s’ stomach, “Except... Can we wait a couple of months?”

Skye looked up at her in askance, her brows furrowed. Judy hurried along, “Just until Moni graduates? Please? She’s been a really good roommate to me; really supportive, and I don’t want to leave her alone. She can’t afford her apartment by herself, and she wouldn’t be able to find another roommate in the two months she has left before she goes home.” Judy finished up, a concerned look on her face.
Skye slowly smiled as she reached her paw up to stroked down Judy’s jawline and throat, “Of course.” She replied. Actually, as she thought about it further, the delay would give me a chance to sort through my crap and make room for Judy at the same time.

Judy smiled in return, her face framed in golden fire light on one side and silver moon light on the other, as she leaned in to complete the thank you kiss that gravity had so rudely interrupted.

Like all good things, the weekend also had to come to an end, as Skye had a shop to manage and Judy had shifts at Dee’s to cover. They packed up the camper the next morning for the drive back home, and Judy waved goodbye to the Big Sur. She was going to have to come back to this place – so many happy memories here.

They drove north along Route 1, the windows down to let the sea air into the car. Skye had the deep blue Pacific coast to her left, and Judy had the rugged Golden State mountains to her right. The turbo charged whined, complaining that the arctic vixen wasn’t using it to its fullest potential. Skye ignored it’s entreaty, preferring to take the trip home sedately, driving the speed limit and trying to stretch out their time together.

They spent most of the four hour drive back in silence, having said most important things the night before.

Skye pulled up before her shop and parked the truck. Judy got out to unlock the front door and walked in, stopping to pick up the mail. *Bill, Invoice, Junk Mail, Junk Mail, wait a minute… Who’s Tonraq?*

Judy turned and called out the door at the vixen just getting out of the truck, “Hey, Skye? Is Tonraq another one of your relatives? You’ve go a letter from them.”

Skye strode up, a frown on her muzzle as she held out her paw, “Tonraq is my father. Why did he send me a letter? He never writes.”

Judy handed her the letter, her eyebrow quirking, sensitive to the change in her girlfriend’s manner. Sky ripped open the envelope, extracted the letter, and began to read. Her eyes went wide as her paw flew to her mouth and she leaned against the open doorjamb as she read down the letter. As
she finished the short letter, her eyes began to fill with tears and she slid to the floor, her head sinking between her knees as she began to sob.

Concerned, Judy knelt beside her, placing her right paw on Skye’s arm, while reaching for the letter with her other paw. She gently pulled the letter from Skye’s limp grasp, and turned it over so she could read it. It was written in the Qikiqtani dialect, much like the letters that Skye got from her brother. Skye had slowly been teaching Judy to read it, but most of what was in the letter was incomprehensible to her. Judy reached up with her right paw and started to stroke Skye’s head, leaning in to kiss her brow. She just stayed there, rest her head on Skye’s, just being there for her. Skye was always patient with her, so she could afford to wait a bit to see what had upset her vixen so much.

Skye slide her paw up to hold Judy’s, and they stayed that way for a spell before Skye spoke. “It’s my mother. She has ovarian cancer, but she missed most of the warning signs, so now it’s spread to her spine and pelvis. The tribal doctor gives her 6 months to live at the outside.” She raise her muzzle to face Judy’s, her eyes red from the tears she had shed.

“Oh, babe, I’m so sorry!” Judy’s face melt with concern, as she reached around Skye’s neck to hug her white head to her chest. “I’m so sorry...”

Skye pulled the letter out of Judy’s paw and started again, “My father wants me to come back home to be with her in her final months. She can barely walk now, and he can’t be home taking care of her and also running his boat.” She stared at the letter and added in a small voice, “I don’t know what to do....”

Judy knew that Skye was referring to her father whom she barely tolerated, “Do you love her?” she asked her fox.

Skye looked up at Judy, “Of course! She’s my mom!”

Judy placed her paws on either side of the arctic fox’s muzzle and gazed into her gold and blue eyes, “Then you need to go be with her, now.” She stroked her paw down Skye’s cheek, “While you still can.”

“But my shop, and my relationship with you...” Skye stopped as Judy put her paw over her lips.

“You’ve got a good brand here, and loyal customers. They’ll understand that you have to go home...
for 6 months, especially if you make arrangements with Big Dawg down the street to take up the slack for half a year. You’ve always had a great working relationship with his shop, since you started your business there.” Judy shook her head, “And I certainly can’t build your electric bikes. I can look pretty on them, but I don’t have the engineering skills to make them work.”

“As for me, I’ll be right here, waiting for you.” Judy gestured out the door, “I can’t leave Moni alone right now, this close to her graduation. As much as I want to go with you, which I really do, she’d fall to pieces if she had to find another roommate right now.” She nodded, “But after she leaves, you and I can discuss things, see how you are doing, and maybe then I can arrange to move somewhere closer to you, okay?” Judy promised her.

Skye nodded, “Okay.”

The next two weeks flew by, as Skye finished out her motorcycle build orders, and transferred other orders she couldn’t complete to local shops. Her tools and fixtures she ended up selling to Big Dawg’s Hawgs down the street, since they had traded work back and forth for years. The old grizzled wolf would pick up supporting her customer base as well as her two employees. Her own personal motorcycles she sold off to loyal customers. She was left with just four bags of her personal effects, clothes, and mementos. Not much to show for nearly a decade of living in Gateway Bay City.

Skye had come here, almost right after college, at the age of twenty two to pursue her passion of custom electric motorcycles. She worked for Big Dawg for a couple of years, but as soon as the opportunity arose for her to open her own shop, she had jumped at the chance. And now the only thing left to show for that opportunity, after nine long years of hard work, was an empty shop with a for-sale sign swinging in the breeze outside.

Judy sat on a stool in the corner, quietly crying as her heart was filled with doubts. In just a few hours Skye will be gone from her life for the next six months or even longer. She had been abandoned before, so she thought she was calloused enough to handle this. But she was finding that after two weeks of preparation that she couldn’t cope with the coming loss after all, even though she had originally encouraged Skye to go. Maybe it was because that Skye didn’t want to leave her either that made this change in their relationship all so very bittersweet.

In a past life, she had found perfect passion with her fox and then lost him. In this life she had found a complete connection with Skye, and now she could be loosing her too. It wasn’t fair, so not fair. But Judy couldn’t scream about it, because Skye was loosing her mother too, and Judy couldn’t allow her own need to hold her vixen back from loving her family. That wasn’t how Skye rolled.
Judy remember how she had described it to her vixen three months ago, how that Skye ‘loved without reservation and forgave without consequence’. Judy had to hold on to that as inspiration for her own life, and love Skye back without reservation, and forgive her for leaving without consequence.

“Hey, babe, you ready to go?” Skye called into the garage bay. She stepped out and looked around for her girlfriend. She saw Judy on the stool in the corner, and rushed over to her. “Oh, baby!” She picked up Judy, and hugged her to her chest.

Judy sobbed into her shoulder, “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know. But I have too.”

“I could still find a way to go with you, you know.” Judy mumbled into her chest.

“Oh, baby, I wish that were true, I really do. But even if you could get past the border guards, my hometown is no place for a rabbit. It’s really a carnivore only town. You would be the only herbivore for miles. You wouldn’t be able to even get rabbit food there. And it smells like rotting fish all day long, so you wouldn’t be able to keep anything down anyway. The only jobs available are on the fishing boats or the seafood canning factory, and they are all dangerous. You would be miserable. Hell, I grew up there, and I know I’m going to be miserable.”

She walked around the shop, hold the little rabbit in her strong arms, stroking her ears with her paw.

Skye explained to her, “My father never accepted me as a lesbian, and he would never accept you. He would pretend you don’t even exist, and just harp on me to get married to some local male so I can have kits. It’s no place for you. I’m only going because my mom is sick and she needs me, not because my father asked, or because I agree with what he thinks about me.”

“It’s no place for you at all, littlest rabbit. No, I need you here, where I know you will be safe; where you can have friends who accept you; where you can get food and a job. I need somebody to remember all that I love about this place, to keep it alive in their hearts for me. I especially need somebody who will go to the top of my favorite mountain, and watch the fog roll in for me. Can you do that for me, light of my heart?” Skye looked down at her bunny. Judy just nodded.
“Okay. I have one last gift for you, and then we need to head to the airport.” She carried the little rabbit outside and set her down, pointing at the waiting camper truck. Judy turned around to look and gasped in surprise. Skye had detailed a Hopps pink bunny face logo on the truck doors, and emblazoned below that was a surfboard laid on it’s side with the letters ‘J. J.’ stenciled on it. She turned back to look at the vixen, delight in her eyes.

Skye held out the keys to her rabbit, “Here. The Beast is yours now; my birthday gift to you. Something to remember me by. Figured you would need something to haul your surfboard around in, and if you can’t find an apartment right away after your roommate leaves, you could always just stay in the camper.”

Judy took the keys, “Thank you! You didn’t have to! And with my family’s farm logo on it too?” She grinned.

Skye just nodded, “Yeah, you convinced me that family is important, so that’s my reminder to you as well. Your mom won’t be around forever either, you know. I think that maybe you should reach out to her as well?”

Judy just nodded, unwilling to argue the point, even though she was sure she had burned that bridge.

Skye returned to her empty shop to grab her luggage, which she stashed in the camper, and then slid into the passenger side while Judy jumped into the driver side, started the truck, and drove them off to the airport.

They stood before the jet-way, having one last embrace before Skye departed. Skye kissed away her bunny’s tears and sighed with a smile, “Don’t cry, light of my heart. This isn’t good-bye, you know. I will see you again, I promise.”

Judy sniffed, and wiped her face with the back of her paw, “I’m gonna hold you to that promise, cause I will be waiting for you.”

Skye nodded, “My grandma used to tell me a legend from my tribe about an arctic hare that had married a female arctic fox. Eventually the hare became ashamed at his inability to provide game for his wife, and the two separated tearfully.” She reached down to cup and lift her bunny’s chin. “Shed no more tears, my little arctic hare. You provided everything I’ve ever needed in a mate and
more. I love you, always remember that.” She bent to kiss Judy’s lips one last time.

“I love you, too.” Judy whispered back. Skye nodded and let go of her rabbit. Picking up her bag with tears of her own threatening to spill over, she strode down the jet-way, knowing that if she turned around and grabbed Judy, she might not be able to let go again.

Judy waved at her retreating form, yelling out, “I’ll see you soon!”

Little did Judy know that she wouldn’t see her vixen again for another eight years.

Chapter End Notes

I really struggled to write this chapter. I managed to get about 1500 words down before I ran into a brick wall, with two scenes done, but I was missing the bookends as well as the middle. I discussed this with Dakzoo, and he encouraged me write what I needed to write, and to take the time to do it right, not trying to force it into the constraints of what my self imposed schedule dictated. So I took another week of research into the beliefs and fears of the Inuit people before I managed to come up with what you have just read.

It's part of the nature of story telling - if it feels wrong, don't force it. Step back, and consider what your characters would think, and they will tell you how the story is supposed to go. Have faith in them. Have faith in the story.
Wednesday Afternoon: There Are No Coincidences

Chapter Summary

Fennick tries to pull a prank on Judy, only to find that the joke’s on him. His mate helps him understand his place in this drama as Judy reconnects with a long lost lover.

Chapter Notes

Back to SkyeHopps land! Yay! This chapter picks up right where chapter 18 left off.

Current Day: Wednesday afternoon in Savanah Center

Judy heard the rumbling first; the distinctively smooth sound of a pair of balanced 90 degree V-twin engines, slowing down to idle as their owners coasted to a stop in front of Crazy Steve’s restaurant. She would recognize that sound anywhere. When she had started modeling as a bike babe for Jack, one of the first things she learned was that, like diesel tractor engines, motorcycle engines had distinctive operating sounds, from the pop-pop sound of single cylinder two-strokes to the deep bass pulsing rumble of a ‘56 v-twin pan-head.

She looked out the restaurant window next to the booth that she shared with Fennick, but because of the angle of the sun shining in through the window, she could only see the two motorcycle. The details of their riders, clad in black alligator leather, was lost in the glare. The first bike was obviously a custom chopper, all chrome and black paint with an extended front fork and long handle bars. A small black bullet shaped side car rode in close formation to the chopper, a shark’s mouth and teeth painted on the front. That must be where Fennick rides, she thought, And that means the long legged rider is his girlfriend.

The other rider was somewhat shorter, but Judy couldn’t figure out what species they were yet. They pulled up on the other side of the chopper, partially hidden from view, but what Judy could see of their motorcycle thrilled her and depressed her at the same time. What thrilled her was the possibility that it was a classic Gold Coast Pale Rider 250V, and one of the few classic gas motorcycles she could actually comfortably ride. The part that depressed her was that she had first learned to ride on a Pale Rider over 8 years ago; what saddened her was not so much the length of time, but who her riding instructor had been. She still missed that vixen, even after all this time.

She looked glumly down at the table, a frown beginning to play across her muzzle. Fennick looked across the table at her with a bit of concern, misreading her frown for trepidation. He tried to
reassure her, “It’s cool, rabbit. Nothing to worry about, I promise you. You’re gonna like Marilyn’s mechanic, and I thinks she’s gonna like you!” He grinned across the table.

Judy locked her eyes on the little fox’s. He looked so pleased with himself that she was instantly suspicious of his motives. “She?” Judy asked him with a scowl, afraid that some joke was about to be played out at her expense. He nodded as his gaze drifted to the door, and behind the back of her booth seat she could hear the sound of it opening, it’s door bells momentarily masking the murmur of conversation the two mammals were having.

Judy’s ears twitched on her head as she identified one of the voice as canine, a light soprano but with the same Amazonia accent that Hugo presented. The other canine voice, though, was softer and more alto, with hints of west coast and something else, something tantalizingly familiar and much more... northern. Judy’s head went back in shock as she recognized that voice and her mouth dropped open. Her gray ears leapt to their full extension, swiveling up and over the back of the booth to lock on to that voice. She heard just one word barely whispered when she did, but that one word was enough for her to know without a doubt who the speaker was.

“Tukisinangitok...”

Judy shoved down hard on the table with her paws as she leapt to her feet, water sloshing out of the glasses on the table and drenching Fennick in the process, as she twisted back around to face the mammals by the door. She locked her eyes on the smaller of the two, and her shriek brought the entire restaurant to a stand-still.

“SKYE!!!”

Marilyn pulled her helmet off, and shook her head. She waited until her fellow canine rider pulled up next to her and turned off her grumbling beast before she asked her question, “So what is it with you and rabbits, anyway?”

The white furred vixen laughed as she unbuckled her own helmet. “I don’t know. I’ve always had a fascination for them, especially as a kit. My grandmother would tell me stories, legends actually, about them and how our two species would interact. My favorite one was about how a buck and a vixen got married.”

She leaned the bike on it’s kickstand, and slid off the seat. She put her helmet and gloves into her
saddle bag, and turned to follow the wolf to the restaurant door, continuing with, “Of course, the moral of the story was about staying inside your tribe to marry, but the impossibility of it always struck a romantic cord with me.”

Marilyn paused with her paw on the door handle, “You? Romantic? Skye, I’ve never seen you have a steady relationship, much less a romantic one! We’d go to a bar, you’d pick up some vixen, and the next day when I’d ask you about it, you can’t even tell me their name!”

Skye stood up straight with indignation, placing her paw over her heart, “I can too be romantic! Really! I even managed to have a rabbit for a girlfriend some eight years ago, before we had to break up after six months. We lost track of each other after that, which is kinda sad.”

Marilyn pulled the door open so that they could enter, “Really? How the hell did you manage that without her running off the moment you smiled and said ‘Hello’?”

Skye followed her inside, “Oh, no, she didn’t run away when we first meet. I was the nervous one, not her. Hell, she asked me out first, if you can believe that!” She smiled at her friend.

Marilyn stopped and turned to look at the snow vixen in disbelief. Skye just grinned back, and as she did she breathed in the particular aroma that was Crazy Steve’s. She could smell the mouth watering scent of fish poaching in the kitchen. She could smell Fennick’s musky scent among the customers, stronger than the aftertaste that always clung to Marilyn’s clothes. She could also smell the earthy scent of rabbit, a scent somewhat misplaced in an omnivore place like this.

She turned her nose toward the scent, and she inhaled deeply, tasting the tang of her favorite scent. Her nose told her it was an eastern cottontail, a female even. But Skye’s breath caught her throat as the rabbit’s ears lifted up. They were gray with black tips…

“Tukisinangitok...” Skye whispered in disbelief. She fell back against the wall as the doe rocketed up out of her seat, turning and twisting to face her. Skye’s jaw dropped open as she gazed back at eyes the color of vibrant heather, eyes she had only ever seen once before on a rabbit doe. She whispered that rabbit’s name as she slid to her knees, only have it drowned out as the rabbit shrieked out hers.

“Judy...” She didn’t even see the gray blur coming straight at her before she was slammed up against the wall by a sobbing, shrieking doe, her own arms reflexively catching the smaller mammal and crushing her up against her chest as they both wept with joy.
Marilyn looked down in bemusement at the two females clutching each other. Seeing that they were going to spend some time getting reaquinted with each other, she made her way over to the booth, where Fennick stood on the seat, soaking wet. “Oh Baby,” she exclaimed, grabbing a napkin from the table and using it to sop up her poor drenched fennec tod. “What happened to you?” She asked him.

“What happened? Crazy-ass rabbit, that’s what happened! She jumped up on the table as soon as you two came in, knocking the water glasses all over me, before rocketing off!” He plucked at his shirt as Marilyn tried to dry it with the cloth napkin, “What are they doing right now?” He swiveled his ears, trying to listen to their mutual sobbing.

Marilyn leaned out to look around the booth, “They’re just locked in an embrace.” She smiled as she sat back up, “I don’t think we’re going to separate the two of them any time soon, at least not without a crowbar.” She put the damp napkin down on the table, and grabbed another to use on his pants, “Where did you find her?” she asked her diminutive Tod.

“Oh, I didn’t find her.” Fennick shook his head, “Hugo came in this afternoon and asked me to babysit her and then he took off, which surprised the hell of me, considering how long he’s been looking for this particular stray. I wouldn’t imagine that he’d let go of her after just finding her a couple of nights ago.” He gestured at the far wall, half in amazement, half in frustration.

Marilyn sat up straight, the damp napkin in her paw momentarily forgotten, “You mean, that’s… that’s…” She pointed at the rabbit.

“Yeah. That’s Judy Hopps. His long lost star pupil from Cliffside, some thirteen years ago.” Fennick scowled in the rabbit’s direction.

Marilyn was struck silent in amazement. She turned back to see Skye stand up with the rabbit still in her arms and walk out door. The vixen turned and walked down the street, away from the restaurant, and out of view. She turned back to look at Fennick, as he gestured out the door.

“I brought her along, figuring that I could tweak his prim little feline nose a bit for dumping her on me by introducing her to Skye, but that just completely and totally backfired on me. It looks like she’s already friends with the vixen, which is weird. You’d think, with the way that Skye’s always obsessing about rabbits, that she’d have mentioned Judy at some point to us.”
Marilyn shook her head, “Fennick, you didn’t see them embrace. They weren’t just friends, they were lovers.” Fennick stared back up at her in disbelief. Marilyn nodded, “Yes, for about half a year; almost eight years ago, she said. I would guess just before her mother died, since she really doesn’t like to talk about that time. She said that time in her life was filled with too much heartbreak for her to really want to talk about it.”

“Shit...” He put his paws on the table, and scowled. Eight years ago? Why was that important? Suddenly he remembered and his eyes snapped up to Marilyn’s, “Eight years ago Judy was in Gateway Bay City, at least according to Hugo. Didn’t Skye have a shop there for several years?”

She nodded, “Yeah, Skye Cycles, before she sold it. She was making custom electric bikes.” She scowled at him, “How did Hugo know the rabbit was there?”

Fennick waved his paw in the air, “He had his other Cliffside students out looking out for her. Apparently Mork, the porcupine in his group of strays, saw her purely by chance at some art school out there that he was attending, and reported it to Hugo. The Cat was so overjoyed he wouldn’t stop babbling about it to me. Mork managed to track down where she worked for him, but before he could talk to her, she ended up having a screaming match with two customers, and she got fired on the spot by the manager. They stormed out of the restaurant crying bloody murder, and she ran off faster than than poor Mork could waddle out after her.” Fennick shook his head.

He frowned across the table before continuing, “Hugo had flown out there on a whim, trying to meet up with her, but she was gone by the time he got there. He managed to get the restaurant manager to cough up her home address, but when he got there she was already moved out. She didn’t leave a forwarding address, so he had no way to find her. He scoured the city, but he just came up empty. He was so bummed when came back to Zootopia.” He turned back to look at his she-wolf and froze as something went CLICK! in his head . OH SHIT!

She looked down at him in worry, “What?” She asked him.

He looked back at her in shock, “I just realized something, that I should have put together before now, but I never did! Oh my God, that’s why she was so upset!”

“Who? Who was upset?” Marilyn demanded to know.

“Cheryl! Our Chery!” He took a breath before explaining, “This was before your time, and Hell, even before Hugo ever met her, but she had gone out to the west coast to do the touristy thing with her girlfriend some eight years back. They had left so happy, but by the time they got back they were all upset and arguing with each other, but Cheryl never told me why. I figure they had some
spat or something, but I don’t think so now.”

He thumped his fist on the table, “Mork reported to Hugo that Judy had been arguing with two cream colored canines, who were yelling about bloody murder, and that it somehow got Judy fired. Now, which canines do we know, personally, that are cream colored, and have cause to yell at a rabbit about murder?”

Marilyn leaned back and whispered, “Catherine...”

Fennick nodded vigorously, “Yeah! Catherine Latrans! And her girlfriend, our very own Cheryl!” He stopped for a moment, puzzlement playing across his features, “Except that Hugo was flying out to Gateway Bay that very day, to meet up with her.” He grabbed her arm, “Marilyn, Hugo flew in to meet her, but before he could, Catherine and Cheryl showed up to chase her off! That’s too many damn coincidences!”

Marilyn cocked her head, thinking, “It’s as if something, or perhaps someone, didn’t want her to be found by him.”

Fennick nodded, “Yeah, and it’s not just him, either! Hugo wasn’t the only one looking for her, oh no. Nick is too.”


Fennick gestured out the door with his jaw, “Judy Hopps’ other name, her street name, is Jessica Lapin. Ever hear of that?”

Marilyn froze for a moment, think back to the days when she worked the poles, “Wait, I know that name. I saw it once or twice on the west coast circuit, back when I was still stripping. She was a big name for while, if you were into really crazy performances. That was her, too?” She looked at Fennick, her brow furrowed.

“I didn’t know about the stripping, but I guess that makes sense considering the rest. She was a porn star for a while, into doing extreme porn.” Fennick just shook his head, “But that’s not what interested Nick in her. He was more interested in what she was doing three years ago, here in Zootopia.” He turned to look at his mate, “Not the prostitution she was doing, per se. She was working the casino district, and it’s legal there. No, Nick is interested in her because of her relationship with Dawn Bellwether.”
Marilyn put her paw to her lips, “She was a Prey First zealot?”

Fennick muzzle split in an ironic grin, “With the way she talks about Hugo, or what we just saw happen with Skye? No way in Hell!” He laughed, “Naw. It turns out she was Nick’s CI deep inside the PF organization.”

“She was?” Marilyn looked back at him in amazement.

Fennick nodded. “Yeah, after Bewether’s death, she grabbed all of their laptops and documents, and gave them to Nick. That’s how he broke the case. It was from that info that Hugo’s medical team managed to make an antidote and cure the savage predators that crazy Bellwether’s gang had attacked.”

She was confused again, “But if that’s the case, then Hugo should have talked her then, right? He wouldn’t have still been looking for her if he knew, but I even talked to him about it last year, and he said he despaired that he would never find her alive again.” She waved her paws in the air.

“He doesn’t know, because Nick never told him. The stupid fox scrubbed the data, and removed any reference about Judy or gray rabbits from it so that Hugo wouldn’t find out. He said he was trying to protect Hugo. From what, I don’t know. The knowledge that she was a prostitute who had been working the Zootopia streets for years, just under Hugo’s nose? Or that she was in deep with some crazy-assed organization that was trying to outlaw predators? I don’t know.” Fennick sat down, “What I do know is that Nick said she had gotten infected with night-howler at the same time that Bellwether died, and she had run off. He believed that she had died out on the streets, probably from terror induced exhaustion like some off the lost predators had.”

He pointed out the door, “Except that’s obviously not the case. She’s certainly not dead yet, as we can see!”

“You?” Marilyn warily asked him, “What do you mean by yet, Fenni?”

“Oh! This is where it gets really weird!” He turned back to her, “Cheryl’s been bugging me about this crazy dream she’s been having, but she won’t talk about it with Nick, or Hugo, or hell even her own wife for that matter. Cheryl Silverheels, noted coyote scholar of the mystic arts, is calling me of all mammals to talk about a dream she doesn’t understand.”

Fennick pointed out the door, “She’s been having this dream for the past month about a dead gray
rabbit lying frozen in a snowbank. In the middle of the Tundra Town central square at night and she swears that the rabbit is Judy Hopps! She’s all worked up about this cause she can barely sleep before she gets hit with it and she wakes up screaming Judy’s name! Luckily, her wife is out of town, or she would be having domestic screaming matches over the contents of her own dreams right now.” He ran down.

Marilyn eyes were boring into Fennick’s, “There’s more to that, isn’t there? More than just her dreams that you aren’t telling me?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Cause in her dream, she was Clawhauser. It was Clawhauser that was supposed to find her dead in the snow. Except that it never happened, cause I figure that Hugo found her first. After ten years of searching, and never finding her, being actively blocked even, he stumbles on her in the dead of night in the middle of his own Goddamn backyard; Tundra Town no less! So instead of being dead in the snow on a cold Monday night, she’s now staying with Hugo with nothing to show for her recent brush with death except for a case of pneumonia.” He tossed his paws up. Crazy Steve, the dingo proprietor of the restaurant, thinking that they needed service, started to walk toward their table. Fennick just waved him off.

“And Clawhauser? He’s now in the hospital, attacked by some patient of Hugo’s. The same patient that Hugo had to go see, but he couldn’t take Judy in with him, so he dumps her on my lap. The coincidences have gotten just absolutely ridiculous, so much so that this has to be some crazy drama plot being written by a cheap daytime soap opera hack! Argh!”

“Fenni, love, you always say that you don’t believe in coincidences.” She gently reminded him.

“No, I don’t, I really don’t. Except that it’s all there. I swear, the only thing that would turn this all into one of those Amazonia telenovelas that you like to watch is if Judy there was some kind of time traveling cop from the future who’s been sent back in time to prevent the apocalypse from happening. But along the way there’s going to be this really crazy love triangle between her, an obsessed asexual cross-bred cat doctor, and a motorcycle racing lesbian from the far north. Oh, let’s not forget Nick naming his daughter after this rabbit, so it’s just gonna have to blow up his marriage with Miki now, too!”

“Cop, why a cop? Why not a soldier from the cyborg future?” Marilyn teased him.

“Oh, definitely a cop.” He nodded, “When I told her about Clawhauser getting hurt, the first thing she wanted to know was if Nick was okay. I never even mentioned Nick. So she’s gotta know him enough to care deeply about him, especially since she obviously sent him all that info in the first place. And she asked about Clawhauser by his first name, not his title. She’s somehow on a first name basis with these ZPD mammals, but they’d swear up one wall and down the other they’ve never even met her. Except that they all want to talk to me about her! I’m the damn mammal in the
middle on this, being kicked around like a bloody soccer ball!”

He finally wound down his rant, “Babe, I don’t know what to do here, I really don’t.” He shook his head.

She took his tiny paw in hers, and she gently squeezed. She leaned over and kissed him on his head before starting, “A very wise mammal I know once told me, when I was just getting started with my own counseling career, is that we don’t get to pick who walks in through our doors. We just get to choose who to help. So I have to ask, are we going to help her?”

“Us?” Fennick exclaimed, “I don’t want in on this! This promises to be a complete and absolute shit-storm! I don’t want any part of this rabbit or her problems!” He shook his head.

“Except that we are a part of this. You said it yourself; you’re the mammal in the middle. They are all your friends, and they have all brought this problem to you. They trust your judgment, so you can’t abandon that trust, no matter how hard the situation might be on you. And you’re not alone in this, my little Zorro! I am here too, to aid you in this quest that has been given unto you by the Espíritus Santos.” She stroked his ears as she explained this to him.

“You? Why are you now dragged into this?” He asked.

“She’s an ex-sex worker, yes? That means she’s meant to be my client. And we just saw that Skye is meant to help with her as well.” She assured him, “Your other friends, well, they are your responsibility. You know how best to get them to work together for the needs of this rabbit and her purpose.”

“What purpose!!??” Fennick exclaimed, “The only thing I see that connects them all together is the whole night-howler thing, except that Dawn’s been dead for three years, and Carl Latrans! What does a coyote astronaut who’s been dead for nearly twenty years have to do with night-howlers? Dawn was a Prey First fanatic, and Carl was a predator in the public space program! I don’t see the connection! What possible purpose could that crazy little rabbit have??” He demanded to know.

She leaned back and looked down at him, “You said she was supposed to die, according to Cheryl, yes? But she didn’t, no? That you believe that something was actively blocking Hugo from finding her for over a decade, but now all of a sudden she is in his care? Well, in my opinion, the only reason that I can think of, is that she didn’t die because she was give some work, some holy mission, by the Espíritus Santos, and it is not yet done!” She poked a claw at his chest.
“And now you are now part of this work, not just because Hugo dumped her on you today, but because you have been a part of this since it began. You are the center, whether you want to or not, because you understand who the players are and what you are supposed to do for them, even if you don’t understand why!”

“But I don’t want to be any part of this, I really don’t!” Fennick desperately whined. “There’s got to be somebody else who can do this!”

She leaned back and stared down at him, “Alright, then, who? Who else has figured this all out? Who else knows all these mammals? Who else do you know that they all trust?” She cocked her head as she considered her little mate. He ground his teeth for a moment, before he dropped his gaze, and nodded his head.

“Just me.” He finally admitted.

Skye became aware that every mammal in the restaurant was watching them, as the conversations around her stilled. Still holding on to the sobbing rabbit in her arms, she stood against the wall. Turning to the door, and without a backwards glance, she walked outside with Judy clinging to her neck.

She turned to walk along the sidewalk, and she was struck by how light her former lover was. Skye looked down at the fur on Judy’s skull, and she could see the patchiness of the fur, and she could smell the scent of medicated body wash. Overlaying that scent was the powerful musk of a male jaguar, mixed in with something else she didn’t quite recognize. Spying a bench by the road, she angled over to it. Settling down on it, she arranged Judy’s patched coat to hang over her knees. Leaning back, she stroked her paw down Judy’s ears, calming the poor rabbit.

Judy’s hiccuping sobs slowed in time, and turned into little whines as she slid down to nestle into Skye’s chest. Skye hummed a nameless tune as she continued to stroke her paws over Judy’s head and down her spine. Skye’s sensitive paws traced over the bumps of the skinny rabbit’s vertebrate. She wasn’t sure what had happened to her little rabbit, but the vixen was certain that she had almost starved to death. Rabbits weren’t supposed to be this skinny. She must have been homeless or abused, which would explain why she was in Fennick’s care, she thought. Her arms wrapped back around the little cottontail and gently squeezed.

They sat that way for a bit, until Judy’s breathing became regular.
Judy spoke first, her tone gently accusing, “You stopped writing back to my letters, and eventually they all came back to me with a big ‘Return to Sender’ stamped on them. I always wondered who you must have found up there that took my place.” She stroked her paw down the slick vest, feeling for the heartbeat under the leather.

“I’m sorry,” Skye murmured back, “My father was intercepting my mail while I was taking care of Mom. He had finally figured out who you were after he opened one of your letters. Since he didn’t approve of my relationship with you, he took it upon himself to change it. He hid my letters to you on his boat, and sent all of yours back, which I didn’t find out about until after Mom died. She held on for two more years, but finally she passed on, freed from her pain.”

“After she died, he tried to convince me to help him on his boat again, and I tried to one last time. I really did, but the sea still terrified me, and he still didn’t care. We didn’t catch anything that day, so instead he cracked open a bottle while we were still at sea, and made me pilot the boat back in. I suppose he felt that jumping off the deep end was the only way to learn how to swim, but I still hated him for it.”

She sighed before she continued, “I managed to pilot the pitching boat all the back to our wharf without puking or curling up in a ball. I was in the process of shutting it all down and putting the maps away when I discovered all my letters to you, along with a few of yours, rubber banded together and hidden in the map box. He never threw them out, the lazy bastard. Just kept them, as trophies I suppose. I had never been more angry with him, so when he came into the boathouse, drunk as a skunk, to bitch at me about my sea handling skills, I punched him as hard as I could right in the nose. I was packed up and gone from the house before he came too. Took the first flight out of our town to the Providence capital and I never looked back.”

Judy pushed back, the look on her face unsure, her eyes searching Skye’s for the truth. She wanted to believe, but the pain was too real, even after eight years. Skye put her finger on Judy’s lips to still any questions before unbuttoning her vest and reaching inside it. She pulled out a slim wallet from an inner pocket, and upon opening it she pulled out a well worn photo, creased and feathered. She handed to the photo to Judy.

Judy took it from the vixen’s paw. It was a photo of Judy standing on a beach next to her short board, soaking wet and grinning like a loon. She turned it over, and written on the back in Skye’s neat script was ‘Light Of My Heart’. She turned back to look at Skye, who quietly breathed, “I’ve always kept you close to my heart, littlest rabbit.”

Bereft of words at this simple gesture, Judy did the next best thing she knew of to do by grabbing both sides of Skye’s muzzle and crushing her lips to the vixen’s in a very belated kiss, a kiss only eight years late.
Flashback: Missed Connections

Chapter Summary

Hugo searches Gateway Bay City after Judy has a fateful confrontation at Dee's. While he searches, she attempts to drown her sorrows at the bar. Looking for a way to make some quick cash as a solution to her housing problem, she decides to try her luck at the strip club. Hugo's search for Judy is fruitless, but in a final stroke of irony, they come within shouting distance of each other, only to be turned away at the last minute by powers beyond their keen. Their paths diverge for now, but all too soon will they be brought back into the conjunctions of fate.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry that this one is two days late. I have spend a fair amount of time writing, editing, and massaging this to get it to this point, and ready or not, here it is.

To Upplet - I tried to keep it short and sweet, and you will be able to see where I was able to condense it down, but eventually the story must be told in it's own fashion, all 8,427 words of it.

To Dakzoo - thanks for letting me bounce ideas off of you, and for being my cheerleader behind the scenes in all of this. Sorry I made ya wait! :)

Flashback: 8 years earlier in Gateway Bay City

Mork sat on the edge of the circular fountain, sketching the Art Institute’s students rushing back and forth. It was graduation day, and there was a rush by students to get dressed and down to the event center for the graduation ceremony. The fountain afforded the porcupine the best place to sit and mammal watch, as the wall was low enough for him to sit comfortably, his spines couldn’t stick anyone as they were tucked into the fountain, and he could lay his tail in the water to help cool himself in the late spring heat.

He was sketching a couple of sheep who had dropped their art work on the ground and so he was facing the wrong direction when he heard her call out. His head snapped up, and he turned to the sound of her voice, Holy Shit! He thought, as he caught a glimpse of her gray fur running through the sea of blue robes. Long ears tipped in black, a carefree smile and those amethyst eyes. He would know that face anywhere. It’s Judy Hopps! What the Hell!

He struggle to his feet, dumping his sketch book and pencils to the ground as he attempted to call
out to her, “Judyyyyy,” but she was gone through a side door without even a backwards glance. He was left standing there dumbfounded, the water from his tail soaking into his art-book.

The only thing he could think of in that moment was, *The Doc is gonna shit himself sideways when I tell him this!* 

* * *

Mrs. Bonnie Hopps

I am writing you to let you know that I now have a credible lead on Judy’s whereabouts. One of my other Cliffside students, Mork, is now enrolled in the Gateway Bay City Art Institute. He has reported to me that he saw Judy at the Institute on Graduation day earlier this week, and he has positively identified her by her black ear tips, eye color, and voice. He is not certain if she is a student there or not, but the other students he has talked to there recognize her description. Apparently she is a regular on the Institute grounds, and is typically seen involved with the Sculpture classes.

As it is too soon for her to have graduated from the school, if indeed she is a student there, I feel confident that she will still be on the grounds, at least for the next few days. As I have little time to spare for a search before the school gets out for the summer, I have booked an immediate flight to Gateway Bay City. Boarding starts in just a few minutes, and I should be there on the ground by this evening.

I will keep you apprised of any new developments.

Sincerely

Doctor Hugo Wiedii

* * *

Mork walked along the sidewalk towards Dee’s Kitchen. One of the sculpture students had mentioned in passing about going back to Dee’s for a post exhibition party, so he was following up on that tidbit. There were several Dee’s Kitchens in the city, but this was the closest one to the school, so he thought he would try here first.
He walked to the door at what looked to be the dinner rush, but as he turned to pull on the door, he saw her. She was standing at the computer on the counter, a pencil held in her mouth, as she busily tapped in orders. He quickly whipped out his phone, and took a picture of her working at the counter. As he contemplated going in and trying to approach her, another mammal exited the door, and as they did so Mork was struck by two things. It was indeed crowded and noisy inside, which was going to send his social anxiety through the roof. But worse than that was the smell of cooking meat, which immediately made his stomach want to flip-flop.

He staggered over to the lamp post, and struggled to calm the incipient nausea. Straightening up, he looked for a place to wait, and across the street he saw a coffee bar. Perfect!

He hurried across the street before the crosswalk light changed, and slipped into the bar. Ordering a black coffee, he settled down at an exterior table to wait for the rush at Dee’s to die down, and also use the opportunity to sketch the mammals walking by his table.

He had only been there maybe 20 minutes, and had been considering ordering an apple danish, when he saw two strikingly similar canines enter into the restaurant. They were tall, regal looking mammals, with very light brown coats, almost a dun cream color. They wore identical khaki outfits, and he supposed that they might be sisters. They were quickly seated at a table by the window facing him, and he used that as an opportunity to quickly sketch them. He wasn’t close enough to make out their exact facial features, so he went for capturing their body language in his drawings.

As he watched them, Judy came up to wait on their table. _Ooo... Perfect_, he thought, _I can get them all at the same time._ But as he watched, something appeared odd in this situation to his artist trained eye. Judy was talking to only one of the canines, first gesturing to herself, and then to them. The other canine was getting progressively more agitated until suddenly, she exploded out of her seat and started screaming at Judy. The other canine stood up quickly, and tried to separate them, struggling to drag the other one out the door. As they reached the door and backed out through it, he could hear the angry one screaming about bloody murder! That one quickly turned on the calmer one, screamed at her about not supporting her in her time of need, and took off running down the street. The calmer one looked anguished for a moment, before she took off after the other without a backwards glance.

Judy stood still and unmoving by the table they had just left, her ears flat against her skull and her eyes downcast as she shook. A small black bear in an apron quickly approached Judy, and asked her a series of rapid fire question, to which Judy only nodded. The bear pointed to the door, and Judy pulled out a black object from her apron and threw it on the table before running to the back of the restaurant.
Uh Oh, this can’t be good, Mork thought. He quickly collected his book and pencils, and leaving the thoughts of apple danishes behind, he rushed to the street corner as fast as his short porcupine legs could take him. He tried to cross the road, but he was almost run down by a yellow taxi cab that flew past him, its horn blaring in indignation. He stepped back on the curb, and punched the cross walk light several times.

When he looked back up, he could see Judy run out of the front door, dressed black shorts and a black jacket. He tried to yell out to her, but his voice was lost in the sound of four lanes of traffic. She turned the corner in front of him, and ran down the hill and quickly out of sight.

The light finally changed for him after a few more moments, and he waddled across as fast as he could, but by the time he got to the opposite corner, she was gone.

Oh, Shit! The Doc ain’t gonna be happy about this, he thought.

* * *

H.W.M.D.:

Fennick, as I reported earlier, I have arrived in Gateway Bay City, but despite my previous optimistic assessment regarding my search for my stray, things have not been going according to projections.

Zerda, Fennick:

You mean it’s all gone to shit?

H.W.M.D.:

While that is a rather crass assessment, it is an accurate one. It is a big heaping pile of doo-doo.

Mork was able to find her work location, but apparently she had an altercation with customers and was fired on the spot. I tried to meet with the owners of the establishment, and even presented them with my credentials, but they offered to have me bodily removed if I didn’t leave forthwith. It was
after I left there that I was approached by one of the other waitresses who handed me Judy’s last
know address.

Zerda, Fennick:

Well, that’s good news, at least!

H.W.M.D.:

I would have thought so as well, but she was also supposed to be evicted to day due to the non-
payment of rent, and had returned home after being fired to pack everything she owned into a
truck. I just finished talking to the nice old landlady in her building who was clearly more
sympathetic to Judy’s plight, but she was unable to provide me with an accurate description of the
truck, as she was rather nearsighted. She did manage to give me two additional phone numbers
usable as possible contacts, so I am going to try them next.

Zerda, Fennick:

Well, Good Luck, Cat!

H.W.M.D.:

Thank you. I will needed it.

* * *

The first number he tried came back as disconnected, which wasn’t good, so Hugo tried the next
one. That one started to ring, but after a couple of tones, it went straight to voicemail. The message
on the phone was simply the phone number spoken by a computer voice, so he had no way to
establish if this message would reach Judy.

Beep! “Judith Laverne Hopps, this is Doctor Hugo Wiedii, from Cliffside. I don’t know if you
would remember me after all this time, but I would very much like to speak to you, if you would be
willing. I am in the city, and visiting with Mork, who was also in your class. If you like, perhaps
we could all get together over tea, and discuss living on the west coast?” Beep!

Hugo looked at the phone, and contemplate rerecording the message. But he left as it as he had no idea how to make it better than it was. Closing down the phone, he stood on the sidewalk in front of her old apartment, staring down the dark street at the night sky beyond.

* * *

Judy sat at the Misty Visions bar, located just behind the airport, nursing her beer, and musing about her lack of planning in life. Like how she could have possible thought that coming here, to Skye’s favorite dance club, was going to assuage her loneliness. Here she was, sitting along at a bar, surrounded by all these hot vixens, and all she wanted to do was go home and cry. Not that she had a home, since she packed all that up today. Great job, Judy! Pick a fight with coyotes who definitely hate you, get fired, end up homeless again, and now work on getting drunk and weepy. That’s a great plan for a great day. And to top it off, now I have to pee.

She pushed away from the bar, and slid off the bar stool, stumbling just a little on her landing. Oops, maybe that was one beer too many, she thought, No wonder I need to pee. She pushed her way through the throng of legs to the back of the club, and pushed open the swinging door leading to the bathrooms. The DJ was in the middle of a set, so the line for the female’s bathroom was nonexistent. Maybe she would finally get lucky today, and find a stall that was somewhat clean. She opened the free stall and had to hold her nose. GAH! Can some mammals not flush? She thumbed the button, and flushed the fragrant floating flotsam out of existence. She jumped up on the rim, pulled down her shorts, and did her business.

Her phone started to buzz, so she had to try to fish it out of her shorts while not slipping off the rim at the same time. Holding it up, she read off the number. What the Hell area code is that? Great, a spam call. Let me guess, my car’s extended warranty is about to expire? She sent the call to voicemail.

Finished with her needs and the phone call, she stretched for the toilet paper roll mounted on the stall wall, just out of reach. These damn toilet stalls aren’t made for small mammals! As she reached, her foot slipped on the rim, and she flailed for balance, falling off the toilet to land on the floor on all four paws, her shorts still down around her ankles.
SPLASH!

What? What just went splash? She looked down at her paw, and in horror she realized that her phone was no longer there. She shot upright, and peered over the edge of the bowl. There it was, sitting at the bottom of the toilet bowl. GAAAAAAAAHHHHH! This day cannot get any better, can it? She screamed inside. She yanked her pants back up, and leaning over the rim, she fished out her phone. She tried to power it on, but to no avail. It was dead.

She left the stall in a fog of drunken depression, and not really thinking about, she pulled up a stool to the sink, and proceeded to wash her phone. She stopped for a moment, staring at her paws, struck by the inanity of what she was doing before slowly turning the water off, and setting the phone aside.

She stood on the stool, staring at her reflection, a single tear of frustration sliding down her cheek. What was she doing here, torturing herself like this, she had to wonder to herself. She should probably just go back to the truck and sleep this off, except for the fact that she was still terribly lonely. Wait, a minute! Her head popped up. What about Frank? He should be here, working tonight. I could go visit with him, and that should take the edge off! He’s always been a great listener for the gals. She grabbed her dead phone, hopped down off the stool, and head out of the bathroom, taking a hard left down the hall, away from the bump and bustle of the dance floor, toward the other end of the club.

Misty Visions was a chain of clubs on the west coast, part dance club and part strip club. Using a loophole in the zoning laws, they keep the alcohol on one side of the building, and the nudity on the other, joined together by a smaller building with ‘shared’ bathrooms. It was a nod and a wink, for sure, but it work with the law, and gave the patrons who went clubbing their choice of distractions. Frank, a large Amazonian Jaguar, was the bouncer for the strip club side, and part of his duties was to sit by the door and make sure club goers didn’t try to sneak drinks in anywhere except in their stomachs. So he was used to dealing with drunk females like her.

She pushed the door open to the strip club side, and walked into a quieter side of town. There were music sets playing for the various females working the poles, and on the far side there was a raucous gaggle of females throwing money at a pair of male snow leopards – that must be a bachelorette party. But for the most part, it was quieter here, to add to the allure and sexiness of it all.

Skye had liked to come over on this side, in between the dance sets, so that she could ogle the other vixens, and to show off her girlfriend as well. It was amusing to Judy to consider just how monogamous Skye had been with her. Judy had never demanded it of her, but the vixen rarely if ever strayed. She had had her rabbit, and there weren’t many of those around that would play with her, so she stayed devoted to Judy. For Judy’s part, she kept her extra-curricular activities strictly
limited to her work with Jack and her modeling with the school. That kept it professional, and kept it from intruding in on their mutual relationship.

Not that Judy’s eye didn’t wander as well. She liked the males too, especially the smaller predators, and this was a great place for her to indulge in those fantasies as well. Skye had little use for males, but she liked to indulge her rabbit, knowing what bed that a certain horny rabbit of hers would end up in, and getting Judy worked up about predators always promised a night of fun.

Judy paused for a moment, scanning about for Frank. She spotted him at one of his usual haunts, a pair of stools up against the far wall where he could fade into the darkness while still keeping watch over the club with those great big yellow eyes of his. She hopped over to him, and gestured to the stool next to him. He tilted his head, and gestured to the stool as well, inviting her up. She climbed up, and sat down next to him.

“Hello there, little bunny,” he greeted her, “You and your gal working the dance floor tonight? I haven’t seen you two in a while.” He nodded his muzzle at the door leading back to the dance side.

Judy just shook her head slowly, “No, Skye moved back up north.”

“What? You two broke up? Shit, that’s too bad. You two were always sweet with each other.”

“No, no… We didn’t break up, sort of.” Judy tried to explain, “Her mom has ovarian cancer, and Skye moved back in with her to help about six weeks ago. I couldn’t go with her, so I had to stay here. Her dick of a dad doesn’t approve of the whole female on female thing.”

“Aw, Fuck, little rabbit, I am so sorry to hear that!” Frank turned most of his attention to her, keeping only one ear on the rest of the club.

“Yeah, it was fucking great. And today was even better, since I got into an screaming match with customers, got fired, got evicted, and I just dropped my phone in the crapper. It’s turned into a shit-tacular day, I tell you.” She was morose as she bit out the words.

“Oh, bunny, when it rains, it pours, don’t it?” He chuckled, his black humor matching her black mood.

“Oh… Yeah...” She stared at the floor for a bit, before turning her attention the the screaming
females at the far end. She watched the two snow leopards pump their hips, and cocked her head.
She turned to Frank and asked, “How much are those two gonna pull down tonight, do you think?”

“The twins?” Frank mimed air quotes as he said that, “Tonight, with their crowd, say $500 each, easy.”

Judy turned her head to the she-wolf entertaining the bikers in the middle and asked about her,
“What about her?"

He turned to watch the silver wolf go about her act, “Maybe $200-300, on a night like this.” He
folded his arms before continuing, “Of course, when the DJ finishes his set on the other side, this
place will flood and then the money will really start to fly. But the gal had better be something
special, have some gimmick like the twins do, if she wants to pull in more.” He turned to look at
her, “Why, little rabbit, you thinking about getting up there and strutting your stuff?

Judy shrugged, “Thinking about it, yeah.”

Frank frowned, “Careful, there, Jessica. The stage ain’t no place for a little innocent bunny like
yourself. They will eat you alive.”

Judy smirked up at him, “I may be little, but I ain’t innocent, Frank. Here, look at this...” She pulled
out her phone, “Shit, I forgot it’s busted.” She turned back to him, “You got your phone, look up
my photographer’s website.” He pulled out his phone, as she gave him the address. He tapped in
the URL, and waited as it came up. He started scrolling through the site, his brow furrowing,
before he turned the phone towards her, “That’s a lot of rope for a little bunny.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a little bunny, so the rope goes farther. But that’s not what I want you to look at.
Pull up his motorcycle tab.” She pointed on the screen.

He opened that tab, and started scrolling through those photos. He quirked his brow, and looked
back at her.

She grinned back at him, “I got my start with motorcycles, and if there is one audience I know, it’s
bikers. Plus, a bunch of them were Skye’s customers, so I know what they’re like when I’m not
modeling.” She assured him.
He cocked his head as he put away his phone, “If your sure, little rabbit?”

She nodded, “Yeah, I’m unemployed right now, and I need enough to afford an apartment before I can get another job. Rents around this town are ridiculous, yah know?”

He agreed, “Yeah, no shit. Well, it’s your funeral.” He stood up and pointed across the club, “But first you have to convince Manny to let you up on the stage. Think you can handle him?”

“Please, he’s just a weasel. I can handle a weasel. And if I can’t, I don’t belong on that stage, do I?” She reminded him. He nodded, and started across the club. She climbed down off the stool and followed him.

* * *

“Yo, boss.” Frank called out to him as they arrive at the booth Manny was sitting at. Frank nodded at Judy, “The rabbit here wants to give the stage a shot.”

Manny leaned back in his white leisure suit, and pulled the toothpick out of his mouth, “Well shit… You got an ID, sunshine?” Judy pulled out her wallet, plucked out her ID, and slid it across the table to him.

He picked it up, and looked at the birth date, and then tossed it back on the table, “Floor fee is $50. You got that on you, or are we going to have work out something… special, sweetheart?” He leered across the table at her.

She stared across the table at him as she picked up her ID, and turned her head to Frank before laughing out loud. She turned back to the weasel, crossed her arms and leaned on the table, “Tell you what, Manny. How I go put on something sexy, you get the MC to announce me, I pay the $50, and you don’t do anything stupid that I would have to break your jaw for?” She smiled sunnily at the weasel, “How does that sound, sweetheart?”

Manny sat back with a shocked expression as Frank started to laugh. He looked up a the big jaguar and demanded, “What are you laughing about! She just threatened me! What are you going to do about that!”

Frank, still chortling, just shook his head, “Manny, boss, I ain’t gonna do shit. Ya see, the owners
of the club, which you ain’t one, hired me to do just three things.” He counted them off on his fingers, “First, I have to make sure nobody sneaks alcohol into this side. Second, I make sure nobody robs the place. And third I make sure that nobody harasses the performers. Protecting your jaw isn’t on my job description. And since what you just implied cuts pretty close to my third responsibility, I ain’t gonna protect your ass if you decide to piss off the rabbit. I’m gonna just sit here on the sidelines and eat popcorn while I watch.” He shrugged at the weasel.

Manny sat there, grinding his teeth. “Fine!” he bit out, “You’re on in 15, rabbit. I’ll go grab the paperwork and Frank can tell the MC to announce you. Happy?” He slid out of the booth and stalked off to his office.

“He folded pretty easy there, rabbit.” Frank observed.

“Please.” Judy responded, “Remember the rope photos?” Frank nodded. She continued, “I do kink, and I can recognize a submissive bitch when I see one.” Frank just snorted over that observation.

She smiled, as she stood next to the table, thinking. She still needed a gimmick, though, for her opening act. A light went off in her head, and she turned back to Frank, “Is the bartender still riding in on his cruiser? Could you ask him if I could borrow it for my act?”

Frank turned his head and looked at her with one eye, “I dunno know… He’s pretty protective of it. He’s probably think you would break it up on the stage.” He shook his head.

Judy just grinned up at him, “You tell him that I said he needs to get his carbs rejetted, and that’s why it’s running rough at idle, okay?”

Frank blinked at that, but shrugged as he walked over to talk to the bartender. The fox looked at him, and then at her. She just shrugged and held out her paws as she grinned back him. He turned back to the panther, and nodded. Frank walked back to her, “He said okay. He’ll go get it wheeled up on stage for you.”

“Thank you, Frank!” as she turned to run out to her truck.

He called after her, “What do you want to be announced as?”

She called back, “Just tell him to call me ‘J.J.’!”
Frank gave her a thumbs up as she used her butt to open the outside door.

* * *

“Okay, mammals! We got ourselves a new gal here, so let’s give it up for J.J.!” the bobcat MC announced over the speakers.

Judy walked out onto the stage and into the bright lights, surrounded by the hooting and hollering. She had put on something simple, just a half-halter top, cargo pants, her best thong, and her riding jacket. It was what she usually wore while riding with Skye, and she sometimes took it to shoots with Jack. She knew how it moved, and she was comfortable in it. That comfort would be something her audience would immediately pick up on.

True to form, Frank and the bartender had wheeled up the cruiser onto the middle of the stage. Judy stalked slowly along the bike, running her paw along the leather and chrome, foreplay in one of her favorite pastimes; making love to a motorcycle. This was her meat and butter.

A wolf sitting in the audience, decked out in black lizard leather, blurted out in a shocked voice, “Holy Shit! It’s a RABBIT!” Judy froze as she immediately locked eyes with the poor wolf. She held up her paw and snapped her fingers, pointing over to the MC to cue her music. As the music started, and she began her act, her eyes never leaving the wolf’s, her smile became feral. She cocked her head down as she opened her mouth slightly to expose her large incisors which she used to bite down her lower lip, hard. The wolf visibly shuddered.

She had them now. Now, she was the predator, and they were the prey!

* * *

At the end of the night, just before the club closed, Frank walked her out the club’s side exit to escort her back to her truck. She was grateful for his vigilance, since she could barely see in the muted darkness. As they turned the corner toward the front of the club to cross to her truck, she caught a whiff of something. Something that seemed out of place here, and she certainly hadn’t smelled it before when she was inside. Passion Flowers.

That scent triggered an old memory, the kind of memory that was more a feeling than a vision, a memory of kindness. Why was that important? What was she associating that scent with with? Her
mind racing, she tripped down a cascade of sensory memories; the sound of pencils scratching on paper, the smell of chalk dust in the air, and the echos of laughter inside a cardboard box. She looked up, and peering over the edge of the box was a kind, feline face. *Oh*, she thought, *Doctor Wiedii. He used to smell like that.*

She took a quick step in front of Frank, her ears flick up and out as she scanned her senses about. She saw nothing but the gray fog, lit in muted pastels by the neon signs of the club. She could no longer smell that tantalizing scent, as all other scents were drowned out by the falling drizzle. Her ears heard the bass thud of the club music first, followed by muted conversations coming from by the bikes, and lastly the sound of crackling, coming towards them.

* * *

Hugo was lost in the fog. The GPS on his rental had to be glitching out, as it told him that he had arrived at his destination, but he couldn’t see anything in this damnable fog. He drove forward slowly, looking for the rental agency sign, street lights appearing out of the fog in front of him only to sweep over his car and fade back out into the gloom. *Wait, there, lights?* He saw neon light, and what looked like cars parked under them, so he pulled into the lot.

But as he got out, he quickly realized that he wasn’t at the rental agency. Music could be heard coming from the long building that stretched of before him, and the sign on side that said ‘Misty Visions Dance & Strip Club’ certainly wasn’t ‘Speedy Rentals’. He looked around for somebody to ask how he could get there, and behind him he spotted what looked like food truck tucked up against the fence lining the parking lot. As he walked over to the truck, he was assaulted by familiar smells from home. Empanadas!

His stomach grumbling, he crossed over to the open window on the side of the truck. He fished out his wallet as he ordered, “Two Chicken Empanadas, please.” The aproned puma behind the counter nodded as he took out two from the cooler and tossed them into the fryer. As Hugo was paying he asked, “How do I get to Speedy Rentals from here?”

The puma just laughed as he replied, “You’re close, cat. Just go back up the road three streets and turn right. They’re tucked up around the corner.” He pointed back down the road, the way that Hugo had come from.

Hugo nodded, “Thank you. I had gotten turned around in the fog, and I didn’t know where I was.”

The puma continued talking as he pulled out Hugo’s empanadas with tongs, “Yeah, it’s really thick tonight, for some reason. It’s like another world out there, or something. You be careful out there,
okay? No telling what you might run into!” He folded the two pastries into a paper plate and passed them down to Hugo, “Careful, they’re still hot.” He cautioned the smaller cat.

“Thank you,” Hugo said as he took them in paw. He opened up the plate, and blew on them to help cool them down. While he waited for them to cool enough to be edible, he walked back along the building. Parked under the sign were rows of motorcycles, and Hugo rapidly felt out of place here. A breeze puffed up behind him, sending cold moist air up under his coat, and causing a shiver to run down his spine. Another world indeed, he thought, this is certainly not a place for me to be at.

But before he turned to leave, the breeze thinned the fog for just a moment, and in that moment he thought he saw the flicker of long gray ears at the end of the building. That’s odd, he thought as the fog rolled back in, what would a rabbit be doing at a place like this? It’s wall-to-wall predators here, to be sure. Curious, he took a bite of his first empanda as he walked forward.

** Somewhere Else **

Lord Jaguar stood to the side, unseen by the mortal mammals before him, cloaked in blackest night. His midnight fur danced with the twinkle of a billion stars flaring to life and winking back out, some slowly dying, others exploding in titanic novas. He stood nude, save for the golden breechclout of woven hyperstrings hanging from his waist, and a headdress of cascading shards of slivered space-time, rifts leading to other places, other realities, and other times. He watched as the two mammals grew ever closer together.

“What are you doing?” another voice called out of the mist, a quiet raspy voice, like the swish of wind through lakeside reeds in the morning light.

He turned toward their call, and with a growling voice that echoed through the deepest caverns, he responded, “Considering... Possibilities...”

“Really?” The other voice responded mockingly, “It looks to me like you’re poking Possibilities with a stick!” The mist resolved into the form of an upright male Coyote, his old eyes laughing. He was clad in old dusty blue jeans, a tattered plaid shirt, and adorning his head was a battered old straw hat with an eagle feather in the band, while a grass stalk hung limp from his lips. As he stepped up next to the Jaguar, he reached out and tapped Reality twice. Time slowed to a stop, the mammals before them froze like insects caught in crystal glass.

“Old Man...” rumbled the Jaguar, “This should not be...” He pointed at the rabbit, “She was to be mine...”
“Really? What makes you say that, o’ Brother Death.” Old Man snickered, “Are you still stuck on her?”

“She was a special soul…” He turned to face the grinning canine, “She was needed… elsewhere…” He pointed again at the rabbit, “What happened to her was not… natural…”

“No, it wasn’t. I’ll agree with you on that, but it solved a very specific problem at the time. The rabbit did ask if there was anyway she could change fate, and the Lady offered her a solution. She took it, and that’s that. And now she has to suffer the consequences of her decision. But we’re not talking about her. We’re talking about you! What are you doing here? For that matter, what is your acolyte doing here?” The Coyote pointed over at Hugo.

“Saving her… From what is to come…” The Cat of Night replied, “Please consider, Brother… Had she not run away at the dinner, Mork would have been able to catch up with her… He would have told her that Hugo was coming to find her, and that she did not need to run anymore… She could have been saved from the suffering that is to come…”

“Nah-Uh! That doesn’t fly, Brother, and you know it! She may have gotten rid of the previous threat that Carl Latrans held over her world, but she still has to face down the menace that is Dawn Bellwether, and to do that she needs to fall down the rabbit-hole just a little farther. We can’t have you snatching her out just yet!” Old Man chided him.

“Is that why you sent your granddaughter?… To drive Judith away?… To keep Hugo from finding her?…” Death scowled at the Trickster. “You can send your acolyte to damn her, but I can not send mine to save her?…”

“Guilty as charged!” He laughed, “Oui, put the sour puss face away. It had to be done, and you know it. And as for what I can do, and what you can do, well, we both know that you’re a stickler for the rules, and I like to break them!”

“She still does not need to suffer… With just a single word spoken, here and now… She could save herself… She could still battle Bellwether, and win, with help…” He pleaded with the Coyote.

“Oh, Sweet Cheese and Crackers!” Coyote threw his head back and groaned, “You keep going on and on! Yes, she could, but she would be an outsider trying to battle her way in, and the blood of the innocent would run fathoms deep as a result! But with the path that the Lady has laid out before her, she’ll be an insider who can sidle up right next to Bellwether. She’ll be able to mitigate
the damages and lower the body count, which I know you’d like. And when the time comes, she will be uniquely placed to solve that problem.” The Coyote nodded to the Jaguar.

“So let it go already! Your compassion is commendable, and it’s one of the best things about you, Brother, but her path has been fixed, her fate sealed, and her destiny decreed, which she had agreed to from the start! And even after all that goes down, she’ll still be yours, so I really don’t know what you’re complaining about.” He pointed at the approaching cat, “So send your acolyte home already, and let Judy get busy with the next stage of her journey as decreed by the Lady!”

Death hung his head and with a sigh he nodded, “It will be done, Brother….”

Old Man Coyote shook his claw at the defeated Jaguar, “And no more of this poking reality with a stick, okay? Let it go! Judy has her path, and Hugo has his, and while they crossed once, that’s it. He did what he needed to do for her, and now she’s on her own. Let her go, and in the future, please leave the rule breaking to those that are good at it.” Coyote winked as he laid a paw over his heart, stepped back into the mists, and vanished.

Lord Jaguar, Arbiter of the Infinite, turned to do as he was bidden. His paw raised, he prepared to restart Time and froze as his mind raced, Why had my Brother mentioned Carl Latrans to me?... He is dead in this time-scale, no longer a part of this equation... Isn’t he?... He did not pass through me to become one with the Infinite… Therefore, he has been returned to life on this mortal plane, has he not?… Lord Jaguar reached out with all his senses, feeling out upon the world before him for a very particular soul, and what he found shocked even him.

Brother, what have you done?… That path will lead only to ruin!… Unless?… Unless... Does Coyote expect me to cheat?... How?... I am bound to my duties, bound to receive the souls of the dead, and pass them on to the Infinite if they so warrant it... And Judy’s soul most certainly warrants it, so I am bound to accept it when she passes on... Wait, no, I am not bound!... I can choose!... I could reject her soul, but instead of sending her back to be reborn, could I choose for her another path?... But how?... Maybe… Yes, maybe, that would work... But it will take careful planning…

Lord Jaguar stood still for a moment, his head cocked, as he considered the problem before him. A grin began to form upon his face, a terrible grin of rent space-time, resplendent with hyper-matter teeth of infinite sharpness. He chortled low and long, the very fabric of space-time shaking as he did, and as he reached forward to restart Time he spoke, his voice rumbling like an earthquake, “Thank you, Brother Trickster!... I accept your wager…”

* * *
Hugo quickly came to a stop when he realized that a few paces before him, staring aggressively down upon him from the gloom, were two great glowing yellow eyes. He could barely make out the dark body, but the height, size, and spacing of the eyes told him it had to be a jaguar or a perhaps panther. A relation of sorts, but still not one he was particular keen to tangle with at this late hour, as the message contained in those eyes was plainly ‘Go away!’ He raised his paper plate by way of greeting, and backed away. He turned around slowly, and returned to his car, leaving the mystery of the long gray ears that he might have seen to the large black cat behind him.

* * *

Judy froze as Frank put his paw in front of her, his head turned to the side. Her eyes darted up to his dark face, and he growled in a low voice, “Somebody’s coming...” She shrunk back, hiding behind his bulk. But after a few moments he relaxed, and started walking again, “It was just some dude wandering around eating an empanada from the food truck. It’s safe now; he went back the way he came.” He assured her.

She quickly peeked around behind Frank’s tail, but all she could see was blackness moving in the gray before it too disappeared. Nothing there, she thought, nothing she needed to worry about now, anyway. She sniffed at the air, but the only thing she could smell was the dank, wet air itself. What ever was the source of that tantalizing scent, it was gone now.

* * *

A few hours later, Hugo stood at the windows next to the terminal gate, looking out over the concrete apron bathed in mist while he waited to board his early morning flight. He pulled out his phone to frame an email to the Hopps family, to which he attached Mork’s clandestine photo. He wrote:

Mrs. Bonnie Hopps,

Success! Of a sort, I must confess. My former pupil, Mork, did indeed spot Judy at his art school in Gateway Bay City, where it appears that she was attending a friend’s graduation. He also learned that she models for figure studies there quite regularly, but as the school is out of session for the summer, she probably won’t be back till fall.

He also managed to track down her last known employer, and took the photo that is attached to
this email. But her luck, or perhaps best to say her temper, was running to true to form, and she had an altercation with two customers, who Mork described as beige or cream colored canines just after this photo was taken. Her employment was terminated as a result, and she ran out of the restaurant before he was able to contact her.

After I arrived at Mission Bay City, I met with Mork, and assessed his information. I went to the restaurant where Judy had worked. I meet with the staff there, and after explaining my credentials and my relationship to Judy, I was able to extract from them her last know address. I investigated that address, and after talking to the landlord I found out that Judy had indeed been living there for about two years with a capybara roommate, but that I had just missed her. She had finished packing up her things and had left just a few short hours before I arrived.

‘Just missed’ seems to be the theme for this day’s endeavors.

But while I may have had a run of bad luck in this, I still feel this is good news. She is alive, well, and for the most part stable, her famous temper none withstanding. She had been employed with the restaurant for well over a year, and she wasn’t fired for the altercation with the customers, but because she had lied about her name on her employment form to the management. It seems she was employed under the alias of ‘Jessica Jumps’ from Podunk. Relatives of yours, perhaps?

I believe she will resurface again, after she has found new employment, and when she returns to the school in the fall to model, Mork will try to make contact.

In the mean time, keep the faith, and know that I will bring Judy home some day soon.

Sincerely

Dr Hugo Wiedii, MD

He looked up from his phone after he sent the email to see that it was time to board his flight. He walked on to the jet with the other early morning passengers, and stowed his bag over his assigned seat on the left side of the plane, and sat down in the window seat. After buckling in, he settled down for what appeared to him be a very foggy takeoff.

The rest of the passengers finished loading in and seated themselves just in time for the commuter jet to be pushed out onto the apron. They were quickly taxiing down alongside the runway while the flight attendants ran through the emergency drills. As it was still early morning, their flight was
As they climbed up through the fog, Hugo was a little disappointed in the view; nothing but gray blankness. Gateway Bay City was such a pretty city, Mork had told him, and he had been looking forward to seeing more of it. Obviously the weather had thought otherwise. But before he could turn away, the jet burst out of the fog and began to rise above it. He stared out at the magic landscape, the lights of the city looking like holiday string lights buried in blowing snow. The fog rippled over the city in rolling waves, like fields of cotton on a blustery day.

As he looked down and to the left, he saw a long narrow mountain top rising like an iceberg from the roiling sea of fog. It was about 3 miles long, and on the western end there were three radio station towers standing straight and tall, like monuments to long lost kings. Looking down, he squinted as he spotted what looked like a small camper parked along the road in between two of the stations. *Huh?* He couldn’t imagine what some mammal would be doing up there, this early in the dark gray morning, sandwiched between the cold rain and the dense fog. But they were the last citizens of Gateway Bay city that he could see as the jet rose into the clouds above, so he raised his paw and waved goodbye to them.

*Someday, I will return,* he vowed. *I have a lost stray to find and bring back home. I made a promise, and I intend to keep it!*

* * *

Judy sat on the hood of the Hasenwagen, sipping a beer as the early morning drizzle settled around her. The city lay quiet before her, blanketed in alabaster fog, while the rain clouds lay low in the sky, bracketing the mountain top of San Bruno between two sheets of cotton candy fluff. The muted lights of the city belied the coming dawn that was still hidden behind the nimbo-stratus clouds that hung over her head.

She sat quietly, her feet perched on the front bumper, staring at Skye’s favorite park bench. This was it, Skye’s favorite place in the city, and it was the place where they had shared their first kiss. She had promised Skye that she would come up here often, but in truth, this was the first time she had been up here since the snow vixen had left. Oh, she had excuses for not coming, she supposed, but the reality of it was that it hurt too much to be reminded of how much she missed that fox. So much so that she couldn’t even bring herself to sit on the bench that sat forlorn before her.

But after the emotional whipsaw that had been the past 24 hours had finally settled, Judy had felt the need to be reminded of her vixen, even in passing. Skye hadn’t written back to her for a couple of weeks, but Judy supposed that she was coping as best she could with her dad, or caring for her mom. It wasn’t like she could call up there, not since since she had dropped her phone in the toilet at the bar. Not that it mattered, since Skye’s dad eschewed modern communication devices. They
didn’t even have a phone in their home, just a marine radio. Perhaps it was just one more thing he had to pay for, and he just couldn’t be bothered.

But oh, so I need to talk to her, so much more now. I don’t have anybody to talk to here, she lamented to herself. She had burned her bridges with her family, and even Moni had flown home earlier to be with her family while she prepared for marriage to her kithood sweetheart. Judy was so lonely now.

Is that why I thought Doctor Wiedii would been out in front of the club? She pondered sadly, Am I so desperately cut off that I could even think that a mammal I haven’t seen in 5 years could have possibly even been at a place like that? He’s probably back in Amazonia, with a position of authority at some local hospital, and even married with kits by now. Certainly not out looking for my sorry ass in a two-bit strip club on the wrong side of town. Her mind had to have been playing tricks on her; it couldn’t have been him. She must have smelled some other mammal that used that same floral scented fur shampoo.

She sighed, and sipped her beer. Reaching her paw into her jacket pocket, she rolled the wad of cash around with her fingers. It was easily three times what she would have brought home waitressing on a good shift, and on her very first night even. If she kept this pace up, she could afford to get a new ID from the old anteater very quickly. After that, well, it was a big country – she could go literally anywhere, and leave the bitter memories of Jessica Jumps behind.

She watched as a jet broke through the fog laying over the bay to her right, it’s lights blinking as it soared quickly to the cloud ceiling above it. But before it disappeared entirely, she raised her bottle to toast the mammals inside, as they escaped this lonely city, returning to their jobs and loved ones. Watching it fade away, she finished her beer, and slipped back into her truck to seek slumber’s embrace.
**Wednesday Evening: Little Toot-Toot**

Chapter Summary

Judy gets to know Skye's bike, and Skye gets to know Judy's troubles. Hugo talks to Emmi about discovering Judy, and how his Grandmother fits into all of this. They make plans for a welcoming home party for Judy, and Agent Daman seeks Hugo's advice. In the end, Finnick proves to be bossy. (No surprise there)

Chapter Notes

After hinting about it for months, we finally get to talk about Hugo's Grandmother! Yay for Abuela!

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**Current Day: Wednesday Evening in Savannah Center**

Judy sat back with a gasp, “I’m sorry, Skye! I didn’t mean to kiss you! Please don’t be mad!”

Skye, taken aback both by the kiss and the apology, confusion etched on her canine features, stammered out, “Um.. Uh.. Wow! That was… Why would I be mad?” She asked the rabbit.

“Your girlfriend! Won’t she be angry?” Judy replied.

“What girlfriend?” Skye looked around, clearly missing something.

“The one you came in with! The tall wolf?” Judy held her paw up over her head.

“Oh, no!” She laughed, “That’s Marilyn! She’s Finnick’s mate.” She assured the rabbit, “She’s just a customer and a friend.”

“Oh… She’s really tall, like twice your height!” Judy frowned, “How do they...” her line of questioning faltered.
“I don’t know! But somehow they make it work; they’re inseparable, those two.” Skye shook her head.

“Okay...” Judy looked down for a bit, trying to work out the logistics of that relationship before giving up. Her head snapped up, “Where did you get another Pale Rider? Didn’t you sell your old one back in Gateway Bay when you left?”

Skye just laughed at Judy’s quick change in direction back to motorcycles. The rabbit was still more of a motorcycle nut in someways than even Skye ever was. She explained, “It’s not the same one, if you’re asking that. It’s a 1960 model, four years older than my last one. I found it moldering in a barn in the Upper Territories, and I’ve spent the last few years restoring it.”

“Oh, Great!” Judy squirmed out of Skye’s grip and hopped to the ground, “Come on, I want to see it!” She skittered back down the sidewalk a few yards before stopping and turning, “Come on, Skye!”

Skye looked down and picked up her photo of Judy off her lap, a new crease etched into it’s surface after it had been crushed between them during Judy’s grateful kiss. Shaking her head in bemusement, Skye returned it to her wallet, and put the wallet back in her vest as she stood up. She turned and followed the scampering rabbit back to her bike parked in front of the the restaurant.

As she watched her old lover run down the sidewalk, her coat billowing behind, she noticed that the rabbit had a slight hitch in her stride; Judy must have injured herself at some time in the past eight years. She was also certain she had heard a slight wheeze in Judy’s breathing, like that of a smoker, but she hadn’t smelled the acrid odor of spent tobacco so the breathing problem must have another source. Judy hadn’t been asthmatic when they first met, Skye knew, so the source of the wheeze must be recent.

The fox was bursting with questions for her rabbit, which is what she still thought of Judy even after all this time, but it was obvious from Judy’s line of questions and her professed interest in the Pale Rider that she didn’t want to talk about that just yet. Skye was just going to have to be patient, and wait for Judy to tell her.

* * *

Out of the corner of his eye, Finnick saw the rabbit come bounding back up the sidewalk, with Skye following at a more leisurely pace. They stopped at the bike, and Judy to be seen gesturing
wildly at Skye. He had no idea why the rabbit was so excited. He turned back to his maned she-wolf.

“So now what?” He asked her rather impatiently, “What are we going to do?”

“Now we are patient, and we wait for her to decide to tell us what she needs. She’s not a client yet, Fenni.” Marilyn gently chided him, kissing him on his ear.

“Yeah, well, I’m not the most patient of foxes.” Finnick huffed.

“No?” Marilyn asked, “You’re always patient with your kits.”

“Yeah, because it isn’t my ass that’s on the line with them.” He pointed out at the rabbit, “She’s a disaster waiting to happen, and I want to know when I’m supposed to duck!”

Marilyn looked down at her little titan with a hint of humor to her brow, “Awfully cranky, big dawg.”

“Yeah, well, I’m hungry.” Finnick said without apology. He ducked down under the table and skittered out of the the booth. He quickly made his to the door, and pushed it half way open. He opened his maw and bellowed at the two distracted females.

* * *

Judy stroked her paw over the seat stitching, admiring the grain of the carefully stretched alligator leather, “Did you do the seat yourself?”

Skye nodded, “Yeah, the old seat was cracked and had pigeon shit all over it, so it was a total loss, and the after market seats are still hideously expensive for this model.” Skye was standing with her back to the door, so she didn’t see Finnick come partway out, but she heard the door chime as it opened. Judy, alerted to the change in Skye’s ears, also heard the door chime, and she leaned around to see who had come out.

Finnick drew in his breath and bellowed, “YO! MAMMALS! I’m hungry! Let’s order so we can
eat! You can admire the bikes later!”

Judy looked back up at Skye, who just rolled her eyes. Judy, cued in by this display, skipped around the front of the bike, “Sorry, Skye. I have to go home now. My dad’s calling me!” Judy slumped her shoulders in a slouch as she whined, and dwaddled off to the door.

“Get in here, rabbit! I will belt your ass if I have to!” Finnick mock-threatened her.

As she passed through the door that he held open, Judy looked down at him coyly, “Ooo… threatening a gal with a good time, are we?” She grinned at the clenched expression on his muzzle and she scampered over to the bench. Skye followed in, her eyes alight, and a grin barely contained on her muzzle.

Finnick looked up at her, “Not one word, Skye, not one word!” He shook his finger up at her as he let go of the door.

“Sure thing… Dad.” She assured him. He glowered up at her.

Judy walked up to the maned she-wolf sitting at the booth, and held out her paw, “Hi! I’m Judy, Judy Hopps!” She greeted the wolf using her real name. Not much point in trying to hide now, she thought, Finnick knows my real name, and so does Skye.

Taken aback by the rabbit’s boldness only for a moment, Marilyn took the dainty offered paw and shook it in return, “A pleasure. I am Marilyn Vega.” She let go of the dainty little paw, and smiled down at the small rabbit, careful to keep most of her teeth hidden. Judy grinned back up at her without fear.

Skye came up beside Judy, and slid into the other side of the booth. Finnick came up behind Judy and reaching up, he tapped on her shoulder with one paw, and used to other paw to tap the empty space next to Skye. Just like in group, Judy thought, telling me where to sit. She sighed dramatically, and crawled up into the bench, causing the other two females to stifle their snickers. Finnick, crawling in under the table, missed the byplay.

Crazy Steve, the owner of the establishment, walked up and handed them all menus, “I’ll give you mammals a minute or two to look over the menus.” He walked away, leaving them to read.
Marilyn looked down at Finnick, and pointed out to him, “You didn’t need to do that. I could have lifted you up.”

Standing on the booth seat, Finnick replied, “Yeah, well, I wanted to climb up.” He looked over at Judy, who was hiding her grin behind a paw, “Not one word, rabbit! I know that Hugo picks you up too!”

Skye looked up from her menu at them, “Who’s Hugo?”

Marilyn spook up, “He’s a neurologist and a work colleague of Finnick’s, but he doesn’t ride, so I don’t think you ever met him.”

Judy turned back to Skye, “He’s my doctor.”

Finnick snorted at this completely inaccurate description of their relationship, “Was your doctor, maybe 13 years ago, rabbit. Now, the Cat’s your roomie, since you’re sleeping at his place.” Also not accurate, but since they weren’t banging, Finnick didn’t see a point in muddling the waters any more than they were.

“Cat?” Skye asked, “Is he the Jaguar that I’m smelling on you?”

“Jaguar?” Judy was confused, “No, he’s this little forest cat, from Amazonia, barely a head taller than me. I think he’s a margay.”

“Half margay, rabbit.” Finnick pointed out, “His dad’s a margay, but his mom’s a jaguar. Probably why he smells like a jaguar to you, Skye.”

“Really?” Judy leaned back, “How does that work?” Cross-breeds were rare in Zootopia, and they rarely lived into adulthood, or so she thought.

“It has to do with the gestation period being long enough, I think.” Marilyn explained, “It works if the mother is a jaguar, but not if the mother is a margay. But even so, the resulting offspring still have health issues, since the parents don’t have the same number of chromosome pairs. I know that he was sick for most of his kithood.”
“Yeah, but that’s because he’s allergic to Amazonia’s jungle leaf molds. Gives him asthma.”
Finnick pointed out.

Judy sat up straight, “Oh, is that why he lives in Tundra Town?

Finnick nodded, “Yup, no leaf molds to make his life miserable. I mean, he can still visit the Rain Forest district, he just has to wear a surgical mask to filter out the mold spores. It does make him look like a stereotypical tourist from the Sunrise Islands. The only thing missing is the big camera hanging around his neck.”

Their conversion took a break when Crazy Steve came back to take their orders. Marilyn and Finnick had their usual, sharing a big plate of antipasto, and Skye went with salmon and rice. Judy thought for a moment, but finally went with the vegan lentil soup and a watercress salad. They gave their menus to Steve and returned to their conversation.

Judy turned back to Skye, a little embarrassed, “You can smell him on me?!” ***Duh, of course she can, Judy. If Finnick could, so can she!***

Skye just tapped her canine nose, “Yeah, but I didn’t know he was a doctor. I thought he was your pimp or pusher or something.”

“What?” Judy exclaimed, “I’m not on drugs, Skye!”

Skye gestured up and down Judy’s skinny body, “Yeah, well you look like a meth-head, all skinny and with mangy fur.”

Judy grabbed her ears in frustration, “I’m not skinny because I’m whoring myself out for drugs! I’m skinny because I’ve been homeless and living on the streets for three years!”

Skye sat back in shock. Marilyn looked over at Finnick, who just nodded. Judy went back to staring back down at the table, so she missed Skye reaching over with her two strong arms and pulling her into the vixen’s lap. The fox embraced the smaller rabbit, and put her muzzle down alongside Judy’s head, murmuring “I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” over and over.

Judy batted at Skye’s arms with a free paw, “Stop it, you’re making me cry.” as a tear trickled down her cheek.
Sky loosed her grip, and sat up, “I’m sorry, if I had known...”

Judy twisted in her lap to gaze up at the vixen, “There was nothing you could have done, Skye. It’s okay...” To silence the protesting vixen, Judy reached up with a paw, and drew Skye’s muzzle down to hers to reassure her with a kiss. As their kiss deepened, Skye slid one paw around to support the back of Judy’s head. Finnick cough broke across the table, and they both stopped the kiss long enough for each of them to lay an eye on him.

He cleared his throat, before he looked at them both, “Ain’t you forgetting something, rabbit?” Judy broke off the kiss, and looked at him in concern, plainly not understanding. “You’ve got pneumonia, don’t ya? Are you trying to give it to Skye here? You know that foxes have weak immune systems!” He pointed out to her.

Skye sat up, scowling at Finnick, while Judy fell over herself trying to apologize. She shushed the rabbit and kissed her on her forehead. “It’s okay, it’s okay.” She turned back to Finnick, “I will have you know that my immune system is just fine!”

Finnick just waved his paw at her, “Yeah, yeah. Ya can’t be too careful. Nick’s is crap, so I might have generalized a bit.”

Marilyn spoke up, “Nick’s immune problems are the result of work stress and poor sleeping patterns, which causes his Lepto to flare up. Not because his lungs are bad.”

“What’s wrong with Nick?” Judy spoke up, her paws tugging on one ear.

*Bingo!* Finnick thought, *I wondered if that might get a reaction out of her.* “Nick’s got a case of chronic Leptospirosis that he picked up about three years ago, during the species riots.” Judy was watching him very carefully now, but Finnick continued, “He was on ZPD SWAT duty during one of the riots when he was bitten by a rat. Nick, being the macho fox that he is, didn’t get it treated by the ZPD medics afterwards, and so of course he went off and developed an infection, which got him hospitalized. Now, most of the time he doesn’t show any symptoms, but any time he gets really stressed out, his immune system seems to crash and he gets a Lepto flare up.”

Judy looked very concerned at this, enough that even Marilyn picked up on it from across the table. Judy asked, “Isn’t that a rodent disease? They can cure it, right?”
“Yeah, ordinarily, but apparently this version seems to have adapted itself to his body, so most of the time he just acts as a reservoir host. He doesn’t seem to be able to pass this variant on to other mammals, so his wife and kit are just fine, and don’t get sick. Except when he crashes hard, gets hospitalized, and they get worried sick.”

Finnick just shook his head, “Eventually his partner, Sargent Wolfard, had enough of that, and he start carrying around Nick’s antibiotics for him. That way, when he sees Nick starting to have a flare up, he can shove a pill down the stupid tod’s throat.”

Judy just replied, “Oh...” as she sat back.

“In fact, I think he may just have had a flare up.” Finnick considered for a moment, “That must be why he was off for the past few days, spending time with the family. De-stressing.” He turned to Marilyn, “Although, you have to wonder, if that’s why he’s such a dick these days.”

Marilyn responded, “Maybe, but my money is still on his stressful job on the task-force.”

Cuddling down into Skye’s arms, Judy asked, “What task-force?”

Rather nonchalantly, Finnick replied, “Why, it’s the biggest task-force in Zootopia – the Night-Howler task-force, tasked with investigating Dawn Bellwether and her band of merry zealots. Nick is the number two mammal in charge.”

Across the table, he caught Judy’s eyes widen in fear. Even Skye seemed to catch the change in the rabbit, looking down at her head. Now why the hell is she afraid? She was Nick’s confidential informant back then, right? She voluntarily gave that info to Nick, didn’t she? She shouldn’t have anything to be afraid of, then, right? Or is there something in all this that Nick hasn’t told me about, something that would make her act all so afraid now? Wait a minute! Was she coerced into being a CI?

Finnick’s eyes narrowed as he considered that possibility. That might account for Nick’s inability to get along with Hugo! Guilt! Is Nick guilty of doing something horribly unethical, something he could never admit to Hugo? Did he actually pressure Hugo’s favorite stray into going undercover in Bellwether’s camp, coerced there against her will? Is that why he thought she died? Did she get caught by the PF while she was turning in the evidence to the ZPD? Did Nick abandon her behind enemy lines, and leave her out to dry? Is she afraid of the fox, and what he’ll do if he finds out she’s still alive? But then why would she still be so interested in him, so concerned for his welfare, if he indeed had done that to her? Why would Nick name his daughter after her if she was just a means to an end? Where is this intense mutual emotional connection on both their parts coming
from? A radical thought intruded into his mind, *Were they … lovers?*

Finnick couldn’t even fathom how that could have happened. But before he could think of a way to test that bombshell of a theory, Steve arrived with their food.

* * Meanwhile, Back at the Hospital * *

Hugo walked down the hall towards Clawhauser’s ICU room with Emmi. He turned to the muskrat and asked, “Are you and Leah free tomorrow night? I would like to host a dinner tomorrow night to thank Dale and Meredith for their help with Judy on Monday night, and I was wonder if you would like to attend, assuming of course that we can actually get of this hospital tonight.”

“Judy? Who’s Judy?” Emmi asked him in confusion.

“I’m sorry, did I not tell you?” Hugo looked over at him, “I finally found my last stray Cliffside student, Judy Hopps.”

Emmi slammed on the brakes and exclaimed, “What, the rabbit?!? When did this happen? Where did you find her?”

Hugo, brought to a stop by Emmi, replied, “Yes, the rabbit. I found her in Tundra Town on Monday night. Did I not actually tell you yet?”

Emmi walked up to Hugo and laid his paws on the cat’s chest, “No, you did not.” He gestured to a plastic covered bench alongside the hall wall, “Here, sit, tell me about your stray.” He hopped up on the bench, and waited for his partner to sit.

As he was sitting down as well, Hugo asked him, “What about Clawhauser? Should we not talk to him first?”

Emmi just shook his head, “He’s fine, other than his ribs. Not much we can do for him now. Let his boss glower at him for a few minutes. That should make the water buffalo happy.” He patted Hugo’s paw and asked again, “So you finally found her, eh? And in Tundra Town no less?”
Hugo nodded, “Yes, but it would be more accurate to say she stumbled into me Monday night in a
Tundra Town alleyway, soaking wet and delirious from exposure. She was dressed only in shorts, a
torn blouse, and a light jack, which is not appropriate street wear for a Tundra town night, as you
well know. She would have died of hypothermia that night, had I not rescued her.”

“Monday? What were you still doing in town on Monday night? I thought you were going home
after the office closed?” Emmi asked him.

“Oh, I was planning on it, but after the phone call, I ended up going to the Neurological Societies
monthly dinner...” Hugo paused as Emmi interrupted him.

“Wait, wait! What phone call, Hugo!? You’re generating more questions than answers, Doctor
Wiedii!” Emmi smacked Hugo’s arm with the back of his paw, “Clarify, please!”

“Fine! Fine.” Hugo held up his paws, “I’ll start at the beginning, alright?” Emmi nodded, and held
his paw out for Hugo to continue.

“After you and Leah had left for the day, I had stayed to finish out some paperwork when my
mother called from Amazonia to talk. My brother had come over with his husband and their twins
to celebrate the cubs’ birthday, and they wanted to say ‘Hi’ to me as well. After that I talked to my
brother, and then my dad, and at the end my Abuela came out to talk to me. She asked me how
was, was I eating enough, and have I done my rituals today. I told her I was fine, and I wasn’t
starving, and that I haven’t done my rituals in 30 years. She always asks that, and I always tell her
that.” Hugo shrugged.

“And then she asked what I was going to do tonight, which was a little odd, but not terribly so. She
is rather nosy, for an old jungle jaguar. I told her I was thinking about going to the dinner, but I was
pretty tired so I was probably going to go home to sleep.” Hugo made a face before continuing, “At
that point she interrupted me with ‘No, No, pequeño! You need to go! You will meet somebody
who needs your help, somebody nice! You’ll see! Promise your Abuela you will go, por favor?’”

“I tried to beg out, but she made me promise, and since she always seems to know when I don’t
follow through on my promises, off I went. And I had a good time there, talking to the mammals
there, and while some wanted to talk to me, none really needed my help. I didn’t really think all
that much of it.” Hugo took a deep breath, “That all changed about a half a block from my SUV.”

He pointed across the hall with his paw, “I heard mumbling come from an alleyway across the
street from me. At first, I thought it was maybe muggers, but they sounded drunk, so I figured that
they were probably a homeless mammal and I could do my duty to La Diosa and escort them to a
shelter. No big deal, no?” He turned to look at Emmi, “That all changed when I saw her standing there, soaking wet, slowly freezing to death. I yanked off my coat, wrapped her up, and carried her off to my SUV.”

Emmi leaned his arm on the backrest of the bench as he asked gently, “Did you know it was her when you saw her, there in the alleyway?”

Hugo shook his head, “No. I mean, her scent was familiar, but I couldn’t place it at the time. She had her eyes closed, and she was whispering to me, but I didn’t recognize her face, it was so gaunt. It wasn’t until I got her back to my SUV, under the streetlight, that she finally opened her eyes, and I recognized her.” Unbidden, tears started to collect in the corner of his eyes. He rubbed them away.

Emmi, sympathy showing on his face, ask his next question gently, “Gaunt? Why was she gaunt? Some kind of eating disorder?”

Hugo shook his head, as he leaned back against the seat-rest, “No. She apparently had been living over in the Rain Forest district, homeless for the past three years. Hiding.”

“Hiding?” Emmi asked.

“Yes, hiding. She said that. The Rain Forest district had good places to hide. And while there can be plenty of things for her to eat in that district, it can’t provide everything. But she never went to a shelter; at least I never heard about her showing up at one, and I have contacts in almost all of them. They would have told me if she had shown up.”

“Not once? Not even for medical attention?” Emmi was flabbergasted.

Hugo shook his head, “Nope. I even talked to her sister, Beth, about it. She’s a social worker over in Bunny Burrow, so she knows about how the homeless think and behave. We both agreed that Judy didn’t want to be found. Why, I don’t know, but she has been acting paranoid, afraid that someone will catch her.”

He shrugged, “Somehow she managed to stay off the radar for three years, and I never heard a peep. But now she’s here and I don’t quite understand why. I mean, she’s happy to see me, very happy at times in fact, so she wasn’t avoiding me, I don’t think. I just don’t know why she never tried to contact me in all that time.”
Emmi thought for a moment, before he pointed out, “You said Rain Forest district. Hugo, you never go to the Rain Forest District.”

“Not if I want to breathe, no.” Hugo agreed, “And I can understand why she would never go to Tundra Town, since there is no wild vegetation for her to eat.”

“No, you miss my meaning, dear friend.” Emmi, laid his paw on Hugo’s arm, “I know that you give lip service to your goddess.”

Hugo bobbled his head at that comment, “I’m mostly a rationalist these days, which gets me into trouble with some of my friends.”

Emmi nodded, “I know, I’m one of those friends. No, what I am trying to say is that this looks, to me at least, like the very heavy hand of Yahweh.” Hugo looked away and down at the floor. “Please, Hugo. I am not trying to preach to you, it’s just that I feel something more is going on here.”

Hugo was still for a moment, before he nodded in agreement, “I know. I feel it too.”

“You do?” Emmi was surprised that Hugo would admit to that, “So you do think your goddess is trying to tell you something?”

Hugo looked over at Emmi and smiled, “Emmi, La Diosa is a living goddess, an embodiment of all living things; ‘Gaia’ if you will. Serving her is serving all living things, part of why I am a doctor, I suppose. And Gaia is more my mother’s thing. No, what I am feeling can more properly be traced back to my Grandmother.” He paused.

Emmi quietly listened, gesturing for Hugo to continue, “I think I’ve told you this before, so if so, please let me know I’m repeating myself. Grandma was a lay shamanist, a priestess of a very old religion, if you could even call it that, from the Zoonia Isthmus, north of Amazonia. You ever hear of the ancient ‘Rubber People’? They farmed rubber trees, and carved these giant heads that lay all over the place down there.” Emmi nodded affirmatively.

Hugo gestured, “They had this cult of death, if you will, where the local jaguars were the priests; I think they practiced mammal sacrifices back in their day. Anyway, she was descended from those priests, or so she says. And while she didn’t practice mammal sacrifice anymore, she still had a paw on Death. She always seemed to know when a local villager was about to die, because she
would show up at their house and start chanting, giving teas to the rest of the family to drink while they sat the death watch.”

“Since I was something of sickly cub in my youth because of my asthma, she spent a fair amount of time caring for me while at the same time she would conduct these rituals for the dying. I learned a lot about those rituals, sitting in her lap, watching. Enough that, when I turned eleven, we did a very special ceremony while my family was off shopping, she and I. She prepared a concoction of leaves and herbs called ayahuasca, made a sacred 7 pointed star in the dirt floor of her hut for us to sit on, and then we drank it.”

Hugo took a deep breath, before continuing, “It was a very powerful experience, and even now I still don’t quite understand what happened that day. I mean, I understand, as a neurologist, what the effect that the chemicals and poisons in the brew were doing to my brain, but as an eleven year old cub? I had no clue, only that we were floating in an infinite void, resplendent with uncountable stars. And as we floated, something thing, or someone, spoke to us. I never understood what was being said, but later, after we woke up, Grandma hugged me, and told me that Lord Jaguar, Arbiter of Death itself, had accepted me as her acolyte.”

“She taught me a vow that day, a vow that she herself had spoken many years before, but because of my youth and inexperience she only had me recite the first part. She also taught me what my duties would be as an acolyte, mostly a whole lot of fetching of things, or preparing basic rituals, etc.” Hugo hung his head and gave a snort of laughter, “It was during that lesson that my mother and father returned from their shopping trip and discovered us.”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of ayahuasca?” Emmi just shook his head no. “In addition to it being a very strong hallucinogenic, it’s also a violent purgative.” Emmi made a disgusted look, as Hugo nodded. “Yeah, I must have looked a sight to my parents, finding me like that, especially when I jumped up and told them I was now Grandma’s acolyte.” Hugo wryly smiled, “I think that episode, coupled with the shenanigans of the local gang of cubs and kits that I was running around with at the time, finally prompted my parents to send me off to boarding school in the capital.”

“Which lead, inexorably to medical school?” Emmi asked him.

“Pretty much,” Hugo nodded, “I wanted to understand what happened to me, and why my brain worked the way it did. Neurology seemed the best way to do that.”

Hugo was quiet for moment, before sitting up. He turned back to Emmi, “Among the sacred duties of an acolyte was a singular task that was performed by only them, not by the priest. Just as it was a priest or priestess’ duty to ease the passage of the dying, and to guide them to the spirit world, there was a counterpoint duty for the acolyte, whereby they would be sent to seek those who did not belong in the spirit world, and return them to the land of the living.”
Emmi sat up, taking his arm off the seat-back. He cocked his head to the side as he looked at Hugo, who snorted in laughter. “Yeah, it sounds odd, but think of it like a spiritual lifeguard, or search and rescue from the beyond. A distraught family would come to the priestess with a tale of woe, a cub lost to the river, or a woodcutter missing for days, and they would want to know if their loved ones still lived. The priestess would enter into a trance, and if Lord Jaguar was willing, he would send them a vision. Perhaps the victim was dead, and if so the priest would then lead the family to their final resting place. But if the mammal was dying, off somewhere alone but still alive, the priest would dispatch their younger, and presumably much faster, acolyte to aid the dying mammal with whatever arts the acolyte could muster, in order to stave off Death’s embrace.” Hugo finished.

Emmi absorbed all this, before he turned back to Hugo with a concerned look on his face, “Is this what you believe happened?”

Hugo shrugged, “I do not know. What I do know is that I have searched for her for a decade, and never found her. I’ve even been in the same city as she was, and either didn’t know about it, or if I did know I could never get close to her. But mere hours after a phone call from my Grandmother, she falls into my embrace? That doesn’t bespeak of naked coincidence to me.”

“Why don’t you ask your grandmother?” Emmi asked.

“Abuela? She can be awfully cagey when she wants to be. She’ll probably say that’s interesting, and then want to tell me about her latest empenada recipe.” Hugo shook his head.

As he looked back down the hall, he saw Agent Daman approaching them. He tapped Emmi on the leg, and pointed at the golden rabbit.

The agent spoke first, “There you two are. I was wondering if you got lost in your own hospital.”

“Ah! No, we were making arrangements for a coming home party for one of Hugo’s former patients.” Emmi assured him and then turned back to Hugo, “How about I bring sushi and sashimi fixings for the party, and Leah can make one of her famous cakes? That would be our gift to your house guest.”

Hugo nodded, “That works. And I have enough veggies there that I can make a large salad for the herbivores, so maybe a mandarin pecan salad?”
Emmi agreed, “Ooo that sounds wonderful! We’ll see you, what, about seven in the evening?”

“Certainly. I’ll let Dale and Meredith know. I think she gets off shift this week at six.” Hugo let him know.

“Alright then. How about I go talk to Office Clawhauser and his boss, and reassure them? It looks like Agent Daman has some questions for you.” Emmi pointed at the agent as he stood up. The rabbit nodded.

Hugo turned to the rabbit, and gestured at the seat, “You can sit, if you like.”

With just a touch of nervousness to his stance, the rabbit declined, “I’d prefer to stand, if you don’t mind.”

Touched with amusement, Hugo damped down his grin. Reaching into his Abuela’s bag of tricks, he worked to project soothing calmness. “You had some medical questions?”

“Well… Not so much medical as… How do I say this?” the rabbit faltered for a moment, “I would like to know how you managed to deal with Bogo so smoothly.”

“Ah!” Now Hugo did smile. Sitting back, he put his paws on his knees, and made himself appear as least threatening as possible to the rabbit. “Fighting with the water buffalo, have you?”

“At every turn, yes.” The rabbit frowned. “I can’t seem to get him to recognize my authority without a fight.”

“And therein lies the problem.” Hugo told him. The agent quirked an ear at him, so Hugo continued, “You can’t win a dominance battle with a water buffalo; you’ll just get trampled. Bogo is fiercely protective of his department and the officers on it who have earned his trust. He despises outside interference in what he considers his domain, and have you put in against his wishes rubs him raw, especially if you come in talking about how you are going to fix everything they’ve done wrong. That will really get his ire going.”

Hugo passed on his wisdom, “The way I deal with him is to anticipate his questions before he asks
them. That way he doesn’t have a chance to stew on the questions, and it makes me look like I understand what is going on. For you, I would recommend taking a more additive approach. You’re not there to take over, you’re there to add something new to the ZPD investigation. Find some angle, something that Bogo hasn’t considered yet, and run with it. Don’t point it out as something he missed, but rather that you just had this wild and crazy idea, and oh look at all the things that you just discovered. Add to the investigation, and he will welcome you. Point out the ZPD’s shortcomings, and they’ll close ranks on you. It’s really that simple.”

“Huh...” the agent grunted, “And Wilde? How do I get him to stop snowing me?”

Hugo snorted, “Sargent Wilde? He’s just an asshole.” Agent Daman was taken aback by this. “I’m sorry, that’s inaccurate. Sargent Wilde and I share a somewhat contentious personal relationship that predates him being assigned to the Night-Howler task force. We share some mutual friends in common, but when we are in a purely social setting together, we have difficulty trusting each other. On my part, I am sufficiently trained to recognize his bullshit for being exactly that.” Hugo stopped himself before he went too far with that.

Hugo was struggling to give the rabbit advice on how to deal with a mammal that Hugo himself couldn’t stand, but he was a professional, and he was asked for help. “Wilde harbors a great deal of self-doubt, in my opinion. He has worked hard to overcome species prejudice to get where he is, yet every mammal he meets still expects him to just be a sly and conniving fox. He uses self-deprecating humor and jokes to deflect attention away from those doubts, so the way to gain his respect is to meet him on his level. Tell him dirty jokes, and get him to laugh. Go grab a mid day snack with him; blueberries are his favorite. Don’t suggest getting a beer though. He’s professional enough that he won’t drink on the job, and enough of a family male that he won’t drink after work. Ask him for his opinion. Value his advice. Treat him like an equal, and he’ll stop treating you like a bureaucrat.”

Hugo stood up, and turned towards the rabbit, who was nodding. Agent Daman looked back at him, “And you? Where did you learn to do that?”

Hugo cocked his head, “Do what?” He asked.

“Sound so reasonable, so calming.” The rabbit gestured up and down him, “Even now, with you standing there, I don’t feel threatened by you.”

Hugo smiled as he nodded. “My grandmother does a lot of grief counseling for families who have lost loved ones, back in my home town. She’s a jungle jaguar, so she has to work hard not to scare them with her presence. She taught me a lot of her arts. I also find that being calm inside helps to project calmness much easier, and for that I use Tai-ji to help me find my center of calm.”
“Jaguar?” Agent Daman asked, “You don’t look like a jaguar.”

“Ah, no, my mother was a Jaguar, and my father is a Margay. I take after my father in size and markings, Agent Daman.”

“Agent Chi Dã Man, actually.” The rabbit held out his paw. “Thank you for your advice, Doctor Wiedii.”

Hugo took his paw, and gave it a firm but gentle shake, “You are most welcome, Agent Dã Man.”

The rabbit grinned, “Ah! You pronounced it correctly! Thank you!”

Hugo smiled, “Certainly. It sounds like a word from a tonal language, perhaps from the Mekong region, if I’m not mistaken? I can manage a few words in that language.”

“Yes, it is. It’s just not a common name.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Hugo was making small talk with the smaller rabbit, watching him become more animated and relaxed in his presence.

Chi warmed up to his story, “Actually, it wasn’t our family name originally, it just got applied to us when my grandfather emigrated here back in the early 50’s. According to the family lore, he got into an argument with the immigration official on how to spell his name, and he got really mad and kept repeating ‘dã man’ at the official. The official thought that ‘dã man’ was the family name, so ‘Daman’ got put on all our paperwork, but all it really means in Mekong is ‘furious’.” He shrugged, “Grandpa never went back and got it fixed, since he was so mad about it, so now we’re the Daman’s.”

He looked back up at Hugo, “Speaking of dealing with Wilde, the Sargent tumbled on to the other meaning of ‘dã man’ which is ‘savage’.” Hugo twitched his ears over this, as Chi held up his paw, “You don’t need to say it. I’m not that rabbit, and I never will be. I don’t even look like him. But Sargent Wilde has figured out that he can really annoy me when ever I ask him for something by saying ‘Sure thing, Jack’ or ‘You’re the boss, Jack’. I can’t make him stop.” The expression of anger on the rabbit’s face was in total keeping with his family name, which was ironic.

Hugo laughed at the juxtaposition before offering some more advice, “So, take it down to his
level. Next time he calls you ‘Jack’, tell him he can only call you that if he dyes his fur white!”

Chi gave him a pained look, to which Hugo simple cocked his head and smiled. Hugo gestured towards Clawhauser’s room, to which Chi simply nodded, and they started walking that way.

* * And now back to Crazy Steve’s * *

Finnick was trying to get them all to eat faster, as the sunlight was fading, and he didn’t want to miss the sunset.

“Hurry up rabbit! We ain’t got all night!” He pointed at her half eaten salad.

“Awfully bossy, isn’t he?” Judy remarked to Skye.

She nodded, “You know… He’s kind of like those little tugboats, down in the harbor, always trying to move the bigger ships around by force of personality alone.”

“Ooo...” Judy pursed her lips. “Yeah, he is. He’s all Toot-Toot, and they’re this deep bass Bwaaa, or a booming Bwooo back at him. He can’t get no respect!”

“Are you two through yet?” Finnick demanded.

Judy grinned, as she pushed her plate and bowl aside. She put her elbow up on the table and her cheek in her paw, and slid onto the table toward Finnick. She lidded her eyes, projecting all the ex-porn star sex appeal she was capable of, and smiled silkily at the little fox.

“You know what, I think I’ll call you ‘Toot-Toot’,” she purred.

“You call me that, and I’ll bite you, rabbit!” Finnick snarled.

“Ooo... Just so you know, I charge twenty percent extra for biting.” she slide right back.
Finnick was a loss for words at that moment as his ears turned red. He inhaled, trying to respond, but he was distracted by Skye who was struggling not to fall over. His eyes flicked over to the other side, where even Marilyn was hiding behind her napkin, her eyes crinkling in laughter.

“Ooo... so dominating… Little Toot-Toot.”

Skye lost her battle with gravity, and fell on her side, doubled over in laughter.
Chapter Summary

Sergent Wolfard and Corporal Wilde are out on late night patrol, shooting the s*** and trying to stay awake. Wolfard tries to pass on some wisdom, Wilde counters with some knowledge, and they both end up going to Wild Times looking for burglars. They get jumped, and spent the next few days recovering. Meanwhile, on the West Coast, Judy has branched out to the video side of things, and finds that it's not what she thought it would be, but she still makes a friend along the way.

Chapter Notes

Note: I refer to both police officers in this chapter by either their rank and last names or their last names when referring to them in a professional capacity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Flashback: 7 Years ago in Zootopia

Police Scanner Codes used in this chapter.

“Here’s one: A deer walks out of a gay bar. ‘Dude, I can’t believe I just blew fifty bucks in there.’” Corporal Wilde guffawed.

Sergent Wolfard groaned as he gripped the cruiser’s steering wheel, “Gawd… Where do you get these? Some bad joke website or something?”

“Maybe… Ooo what about: ‘How do you get a squirrel to like you?’” Wilde tried again, as he turned in his seat to face his partner.

“I’m gonna regret this, I know it.” Wolfard shook his head, “Oh I don’t know. How?”

“Simple, act like a nut.” Wilde chortled.
“Oh, that’s awful. The first one was sexist, and the second was speciest. Can you be anymore offensive tonight?” Wolfard shook his head.

“Hey, at least I’m not talking politics, yah know? I’m keeping it clean in comparison.” Wilde pointed out.

“Oh, don’t I know it. Six weeks till the election, and the opposition’s screaming is starting to hurt my poor aching ears.” Wolfard’s ears twitched in sympathy.

“Yeah, like they have a chance in hell of dislodging Lucky Leo and his attack ewe… What’s her name again… Bellwether?” Wilde asked him.

“I think so. Have you seen her? She’s like some miniature sheep, not even full size.”

“Yeah, but I bet she’s still fluffy! Oh… So… Fluffy…” He grinned at the wolf as he made squishy motions with his paws.

“What? Are you on that sexual shit again? Dude, why oh why, would you want to take that runt of a herbivore to bed? You got a thing for small prey species or something? You must be trying to give me nightmares!”

“Maybe?” Wilde drawled, “But at least I’m keeping you awake.”

“Small miracles, that.” Wolfard grumbled as his eyes scanned the darkened streets, “Yah think, with our nocturnal biology and shit, that we’d be primed for this sort of thing, hunting in the dark.”

“Sure, if we had naps before we went on patrol, but after 5 hours of this seat, my butt’s turned to lead, and my eyes just want to fall out. And what do you think we’re hunting, you big bad wolf? It may be the witching hour, but this isn’t the Nocturnal district. That’s on the other side of the bridge. This here is Hay Market, the divine promise land of ungulates everywhere, and they’re all asleep, tucked into their big beds, dreaming of tomorrow’s cud.” Wilde shook his head, “Sorry buddy. There’s not hunting here for you tonight.”

“Well, I need something. How else am I ever gonna teach you how to track?” Wolfard mused.
“Hey, I can track just fine! Blueberries are usually on isle three, behind the produce section, and tofu is found in the refrigerated section at the back of the store next to the discount bin.” Wilde pointed out.

“That’s not tracking, that SHOPPING!” Wolfard shook his head, “No, you need to know how to track your prey if you want to be a real predator!”

“Omnivore.”

“What?”

“I’m an omnivore.”

Wolfard exclaimed, “I know that! It’s the principle of the thing! It’s an important skill you need, and it will save your life one day, I promise. Why, when I was a rookie...”

“Don’t you mean, ‘Long, long, ago’?”

“What?”

“You’re about to tell me a fairy tale. They all start, ‘Long, long, ago!’”

“No, no what? Fairy tale? What are you yapping about, pup?”

“You said when you were a rookie. That was a long, long, time ago. Do you mean back sometime in the Paleozoic era?”

“Paleozoic? There wasn’t a single mammal alive in the Paleozoic. I ain’t that old, Corporal Wilde!” Wolfard fixed an eye on his younger partner, “Listen, Mr Trainee Fox, you will respect your elders, or I will drive behind that building there, pull out my official manual of Zootopia Police Procedures and Revised Statutes, and I will box your ears with it! I will go on for hours and hours...” He threatened his partner. “Besides, I had to listen to your awful jokes, so you have to listen to my enlightening words of wisdom.” Wolfard tacked that on to the end just a bit primly.
Wilde grinned, as the bullshit was getting deep in the cruiser, “I’m sorry, Dad. I’ll listen.”

Wolfard, glared at the smart mouthed fox for a moment, before he turned his attention back to the road slowly passing under them. “Anyway, back when I was a rookie.” He glanced over at Wilde, to see if there was any feedback to be given. Wild just gazed back, a slight smile on his muzzle. “I was sent out to assist the Bunny Burrow Sheriff’s department in tracking down an escaped fugitive.”

Wilde quirked his brow, “What? Bunny Burrow? That’s a 200 mile hike for a ZPD officer, and way outside of our jurisdiction. Why didn’t they call the in the Marshals? That’s their thing.”

“Yeah, well, apparently the Sheriff did try, and the Marshals just laughed at them. So they called in a favor with the ZPD.”

“The Marshals laughed? They don’t have a sense of humor, Wolfard. It’s surgically removed during their swearing in ceremony.”

“No, the Sheriff said they laughed over the phone. I mean, I don’t know why they didn’t take it seriously. She was a dangerous kit and the Sheriff’s department had a right to be concerned about it.”

Wilde quickly did some math in his head and asked Wolfard, “Kit? What was her name?”

“Jessica, Jill, Jenny… Something. Started with a J.” Wolfard gestured off with his paw.

“Judy.” Wilde offered him.

“Yeah! That’s her! She had escaped for some three weeks, and they had gotten pretty desperate to find her.” He nodded to the fox.

Wilde sighed, “Wolfard, we’re talking about Judy Hopps here. She was all of, what, ten years old at the time, and maybe a foot and half tall. She was not that dangerous.”

“Hey! She had killed a mammal! What, Carl Latrans, right? That made her a murderer.” Wolfard
objected.

Wilde, exasperated, explained, “Wolfard, she shot a coyote she obviously thought was a danger to her family, with her dad’s 22 magnum revolver. It was so heavy that she couldn’t even get it aimed higher than his stomach, and when she fired it the recoil knocked it right out of her hands. Had it been loaded with a straight 22 magnum round, the coyote would have probably survived. But her dad used to it shoot snakes, so it was loaded with snake shot. One of the pellets nicked open an artery in Latrans’ liver, and he bleed out into his abdomen before they could get him on an operating table.”

“I heard he died cursing her name.” Wolfard pointed out.

“I’m pretty sure that Latrans cursed a lot of mammals before he died. Funny, the things that go through your mind at that moment, I’d imagine.” Nick mused.

“Wait a minute? How do you know all this? They teach this at the academy or something?”

“No, I read most of her patient file, back during the Horizons investigation. She was one of the patients at Cliffside, don’t you remember?” Nick leaned forward.

Wolfard shook his head, “Nope.”

“What do you mean, ‘Nope’? Didn’t you read any of the stuff we were shuttling around?”

“Not my job, so double nope.”

“Not your job? How was it not your job to be informed about our investigation?”

“My job was to play the big bad dumb wolf, and that that meant staying in character. It was your job to shuttle the stuff around, and it was my job to make sure that nobody popped you one while we were doing it. If you wanted to read all of the that stuff, that was up to you.” Wolfard pointed out to him.

“Ooo... The big bad dumb wolf, eh? So is that why you do the driving, and I do the paperwork,
“Yup, that seems to me to be an equitable exchange, the perfect balance of mature wisdom passed down to youthful energy.”

“You’re mangling your metaphors there, old wolf.” Wilde grinned.

“Whatever. Hey, it sounds to me like you sympathize with the rabbit, or something?” Wolfard looked over at him.

“It was a fucking travesty of justice, that’s what it was.” Wilde spat out.

“Whoa… Really?” Wolfard was taken aback by his younger partner’s vehement response.

“Yeah. We’re an enlightened mammal society, supposedly, and we just don’t do that shit to kits. Hell, she was three years under the minimum age limit for a juvenile delinquent, and they tried her as an adult? How the fuck did the judge let that stand? And then they end up sending her to Cliffside? What the hell? Just because she defends herself from the older inmates in juvenile who tied to beat her up? Ooo ‘That just proves she has a history of violence.’ Fuck that. She was defending herself, plain and simple.”

“She got beat up?”

“She got hospitalized several times from the beat downs. Finally she had enough with playing the model prisoner and she started fighting back. Broke some bully’s jaw or something.”

“Whoa… Ow..” Wolfard popped his jaw as he thought about it.

“Yeah, rabbits have hella strong legs. Don’t ever let one kick you in the face, old wolf. You’ll lose what little teeth you have left.”

“Har, har, little fox.” Wolfard grinned, “So you think they should have done something different with her.”
“Yeah, I do. Hell, the whole thing about her fighting was just a setup anyway.” Wolfard looked over at him in askance, “Yeah, the guards there had some side betting going on, watching the local fight club, as they liked to call it. It went on for a couple more years, and then there was a rash of kits dying from their injuries, and the Tri-Burrows finally launched an investigation. Eventually the guards got arrested, and the warden got sacked. But that didn’t help her any.” Nick shook his head, “They used to say Cliffside was the roach motel. Roaches check in...”

“But they don’t check out...” Wolfard finished. “Damn.”

“Yeah...”

Crackle… All Units be advised, 10-66 in progress at Wild Times Amusement Park, white van seen entering gates. Crackle....

Wolfard looked at the time on the dashboard, “3:20 am. Odd time to be doing maintenance.”

“At an out of business amusement park? Yeah, no shit.” Wilde reached for the mic as Wolfard hung a U-turn and rocketed back the way they came. “Dispatch, this is unit 111, we are 10-8 and responding.”

Crackle… Roger, 111. We show you en route to Wild Times. Crackle...

“You thinking thieves?” Wilde asked his senior partner.

“Probably. There for the copper in the pipes and cables, I would think. Or they could be there to dump a body.” Wolfard observed.

“Better to do that at the locks and docks district, nobody would notice the smell in the stench of rotting fish.” Wilde suggested.

“Or dump them in a river in Tundra Town. It’s so cold there they’d never rot.” Wolfard countered.
“You think that’s how Mr Big gets rid of the competition? Tosses them in the river with concrete overshoes?” Nick asked his partner.

“Mr Big? Naw, he’s an upstanding citizen of Tundra Town. He’s a legitimate business mammal!” Wolfard deadpanned.

“Legitimate, my furry red butt… Here it is.” Wilde pointed at the Wild Times entrance.

Wolfard pulled up to the gate, “Huh, gate looks closed, and the chain’s still wrapped around it. False alarm?”

“Maybe,” Wilde acknowledged, as he popped open his door, and stepped out. He scanned 180 degrees on his right, looking for lights or movement, but he saw nothing. Leaving his door open, he jogged over to the gates to examine them in the headlights glare. He found the chain wrapped around the two gates, but no padlock. It was missing – some mammal took it but left the chain behind, wrapped around to make it look like it was still locked.

Wilde briefly considered his options, as unwrapping the chain and opening the gates was technically breaking and entering. But they did have a report of a white van entering, and the padlock was missing. With the park shutdown due to bankruptcy and receivership, he supposed it belonged to the government anyway. It was a stretch, but it worked for him. He unwrapped the chains and opened the gates for Wolfard. Hopping back in the cruiser, he explained to Wolfard, “Padlock’s missing.”

“Ooo, Definitely thieves then, looking for a quick getaway.” Wolfard killed the cruiser’s lights, and slowly crept into the lot, trusting their eyesight to adjust to the dim moonlight. Nick called it in, “Dispatch, this is 111. We are 10-97, front gate is unlocked and the padlock is missing. We are investigating. 10-23, Dispatch.”

Crackle… Roger, 111. 10-23, Dispatch. Be careful. Crackle…

“111, Always, Dispatch!” Wilde smiled at that. Dispatch officers was always worried about the patrol officers.

Wolfard slowly crawled the large police cruiser off the parking lot, and on to the maintenance roads. At slow speeds, the cruiser was nearly silent, except for the crunch of gravel under the tires, and even that was enough to make him cringe. Wait, there, in the lane ahead. What’s that?
A white square loomed in the darkness, hovering over the lane. Wolfard parked the cruiser and shut it off, blocking the lane and any potential escape. They both quietly exited the cruiser, and quietly crept forward. Wolfard drew his taser, but Wilde opted for his tranq.

They approached the back of what quickly resolved to be a white panel truck, and they split to go around it. Wilde looked up on the wording on the side that read ‘Zootopia Discount Floral Supply’ with a phone number emblazoned under it. He wondered if the truck was stolen.

They crept up to the cab, and peeked in. No one was in the cab. Wolfard sniffed around inside while Nick checked the front bumper. No plates, and the DOT number was missing as well. He met Wolfard as he was climbing down. He whispered to the wolf, “No plates, no DOT.”

Wolfard whispered back, “Sheep.” and held up two fingers.

Nick crouched down, and called it in a quiet voice. “Dispatch, this is 111. We’ve found the van, no plates or DOT number. Possible two sheep occupants. There’s a business name and phone number on the side.” He read off the lettering to them. Dispatch called back on his earbud and asked if he needed backup. He looked up at the wolf, who tapped his nose, pointed at his eyes, and then into the park. He called in, “Dispatch, 111. Sergent Wolfard want to find out where they are. It’s a big park, and he doesn’t want to spook them yet.” Dispatch wasn’t happy with that. Wolfard just shrugged, and led the way into the park anyway.

*Big Bad Wolf,* thought Wilde as he shook his head, *gotta show me his hunting cojones.*

True to the fox’s prediction, Wolfard quickly pointed out hoof prints in the dirt, “Trail sign,” he whispered and pointed for Wilde.

Wilde moved over a few feet and pointed down at another sign in the dirt, “Wheelbarrow,” he whispered back with a grin. Wolfard rolled his eyes, and preemptively motioned to follow the trail. Wilde swallowed a snicker.

They tracked the sheep further into the center of the park. Peeking around the edge of a shuttered game stand, they heard the sound of shovels hitting the dirt, and the squeak of a wheelbarrow wheel. The two officers spotted the two sheep digging in the overgrown flowerbeds. Wilde whispered, “I suppose that’s one way to get your discount floral stock – steal it.”
Wolfard nodded. He motioned for Wilde to around the far side to block their escape, while he went straight up the middle. Wilde scampered off to the far end, so he didn’t have eyes on his partner when he heard the sound of empty garbage cans crashing to the ground. He quickly peeked around his corner at the flowerbeds, but the two sheep were gone.

*Oh Shit! We’ve been spotted!* He called over his radio, “Wolfard, Wolfard?” No answer. *Shit, shit!* He quickly called it in, “Dispatch, this is 111. we are 11-99, officer down, in the center gardens. Sergent Wolfard is non-responsive. We need that backup now. Two assailants, classified as large male rams.”

Dispatch crackled in his ear, “Roger, 111. You have three units inbound your position, medical response is two minutes behind them. Sit tight, stay safe, help is coming! Dispatch, out.”

“Roger, Dispatch.” Nick looked around, feeling a little exposed on the edge of the gardens, so he turned around and started to retreat back to their jump off position. He froze as he watched a ram run between the store fronts in front of him. He brought his traq gun up, but the ram was gone before he could get a shot off.

A tingle on the back of his neck and a swish of sound, just a millisecond of warning, and he looked up in time to see a large sack descend towards his head. The force of the impact knocked him flat to the ground. His chin hit the ground and his teeth pierced the side of his tongue.

Dazed, he struggled to his feet, blood trickling from his mouth and ears, trying to be ready for what he knew was going to hit him next, when out of his left peripheral vision he spotted an arm snake in towards his head. He tried to dodge out of the way, but his head slammed into the wall on his right, just as a loud crackling sound thundered in his left ear. He convulsed and bit his tongue again as the taser fired into the side of his neck, just below his jaw. As he began to lose consciousness, sliding down the wall headfirst to land in a heap, he dimly realized why the two officers had gotten jumped first. There had been three rams, not two.

The pain was intense, and as the light before his eyes grew and blanked out his vision, he thought, *This is how I die… Mugged by stupid sheep stealing stupid flowers...*

Darkness claimed him as he slide into oblivion. But echoing out to meet him from that infinite void came a whispering voice with thunderous force…

*Not yet!*
He awoke to ringing in his ears, and bright lights flashing in his retinas. He blinked several times, and most of the lights started to fade on their own, left only with the blurry red and blue flashes all around him as he lay on the cool concrete.

Like voices down a long tunnel, he dimly heard a voice calling his name. Looking over to his side, his vision still blurry in the darkness before him, he could only see a white throat and muzzle surrounded by gray fur. He whispered up to the form, “Heya, Carrots.”

The head cocked to the side, as it whined back at him. He smiled as he slid back into unconsciousness.

He blinked. Several times. Well, he must not be dead. Cause if they had stained ceiling panels and off color florescent lights in the afterlife, he wanted to register a complaint. Where were the angels and fluffy clouds, after all?

He heard slightly labored breathing to his right, and he turned his head that way. There, sitting on a recliner, his torso wrapped in bandages, was his big bad wolf partner, reading a book. Wilde swallowed against the dryness in his mouth and croaked out, “Thsince when tho you reath anything, you thumb wolft?”

Wolfard’s head snapped up, and he smiled. “Hey, hey, hey… Look who’s back?” The wolf set down his book, and gingerly stood up out of the chair. Holding on to his side, he walked the few steps to his partner’s side. Putting one paw on the railing, he reached over Wilde’s head and pushed a button.

“How yah feeling, little fox?” The kind blue eyes looked down at him.

“Like steam wolloed sthith.” Wilde mumbled back. His tongue wasn’t working right. “My tongue thoethn’t worth.” He frowned.

“Yeah… You bit it twice, the first time when your chin hit the ground, and the second time when the taser was fired into your neck. It’s kinda swollen right now.” Wolfard gestured to his head, “Beyond that, you’ve got several deep gashes in your scalp, now held together with more stitches than a Tundra Town sweat shop, a severe concussion, and burns on your neck from the taser. The docs are still arguing if it was one single concussion, or three separate concussions based on how
“Your skull got impacted. They’re not sure.”

“I’m thorry, I wathn’t fasth enough...” Wilde started to mumble.

“Hey, hey. Enough of that. It wasn’t your fault.” Wolfard gripped his partner’s paw. “If it was any mammal’s fault, it was mine from the start.”

“I openth the gathess firth.” Wilde admitted.

“Yeah, but I drove the cruiser in, and prevented you from calling for backup, and then when we found them, I split us up. I got cocky, underestimating sheep of all things, and I paid for it. You paid for even more than I did. So no apologizing for you, Corporal Wilde. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Wolfard shook his paw.

He continued as he looked off into the distance, remembering, “When you had left, I started trotting out toward the gardens, and I never even saw him. He came blasting out from behind the shops, and hit me right in the ribs. Knocked the wind right out me and sent me flying in to some garbage cans. And while I was lying in a heap, he stole my taser, which he then used on you.”

“Bogo...” Wilde looked up at him.

“Bogo’s pissed, sure, but at me. Not you.” He poked Wilde in the chest. “I’m the senior officer with the tactical experience, and I should have know better. But I got cocky, and I was showing off a bit.” Wolfard shook his head slowly, “Actually, that’s not all Bogo’s pissed at me about. They also grabbed my keys.”

“The cruther?” Wilde’s eyes went big.

“Yeah, it was gone by the time the backup showed up. The ZPD doesn’t know where it is right now. Apparently they knew how to turn off the low-jack system. We’ll probably find it in some abandoned alleyway out in the Sahara district, stripped for parts.”

There was a knock at the door, and Wolfard turned. A deep booming voice asked, “Can I come in now?”
Cocking his head, Wilde could see Chief Bogo standing in the doorway, and behind him a flash of red in green scrubs. He waved them in. Bogo strode into the room and around to the other side of his bed. The red resolved itself to be a very concerned looking vixen, who positioned herself at the foot of his bed. She had never looked so good to him as she did in that moment.

Bogo began to speak, and Wilde tore his eyes off of her to look up at the big water buffalo. “How are you doing, Corporal? How are you feeling? You need anything?” He gazed down at the smaller canine.

It was a very bizarre feeling for the fox, laying vulnerable to all that power and controlled fury, yet he could swear there were tears glistening in those big oxen eyes. Wilde tried to deflect the emotions of the moment with some wit. “I really canth complain, thir.” he smiled up at his chief, “I findth myself a bit tongue tiedth at the momenth from all the attenthion, thir.”

Bogo snorted at the joke. His gaze then fell on Wolfard, “Sergent?”

“Yes, sir” Wolfard tried to stand up straight.

“Where is your cruiser, Sergent?” Bogo mildly inquired.

Wolfard looked down at Wilde for just a moment, a grin in his eyes, before he replied, “I don’t know, sir.”

“Well, find it.” Bogo suggested.

“Yes, sir.” Wolfard responded.

With that, Bogo nodded. He glanced down the small fox, and reaching down, he awkwardly patted Wilde’s other paw. Looking back at the impatient vixen, he abandoned his post a Wilde’s bedside, and strode from the room.

Wolfard whispered down to Wilde, “I think he likes you.” Wilde just rolled his eyes in response.

Miki watched the water buffalo go, before slipping around to the other side. She reached up, and
planted a kiss on Nick’s forehead. He sighed. There would be screaming later, he was sure, followed by sobbing, and more likely than not a whole lot of very passionate lovemaking, but right now there was peace. “Do you need anything, Nicky?” She asked.

“Sheh wath er wou ind be grandw.” He smiled at her.

She cocked her head. “You still have stitches in your very swollen tongue, so how about some nice ice chips instead for you to suck on?” She smiled brightly, and looked down at him like he had absolutely no say in the matter. He nodded slowly. She kissed the tip his nose, and slipped back out of the room.

Wolfard, watching her go, commented to the fox, “You know, if you actually do wind up marrying her, you’re not going to win many arguments.”

“I never tho.” Wilde smiled.

Wolfard turned back to him, and in a serious tone he asked. “Alright, I do have a serious question, Fox. Why the hell did you call me Carrots?”

Wilde looked back up at the wolf in confusion, “Why would I call you carroths?”

“No, Carrots, with a capital C!” Wolfard shook his head, “I distinctly remember you saying, ‘Heya, Carrots’ when I first found you on the concrete!” He waggled his finger at Wilde.

“Why would I uthse the name of a rooth vetetable to desthribe you? Other than you thearly habe a headth filleth with carroth. How do you noth thmell the thirth ram, Mithter My Nothe is Bigger thanth my Brainth?” Wilde mumbled back at him.

“What!??”

They continued to bicker until Miki returned to his room with the ice chips, and she ejected Wolfard so that her Nicky could rest.

* * *
Two days later, Corporal Nick Wilde’s tongue was working much better. Nurse Miki, love of his life and absolute arbiter of what he got to eat today, was feeding him vegetable soup and apple sauce, one spoonful at a time.

“You know, my paws work just fine, Miki.” Wilde pointed out to her. “I can feed myself.”

“I don’t want you to choke.” She replied, carefully sliding another spoonful into his mouth.

There was a knock at the door, and it slid open. Sergent Clawhauser struggled through the door, a basket of flowers overflowing in his grip. “Hi, Corporal Wilde! The officers down at ZPD got you some more flowers!”

Wilde looked around at his room, which was already overflowing with flowers, get-well cards, and candies he wasn’t allowed to eat. Wolfard got up from his chair, and went over to clear some space on the window still for the new basket.

As Clawhauser handed off the basket, he casually remarked, “Oh, they found your cruiser, by the way.”

Wolfard stood up and asked, “Where? Was it stripped?”

“Well,” Clawhauser temporized, “The divers said it looked mostly intact.”

“DIVERS! What divers?!?!?” Wolfard demanded to know.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t say where, did I?” He tapped his paws tips together, as he grimaced, “They found it off one of the piers down in the Rain Forest district.

“Off?” Wolfard asked, his expressions playing across his face; shock, denial, acceptance, dread.

“Yeah, it’s currently in 10 feet of water. A fishing boat had run across it when they were coming into dock, and gotten it stuck under their keel.” The big cat explained, “The ZPD garage techs are
organizing the recovery. You can ask them which pier it is.”

“Oh Shit.” Wolfard exclaimed, as he tried to run out of the room, only to be brought up short by Miki’s paws as she stepped in front of him.

“Sergent Wolfard, you have cracked ribs and bruised lungs, and have no business driving anywhere!” She scolded him.

“But I need to see it!” He pleaded with her.

Nick took advantage of her distraction to grab the applesauce and try to put a spoonful of it into his mouth by himself. He got most of it in before he hit one of the puncture wounds in his tongue with the spoon. The blast of pain that shot through his mouth caused him to spit the applesauce back out of his mouth, and down the front of his hospital gown. Oww...

Wolfard and Miki turned to look at him. He tried to grin back at them, applesauce dripping down off the end of his muzzle, but the effect just came across as slightly demented. Miki just shook her head. Her fox never listened, so she had better be proactive before the two jokers tried to do something stupid on their own, she knew. “But I will ask if we can take one of the patient transport vans down to the docks. Wait here, and clean up your partner. Clearly, he has developed an eating disorder of the stupid kind.” Miki spun on her heel, and marched off to find a doctor to clear them for temporary release.

“Upon reflection,” Wolfard observed as he hunted for a towel, “It’s entire possible that when you finally do ask for her paw in marriage that she’ll say ‘No!’ . That would be the sane thing for her to do, don’t you think?” He asked the embarrassed fox, who could only hang his head in response.

* * *

They stood next to the idling van, Miki sitting at the wheel, as they watched the recovery operation that was currently underway. The large mobile crane swung it’s boom out over the water, and dropped it’s hook down to the waiting divers. The otters hooked up a pair of straps to the hook, and gave the fore-mammal the thumbs up. He ordered the crane to start pulling up the cruiser.

As the rear of the cruiser broke the surface, they could see that what was once a machine of power and authority had been reduced to a crumpled waffle of steel and plastic. They watched as the rest of the crushed cruiser slowly cleared the murky surface, water cascading out of the open doors.
"Wolfard, can I say something horribly speciest as we stand in witness to this event?" Wilde asked him.

"What's that?" the wolf asked him.

"I hate sheep." Wilde confided.

"I hear you, brother, I hear you." Wolfard nodded.

As the former cruiser finally ended up out of the water and dangling from the end of the cable, swaying in the air like a crushed beer can and resplendent with muck and water weeds, Wolfard moaned, "I am so screwed."

“Yup. Screwed.” Wilde simply agreed.

Meanwhile, On the West Coast

The rabbit leaned against the pole as she knelt on the stage floor, slowly spreading her knees. She pumped her hips slowly as she moaned, “You like what you see, honey?”

The black rhino sat back from the stage, dressed in a black tux. He pulled his shaft from his pants, and started to stroke it. “Oh, yeah, baby. Daddy likes...”

“Ooo that’s quite the pole you have there. Maybe I should dance on that instead of this cold stage...” She cooed at him.

He beckoned to her, “That sounds like a fine idea, baby. My tower is always ready for a hot lady like you to come climb it.”

BWANG!!!
They both jerked and turned to look behind the rhino. The boom mike operator had fallen over, and dropped his boom mike on the stage.

“DAMN IT, DANNY!” The weasel director yelled from behind the camera.

“I’m sorry boss. I didn’t see the cables. They got caught in my feet.” the raccoon stammered, as he tried to pick himself.

Judy stifled a giggle, as she knelt on the stage. Here she was, naked as a jaybird, save for an itty-bitty thong, and she was surrounded by males who were completely ignoring her as they focused on the unfortunate raccoon. Her co-star caught her giggle, and he threw her quick grin and a wink, sharing in the humor of the moment. She looked down at his rather impressive member as it quickly went from tower to submarine. *Yeah, I don’t blame him. This is hardly anything I would call erotic,* she thought.

The weasel sighed in frustration, as he hopped up to go help the hapless procyonid. Grumbling, he untangling the cables from the sound mammal's feet, and stood up, muttering “Great, well, we’ll just start over at the point when Amber comes in.” He looked up and around, but he didn’t see her anywhere.

“Where’s Amber?” He demanded to know. One of his assistants nervously pointed back down the hall to the dressing rooms. Fuming, the weasel yelled, “Take five everybody, I’ll be right back.” and he stalked off to the dressing rooms.

Judy slide across the stage to pull out her rather abbreviated script. Looking it over, she whispered to her co-star, who was busy stuffing his meat popsicle back into his pants, “Who writes this stuff? What are they, twelve?” She stared at the ridiculous lines.

He zipped up his pants, and leaned in to whisper back, “That would be our esteemed director, Ricky Tails. He’s not what one would consider a playwright, but he pays good, so what he writes goes.” He held out his enormous paw to her, “I’m sorry we weren’t formally introduced. I’m Randy McHorny.”

She giggled, “That is such a porn star name for a rhino!”

He shrugged, “Yeah, well, what do you expect, in this business? But you can call me Lance.” He caught her look and her grin, “No, it’s not another porn name. It’s my actual name.” He laughed.
She smiled back at him, “Alright then, Lance. I’m Jessica Lapin, but I strip under the alias JJ. Jessica, or JJ; either works for me.” She shook his massive paw.

He nodded at the sheet she was holding, “First time working on set?” He asked.

She looked down at the sheet, and then back up at him, “For video? Yeah, this is my first video shoot. But I’ve done a lot of photography work; glamour, bike babe, kink, lesbian soft-core, and what not. But the photographer I used to work with moved back home Down Under, so I was stuck twiddling my thumbs up in Gateway Bay City. Eventually I ran out of new clubs to work at up there and I got bored, so I came down here to Angels City a couple of months ago, and I’ve been working the circuit ever since. My agent called me about this last night, said this weasel he knew needed a tiny stripper for a gig, and asked me if I was interested. And here I am.” She shrugged, “You?”

“No my first set, obviously.” He laughed, “Been doing this gig for five years now, maybe? Before that I did some Mixed Martial Arts competitions, and some pro wrestling for a year, but they didn’t renew my contract, which was just as well, because I didn’t need any more concussions. Same as you, my agent called one day, and wanted to know if I was willing to go do some soft-core stuff, standing around on set and looking pretty, and I said sure. And here I am, five years later, waiting to see if Amber Cloud, hippo diva extraordinaire, is sober enough to act today, much less walk.”

Judy quirked a brow at that, and he laughed. “Tell you what. I’ll give you 3 to 1 odds that he comes out and tells us she’s too stoned to work.”

Judy exclaimed, “No way! She can’t do that!”

“Amber? Watch her.” He turned to look down the hall, as he heard the weasel come down the hall muttering.

Ricky quickly made his way over to Lance and Judy. “Um… Shit. We got a problem, Randy.”

“She stoned?” The rhino asked.

“Maybe, I don’t know. Damn it. Yes. She’s out cold now. What the hell am I going to do now?” He looked at Lance.
“Sorry, Necrophilia ain’t my thing, boss. She has to be awake and moving, or I just limp out.” Lance assured him.

“Damn it...” Ricky looked at him, and then pointed at Judy, “Say, would you two be able to...”

Judy, figuring out what he was asking for, burst out laughing. It might be unprofessional but she couldn’t help herself.

Lance just snorted and said, “No... Hell no. She ain’t anywhere near big enough for me, Ricky. Tell you what. I’m gonna break for lunch, and either Amber will be awake when I get back, or you’ll have found a replacement for her in my size by then, okay?”

Leaving the weasel to froth at the mouth over this, Lance stood up. Looking down at the little rabbit, he asked, “You hungry, JJ? Wanna head over to Alfalfa’s for a salad, and maybe talk motorcycles?”

She looked up at him, and grinned impudently, “You buying?” She asked him.

“Sure, rabbit, I can buy.” She’s just a little rabbit, how much can she eat? He wondered. “You got something decent to wear?”

“Absolutely. I’m easy! Shorts and a halter top, and I’m good to go.” She ran over to her bag behind the curtain, and pulled out her clothes. Slipping them on, she jumped down off the stage, and beamed back up at him. Free food and motorcycle talk always appealed to her.

“Alright then.” He smiled down at her, and led the way out of the club, leaving Ricky behind to yell at his phone.

Chapter End Notes

When I first plotted out this story, Nick Wilde was going to be bookend character, appearing first in chapter 11, and then not again until chapter 35. Any character development was going to be alluded to as comments by other characters. Except that as the story developed, certain feedback lead me to believe that Nick was being
interpreted as a two dimensional character. He certainly wasn't to me, since I'm the author, but what he appeared to my readers was something completely different. I began to realize that he need to be part of this story in a much more active way, and this chapter is the start of that.

Oh, and Nick's filthy mouth is part of his relationship with Wolfard, a police partnership going on six years now, ever since the events in Chapter 11.

P.S. For those of you who sat through the unguided and unfunny travesty that is "A Working Solution!" I am profoundly sorry. I tried to write Funny and Fluffy, and what came out was Dark and Dismal. I will try harder next time I write for that work.
Wednesday Evening: Lost Sleep

Chapter Summary

This is it, the end of Judy's Wednesday evening. It's a beast - 12,000 words. But it's worth it because Judy finally gets to riding with Skye, while Nick is off hunting for a mysterious rabbit. Finnick takes some very pretty pictures of some very pretty females in the sunset, and Judy catches him in the act. Hugo Meets Skye for the first time, and Skye's not sure she like the competition. Finnick finally brings the Mystic Coyote Cheryl Silverheels up to date, and Judy figures out how to make Hugo purr.

Chapter Notes

Dakzoo, I am sorry this one took so long to get done, blowing past my Tuesday dead line by two days. I'm sorry it's so big, but I had to wrap up six different plot threads before I moved on to the Current Day: Thursday arc, and I didn't want to screw up the order of my Flashback chapters any more that I have already by splitting the chapter up.

It had to be said, and now it is done. I can now go soak my hands in ice water.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Current Day: Wednesday Evening in Zootopia

Finnick brooded. He seethed. He was a little ball of hellfire wrapped in fur, about to explode, and nobody seemed to notice. It was so frustrating being the smallest mammal at the table. Even the skinny homeless rabbit was bigger than him.

Marilyn and Skye were arguing with Judy about something absolutely inane, and they didn’t seem to be at all interested in leaving. They had already paid, with Marilyn and Skye splitting the bill, and now they were discussing some upcoming spy thriller movie.

Sitting down in the booth seat, Finnick could barely see over the table edge. So when his paw phone vibrated on the table top, he didn’t immediately notice. But when it vibrated again, skittering across the table towards him, he stretched upwards and grabbed the edge of his little paw phone. Pulling it down, he pulled up the screen and looked at the message notifications. There were two and he pulled them up.
Shit… It’s Cheryl...

*Silver-Heels:*

*Hey there, Counselor! You free?*

No, Cheryl, I’m 125 bucks an hour! I’m not free! What do you think? He sighed. He looked at the next one.

*Silver-Heels:*

*I need to talk to you.*

He looked over the table at the rabbit gesturing wildly. He could well imagine what Cheryl wanted to talk to him about, and he was sure it was going to be weird. *Well, shit. I guess it is down to me, after all. And you’re the first, you crazy coyote. I hope you haven’t been smoking the peyote again, because you’re gonna have to be cold stone sober to handle this.*

But this wasn’t the time, not yet. He had three other gals that needed his attention, and he needed privacy to talk to the dream-walker, because he needed her wisdom as well. He was in over his head, and sinking fast.

Judy sat back in her seat with a thump, breathing hard. Skye looked at her, a question on her lips, which Judy just tried to wave off. The rabbit was trying to put on a brave front, but Finnick could see she was fading fast, even with the large meal she just had. He’d been around enough desperately homeless mammals to recognize the signs of somebody running on the last dregs of their reserves. The rabbit needed rest. She needed care. She needed Hugo.

Marilyn looked down at him. He looked back up at her, and held his phone up for her to read. She plucked it from his paw, and scanned the two messages. She looked across at the rabbit for a moment, and then nodded, giving him his phone back. Under the table, he first pointed at the rabbit, then the door, and hooked his thumb at the bikes. Marilyn nodded again, and slid out of the booth, motioning to the other two that it was time to go.

He turned his attention back to his phone, tapping out a message.

*Big-Ears:*
I’m gonna go do an evening sunset ride with the ladies. Can I call you afterwards?

After a short delay, a message popped back up.

_Silver-Heels:_

Yeah! Sure. No hurry. It's okay.

No, it’s not, Cheryl. He knew her well enough to tell the level of her agitation just from how those six words were delivered. He asked her a question.

_Big-Ears:_

Is it the dreams?

_Silver-Heels:_

Oooh Yeah! They’ve… Changed. It’s really weird, even for me.

Finnick looked out the window at the rabbit, bouncing on her heels as she strapped on her new helmet. Yeah, it's gonna get even weirder, he knew.

_Big-Ears:_

We’ll talk later, I promise.

_Silver-Heels:_

Okies!

He shut his phone down, and slipped it back into his pocket. He slid out from under the table, waved goodbye to Steve, and sauntered out the door after his ladies.

“I mean it! You can stay with me, if you want.” Skye offered Judy again, as she straddled her Pale Rider.
“Skye, you live in a little tiny trailer behind your uncle’s shop. It’s cold and cramped there.” Marilyn observed as she shook her head.

“What’s this?” Finnick asked as he strode quickly up the sidecar.

Marilyn pointed with her chin over at Skye, “Our little white vixen wants Judy to stay with her tonight.”

“Oh Ho! Skye, you can’t keep the rabbit. I have to give her back to Hugo tonight. Besides which, I said you could come along as long as you didn’t try to kidnap her.” Finnick pulled his helmet and googles out of the side car’s little trunk, and started to put the on.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know her like I do.” A desperate edge crept into Skye’s voice. Judy, concerned, walked over to her and laid a paw on the fox’s thigh, the black leather covering it cool in the evening air. She gazed up into those mismatched eyes and saw a desperate longing. She smiled, realizing that perhaps it was possible after all this time for Skye to still need her rabbit. She had always thought that their previous relationship had been a little one-sided, with Judy doing most of the needing and Skye doing most of the patient giving, but that seems to have changed.

“Fox, are you a board certified Neurologist? Do you have years of experience treating homeless mammals, or the resources to meet their needs?” He bluntly asked the vixen.

She shook her head, “No, but...”

“No Buts!” Finnick shook his finger as he came up to her other side. “She might have been your girlfriend years ago, but right now she’s in Hugo’s care. She’s his responsibility now.” He also laid a paw on her leg, although a bit lower down than Judy could reach on the other side. “So drop whole fox possessiveness thing, and let her recover before you start dictating her future.” He scolded her.

Judy reached up to grab Skye’s paw from the handlebars. She rubbed her cheek on the back of the paw before turning to look back up at that fine muzzle, “Skye. I’m not going anywhere. I promised Hugo that I’d stay, and I’m going to. We’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other again.” She held the paw to her chest, “Besides, we’re not the same mammals we were eight years ago. A lot has changed for us both.” She let go of the paw. “We need time to talk, and to figure out what we are to each other now.”
Skye laid her paw back on her handle bars, and grinned wryly back down at the smaller mammal, “Look at you… When did you get so wise?”

Judy looked back down and snorted, “Years of experience.” She thought about Lance, and Dawn, and the years of being alone. She had learned much about herself, her fears, her doubts, and her convictions. She shook her head, “Who would have thunk it, no?”

Skye chuckled, as she pulled the bike upright, and kicked up the stand. She reached out her paw, and helped Judy to climb up behind her. Judy sat back and arranged her coat so that it wouldn’t get caught in the rear wheel while Skye thumbed the starter. The beast beneath them coughed and growled, then caught itself with a low grumble. Judy leaned forward, resting her cheek on Skye’s spine while her paws grasped the side of her riding jacket. She felt the vibrations of the v-twin reach up through Skye’s body and into their connection, bringing back memories that evoked a sigh from her chest.

Finnick trotted around to Marilyn, and jumped into the side car. He stood in the seat and held up his fist, twirling it in a circle before bellowing out over the rumbling beasts.

“LET’S RIDE!”

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*An alleyway deep in the Rainforest district*

The drifting evening rain fell from the sky as a slow breeze wafted down the alleyway. The water collected on his long whiskers, cooling them as it ran down the length until at the ends gravity claimed the drops once more. Nick glanced upwards through the buildings and even taller triple canopy trees at the sparse evening clouds drifting overhead, blazed in blood borne flames from a sunset hidden from him by leaf and branch. He breathed slowly, taking in the scents of a city masquerading as a tropical forest, tasting ozone in one breath, and wild flowers the next. He stood in the alleyway, staring into the dark bridge overhang before him, the inky depths hiding a ramshackle hut of moldy cardboard and frozen detritus.

What am I doing here? he asked himself. *I should be at home resting, which is what Miki thinks I’m doing. I should be home watching ‘Friendship Is Magic’ with my daughter, instead of out here chasing ghosts. She’s real, my little Judy Grace, and she needs her father now. She won’t be a small kit forever. I should be there.*
He sighed.

*I can’t keep paying the dead for my mistakes...*

His feet stood frozen to the dank pavement, the only motion upon his person was the wind ruffling his ZPD poncho. He didn’t know why he didn’t duck into the rude hut before him. Was it fear? Fear of the unknown? Fear of being wrong? Fear of failure? Fear that he could never be forgiven?

*Some cop you’ve turned out to be, Nicholas P. Wilde. Afraid of some nameless homeless rabbit who ran away as soon as they saw you? What’s the world coming to?* He just snorted at his melancholy, *Just get in there already, ya dumb fox.*

Almost of it’s own accord, his left foot slid forward a few inches. He stared down at the traitorous member of his own anatomy, daring it move again, only to be startled when his right foot started moving. He snorted and shook his head. *Fine. I guess we’re doing this after all.*

He stepped up on the curb that ran next to the bridge as the sounds of tires rumbling overhead became less heard and more felt as he was swallowed by the gloom. His eyes adjusted easily to the dirty darkness, but his nose was going to take longer to accept the miasma of sadness that penetrated the nook. He looked about the dirt and rocky plot he stood on for any other resident mammals of misfortune, but there were none. He was alone here.

He turned his gaze back to what he could only describe as a pile of refuse. What had been once been a cozy little hut was now just a mound of wet cardboard and mildew. He reached down, and pulled out what would have been the roof, it’s sodden mass collapsing in two around his paws, and tossed it to the side. He turned to look back into the small space, and saw that it was empty of rabbits. Who ever had lived here once had never returned. They were gone.

He stepped into the small space, now open to the evening mist, and knelt in what was once the doorway. On either side of him was a pillar of carefully folded newspapers, piled in an alternating pattern, like they were bricks of a chimney. He ran his paw down them, but he didn’t see or feel any rubber bands or plastic wrap. *Had the rabbit read all of these before carefully refolding them and placing them in the stack?* He asked himself, *It spoke of an ordered mind, but was it a sane mind?*

Empty food containers were piled in one corner, and in the other was a pile of discarded mammal clothes, piled into a little nest. As he reached for the clothes, he stopped and stared at the food containers. *That’s funny,* he thought, *where are the alcohol bottles?* He looked around quickly, but he didn’t see any cans or bottles. *This rabbit doesn’t drink? What about drugs?* He pulled the pile
of clothes over, looking for a stash, but all he found was a small bag of gold stickers. He picked it
out, and held it up to examine it, turning it over in his paws. Huh! He thought, It’s just those Junior
Detective badges we give out to the kits. I wonder how the rabbit collected all of these?

He was confused by the evidence before him. Why was this rabbit homeless? No drugs, illicit or
legal, and no alcohol. They aren’t addicts. The tidy nest and the organized newspapers doesn’t say
schizophrenia to me. He wondered to himself. He looked down at the pile of clothes in his other
paw, questions forming in his mind. He held the wad up to his nose, and inhaled deeply.

ACHOOOO!!! He sneezed mightily.

Oh, that was foul! He thought as he shook his head to clear it, before delicately trying again to sniff
the bundle. A female rabbit with dirty mangy fur, he thought. But he couldn’t tell if she was the
rabbit he sought. He thought he was thoroughly familiar with her scent, after the exhaustive search
for her that he and Wolfard had performed. Maybe my scent memory had degraded in time? He
wondered.

Wolfard would know. Yeah, he could take these clothes to Wolfard, and the old wolf could tell him
if they belonged to their lost rabbit. Except… He would have to explain to Wolfard how he found
them, explain that instead of resting after his latest attack he was instead traipsing around the Rain
Forest District chasing a ghost. His partner would nod sagely, say something wise and profound
and biting at the same time, and then pick up the phone to call Miki to report his truant behavior.

I swear, I’m the only fox in existence with three mothers! Mom, Wolfard, and Miki! Between the
three of them, I’ll always be a kit in need! He sighed and yawned. As he clapped his jaw shut, his
tongue tasted the scents before him. Surprised, he looked back down at the bundle of clothes in his
paws.

Wait, why do I taste ketones and ammonia? Was she suffering from malnutrition? Why? There’s
plenty around here for a herbivore to eat around here. Maybe she had some underlying medical
problem after all? Wait a minute…!

He froze, his mind racing. Poor hygiene, but a well organized den. No drugs or alcohol seen, but
evidence of malnourishment. Homeless, but well read. This rabbit was used to a regimented
lifestyle, like in the military.

Or in prison. Maybe even a very special prison. A special prison for special mammals with very
special mental illnesses.
Come on, Nick. All the evidence is right in front of you! How many rabbits do you know with gray fur, black tipped ears, and purple eyes, that did time in an asylum but have no known histories of substance abuse, and are fascinated with the police?

Just one, and you named your daughter after her, ya dumb fox!

Except... Except that these clothes really don't smell like her... If there was anything he should have remembered well, it was what Judith Laverne Hopps smelled like. He and Wolfard had pursued her for days, trying to track her down after she went savage three years ago, but they eventually lost her here in the Rain Forest District. He looked around. Maybe she never left? But... but... untreated night-howler intoxication is always fatal, isn't it? Eventually the infected mammal would succumb to the terror and pain and then die, right? She can't be alive now!

He stared at the bundle of clothes in his paws. Could she? If there was a chance that she was still alive after three years, how could I find out? Nick’s head came up as he consider that excitedly, until he realized exactly who he would have to ask.

There is a mammal in Zootopia who could tell me that. He knows more about night-howler toxin than any one else I know, about how toxic it really is and if recovery is possible. Except that I can’t possibly face him now; certainly no now! If Judy is alive and he found out that I kept that all that information about her from him, preventing him from finding her after thirteen years, he would never forgive me for it!

Nick reproached himself, Which on the whole makes you a spectacularly shitty fox, Sergeant Wilde, especially since you owe Hugo your life!

The Western Docks on the edge of Haymarket

They stood on the western docks, silently watching the sun begin to dip down behind the mountains across the bay. Finnick sighed contently as he lounged in Marilyn’s lap, held there by her long elegant paws. He turned his head to look at the other two females. Their pose echoed his, with Judy standing in front of Skye, held there by Skye’s smaller paws resting on her shoulders. Skye’s cloud white fur was lit with orange and red highlights, and even Judy looked spectacular in the setting sunlight, the light masking her slimness and making her body look elegant, if not regal, in the dying light. He smiled as he realized that he needed to immortalize this.

He tapped his she-wolf’s paws, and she let him slide down to the ground. He pulled out his phone and held it up, motioning her to go stand next to the other two mammals. They all looked at him
expectantly as Marilyn slide over to side on Skye’s Pale Rider, but he waved over their gaze at the sunset. They all turned their eyes off of him, and on to the spectacle before them, leaving him to be witness to their ethereal beauty.

Finnick had long understood his fascination with the larger female form, part of the result of having made peace with his small stature years ago. He had never considered his size would in turn make him attractive in their eyes, but after meeting Marilyn, and how she had responded to his attentions, he had come to realize that he had much to offer them. Sometimes it was as the court jester, the butt of their jokes, like their tugboat joke at his expense during dinner, but most of the time it was as their greatest fan, always there to tell them how beautiful they were in his adoring eyes.

He took photo after photo, getting closer and closer to them, until he stood under Judy, looking up the three of them. His closeness and his stature created a forced perspective through the camera lens, with their heads all the same sizes, lined up in a diagonal across his frame. The splashing light ignited the golden highlights in Judy’s fur and brought a commanding sparkle to her royal purple eyes, eyes that made him want to fall to his knees before her and beg forgiveness for all his transgressions. Skye’s blue and gold eyes blazed fiercely, sending a shiver of fear to play down his spine, as her fur glowed through with a play of pale greens, blues, and yellows, almost like he could see the northern lights dancing on the tips. And Marilyn, his beautiful Marilyn, her long elegant muzzle pointed arrow-like at the western sky. Her brow angled sharply forward, her fur glowed a blood red, and her ruff blew gently in the breeze. He could almost see the tall grasses swaying around her form.

They were perfect.

He sighed, and breathed a thank you. Judy’s eyes snapped down, as her long rabbit ears picked up his whisper. Her brows narrowed, an evil grin playing across her muzzle as she watched him attempt to regain his self control, but her look simply made him shudder from ear tip to toe. Of course she would recognize what he was, he realized too late. She was a former sex worker; his fetish would be well know to her. She smiled cruelly down on him, and he waited for a scathing retort, some revenge for the shit he had given her earlier today, but she was above that pettiness. She slowly raised her eyes back up to the vista before her, relegating him to the background of her consciousness. He faded to invisibility once more.

*Hugo, my friend, I envy you. For you don’t yet understand the power she will bring to the fore, but you soon will, oh yes. She has set her eye upon you, and it will be only a matter of time before she stakes her claim upon your soul. She had mine with a glance.*

He quickly turned away. *Professional, Fox! Be a professional! Drag your mind out of the kinky gutter and put your game face on! You don’t like this rabbit, and you don’t like her problems, and you certainly don’t like being dragging into this mess!* He sighed. Trust the Powers That Be to give
him a problem that he had to solve that involved a female who had just figured out how to push his buttons. He was so doomed. But he had a job to do, and then sooner he got to it, the sooner it would be over.

As the last sliver of glowing orb slipped beneath the mountain tips, a green flash sang out for just a few seconds, and it was gone. He put his phone away, and clapped his paws together. He barked out, “Alright mammals! Enough lollygagging! We need to get back.”

Skye just rolled her eyes, “God, he’s bossy!” as she looked back at Marilyn.

Judy commented to the group, “He’s probably just compensating.”

“Compensating?” Skye asked back at her. Judy held up her paw, her thumb and forefinger just a few millimeters apart, a grin spreading across her muzzle. Skye’s eyes got wide with that gesture.

Marilyn stifled a giggle at their interplay as she stood up and strode over to her favorite little fox. She reached down and swung him up to her chest, clasping him to her bosom. She spun lightly on her feet, a glad laugh escaping her lips. Stopping, she stared down at him, before she dipped her muzzle down to his and shared a long kiss. She turned to her bike, and slowly lowered him into the sidecar.

Skye let go of Judy and turned back to her bike. Judy tried to turn as well, but she caught her foot and stumbled. Only Skye’s quick canine reflexes caught her before she crashed to the ground. She pulled Judy back upright, but kept her paw on the smaller rabbit’s shoulders as she peered down at her face.

“I’m fine, Skye! I just tripped!” Judy batted at Sky’s paw.

Skye held fast to the little rabbit’s shoulders, her grip feeling the tension radiating from the slim frame. She reached across with a paw, and lifted up Judy’s muzzle as she knelt before her. She could see the quiver in the long ears, hear the hitch in her breathing, and the eyes that struggled to stay open in the darkening evening. “You’re not fine, Judy. You’re so exhausted that you can barely stand up straight. You’re not going to ride back with me, that’s for sure.”

“But, but...” Judy protested.
“No buts, littlest rabbit. You said that we needed time to get to know each other again, and that means more rides. But this one is done for you. I just found you, and I’m not going to loose you again just because you fell off my bike in the dark. It’s into the side car with you.” Skye picked Judy, and swung her into the side car next to Finnick. She placed Judy’s helmet in her lap, and gave the rabbit a kiss between the ears as she grumbled her protests, which just gave Skye a little smile. Skye left her there and strode back to her Pale Rider.

Judy buckled on her helmet. She turned back to Finnick before remarking, “Well, if I have to take a nap, I might as well have a pillow.”

“You use me as a pillow and I will bite you, rabbit!” Finnick tried to threaten her.

Judy snorted as they pulled out of the docks, “So you keep saying, little fox.”

Finnick glared back at her.

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**The Rainforest District Barrier Mountains**

Nick ran, his nerves singing, as he hunted his mystery rabbit. He might not be the stalking expert that his partner was, but he was still a good cop. When he lost her trail, and her scent had faded, he asked around. Here, a shopkeeper recalled her running by. There, a group of kits had their Monday night pickup hoops game interrupted by a rabbit barging through.

Following the clues, he quickly developed a pattern to her movements. True to form, she minimized energy expenditure and moved to the path of least resistance as she ran. Where there was a wall she had gone around, and where there was a fence, she had gone under. In the protected spaces, safe from the rain, her scent still lingered.

What he couldn’t figure out is why she kept running after the first few blocks. He hadn’t pursued her Monday night and she should have seen that. Yet she had continued to run, as if Death itself was nipping at her heels. He had examined her scent when he could find it, but he could never smell any other mammals chasing her. Nor did he smell the sharp tang of fear, which was odd. Mammals ran like she had for two reasons: either they were fleeing for their lives, or they were on a timed cross country marathon.
He didn’t think she was running a Spartan, not as a homeless rabbit. What drove this rabbit to flee across the whole of the Rainforest District was a mystery to him. What wasn’t a mystery was her destination; she was headed straight for the tunnels that passed under the barrier mountains separating the Rainforest from Tundra Town.

As he ran, he mulled over her scent as he found it. While there wasn’t the tang of fear in it, there was something else there. Something pervasive and yet less tangible. Its presence was hard to comprehend, but if he had to give it a name to describe it, he would only use one word.

Grief.

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*Tundra Town Central Hospital*

They rolled back into the hospital parking garage in Tundra Town. Finnick was cold. Skye obviously didn’t care about the temperature, being an arctic fox, and Marilyn had a big heater strapped under her thighs, but he didn’t. All he had was a thick woolen blanket from the trunk of the sidecar and the rabbit who laid across his lap, snoring away. She didn’t generate all that much heat, and seemed to be stealing all of his.

Luckily, Hugo was standing outside his SUV, dressed in his usual black suit, alerted to their arrival by an earlier text from Finnick. The two riders pulled their bikes up next to him, and shut down their engines. Hugo slid over to greet them.

“Hello, Finnick.” He greeted the smaller fox and nodded up at Marilyn, “Ms Vega.” She nodded back at him. “How was your ride?”

“Just peachy, Cat. Now can you please take your rabbit back? My legs have gone to sleep, and I can’t feel my toes.” Finnick snarled back at him.

Hugo just smiled at the display of rancor. If the little fox had really been angry, he would have been curt and dismissive. He bent over the unconscious rabbit, and drew back the blanket covering her. Sliding a paw under her neck to support her head, he slid the other under her pelvis and lifted her clear as he leaned back. Setting her head on his shoulder, he carried her over to his SUV, and opened the passenger door. Laying her on the passenger seat, he covered her with his parka, and boosted the seat warmer to max. He shut the door, and turned back to the waiting canines.
“Thank you, Finnick. I appreciate this, I do.” He thanked the little fox.

“Yeah, yeah.” Finnick muttered as he tried to shake out one leg, and then the other. He pointed over at the vixen, “Hugo, met our friend Skye. Skye, this here is my Cat, Hugo.”

Skye dismounted her motorcycle and stalked over to the feline. He held out his paw in greeting. She stood up straight and stared at it for a moment with a scowl, before accepting it by grasping his paw in hers, and squeezed.

_That’s interesting,_ Hugo thought, _A dominance display, and from a female I’ve never met before. Why is that?_ He grinned, and matched her grip, plus a little more. His eyesight never wavered from hers as they matched strengths. She broke first with a yelp, yanking her paw away from Hugo’s and stepping back, giving ground to him. She turned to walk away as she shook her mangled paw out.

Finnick and Marilyn both caught the display, and Finnick was the first to respond, “Skye, did you just grip check the Cat? Don’t do that! He’s a bodybuilder and a climbing cat! I’ve seen him pulp fruits with those paws of his!” He snickered.

“Cielos!” Marilyn exclaimed, getting off her bike. She leaned over Finnick and whispered “Hush!” to the little fox. He shrank back into the seat. She turned Hugo and tried to explain, “Skye and Judy, they… they were...” She struggled find words that wouldn’t offend him, knowing how he felt about the little rabbit.

_Ah! That’s what this about! I was sure she had a predator lover in her past. I hadn’t imagined it to be a vixen, though. This is good!_ He mused to himself. “Bueno! They were lovers, yes?” He smiled easily back at Marilyn, pleased with this revelation.

Marilyn, taken aback by his lack of anger, nodded, “About eight years ago, she told me.” She was curious about his lack of jealousy. He had searched for Judy for years, yet he was oddly dispassionate about this new information.

“That is good! It always helpful for a homeless mammal to have others that love them. It gives them a sense that they can connect with others, and that they belong where they are. I trust they parted on good terms?” He asked her. Marilyn nodded. He nodded back, “Thank you. Please convey to your friend Skye my sincere apologies. I was unsure of the purpose of the dominance display, and I may have over reacted, in part because of the stress of my day. My actions were unbecoming, and I hope she can forgive me.”
Marilyn nodded, “I’ll talk to her.” She walked after the departed vixen.

Hugo turned to Finnick, who was watching his wolf walk away. Hugo spoke first, “Thank you again, Finnick, for taking care of Judy while I worked.” He nodded at the two females on the ramp, “I hope that you can explain this all to me? Tomorrow, maybe? I am tired and need to sleep, as the day has been very stressful.”

Finnick tore his eyes off the females, and looked back at Hugo, “Sure… Maybe.” he semi-promised. *Explain all this? I’m not sure I understand any of this!*

“Alright, tomorrow it is. Good night, Finnick.” Hugo turned to go. Finnick called after him, “Night, Cat!”

Hugo got in his SUV, and pulled away, leaving Finnick alone in the dark garage. He looked around and muttered, “Screw this, I’m gonna go wait inside where it’s warm.” He clambered out of the side car, and departed in search of an entrance.

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*An alleyway two blocks from Tundra Town Central Square*

Nick stood alone in a dark alleyway in Tundra town. Pallets lined the walls, and squat green garbage bins sat askew next to them. Here, the trail had gone cold, literally. A fresh blanket of virgin snow covered the alleyway before him, erasing any tracks and blurring any scent markers. Here, his hunt had ended in failure, where the only tracks evident were his own.

He had asked around, but none of the local businesses had been open that late on Monday night. Nor were there any security cameras in the blank alleyway. There wasn’t even a traffic cam on the street. There was nothing he could investigate, no threads left for him to pull.

It was as if someone had chosen this spot as the perfect location to come in, sweep her off her feet, and make her disappear, leaving him with nothing to show for his search but a bag of old stinking clothes in his paws.

He considered pitching the bag, but it was evidence, and old police habits were very hard to break.
He’d keep it with him, and find some opportunity to show it to Wolfard, and see what the old wolf had to say.

He took one last look around the cold bleak space before departing. But he wasn’t going to run back. No, he was going to take the train back to his car.

He had run enough tonight.

Tundra Town Central Hospital

Finnick sat in a nook he had found just inside the garage entrance. It was quiet and comfortable, with room to pace if he needed to, and it was empty. Just him, a phone, and four bars of cell phone reception strength. He didn’t really have any more excuses, since he was sure that Marilyn and Skye were gonna take their time talking through whatever is bothering Skye. He had time, he had the place, he had the phone, and now all he needed was the motivation. That was the hard part.

He sighed, and thumbed on his paw phone, scrolling down until he found Cheryl’s number. He hit the dial option and waited.

BUZZ…BUZZ…BUZZ…CLICK!

“Hey there, Fen.” Her tired voice came across his speaker.

“Hey back at ya, Professor. You sound tired.” He greeted her back.

“Hey back at ya, Professor. You sound tired.” He greeted her back.

“Yeah, well grading papers and not sleeping well will do that to you too.” Cheryl allowed, as she sat at her low table, slowly stirring the spoon in her mug of spiced tea with her left paw. A stack of student papers sat next to her right paw, a red ink pen clutched lightly in her grip. Her phone lay in front of her, set to speaker, and on the screen staring back at her was an old photo of Finnick, glaring at her over his sunglasses. “How about you? You have a nice ride with your lady friends?”

He laughed, and then sighed. “Yeah… it was nice. Took some nice photos of them in the light of the sunset. Might even show you some.” There, now he was committed. Not that he had a choice, he knew. The revelation was coming, so he might as well control it.
“Oh yeah? You enjoy yourself?” She knew all about the little fox’s particular interests in female photography.

“You could say that...” He stared at the floor, a slight grin on his muzzle as they bantered before the main event.

“Pervert.” She laughed.

“You know it!” He laughed back, and then turned serious, “You still not sleeping, C?”

She sighed. “Gah! No. It was the same dream for weeks, over and over again. I get that They are trying to tell me something, but sometimes I wish they would just sent an email or something. She keeps dying in the snow, and it’s horrible and all, but it still doesn’t help me find her.” She paused, “And the new ones don’t give my much to go on either.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Hell, last week I even asked Clawhauser if he ever did patrols, but apparently since he doesn’t have a partner, Bogo won’t send him out in a cruiser. So I don’t understand why it has to be the poor cheetah that has to discover her.” She took a deep breath before continuing, “Anyway, they’ve changed now. The dream on Monday night was frustrating, because as soon as Clawhauser kneels to touch her face and tell her that she should have been loved, she disappears into the snow bank. He’s left touching nothing but snow.”

“That is weird.” Yeah. ‘They’ weren’t being subtle now, were the they? He was starting to wonder if these dreams that Cheryl has been having weren’t actually meant for Cheryl to interpret. She was just supposed to been the conduit and the message was supposed to have been passed on, but they only got as far as Finnick before they got stopped because he didn’t take their significance seriously. But if he had told either Nick or Hugo about what Cheryl had seen, like it seems he was supposed to, those two males would have in turn torn Tundra Town apart looking for the rabbit and they wouldn’t have stopped until they found her.

Cheryl would never have thought of tell either one of them, since she didn’t know about their personal history with the rabbit, nor about the current obsession they both shared with finding her. They in turn were acutely aware of who Cheryl’s wife was, so they made sure to never mention the subject in her hearing either. So she didn’t know they were looking, and they wouldn’t know about her dreams. The only mammal who did was a certain little sand fox.

But since he didn’t take any of it seriously, that communication never happened. The message died
on his lips. ‘They’ must have gotten tired of waiting for him to get off his little furry butt and act, and gotten the message out another way. “And last night?”

“Oh, it was a variation on the theme, I guess. I was Clawhauser again, standing over the snow bank, but this time there was no rabbit there. I was staring down at the snow when I became aware of a presence, one I had never experienced before. I looked up and around but I didn’t see anything at first. I became aware in the silence of the slight sound of crunching snow, as if they were paw steps. I looked in that direction, but all I saw was an inky blackness that was quickly swallowed up by the snowfall. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I heard something whisper, like they were talking quietly down a long tunnel, something along the lines of ‘Not yet...’” Cheryl expressed her frustration, “‘Not Yet’ meaning I’m not supposed to find her yet, or she’s not supposed to die yet, or something? I don’t know what it means! GAH!” She leaned back on her pillow, and raked her claws through her head fur.

You’re not supposed to, Cheryl. The message isn’t meant for you. He knew. “Pawsteps in snow, and a darkness? Maybe that’s some mammal wearing dark clothing?” Hugo... How did he know to be there? How did he get the message? Shit, I’m gonna have to ask him tomorrow, won’t I?

“Dark clothes? Maybe? Oh, like your buddy, Hugo, right? He’s the one that always wears black suits? He kinda looks like he’s like he’s always in mourning, except that he’s usually pretty cheerful? Yeah! That’s all he wore, back when I worked with him on the Night-howlr case. Doesn’t he live and work in Tundra Town? Oh, I can ask him if he’s seen anything down there!” Excited, Cheryl babbled out this latest train of thought.

“Actually, he’s gone home. He said he was pretty tired, so I think he was going to go home and sleep.” Finnick temporized. She guessed it was him right away! This is all happening too fast, he thought.

“Oh!... So, what did you talk to him over the phone? Or did he go riding with you too? I didn’t get the impression from talking to him back then that he was into motorcycles.” She frowned at her phone.

“No, it was face to face, but he didn’t go riding. He...” Fuck it, Finnick. Get this over with! “He had me babysitting one of his patients this afternoon, and I had to return her to him tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Who?” She asked innocently.

Shit, how do I say this? He stared at the phone for a moment before he had a brainstorm. A picture. He’d send her a picture. They’re worth a thousand words, right?
“Cheryl, I’m gonna drop the call for a moment. I gotta send you a photo from today. You’ll understand when you see it.” He promised her.

“What? Okay?” What the hell. Does he mean the ones from the sunset ride, his ones of his ladies? She was confused. She liked female porn as much as the next lesbian, but she really wasn’t in the mood for his usual goddess worship photos.

Finnick dropped the call, and pulled up his photos. Selecting the very last one, the one where he was the closest to them, he send it to Cheryl without a message. He waited for what would come next.

On the other end, Cheryl’s phone beeped once. She looked down at the new message icon, and tapped on it. Her message stream with him popped up, and at the bottom was a small image icon. She tapped on it, and it expanded to fill her screen. Looking down the image from the top, she saw his girlfriend at the top, some cute looking arctic vixen, and a gray rabbit. What? She zoomed into the rabbit’s face, and froze.

*Those. Eyes!* Her mind screamed at her. Those purple irises, surrounded by a very living face.

*Finnick, you absolute bastard!* *What. The. FUCK!*

She immediately called him back.

“Hey, Cheryl. You get my photo?” He asked innocently.

She all but screamed at him over the phone, “TALK! NOW!”

*Tundra Town Central Hospital*

“Skye! Skye, wait, please!” Marilyn called out, trotting up to her friend.

Skye turned back, a miserable expression on her face and muzzle.
Marilyn pointed to the vixen’s paw, “Are you okay?”

Skye looked down at her paw and then shook it, “Yeah, it’s fine.”

Marilyn stood up straight and pointed back the way they had come, “What was that, Skye?”

At a loss to explain, Skye bit out, “I don’t know! I don’t know why I did that! I mean, I never play the dominance game. Like, ever!” She shook her head.

Marilyn tilted her head as she looked down on the snow fox, “Well, it’s a good thing that Hugo’s so polite. He was worried that he overreacted and hurt you. He wanted to apologize.”

“Why should he apologize? I started it.” Skye pointed out.

“I noticed that, and if Hugo had been any other cat with his background, I would have thought you suicidal to pull that. But as it was, he probably thought it was funny.” Marilyn responded.

Skye looked confused, “What’s his background have to do with it?”

Marilyn snorted, “You just met him, so you don’t know, but he used to run with a rather violent Amazonia street gang as a kit.” Skye’s eyes got big as Marilyn continued, “I don’t think he’s ever killed any mammals, but he’s been in his share of fights.”

“Oh...” Skye let out, staring at her paw.

“Are you jealous? Of him?” Marilyn bluntly asked her.

“I don’t know? Maybe? Yes? He has her tonight, all to himself, and … and … I’m just here…” Skye ran down.

“She was more that just a lover to you, wasn’t she?” Marilyn gently asked.

Skye nodded, tears coming unbidden to her eyes, “I had asked her to move in with me. We were
starting to plan a life together, and then my Mom got sick, and I lost all of that to go take care of her. Then my Dad, being the asshole that he was, intercepted our love letters to each other, and we lost what little contact we had with each other after that.”

Skye started to pace in front of the wolf, “You wouldn’t think it, right, to know me? That I’d be in some long term relationship with anyone, much less a rabbit? I’m the love em and leave em type these days, but I wasn’t always that way, you know?” She looked back at her red friend, “I used to try, try really hard to make it work with my girlfriends. And even with Judy, it took a lot of work, well, because…” Oh Shit, I don’t have Judy’s permission to discuss this with Marilyn! Skye realized.

“She is so damaged?” Marilyn finished. Skye’s paws came up her lips in shock. Marilyn nodded, “Finnick told me all about her. And I’ve known Hugo for years as well. I know what kind of mammals he works with. I don’t imagine that Judy is some simple farm rabbit from Bunny Burrow any more.”

Skye nodded, the tears streaming down her face, “I used to be stronger that this. I used to be the strong one, the one others would turn to, but along the way something changed, and now I can’t handle this shit. I don’t know what changed.” She looked up at her taller friend in misery, “I don’t know what to do, Marilyn…”

Marilyn stepped forward and gathered her smaller friend in a gentle embrace. “Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay.” Actually, Marilyn had a fairly good idea what was going on with the vixen. From what she could see, Skye had never fully processed the grief from the loss of her mother and the loss of her relationship with Judy, choosing instead to bury that grief deep down inside. It was probably why Skye never risked having a long term intimate relationship again. Now the reappearance of the rabbit had brought all that repressed pain and loss out into the light, and the avalanche of emotions was threatening to overwhelm the poor fox.

Luckily there were grief counselors who dealt with this sort of thing, and Marilyn knew several of them. But that wasn’t what Skye needed tonight. Tonight was different. Tonight, Skye just needed a friend to talk to.

“Come, let’s go inside. My feet are going numb from the cold.” She steered the vixen toward the hospital entrance. “Let’s find a quiet couch somewhere, and we can talk, okay.”

Skye simply nodded as she let herself be guided inside.
Nick pulled up next to his mother’s apartment building and parked his car. He got out and stretched his stiff limbs, marveling at the warm feeling of his muscles. He hadn’t run like that in ages.

As he walked up the stairs, he wondered why he felt so light. Relief, perhaps, that he didn’t find what he feared was there? Some poor rabbit he didn’t know that ran only because they were terrified of him? Or perhaps even a corpse hidden behind a dumpster? Ouch. Now there was a depressing thought.

He scowled to himself as he stood before his mother’s door and rang the door chime. A couple of thumps later, and the door opened. His mother stood in the door way, looking at him gently, “Hello dear. Come to pick up my granddaughter?” she asked him.

“I am, o’ mother mine.” He answered affably.

There was a shriek in the background, another thump, and then the sound of little running feet. “DADDY!” His little kit collided with his shins and almost knocked him over. She held her arms over her head and demanded, “UP!”

He laughed as he bent down to pick her up and swung her up to his chest as he walked through the door. His mother shut the door behind him. He looked at his daughter and asked, “And how is my little blueberry? Still sweet as ever?”

“My name isn’t blueberry, it’s JUDY!” She shrieked back at him. He blinked at that, and out of the corner of his eye he saw his mother wince. He had to grin, as apparently volume control had been an issue tonight.

“Well, I think you’re still sweet!” He told her.

She leaned in and sniffed his head, “And you’re STINKY, Daddy!” she scolded him, as she rubbed her nose with the back of her arm.

His mother seconded the notion, “Yes, dear. Have you been rolling around in the garbage bins again? I though I raised you better than that.”
He laughed again, “I only do that during an investigation, if we’re trying to find evidence or something. No, I was just out running in the city, and lost track of time.”

His mother was concerned, a frown playing across her muzzle, “Your infection, dear...”

“It’s fine, Mom.” He hastened to reassure her, “The docs want me to do more exercise anyway. Apparently it’s good for my cardio-vascular system and my immune system, and it helps reduce stress.” He sniffed himself, “Tell you what. I’ll take a quick shower, and I’ll come back and join you two lovely lasses in watching ‘Friendship is Magic’, for what? The second or third time?” He asked them.

His daughter nodded emphatically, while his mother leaned in and whispered, “Forth!”

“Ah!” He exclaimed as he put his daughter down, “Well, they say that good entertainment is hard to find these days.” He dashed off to grab the shower.

Ten minutes later, he dressed in some old ZPD shorts and went back to join his ladies. He grabbed his phone from his jacket, and set it on the arm rest of the couch. He sat down on the couch, where upon his daughter spied the availability of her favorite perch and crawled up into his lap. His poor suffering mother started the movie yet again, and then set down next to him with her knitting, trying to finish yet another sweater for Judy Grace before she outgrew it.

Ninety minutes later he lay back on the couch cushions as the movie credits rolled up the screen. His daughter was sacked out on his chest, held there by his left paw, sucking on her thumb and making cute little whining noises. His mother had put her impossible knitting away, and was leaning on his right arm, dozing in the manner of all truly exhausted grandmothers.

Nick looked at his little family, three generations worth, and marveled. These were the moments that he should be treasuring, not out there brooding on the mistakes of his past. He had enough failures to last a lifetime, and he swore his family wasn’t going to be one of them.

His paw phone buzzed as a text message arrived, so he freed up his left paw and slapped at it. Picking it up, he saw that it was Miki texting him.

*Miki-tails:*
How’s it going?

He smiled. She had to be tired after working a new shift at a new hospital, so he should send her something back to smile about. He held out his phone, and quickly took a selfie of the three of them. He sent it back to her.

Nickmeister:

They have finally surrendered to slumber’s embrace after the fourth viewing of ‘Friendship is Magic’. How’s it going with you?

Miki-tails:

Aw… That’s sweet. I’m Tired. You know what it’s like on a new shift.

Nickmeister:

Ain’t that the truth.

Miki-tails:

Yeah. The head nurse, an adorable old doe by the name of Meredith, said that they were having a rash of new babies recently, and it’s left their department overworked.

Nickmeister:

Rash? She makes it sound like a horrible disease!

Miki-tails:

Oh, hush. You know what I mean.
Nickmeister:

Yeah, yeah. So, does being around all those newborns make you want another one yourself?

Miki-tails:

Maybe?? :) 

Nickmeister:

I’m doomed!

Miki-tails:

Hardly that. Actually, speaking of doomed, what was with the whole lock-down thing today?

Nickmeister:

Lock-down? What lock-down?

Miki-tails:

There was a lock-down here at the hospital today. They shut down an entire wing for one patient, and the ZPD got called in. They haven’t told us what it was about, so I was wondering if you had heard anything.

Nickmeister:

Nope. Nothing. In theory, I’m supposed be off today, so if they wanted me to know, they’d tell me.
Bogo will probably still make me do the paperwork for the lock-down, though. They always involve lots of paperwork. I suppose I’ll find out eventually.

Miki-tails:

Okay. I’ll be off shift in a few minutes, and then I’ll meet you at your mother’s?

Nickmeister:

Sounds good to me. I’m not going anywhere - I’m kinda pinned down here.

Miki-tails:

:) I love you.

Nickmeister:

I love you too, babe. See you soon!

He set the phone down, and turned his attention back to his daughter, stroking his paw down her back.

Yeah. This is where he belonged, with his family and his future.

Not out chasing the ghosts of failures past.

Let the dead lie in peace...
Cheryl grilled Finnick over the phone, “Okay, let me get this straight... Hugo’s been looking for her for ten years with no success, ever since she left Cliffside, and she somehow stumbled into his arms Monday night?”

Finnick simply replied, “Yup.”

Cheryl sat at her table, her tea cold and forgotten in it’s cup as she stared at the wall. “Well, damn.” She stared down at the flat surface. “You know, I met her once.”

“Yeah, I know. In a dinner called Dee’s Kitchen in Gateway Bay city.” Finnick told her.

“Wait? How the hell did you know that?” She demanded. She had never talked to him about what happened there that day.

“Hugo told me. One of his students had tracked her down, and was trying to make contact, except the two of you showed up and your girlfriend’s theatrics got her fired. She ran off, and Hugo was never able to find her again. How’d you to settle on going there, anyway?”

“Chance! Pure chance! We were wandering around and got hungry, so we looked up omnivore restaurants on Yowl, and Dee’s was what it recommended, so we went there. That’s it!” Cheryl gestured to the wall.

“Ah ha...” Finnick snorted, “I’m starting to think that very little in this rabbit’s life has been left up to chance.”

“Yeah... The Divines can be can be pretty heavy handed with their favorites.” She paused, “Hugo, huh? I guess my dream was meant for him, then?”

“Well...” Finnick temporized, “Either him or Nick. Either of them would have worked, probably.”
“Nick? Why him?” She was baffled as to why he would be included now.

“What? He never tell you? Never tell you the story of how he named his daughter?” Finnick asked her excitedly.

“Uhhh… He said something about an aunt or something on his father’s side.”

Finnick laughed, “Yeah, that’s just straight up Wilde bullshit. His dad’s dead, and he doesn’t know any mammals on that side of the family. No, remember all that evidence that he showed up with at the end of the night-howler shit? The stuff that was used to make the cure?”

“Yeah?” Cheryl had been there on that team.

“The rabbit’s the one who delivered it to him.”

“What?!!” Cheryl exclaimed.

“I shit you not, Cheryl! She was his informant inside the Bellwether camp.”

“Oh fuck.” Cheryl sat back.

“Language, Professor! Language, please.” He mocked back.

“Oh, shut up. Okay… So Nick knows about her too? Should I talk to him about this?” She asked him.

“God, no! Please don’t!” Finnick begged her.

“What? Why not?” She stared at the wall.
“Because Hugo doesn’t know any of that. Nick never told him any of it, and he only told me on the condition that I never tell Hugo either.”

“Well, that’s stupid.” She pointed that out.

“Yeah, well, I know. I’ve already regretted making that promise today.” He agreed.

“Yeah, you were stupid, Mr Counselor, but I was talking about Nick. Why the hell did he do that?”

“Well, he said it was for Hugo’s protection, that he didn’t want Hugo to go chasing after her and getting hurt. He also seems to think that she some how went savage and died around the same time, so he didn’t think Hugo should get his hopes up. I don’t quite understand why he thinks that she should be dead.”

“Well, she not!” Cheryl pointed out.

“I know that! She’s been with me all day.” Finnick agreed.

“So why do you think Nicks been trying to keep this a secret from Hugo?”


“No WAY! She’s rabbit of all things, a felon for that matter who was involved with predator haters, and he’s been with Miki since like forever!” Cheryl protested.

“Yeah, normally I’d say yes to all of that, but this rabbit has predators crawling all over her. You remember the white vixen from the photo?”

“Yes?” She hissed at him.

“That’s Skye, Judy’s ex from eight years ago.” Cheryl couldn’t see him smirk.

“Okay, Finnick, you have to stop! My head is starting to hurt.” Cheryl took a deep breath.
Plainly she was supposed to forgive the rabbit, and somehow help her. The Divines had spent the last month slapping her repeatedly over the head with that. That was obvious. That meant that there was more to the whole Carl thing than meets the eye, since nine year old female rabbit kits were not on the whole murderous little psychos with guns. Every thing else that Finnick had laid out was just icing on top of that cake, and she was having trouble chewing on this mouthful as it was. The final straw for her was that this rabbit was a fellow lesbian fighting for her place in this world, and that fact resonated with Cheryl on so many levels.

She took a deep breath and continued, “They have to talk, those two.”

Finnick sighed, “Yeah, I know. Uncle Finnick’s working on that.”

“Yeah, well work faster.” She admonished him. “And I need to meet her. I know she wants to meet me.” That had been very plain to Cheryl from that fateful day in Dee’s.

“I’ll talk to Hugo about it tomorrow. I’m supposed to call him, talk to him about the whole Skye thing anyway. Does that work?”

“For now, yes. At this point, I’m about to fall over with exhaustion, and if I let any of the 10,000 additional questions queued up in my head right now out of my mouth, I won’t get any sleep at all tonight. It can all wait till tomorrow, right?” She hoped it would.

“Yeah, it can wait. I’ll call ya after tomorrow, after I talk to Hugo, how’s that sound?” He offered her.

“That sound’s excellent. Thank you, Finnick, for calling to listen to me whine about my dreams and then proceeding to blow up my entire world with this new revelation! I appreciate that, I really do. I bid you good night.” She stated.

Yeah, she’s really gotta be tired if she’s gonna be this sarcastic, he knew. “Night, Cheryl.” The call dropped, and he was left staring at the phone.

Well, that was a lot easier than I expected, he mused. Of course, the hard part is now getting Nick to overcome his guilt long enough to finally talk to Hugo, and in turn keeping Hugo from ripping Nick’s balls off when he hears what Nick has been hiding from him for the past three years.
Hugo pulled into his garage and shut off the engine. Exhausted from the day’s frantic pace, he leaned forward and rested his head on the steering wheel for a moment. He took a deep breath and sat back, before looking over at Judy’s sleeping form. He watched her for a few minutes, her chest rising and falling rhythmically under his parka.

He raised his right paw and after a moment’s hesitation, reached across the seat and stroked it down one of her ears. He marveled at the impossibility of the action, for after thirteen years of searching he had given up hope, and yet here she was, sleeping peacefully in his SUV. He could actually reach out and touch her.

He smiled with a tired sigh, and stepped out of his door. Walking around, he popped her door open, and pulled her gently into his arms. He carried her inside in the manner that only a cat could, quietly padding up the stairs without a sound.

He walked to the couch, but as he knelt to lay her on the old blanket there, he could smell the foul odor emanating from it. He stood backup, and freed a paw to grab it and throw it over by the door. She needed a clean blanket. Hell, she needed a bed. The couch would not do long term, he knew.

He cradled her in his arms as he turned and sat down on the couch himself. Holding her quiet form to him, he tried to organize his thoughts to her care, but nothing would coalesce for him. His mind was darting back and forth, and focus eluded him. Maybe if he relaxed, leaned back into the cushions, and stilled his mind, he could find his center…

His mind quieted but instead of the focus he sought, sweet oblivion found him instead and he slumbered with the rabbit cradled on his lap.

An indeterminate time later, Judy awoke with a start. She blinked rapidly, trying get her bearings in the darkness. She could smell cat, and disinfectant, and the subtle scent of passion flowers…

Hugo... She was at Hugo’s place. The darkness around her was silent. There was no need to panic. She was safe. But still, a need called to her, and so she slipped off his lap, and bumped through the darkness, looking for his bathroom. It was a good thing she had done this exploration last night, or she might have panicked. She found the door at last, and slipped in.
As she sat in the dark and relieved her burden, she wondered about why she wasn’t panicking. Usually, by this time of night, she would have had at least four panic attacks while trying to sleep in her little hut. But here, she had only had the one last night, and it had quickly resolved itself after she had gone downstairs to watch him perform his Tai-ji meditation. What was so different about here?

She knew that she was safe here, but that wasn’t all of it, was it? What was it about him that calmed her so, that stilled the mad buzzing in her brain?

It wasn’t like that with Skye, she realized, thinking about what had happened today with the vixen. She had felt this desperate need and a terrible sadness, a longing for something that had been long lost to the stormy seas. She had felt passion, and she had felt joy. But she hadn’t felt this deep and abiding calm that she felt now in Hugo’s presence.

Eight years can change a mammal indelibly, and she had suffered and changed a lot in those years, as had Skye. There was a brittleness to to the vixen’s character, a lack of surety, that hadn’t been there when they first meet in Gateway Bay City. Her mother’s lingering death must have really destroyed her, and her asshole father obviously hadn’t helped her deal with the loss afterwards.

Judy got down from the toilet and pulled up her pants. She stared at her reflection in the dimly lit bathroom, the only light coming from the light switch on the wall.

*It would be a mistake for me to just jump back into a relationship with her now, pretending like the past eight years never happened. I’m even crazier than before, and that’s not what Skye needs right now. She’s hurting, and I don’t want to dump myself on her like that, not until I can get to a better place and can be a better rabbit for her.* She realized.

*But we can still be friends, and help each other to heal. And then, then we can see where we go from there…*

She left the mirror behind, and padded back to the living room. She stood next to his sleeping form on the couch, and searched around for her blanket. In the dim light, she couldn’t see what had happened to it. Damn it! She really didn’t want to just curl up next to him in her coat, but if she had to…

She climbed up next to him and as she did so, her paw reached out and grasped his leg. She froze for a moment, wondering if she had woken him, but he continued to sleep peacefully. *Duh!* That
gently touch wasn’t enough to wake him, since he was a sound sleeper. She started to raise her paw up when she realized just how warm he was in comparison to the couch. She put her paw back down and slowly stroked along the length, amazed at the warm muscles she felt underneath the pant legs.

That tears it! She thought, as she quickly knelt on the cushions next to him. Placing a paw on his chest, she whispered to him, “I’m sorry, Hugo, but I need something from you now, and I can’t wait any longer. I only hope you can forgive me for what I’m about to do.” She took her paw back and shucked her coat, folding it and setting it next to Hugo. She reached down to the hem of her halter top, and pulled it over her head in a single motion before she dropped it to the floor.

Stepping lightly, she straddled his thighs and sank back down in his lap. She leaned forward and reaching up with practiced paws, she smoothly unbuttoned his shirt all the way down to his belt. Reach in, she spread the cloth to either side, and tentatively touched his broad chest. His chest fur was smooth and untangled, and his undercoat was thick and downy. She reached up with her other paw, and slid it along the bulge of his pectoral muscle. She was amazed at the firmness under her paws, and as they slid under the outer coat of fur, she gasped at the heat trapped within.

Her mind swam for a bit, as she slid up to lay her head on his sternum. She breathed in deep of his masculine scent as she rubbed her check on his chest, her ears finding his heart beat, low and steady like a slow metronome. She sighed in desire. If he wasn’t a cat, she would have woken him up just so that she could convince him to let her have her way with him.

Her eyes snapped open, and she stifled a giggle. Of course, he’d probably tell me no, that I’m still sick, and he’s my doctor, and, and, and, yeah… Yeah, it’s a good thing he’s a cat, cause I’d probably chase him around the house right now.

Alright, libido, it ain’t happening, so let’s just get get our coat and settle down, okay? She reached down to the side, stretching to reach the folded up coat, but the change in her balance shifted her weight in his lap, and this finally elicited a reaction from him. His arms reached up and enveloped her, pinning her back to his chest. His left arm slid along the small of her back, while his right slid up her back and grasped the back of her head. Soon he was still again, and his breathing was unchanged. He never woke up.

URK! She was pinned and unable to move, fighting to contain her panic. She couldn’t even free her arms, and she was afraid that if she yelled, he’d be so startled that he’d break her neck before he even realized that she was there. This must be what it feels like to be captured by an anaconda! Pinned and unable to move, just waiting to be eaten alive. At least I can still breath.
She lay there for a bit, and gradually her heart stilled and her breathing became regular, and as it did so she became aware of a rumble, emanating up from his chest. She listened, concerned at first, but quickly realized what it was. That bobcat had done it too, that one time she had slept with him.

Hugo was purring in his sleep as he held her tight to his chest.

Okay, she wasn’t going to die. Her claustrophobia was being balanced by her libido right now, so there should be no panic attacks from being trapped. Well, if he’s happy to keep me here, I’m happy to stay, she thought with a smile.

Her eyelids, lulled by his purr, drooped closed as she continued to sink deeper into his firm, but not crushing, grip. It was if he was saying to her “This is where you belong...”

She certainly wasn’t going to argue.

Cheryl’s Shop in Old Downtown

Cheryl stretched her arms, and yawned happily. She finally understood what was going on, and that meant the dreams would finally stop. She could go to sleep in peace. She pushed the stack of student papers back; she would deal with them in the morning. She stood up, and walked off towards her bedroom. She ran through her nightly rituals, and finally slipped into her bed. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and darkness took her.

And she dreamed...

She stood in the night upon a snowy street, the blustery wind swirling the icy flakes around her naked form. She shivered.

Her ears perked up, for in the distance she heard a shrill cry of rage.

“...WHAT'S MY NAME?...”
The echoes rang down the street, bouncing off the dark buildings lining either side, until finally silence ruled the space again. She stood for a moment, alone in the dark, lit only by a single street lamp above her.

But only a moment, for behind her came the sound of footsteps crunching in the snow. She turned to look, and all she saw was a deep inky darkness advancing towards her.

A few more steps, and the well of darkness towered above her, resolved itself into the form of a great cat, who’s coat was black as night. Actually, the coat was Night, for inside the depths she beheld comets blaze by, galaxies spin like whirlwinds, and stars twinkle and explode. Around his waist wrapped a girdle of light and hanging from that was a golden loincloth. From his head there sprouted long sweeping dark shapes, almost feather-like, but as she stared through them, she could almost catch glimpses of things mere mortals weren’t meant to witness, other realities built upon other truths.

Gazing down upon her small form were these great big golden eyes, gentle in their caress of her soul. They could see all that she had been, all that she was, and all that she would be, and even so those eyes loved her all the same. She just wanted to surrender to those eyes, to feel the embrace of his arms, and finally know peace.

Holy… Lord Jaguar, Arbiter of the Infinite and Guardian of the Afterlife. Death itself personified. Okay, this is new!, she thought to herself, frozen in place by his gaze.

Then he spoke to her, his voice more felt than heard, the rumbling of a terrible and gentle earthquake, rolling out from caverns deep below.

“1-3-5-7-11…”

…”

“When madness claims the center and all will stand in final judgment…”

…”

“The circle must be drawn with love’s sacrifice and wrought with heart’s tears…”

…”

“So that Death may once again stalk freely the path that no mortal paw may tread…”

…”

“Prepare yourselves, for the time is nigh...”
…

“Find my Acolyte, Cheryl Silverheels…”

…

“He will know what to do…”

…

“1-3-5-7-11…”

With that said, he began to fade away, until only the snow fell before her and she was alone once more.

She awoke with a start and lay there prone in her bed, staring at the ceiling.

Well, she groused, that was decidedly unhelpful as far as prophecies go.

She rubbed her eyelids with the palms of her paws.

GAH! And I had been so looking forward to finally getting some sleep!

Chapter End Notes

I wrote most of this with "Ciaran McAuley & Clare Stagg - All I Want" on loop. It's funny what you can accomplish with the right music.
Chapter Summary

Judy's in a good mood coming back from a photo shoot in The Angels City. She spends the afternoon with her black rhino friend Lance at his gym, and she ends sparing with a wolf. Later they retire to his flat for dinner while they watch a movie and cuddle. Meanwhile, on the opposite coast, in Zootopia, Nick is suffering from the after-effect of the bachelor party that Finnick threw for him. Wolfard comes in to help him fix his tie, and they bond over Wolfard's personal lose. After that, Nick attends a wedding - his.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Flashback - 7 Years ago: Downtown in The Angels City

Judy pranced down the city street, the ache between her legs counter-balanced by the spring in her step. She felt good, even though every stride brought a burning twinge from her crotch. She supposed it must be the endorphins rushing through her system that made her feel so high, her body’s response to all the strenuous stretching she had just done for today’s “Veggie Delight” photo shoot with Herbivore Hotties.

The carrots that she had started with at the shoot had been easy enough to handle, and since they were tapered it was easiest to start with them. The cucumbers that followed had taken more work, but with some time and patience, she had conquered even them. But that long bitter melon, with it’s ridges and lumps? That one had been almost impossible. But she had gritted her teeth, and by rotating it around she had finally made it fit.

It was an exhilarating experience, to do that in front of a small herbivore crew handling the light and her makeup, with a skunk photographer snapping photos madly away just a few feet from her pelvis. She had raised her paws in triumph, and they had given her a little round of applause to congratulate her. That portion was going to end up on the blooper reel, she was sure.

Porn is such a weird business.

She grinned as she skipped along the sidewalk. Herbivore Hotties was a national magazine, a staple for horny herbivore males across the country, even in conservative Bunny Burrow. It excited her to realize that bucks that she might know personally would buy next month’s issue, and take it back home for their viewing pleasure. After the bucks were done with them, they would be hidden...
from the does’ prying eyes, and eventually passed around the community of frustrated single males. She knew that some of her brothers, and many of her cousins, bought the magazine, and that they might just end up seeing just what she had accomplished today. It gave her such a horribly illicit thrill to consider that possibility.

But she didn’t need to worry about her father finding out. Unlike other female performers in the industry who’s fathers did consume porn, the only picture magazines that her father ever bought had just tractors in them. Well, and the occasional tractor calendar with scantily clad farm-does. Hum… Maybe she should ask around, see if she could talk her way on to one of those shoots. Maybe dress up in hip riding daisy dukes and a tied off shirt, stick a wheat stalk in her mouth for the added touch, all while she stood at the controls of a large powerful tractor. Wouldn’t that be hilarious, ending up a tractor bunny in a calendar pasted to her father’s workshop wall? Miss September, anyone?

Not that he would recognize her. Not that anybody back home would recognize her, certainly not how she looked now. Her body fur was dyed an iridescent black, and when she moved a rainbow sheen would chase across her body, rippling down her length. Shaved into that ebony fur were eldritch patterns dyed in screaming scarlet: bold spirals winding down her arms and legs, chevrons etched into her neck and chest, and angel’s wings bleeding across her back. Complimenting the fur, she wore deep emerald green contacts to hide her amethyst irises. Combined with the way she walked, the way she held her head up high, she knew that no one in Bunny Burrow would ever recognize what she had become.

Completing her look, she wore torn fishnets over her legs and under her black denim spanky shorts, a torn t-shirt presenting a fox’s middle finger salute, and a black mamba leather coat with chrome studs. She was the perfect punk rabbit, which was ironic, since she never listened to punk music. Lite and poppy stuff, like Gazelle or Justin Timberwolf, suited her mood far more accurately.

She was done with the day’s shoot, and was on her way to visit her “boyfriend”, which is what the porn paparazzi called her friend Lance Blackhorn. The Angels City was a study in scripted reality, where sculptured actors pretend to be anybody else other than themselves, while the tabloids tracked the dalliances and disaster that those actors lived out when they weren’t on set.

Randy McHorny and his diminutive girlfriend, Jessica Lapin. The dynamic duo, two very different yet still very aggressive mammals, unafraid to take the world head-on, wholly on their terms. No event to small, no party to big, they were there to be seen, willing to throw down and take some names.

Who they were in private as a couple was a completely different story.

* * *
Judy stopped in front of a local MMA gym that went by the unassuming name of “Hard Right”, located in an old brick multi bay repair garage. It was a former boxing gym that had since transitioned the more popular MMA fighting style, and Lance worked there part-time as one of the coaches. One of the ironies of the porn business was that while it was heavily male-centric in organization and audience, it was the females who were the best paid. Judy would get paid two grand for her shoot today with HH, based in part on her name and what she was willing to do on camera. Not bad for two hours of work. Lance, on the other hand, usually managed to pull down only half to a quarter of that fee for his shoots.

He had to hustle to make ends meet. Luckily, he had other skills he could bank on, including teaching his martial arts skills to young MMA hopefuls, as well as blending in some pro wrestling techniques as well. An observer might think the two fields of study were mutually exclusive, but there was quite a lot of overlap, in the way body was balanced, the aggression projected, and the economies of motion.

Judy’s personal favorite was the version of Amazonia Kenpo that they taught there. Lance and a few of the other instructors at the gym had spent the last few months working with her on her forms and techniques. In truth, she had little interest in actually competing, because as Lance liked to point out, concussions sucked. She didn’t want to addle her brains anymore than they already were. But it’s mixed fighting style still appealed to her rough and tumble childhood spent at Juvenile Detention and Cliffside, and it most closely resembled what little she could remember of her police training in another life; a life once lived proudly but was now mostly shrouded in the mists of time and lost memories.

She only practiced Kenpo once or twice a week, mostly for the mental discipline that it afforded her. Yoga and running kept her body lean and tight, but she still needed an edge, something that told other unscrupulous mammals that might try to take advantage of her in the industry or on the streets that she was not to be trifled with.

She ducked under one of the open bay doors, and wandered through the busy gym looking for Lance’s large frame. She walked with her head held high, and her ears erect, a smile on her muzzle. She held little fear of being accosted in the gym itself, as most of the mammals there were too busy with their training to notice her small form. Those mammals that did cat call her quickly came to regret it, since the coaches would unceremoniously toss them in a ring with her, where she would quickly hand them their asses back to them with a smirk.

She spotted Lance in his black gym sweats at the back ring, coaching a female dhole on her footwork. The little rabbit bounded up to the ring and hopped up on the floor, climbing the ropes in the corner so that she could sit level with Lance’s head. “Hey there, big boy!” She said by way of greeting, and held her nose out to him, closing her eyes in the process.
“Hey yourself, little rabbit.” Lance reached his massive nose across the space between them, and gently rubbed noses with her. It was an expression of the total control he maintained over his body’s motion that he could do that without headbutting her with his snout.

He turned back to the dancing dhole, “Hey, Keya! You had enough practice? You want to go a couple of rounds with JJ here?” He cocked his horn at the rabbit sitting next to him.

Keya stopped her feet, and put her gloved fists on her knees while trying to get her breathing slowed down, “Do I have to?” She winced.

Lance stood back from the ring, his mighty hooves wrapped around the top rope, “Isn’t that what you’re training for?”

Keya stared at them, her gaze flicking back and forth between Judy and Lance, “Yeah, except that I really don’t want to get murdered by your girlfriend today, Coach. I’m really tired, and she’s fresh and ripping to go. I mean, look at her eyes.” Keya waved her glove at the rabbit sitting on her perch like a raptor surveying her hunting grounds.

Lance glanced over at Judy, Yeah… Her eyes are really bright. Maybe a little too bright. She must have had a really good session with HH to be riding so high right now. Lance had turned the pain of a beating into power many times in his past, but he also knew that when the endogenous morphine flowed through his veins he didn’t always make the best decisions. Maybe later, when she’s calmed down a bit, he thought, I can watch her fight.

“Allright”, he told the dhole, “We’re done for the day. Go cool down.”

Keya walked to the ropes, ducked under and hopped down, heading off to the lockers.

Judy muttered under her breath, “Wimp.”

“Hey, hey… Maybe she just wants to keep all her teeth inside her jaw today, ya know?” He admonished the energetic bunny.

“Well, how about you and me, then?” She purred at him.

He grinned as he shook his head, “No way! I know better!” He laughed, “Tell you what! I’ll ask
Carlos if he’s willing to put on the pads later and take you on, after he’s done coaching and all? Maybe he can work off some of that excess energy you seem to be carting around right now?” Unlike Keya, the smaller lobo was an experienced fighter who liked a good challenge.

Judy perked up on the post, “Ooo! That sounds good! Let’s do that!”

Later that evening back at Lance’s pad, he was chopping vegetables on his kitchen while Judy lay on the counter, moaning. He grinned and asked, “How ya doing there, JJ?”

Judy groaned, “It hurts… It all hurts… Like, every muscle from my hips on down is burning…”

He snorted as he observed, “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have gone that many rounds with Carlos. He likes to make his partners dance, ya know?”

Judy nodded. She couldn’t punch worth a damn in a fight, and she was to short to intimidate a larger partner, so her entire strategy depended on her legs. Moving, jumping, striking, it was all on her legs. She was an excellent kick-boxer, but the little wolf was a cagey sparring partner, and he knew all her weaknesses. He would sham some opening while sparring with her, fooling her into committing to her attack, and then stepping back just out range while she just struck nothing but air with her feet.

Enough rounds of that, and she hadn’t even been able to continue standing, much less kick him. He just waited her out, and then when she could no longer get up of the ring mat, he just stood over her grinning and mockingly asked her, “That all you got, frijol?”

That was her nickname at the gym; frijol or bean, short for jumping bean. Except that after Carlos was done with her that afternoon, she hadn’t felt like jumping anymore. It hurt too much.

Lance scrapped his vegetables into a large bowl of hay, and started to walk out of his kitchen. Judy held her arms up to him and crooned, “Laaaaannnccceee… Carry me?!”

He looked down at her and just shook his head, “I swear, rabbit! You are so helpless!” He set his bowl aside, and gently picked her up to cradle her in the nook of his elbow. Fetching the bowl with his free hand, he wandered into the living room, and sat down on his oversized couch to watch a martial arts movie with her.
Judy smiled to herself as he adjusted himself. He was always so gentle with her, like she was some little pet of his that he had to take care off. That was the truth of her relationship with him. Intellectually, they were the best of friends, united in the expression of their professed lively hoods, a love of martial arts, motorcycles, and really bad movies. But physical affection between the two mammals was difficult, and sex down right impossible. She was simply too small, and he too large.

Other mammals in the industry had assumed that the two had figured out a way bang each other silly, but was just fantasy on their parts. The truth was far simpler. After a long day on set, the last thing either of them wanted from the other was sex. They both just wanted somebody to come home to, somebody to talk to, somebody to have a quiet dinner with.

Judy still needed more, but it wasn’t in Lance’s capacity to give her what she desired, and it was still too soon after her break up with Skye for her to consider adding yet another fox into her life. She liked foxes physically, especially their predatory nature, their economy of movement, and the fact that while they were large enough to make her feel small and safe, they were still small enough that she could comfortably share affections with them, both publicly and privately.

But emotionally, her heart wasn’t ready for that commitment just yet. Maybe someday, but not right now. Now, she just snuggled down with Lance, snacked off his bowl of goodies, and laughed at the corny movie dialog with her best friend, before finally succumbing to the allure of his warmth and the drag of her exhaustion as slumber took her away.

At Mama Wilde’s Church in Zootopia

Nick stared at his reflection in the mirror as he struggled with the basic task of fastening his bowtie to the collar of his tuxedo. Not only was the bow backwards in the mirror, the image was a bit blurry, and his two sets of fingers didn’t quite want to cooperate with their opposite numbers. It was all rather frustrating.

It must be the pre-wedding nerves.

Or maybe it was all the alcohol they had consumed last night. Finnick had taken them to this new strip club that the little fox had found over in the Meadowland for Nick’s bachelor party, his last hurrah before putting on the old ball-n-chain forever. As he squinted at his reflection, he had to wonder if everything that had happened last night had been Finnick’s idea of revenge. Revenge for not picking the diminutive fox as Nick’s Best Male. Finnick had sworn it didn’t matter to him at all.
that Nick had asked Wolfard to do the task, but he still had this little evil gleam in his eye after
Nick had promised him that he could plan the bachelor party instead.

Ugh… This was hopeless. He was so not ready for this wedding. Or marriage. Who would have
thought that he would be getting married at 30? He was an old bachelor! Dedicated to the free
pursuit of vixens at every corner! Yeah right, he thought, who am I kidding here? Miki’s had me by
the short lease for thirteen years. The bigger question is why I didn’t do this sooner? Or why she
waited for him?

That was probably the biggest mystery in Nick’s life right now. That, and where the hell Wolfard
was with his painkillers. His head was splitting open right now.

There was a knock on the dressing room door. He turned his head and called out, “Come!”

Wolfard open the door and snuck in, “Hey, there little fox, how ya doing?”

“Well, old wolf, my head is killing me, everything is blurry, and I’m about to tie this fucking thing
into a knot and leave it like that. I’ll just cut it off tonight.” Nick snarled at the mirror.

“Here, let me.” He gently turned his partner around, and handed him a couple of small pills and a
steaming cup. He reached down, and deftly undid the mess that Nick had made of his bowtie.

Nick tried to focus on the pills, but he couldn’t tell anything but their color. “What’s this?” He ask
his attentive Best Male.

“Carprofen for your headache, and the tea is Chamomile and Willow Bark.” He answered as he
smoothed out the wrinkled tie, and starting tying it correctly. He could see just fine, most because
Finnick wasn’t interested in getting him drunk last night. Just Nick.

“Not Coffee?” Nick had been hoping for a taste of the forbidden bean as he threw the pills into his
mouth and washed them down with a swig of scalding herbal tea.

Wolfard just snorted, “You want to have a heart attack at the alter? That would please Miki to no
end, I’m sure, having to do CPR on your sorry ass on her wedding day!” He observed as he
finished Nick’s bow tie and smoothed it flat, “There. All better.”
“Her wedding day? What about me? It’s my wedding too.” Nick protested.

A strange expression came across Wolfard’s face and muzzle. “Sorry, Nick.” He softly apologized. He stood back.

No way, not today. Nick stepped forward and laid his paw on Wolfard’s crossed paws. “I’m sorry too.” He should have been more sensitive, and realized the emotions that this was bringing to the fore for the wolf. “I shouldn’t have asked you to do this.” Nick gestured out toward the chapel.

“It’s okay, Nick. It’s no big deal, really. It was a long ago.” Wolfard shook his head as he awkwardly patted Nick’s smaller paw.

“No so long ago that it doesn’t still hurt.” Nick gripped Wolfard’s paw.

When he had first met Wolfard seven years ago, he had just been assigned to the Cliffside/Horizons case by Bogo. Wolfard had been partnered with him on a temporary basis while his female partner was out on maternity leave. Nick quickly learned that she was Wolfard partner in every sense of the word, since she was on maternity leave because she was carrying Wolfard’s pup.

She had been a gorgeous female timberwolf, all black, save for a single white patch on her forehead in the shape a four pointed star. Wolfard like to call her ‘Starlight’, and she was his whole world. They had been on the force together for four years, and saved each other’s life at least twice, from what Nick had discovered talking to other ZPD officers. They had been bound, body, blood and soul. Soul mates.

Nick didn’t quite know what that meant, at least for him. He really didn’t think his relationship with Miki qualified as that. They might have had that magic in the beginning, when they first met, but they had been just teenagers, living dangerously, where everything felt like magic. But after thirteen years of dating the same mammal, you were left with very little illusions about the strengths and weaknesses of your partner.

Nick stared at the sad face on his partner, and tried to grapple with the alien concept that someone was truly meant for you. That they were the perfect complement for you in every regard. Maybe that had been how his Mother felt about his dead Father, since she had never remarried. He didn’t know. Maybe he never would. He doubted that he would ever be that lucky to met her, who ever she was. But Wolfard had, and the loss of her had torn his soul in two.
Starlight had died in the most mundane of ways for a Zootopian mammal, not even a month into her maternity leave. She had been clothes shopping for the kit in Tundra Town, and had been stopped at a stoplight, waiting to turn. A large delivery truck had been coming down the hill to her left was going a little too fast, and when he tried to slow down for the light, his tires broke traction, and he careened into the side of her car at thirty miles an hour. She never even saw him coming.

She was crushed instantly.

It took the responding fire rescue team an hour to extract her and her pup from the wreckage caught under the truck, but by then it was too late. She had died there, her pup joining her on the next journey.

Nick had driven Wolfard to the Tundra Town central hospital, having been alerted by Dispatch as to the accident. The cruelest of irony had been that Wolfard had been planning on asking her to marry him, working up the nerve to ask the mother of his pup to say yes. Nick and Finnick had even helped Wolfard in picking out the ring, which the wolf had taken to carrying around in his breast pocket in a little velvet bag, but he never got the chance.

Captain Bogo had been waiting at the hospital for them to arrive, and he had taken Wolfard back to say his last goodbyes to her, leaving Nick standing alone with his thoughts in the waiting room. He had only been there for few minutes before Finnick came running in, followed by his cat co-worker, Hugo. Finnick had been talking to him, trying to break through his shock, when he noticed Hugo had been staring at him the most particular fashion.

Hugo had pulled up a stool next to the fox, gotten up on it, and wrapped him in a bear hug. He held the fox like that for a couple of moments before releasing him, and then held him at arms length. Nick would always remember what he had said, even if he didn’t understand why.

“Nicolas, you have been touched by death once more, and you will be touch by death again. Should you ever want to talk about it, I will always be willing to listen.” Hugo had then done this gesture, where he pointed to his own eyes, then laid his paw on his own heart, before reaching across and laying that paw on Nick’s heart. “Always.” He had said, before climbing down.

Nick hadn’t understood why the cat had done that. He hadn’t known Starlight all that long, less than a month, and he was more concerned about Wolfard than himself. Plus, he was sure the little feline didn’t like him, so he didn’t understand the offer at the time. But the little gesture had stilled his agitation, and he was able to sit down next to Finnick and talk.
As he now stared up his larger partner, dressed an identical black tux, he thought about that gesture. Looking down the paw holding his tea, he set the cup down on dresser. He pointed to his eyes, then laid his paw over his heart, and then reached across to lay it over the larger canine’s heart. As his paw met the jacket, and pressed inward toward Wolfard’s chest, he felt something under the palm of his paw. A little circular object held in a little cloth back.

Some pains never heal, no matter how much time goes by.

“Hey,” He spoke softly to the melancholy wolf, “I would have liked to have her here today too. She would have been so supportive of Miki. And your pup too.” Nick smiled to break the dark mood, “That way Finnick wouldn’t have to be the combination ring bearer and the flower petal pup.”

Wolfard gasped out a laugh, “Ahh Yeah.” He agreed.

“ Speaking of ring bearer,” Nick observed as he took his paws back, “Where are they?” The rings were the last things he needed to lose today.

Wolfard smiled down at him, “I gave them Cheryl. I figured she was the most sober one here today.”

Nick nodded, “Yeah, she the responsible one of the this bunch, now that she’s got her doctorate.” Nick turned back to the dresser and grabbed his now cooled tea. He quaffed it down as quickly as possible before tossing the empty cup in the trash. He patted his friend on the arm, “Come on, buddy. Let’s get this party started!”

He walked out of the dressing room.

Nick stood on the dais in the front of the chapel, with Wolfard at his back, holding him upright. He nervously waited as the chapel began to fill with friends and family. Well, not a lot of family, he knew. He was an only child with limited cousins on his mother’s side, and knew nothing about the relations on his father’s side. He was sure there were other Wilde’s out there, it’s just that he’s never met them. Miki only had her parents and her two younger siblings in the entire country for family, with most of her other relatives still living back in the Sunrise Islands far to the west.

I feel queasy...
No, his family was the ZPD, his brothers and sisters on the force. Quite a few officers had come down for this wedding, some coming to wish him well, and some others just coming for the free cake and champagne. Officer Clawhauser was running around with his camera taking wedding pictures left and right, and mostly making a nuisance of himself. But he was so cheerful about it that nobody stayed annoyed with the cat for long.

_I hope I don’t puke..._

Wolfard nudged him, “Check out Finnick.”, he said, motioning with his muzzle down the aisle.

Nick looked up nervously and what he saw made him groan, “He didn’t!?”

“Yup, he did.” Wolfard assured him, “He might be even more pissed at you than you ever realized.” The wolf chuckled.

Finnick was marching down the center aisle, dressed in a pure white leisure suit with a sky blue shirt and a large gold medallion hanging from his neck. Mincing alongside him on impossibly long legs was the tallest female wolf Nick had ever seen, fully a foot and a half taller than Wolfard. Her red fur darkened to black socks on her paws and a black ruff of head fur wrapped around behind her head. She was wearing a red sequin tube dress that was too short for anything except a dance club, and far, far too short for a wedding. They stopped and found a couple of seats on the left side of the aisle.

“Is it her?” He asked Wolfard, hoping that his hang-over was fucking with his vision, and that she wasn’t who he thought she was.

“Yup!” The wolf gleefully agreed, “It’s the same really tall one who was giving you all those lap dances last night, the ones that Finnick kept paying for!”

Nick groaned. _Oh, Finnick, buddy, why you have to do that? Why? What prompted you on God’s Great Green Earth to bring a stripper as a date to my wedding? Miki is going to have an absolute wild eyed fit when she finds out!_

Wolfard clapped him on the shoulder, “Cheer up, kit! It’s gonna be a memorable day!”

Yeah, the same way an elephant riot was memorable. _God, I hope Finnick doesn’t embarrass me_
during the toasts later. Nick held out little hope for that.

I really am going to puke…

The organist started to play music, and this was the cue for the rest of the guests that were standing outside talking to take their seats, ZPD cops on the left, and the medical professionals on the right. Captain Bogo also arrived, and sat in the back, staring at Nick. Oh, my God, he’s here, and he’s glowering at me. Huh. That’s weirdly comforting. Nick smiled.

What would have been even more comforting was if he had been allowed to wear his uniform for this ceremony, but Miki had put her foot down. She was marrying Nick, her long time boyfriend, not Officer Wilde the cop. She had sarcastically suggested that if he wanted to wear his uniform to this, did he think she should come in her scrubs? Well, actually he hadn’t seen any problem with that idea. Why shouldn’t they be comfortable at their wedding? It had been the wrong answer, he quickly learned, one of many he would eventually get wrong in this whole process.

Luckily, his request that Cheryl be one of his grooms-mammals had been taken without a fuss, as long as Miki’s youngest brother took the other grooms-mammal duty. Nick watched as the female coyote was doing her duty of escorting the mother of the bride down the aisle, and he had to say to himself that she did look absolutely smashing in a tux. She seated the older vixen, and motioned Miki’s father to join her. Once he sat down, she turned toward Nick and Wolfard, walking to join them on the dais. She pulled a small velvet bag from her pocket and handed it to Wolfard, returning the rings to him, before turning to stand next to the wolf.

Distracted by that, Nick missed the bride’s maids slowly climbing up on the opposite side of the dais from him. They were climbing slowly because they were all wearing identical pink kimonos with cherry blossoms on them. Unlike Miki’s younger sister who took the maid of honor position, the other mammals were close friends of Miki from nursing school, and they were unused to moving in the tight clothing.

Nick was absolutely relieved when they managed to get to their positions without tripping and bashing their muzzles in. He hadn’t vomited into the flower arrangements, Wolfard wasn’t drunk, and Cheryl hadn’t lost the rings, so maybe, just maybe, they were all going to get through this alive. The only thing they were missing at this point in the party was the bride.

God, I hope she isn't puking!

The organist paused for a moment, a moment that quickly stretched to infinity in Nick’s stress addled brain, before starting the bride’s overture. The guests quickly stood and faced toward the
doors at the head of the aisle. The ushers, both ZPD rookies in formal dress, opened the doors, and what Nick saw took his breath away.

Miki stood at the entrance, escorted by her paternal grandfather, who had flown all the way from the Sunrise Islands for this wedding, and while he was dressed in a black tuxedo, she was wearing the most elaborate kimono that Nick had ever seen. It was made from what appeared to be several pure white robes layered one over the other with little tassels hang down from the collars, and covering her head there was a large round headpiece that look for all the world like a laundry bag to him, only made from silk. Her grandfather started to walk her down the aisle slowly towards the dais.

Cheryl leaned over to whisper in his ear, “It’s called a shiromuku, a traditional Sunrise Island wedding dress. It was her grandmother’s wedding dress.”

Nick could only nod, as he was dumbfounded by what he saw. She was beautiful, his lady in white, slowly walking down the aisle. She had been so right to make him wait for this.

After what seemed to him to be an eternity, she was suddenly in front of him, climbing up the steps to join him in front of everyone else. He held out his paw to help her up, wonder etched on his face. She took his paw and held fast, smiling up at him in her quietly intense fashion, while he grinned back at her like a dope.

His mother’s pastor, a short rotund raccoon came up and lead the congregation in a prayer. Miki dropped her eyes, breaking her hold on him for a moment, and for a moment he panicked, struck by a sense of wrongness to what was happening, but he couldn’t put a claw on it.

He did a quick mental check of the old saying, *Something old, something new. That would be Miki’s kimono, and the rings were brand new. Something borrowed, something blue. The tux is rented, and Wolfard had given him a blue carnation for his lapel, so he was covered there. What am I missing?*

He stole a glance out over the audience, checking to see that everyone was where they should be. His mom was here, as were Miki’s parents and her grandfather. Bogo was in the back, and Clawhauser was next to him. He looked back at Finnick and found him in the lap of the maned wolf, held there by her clasped paws. He smiled a quick smile at that, before sweeping his eyes back up. There, in the back next to two white hares, a small gold feline head. Even Hugo was here, seated in among the nurses, which made sense since he was a doctor.

No, everybody was where they were supposed to be. But as his eyes swept back down the aisle, his
gaze stopped down at the very front, at the empty space between the two rows. It was empty, and he couldn’t understand why that disturbed him. Ever since his assault and hospitalization a year ago, he had been prone to moments of disquiet, a sense that something was missing from his life, but what was missing he could never put a claw to.

He didn’t know if it was PTSD, or maybe even brain damage from his concussion. He didn’t even known how to describe the odd sensation to the department shrink when he had talked to her about it, other than he felt an empty space beside him that he could not describe. She had nodded wisely, said something profound, and cleared him for active duty anyway.

As he stood on top of the dais, holding on to Miki’s paws, listening to the pastor call upon the benedictions of the Divine, he was struck with the sense that someone was missing, and that he should know who they were. They needed to be here with him on this most important day of his life. They needed to be here to share this with him. But they weren’t, and he didn’t know who they were.

All he felt, staring at the empty space, was a sense of dancing gay laughter, and two words.

...dumb fox...

Ain’t that the truth, he thought. He turned his gaze back to Miki, to his mate, to his future. She would be his, and he would be hers. They would be one, together, and he would finally be complete.

He hoped that completion would still the echos of emptiness within his soul.

Chapter End Notes

There was going to be another scene here, dealing with Skye and the death of her mom. But while it was powerful, there was no way to make it fit with the other two scenes, so it got cut. It will have to be dealt with later.
Chapter Summary

Revelations, Part I: Hugo wakes up with Judy still in his arms. He tries to groom her, but finds her not to his taste. He still makes an interesting discovery. While he does, Judy dreams a strange dream. Finnick calls, and Hugo talks to him about Skye, Cheryl, and the power of wise grandmothers.

Chapter Notes

Revelations has been split into three parts due to length. I am sorry to do this, but the chapter was just too long, and I'm not going to post a 12k beast again. I will be posting the rest of it across this week. There won't be any flashbacks in between these three parts, as I don't want to muck up the flashback order.

Current Day: Thursday Morning In The Snowy Hills.

Hugo...

Hugo awoke with a start.

The morning sunrise blazed through his bay window, filling his living room with golden light. He looked around the bright living room for a moment, as he was sure he had heard someone calling his name. Nothing. No sounds, except for the sound of his own breathing, and the soft chattering of a rabbit’s teeth. Hugo looked down at his little ward, and watched her mumble in her sleep, held to his chest by his own paws. She had made that same sound after had found her Monday night and she had fallen asleep on his chest.

He really was going to have to look information on what happy bunnies do, their body language and behaviors, as he only knew how to calm anxious ones down. Plainly this conejita was happy. *Huh, this might be a dream*, he thought, *I searched for so very long for her, never finding her and yet here she is, sleeping peacefully in my grasp. I want her here, I want to keep her here, just like this. Warm. Safe. No more slow withering death, lost and alone in a terrible world, for my little conejita.*

He had waited so very long for this, and her proximity was driving him crazy. He had held off for
two days, but he could no longer delay. She was here, so very near to him, and he was so ecstatic to have her right here. He needed to do this. It couldn’t hurt, and if he was very, very gentle, she wouldn’t even wake.

He desperately needed to groom her.

He nuzzled the top of her head with his nose, and tentatively slid out his tongue, licking it along the top of her scalp from one brow to the opposite ear. It was so easily accomplished, so very gently done. He didn’t want to wake her, he didn’t want to scare her. As he drew his head back, to try another lick, he moistened his tongue, and as he did so he was struck by a most peculiar taste. He worked his tongue in his mouth, Judy’s head fur momentarily forgotten, as he tried to work out what the new taste was.

Was it her? Was this her taste? No, this was an aftertaste of something, but not of rabbit. Too late he realized what it was, the aftertaste building from unknown, to unpleasant, to awful, and finally to outright horrid. He tried to spit it out, but it was stuck, glued, to his tongue. Oh, how he had forgotten this particular taste, but he knew it still the same. It was not something a cat should ever forget. He needed a drink, no gargle, something, anything, to wash the terrible taste of medicated anti-mange body wash off of his tongue.

He tried wiping his tongue with his paw pads, but that just seemed to move the taste around on his tongue.Qué asco! He thought to himself, Well, I am sorry Judy, but there will be no grooming for you today. He reached up with his right paw, and smoothed out her head fur where he had licked, trying to get the ruffled fur to lay flat again. Her fur was looking much better now as he felt the return of the oils to her skin. He also noticed that her fur wasn’t a uniform gray, but a mixture of white, black, and dozens of different gray hair shades scattered across her scalp. She also had what looked like very small uniform spots of white in rows down her scalp, like the spots on a deer fawn. Interesting. I didn’t know rabbits could be spotted. I wonder why I didn’t see them earlier on Monday? Her fur must have been too wet, and they blended in.

As he stoked down along the row of spots, Judy moved inside his grasp. Ticklish? He wondered, but she quickly settled back down. Wait, back up. That’s odd. In stoking the spot, his finger pad found a small divot in her skull, a shallow hole in the bone. He examined the spot with his eyes, but he saw no visible scar on the surface of her scalp. No, there is definitely an impression here, he thought as he felt with his pad. 3-4 millimeters across, maybe a millimeter deep? The bone has filled back in, and it’s well healed now. The white hairs might be a reaction of the trauma the scalp must have suffered. Except... He examined a couple more of the spots. They too had divots at their base, well healed and without visible scars.

The spots weren’t obvious to the naked eye, being so small, and he would never have noticed them had he not tried to groom her. Multiple rows of even divots like that weren’t accidental or even some thing she might have developed over time. She must have had neurosurgery, and those divots
were the entry points. Cancer treatment? No, there are too many of them, and they’re evenly spaced. An experimental epilepsy treatment, maybe? But again, why were there so many divots? He was going to have to ask Emmanuel. The muskrat knew a lot more about neurosurgery options than Hugo did. He would recognize this procedure, and maybe why a rabbit would need to have it done. Maybe then he could ask Judy for details.

His phone started to vibrate and chirp in his coat pocket, seeking a slice of his attention in his time of sensory crisis. Freeing up his left paw from Judy’s back, he reached down to his left side and pulled it out. Finnick. Why are you calling me so early? He thumbed it on, “Hello?” he whispered.

“Yo Cat! What’s wrong? Why the hell are you Whispering?” Finnick demanded to know from his side of the phone.

“Judy is still sleeping, and I don’t want to wake her.” Hugo tried to explain.

“Oh Ho! Taking the rabbit to bed, are we now? Ain’t that a little fast, Cat? Maybe you should take her out to dinner first, maybe a movie afterwards?” The little fox snarkily suggested.

Hugo groaned internally. It was far too early in the morning for Finnick’s lewd suggestions. “No,” He corrected the little fox, “We crashed out on the couch, and never made it to bed. Hang on, I need to get to my office so I can talk.” He set the phone down on the couch arm, and turned to lay Judy down on the couch cushions. As he did so he noticed that her halter top was missing, and that his shirt was unbuttoned to his belt. When did that happen? He wondered, Ah! She must have gotten cold in the night and tried to snuggle in, since I tossed her blanket away.

Realizing that she didn’t have a blanket to cover up with, he pulled his shirt and coat off and laid them across her curled up form. Picking up his phone, he retreated silently to his office, and partially closed the door.

“Hugo… Where are you, Kitty?” Judy called out, as she set her paper bag of groceries down on the counter top. She hung her keys on the key rack next to the refrigerator, and pulled took off her overcoat to hang next to the door, leaving her standing there in her tee-shirt and blue jeans. Pulling off her Doc Martins boots, she set them on the shoe tray to dry and slipped into her gray fuzzy rabbit slippers, the bells on the tips of the ears jingling merrily as she walked.

“Hugo… I’ve got your favorite Whiskas! Turkey and bacon! C’mon kitty…” She walked back into
her bedroom, and there she found her orange tabby, curled up in among all of her fox stuffies. “There you, you silly cat! Didn’t you hear me calling you?” She flopped down next to him, her long pale hair floating down to fall across his body. She giggled as he attacked her hair with his paws and grabbed a mouthful. His eyes got big and he spit the hair back out. He stared accusingly at her as he quickly started to composure wash his paws.

“Sorry, kitty. Looks like you don’t like my shampoo, do you?” She reached across the bed to grab him with her delicate hand, and drew him to her chest. She stroked him, and he rewarded her with the start of a rumbling purr, but he got interrupted. He jerked, and quickly sat back up, his head turning to the wall, his ears swiveling back and forth.

Judy looked at the same wall, and sighed. She cupped her hand to the side of her head around her ear and listened. She put her hand back down to her cat, and started to stroke down his back. “It’s just Chuck and Frank, arguing again.” She told him, “The nice Lakoda lady down the hall, Cheryl, said that I could hear them because the walls were very thin here. She must be right, because it’s getting easier and easier to hear them these days. I swear the walls that separate me from everybody else are getting thinner every day. Soon there won’t be any walls, and I’ll just be sitting in the middle.”

“It’s so noisy. Hugo. It’s so noisy, I can’t even hear myself think anymore. What will I do when I can’t shut out the noise anymore?” She started to cry these little hiccuping sobs. Hugo crawled up to her, butting his head into her throat, his purr rumbling in her ear and resonating through her skull, drowning out the shouting.

“Thank you, thank you, little kitty.” She hugged him to her chest.

A knock at the door drew her back, and she looked up. The knock sounded again, so she rocked her way out of bed, dragging Hugo with her. She hurried to the door, her cat clutched to her chest. She opened the door and stopped with a gasp as she saw who waited for her.

Three sheep stood outside her door, sheep standing on their rear legs, dressed in funny clothes. The two outer sheep looked like rams, with large curling horns, dressed in blue police officer uniforms. They flanked a much smaller ewe in the middle. She was dressed in a dark coat and skirt, with red tortoise-shell glasses perched on her little muzzle. She looked up at Judy and smiled.

“Hello, Judy!”

Judy froze, as Hugo screamed in her arms in recognition and launched himself at the sheep.
Hugo sat down in his office chair and scratched under his chest fur with his claws as he yawn. He held the phone up to his ear with the other paw as he spoke, “Okay, I’m in my office now. What do you need?” he asked the fox.

“You told me to call you, Cat, remember?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m still waking up here… The vixen, yes?”

*Ohhh sleep*… Finnick wished he could get some sleep. But between the three separate females wanting to talk to him till all hours yesterday, he didn’t get all that much sleep. He sitting in his living room, sucking down Cheryl’s hang over tea blend, hoping that it could cut through his headache.

“Wake you, Cat? You should be so lucky to get some sleep. I’ve been up most the night because I have had three females try to talk my ears off all night long, and Skye was just one of them. Apparently she’s Judy’s ex-girlfriend.”

“Marilyn stated so last night. How did they break up?”

“Amicably, actually; they didn’t want to. Skye had even invited Judy to live with her. But Skye’s mom got really sick with late stage ovarian cancer, and she went north to take care of her.”

“Wait a minute… Was this before or after I went out there to meet Mork?”

“Before, I take it. It wasn’t so much as a breakup as it was a pause in their relationship. There seems to have been some expectation, at least on Skye’s part, that they would get back together or something.” Fennick paused for a moment, lost in thought, “But her mom kinda lingered for two years before finally passing away, and by that point they had lost touch.”

“Did they have a falling out over relationship expectations?”
“No! Her asshole dad, which are her words by the way, was confiscating their letters to each other. Apparently he didn’t approve of the whole female-on-female thing. So by the time Skye got back to Gateway, Judy was long gone.”

“Down in Angels City, with a new name and a new look.”

“Yuppers. Anyway, Skye bounced around the country for a while, doing odd jobs and working at other shops, before coming back here a couple of years ago and setting up shop with her uncle’s automotive repair business. Apparently her brother also works for him; it’s a family affair sort of business. She does classic motorcycle restorations, which is how Marilyn ran into her.”

“As for the whole rabbit thing, at some point the two were out dancing at the club, and Skye got kinda drunk and weepy, and she blurted out this thing she apparently has for rabbits. It turned into this whole running joke for us, and so when you dumped Judy on my ass, I figured I could play a little with you two, and introduce her to Judy, maybe freak the rabbit out a bit.”

“Things not work out the way you expected, Finnick?”

“Oh no… It never does, and you’d think I’d learn. Mess with the lesbians, and they will step all over you.”

“I thought you liked that sort of thing?”

“Naw, getting stepped on still hurts. Yeah… I gathered from reading between the lines that Skye still considers Judy to be her mate, even after all these years. I think that’s why she reacted to you that way last night. You know how possessive foxes can get with their mates.” Finnick drawled.

“Hey Amigo, I only borrow your girlfriend occasionally, and even then I’m only interested in the strength of her arms. You can keep the rest of her.”

“Pervert!”

“What? Who are you calling a pervert, Senior Zorro? You’re more submissive that I am.”

“Yeah well, I can’t do the whole punching bag thing. So it’s good for my hide that you’re around whenever she gets pissed off and needs to blow off some steam, I will grudgingly admit that.
Sometimes it’s good to share the love, Cat.”

“How did we end up talking about kink again? I thought we were talking about Skye and Judy.” Sometimes it was impossible to keep the little fox on track, Hugo groused.

“How do think, Cat? We be talking about lesbians, violence, domination, pain, so of course we’re gonna talk about kink. Oh, and let’s not forget the whole extreme porn thing Judy used to do, ya know. That’s one worldly rabbit ya got there, Hugo. She’s got the look, ya know?”

“Look, what look?” Hugo was now confused.

“The way she looks at you? You don’t catch that? Seriously? You show up at my office with her fur all over your clothes, and you don’t catch that she wants to be inside them? It was obvious to me!”

“Uh… No…”

“How do you miss that, Cat? She couldn’t shut up yesterday about you and your muscles, and the only reason she hasn’t jumped you yet is cause she thinks you’ve got spikes on the end of your dick!”

“Um, I don’t…”

“Yeah, ya don’t. I know that. You know that. She don’t. And what do you think is gonna happen when the rabbit figures that out? Oh, your clothes won’t stand a chance in hell. And you might pretend that ain’t your relationship right now, but I know exactly what happens to you when a female uses that commanding tone on you! Not as submissive as me, my ass.” Finnick snorted.

Ooohhh… mierda… Is that why Judy unbuttoned my shirt last night? Have I been missing… Oh. Recognition finally clicked.

“Um… Finnick, I don’t know this, but I figure you might know this, but do female rabbits have a ‘happy’ smell?”
“Do they what?? A Happy Smell?” Comprehension dawned on Finnick, “BWHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!” He lost it laughing on the other end.

Hugo listened to the phone, thinking, *I’m not going to even mention about what happened last night, with Judy taking off my shirt, because Finnick would never let me live it down. He would never, ever shut up!*

Finnick fought for breath, “Hehehehe… Yeah, no, Cat. They chatter their teeth when they’re happy, but I don’t think they have a specific scent. Why, does she smell ‘Happy’ to you when she’s all over ya?” He grinned evilly on the other end.

“...Yes...” Hugo admitted grudgingly.

“Yeah… You’re doomed, Cat. She’s got her eye on you, and she knows what she wants.”

“That might be so, but even if she got my pants off, it’s not going to do her any good. I’m sorry, but I have almost zero interest in sex with any mammal.” Hugo just shook his head.

“What? When did this happen? You’ve had girlfriends, Cat! I know you have! I’ve met them! What, it was that the tree pangolin, and before that it was that crazy honey badger, what was her name?”

“Madge.”

“Yeah, that’s her! I’ve watched you be all lovey-dovey with them! You not have sex with them?” Finnick couldn’t believe it.

“Pretty much never. Yes, I like the romance, and the kissing, and all that. I want what my parents share, but the sex not so much. I figure that it is because of my sterility and my messed up nervous system, but I have always had very little interest in sex or sexual attraction. Porn does nothing for me. Strip clubs don’t interest me. And apparently I completely miss it when females are throwing themselves at me.” Hugo rubbed his brows. How did this conversation go so wrong?

“Dude, like what the hell? I’ve known you for, what? Thirteen years? And this has never come up?”
“I don’t advertise it, okay? Being a virile male is part of my Amazonia culture, and once I figured out that I just wasn’t interested in females, or males for that matter, that way, I just hid it. Sure, I like pain, and I got in lots of fights during my gang battles, but sexual pleasure not so much. I like females just fine, just not that way.” Hugo sighed, “I didn’t even start dating until after medical school, once I found out there was even something like BDSM available to me.”

“I’m sorry dude. You should have told me a long time ago. I would have given you a whole lot less shit about it all.”

“Like I said, I don’t advertise. Being sexual is all tied up with being a male predator, even here in liberal Zootopia, and most mammals look at my body and assume that I because I look the way that I do, I must be very sexual active. I’m not. I just work out because I like being strong, and it keeps me healthy.”

“Yeah, I hear you, dude. I know all about Zootopian society thinking your maleness is tied to your physical size.” Finnick sympathized with the Cat. “You’re gonna need to talk to the rabbit, though, and get her straightened out. The sooner, the better, I think.” He counseled him.

“I will.” Hugo promised him.

“Well, at least there’s a back up plan if the rabbit gets too horny on you. I’m fairly certain I know a vixen that would take her off of your paws for a spell.” Finnick snickered.

“Oh, is Skye now Judy’s consultation prize, is that what you are insinuating? I’m not sure what either of them would think of that.” Finnick humor was crass, but accurate. “Wait a minute… You said three females. Marilyn and Skye were there, and I had Judy, so who else were you talking to last night?”

Ah Shit… Hugo, you would tumble to that, wouldn’t you? Well, Finnick, ya got it to do…

“You know my friend Cheryl Silverheels, right?”

“The coyote professor, yes? Yeah, I worked with her during the Night-howler crisis, because Nick brought her onboard. I don’t know her socially.”
“Because of her wife?”

“In part, but I could definitely sympathize with Catherine’s loss. No, it’s more a matter of philosophical disagreements on the nature of sentiency. We tended to get into arguments about the root of mammal intelligence during our time together. I understand she’s also Nick’s friend, so I supposed that’s also why I don’t interact with her all that much.”

“Yeah, speaking of Nick and not interacting, what’s it gonna take to get you two talking? Uncle Finnick’s kinda tired of keeping the two of you separated in his social life, especially for the past three years; makes planning parties a drag, ya know?” Finnick dangled the question.

“Honestly, Finnick, it’s mostly on him, I suppose. I despise his tough cop demeanor, and I have little interest in his ZPD horror stories, no matter how funny he finds them. Cops equal corruption in my head, and I know that’s a limitation of my cultural upbringing, but I don’t trust the badge. But, still, I’d be interested in what he’s like outside of the ZPD, what his family is like. He is your friend, and since you asked I will try to get along with him.” Hugo paused for a moment.

“Actually, I might not have a choice in avoiding Nick. The new head of the Night-howler task force has ordered Bogo to get Nick to brief me fully on the case. The new agent doesn’t understand the medical/neurological stuff, and wants me to bring him up to speed on that side while he works the financials.”


Ah… meirda… “Yes. The goat was in the middle of Night-howler induced savage fugue when he attacked the poor Sergeant. We don’t quite understand how he got intoxicated, and since he attacked an officer the ZPD got called in.”

“Sooo a new agent, eh?” Good! Finnick thought. Now he doesn’t have to tell the Cat anything! Nor did he have to yell at the fox, although he might still push him to be nice about it.

“Yes, he’s an agent of the Commonwealth, by the name of Chi Daman. Apparently Nick has been snowballing him with information, and Agent Daman wants a mammal to put it in a form he can understand.”

“And they chose you, Cat? They must be desperate, down at the ZPD.”
Hugo snorted, “Funny, little fox. And you’re stalling. What’s going on with Cheryl that you don’t want to talk about, Finnick?” Hugo asked politely.

_Busted! Shit._ “Okay, I know this is gonna sound weird, but it’s all connected, I swear. Bare with me here, Cat. Judy said she found you in a Tundra Town on Monday night, a couple of blocks from the Central Square, right?”

Hugo frowned at his desk, “Um, it would be more correct to say that she stumbled into me. I had heard mumbling coming from an alley way and I went to investigate. That’s where I found her, soaking wet and shivering. She was pretty far gone from the hypothermia, delirious even. I’m not sure she ever even recognized me.”

_Trust Hugo to stick his nose in an alleyway looking to help a strange mammal,_ Finnick thought. “Was she close to death?”

“Oh, yes. She would have collapsed from fatigue in a matter of minutes, and after that she would have died from exposure, as her internal temperature had gotten too low. She was in shock, and mostly incoherent.”

“So, you think she would have died out there, in the snow?”

“Certainly… What are you leading up too, Finnick?” _They were supposed to be talking about Cheryl, not Judy… Oh… Diosa, he was dense today._ “This is about Cheryl, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Cat, it is. I know you don’t agree with all of her beliefs, but I want you to listen, okay.”

“If this is about the supernatural element of her rescue, you’re going to be the third mammal to bring this up.”

“Huh?” _Really, he’s not the first to figure it out? Who then?”_

“Emmanuel talked with me about it yesterday, and my Abuela on Monday evening, before I even found her.”
“What do you mean, before?” Finnick was stunned.

“I mean, that my Abuela sent me to find Judy.” There, he had said it. It sounded crazy, like that out in the open, but he was increasing convinced that none of this was by chance.

“The shamanist, right?”

“Yes. I believe she sent me on a Hunt, find the lost and the dying, and to guide them back to the land of the living.” Now he waited for his little friend to respond to that proclamation.

“Okay, then. That makes me feel a lot better. I thought I was going nuts, but it’s not just me then.”

“Finnick…” Hugo growled.

Okay, Okay! Cheryl has been having this dream every night for a month where she’s Clawhauser on patrol in Tundra Town, and she discovers a dead rabbit in the snow. A gray female rabbit, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was…”

“Judy.” Hugo finished for him.

“Yeah, Judy Hopps! She was convinced of this! And she kept having the dream, every night this past month, right up until Monday night, when it changed. Judy was no longer in the snow, right? She should have been there, but she wasn’t anymore. You know why?” He asked the cat.

“I had her.” Hugo breathed…

“Exactly…” Finnick concluded.

“Finnick, when I was leaving Tundra Town on Monday night, I drove past Clawhauser who was out in a patrol cruiser. He was driving toward the Central Square.” Hugo explained.

“Oh… Shit!” Finnick swore, “She was supposed to die there, and They were smacking Cheryl with the news, and she passed it on to me, and when I didn’t do anything with it, They got your grandma
to send you in. What the hell, Hugo? What’s going on? What is so special about this little rabbit?” Finnick demanded to know.

Hugo was struck with a thought, “She was marked for death, and Lord Jaguar himself has interceded on her behalf, but He has interceded in her death without petition, Finnick. No one petitioned to find her. I certainly didn’t petition to find her, and Abuela would have told me if there was a petition, I would think. No, nobody who loved this rabbit knew where she was or if she was dying. Nobody knew.” Hugo’s mind was racing to a conclusion.

“Finnick, this incredible.” Hugo was stunned to realize, “This hasn’t happened in living memory, I mean...” He ground to a halt.


Hugo struggled to explain it to the little fox, “Abuela used to tell me legends, legends of Death Priests and their Acolytes sent by Lord Jaguar himself to save a hero. I mean, she didn’t tell me of any where they were sent to save the villain. It might of happened, I suppose.”

“Except that there is nothing heroic about this rabbit! She’s a former porn queen, and now she some kinda crazy homeless mammal, right?” Finnick still couldn’t wrap his head around her.

“Yes, that is true, but in the legends that my Abuela taught me, the meeker the mammal, the greater the quest.”

“Ah… Shit… Marilyn said the same thing. She said that Judy was on some holy mission from the Espiritus Santos, and that it was our job to support her.”

Hugo mind halted with a click. The meeker the animal… Judy was anything but meek. She was damaged, yes, but meek no. “Our job to support her? Or is that our job as predators to support her?”


“She’s a small, weak, and sickly prey mammal. Yet she has surrounded herself with predators. She prefers the company of predators, Finnick. She is comfortable in their company. How many other rabbits do you know that can say the same?”
“Ohh...” Finnick breathed.

“Think, there’s me, a forest cat, you and Marilyn, a fenec fox and a maned wolf. Cheryl’s a coyote. She’s even taken a fox as a lover!”

Finnick’s mind quickly caught up. What about Nick? “Is there’s bound to be more predators involved?” He asked Hugo.

Hugo responded honestly, “I would think so. She’s going to need a lot of help, and lot of protection, if she to succeed with what she was sent to do.”

Finnick blurted out, “And what is that? I’ve been racking my brain, but everything is peaceful right now! I don’t get it!” What’s the connection with those two dead mammals, Bellwether and Latrans?

Hugo looked down at the floor. The answer was obvious in hindsight. “There is one mammal who does know.” He told the fox.

“Judy.”
Revelations Part 2:
Judy dreams of Bellwether, and it's not a pleasant dream. She wakes and goes in search of Hugo and more blankets. She's directed to his bedroom closet, and while she's there she makes some discoveries. Embarrassed, she seeks to know more about her host and rescuer. The irony is that he feels the same way about her.

Thursday Morning at Hugo's place in the Snowy Hills

“SKRRRREEEEE!!!!” Dawn Bellwether's savage shriek echoed down the hallway. Judy was already down on all fours, her stride fully extended and her ears laid flat against her skull as she pelted for the exit fire doors at the end of the hotel hallway. She slammed through them, and suddenly she was on a dark and dingy road on an island in the Muddy Swamp section of the Rainforest District.

“JUUUUuuuuudddddyyyyyy…” Dawn’s voice carried through the musty swamp fog. Judy cautiously hopped forward, her instincts screaming in her head to be wary. The fog rolled away suddenly, and Judy could see Dawn standing on the street corner curb, next to a storm drain. She was dressing in her blue cardigan, stained red and gray with her own blood and brains spilling out her shattered skull and down her crushed face. Her eyes were rolled back in their sockets and she moaned through her catastrophic jumble of crumpled jaw, missing teeth, and split tongue, “JUUUUuuuuudddddyyyyyy…”

The ewe held up a small silver cylindrical object at the end of her bloody paw. It was the night-howler antidote! Judy needed that! But as she dashed forward to grab it from the moaning ewe, Dawn let it slip through her paw and into the storm drain. Judy dived for it, but her reach came up short, and it tumbled down into the waters below.

“Nooo!” Judy reached through the storm drain gate, but her short rabbit arms couldn’t reach the auto-injector. She pulled her paws back to try a more direct approach, but she couldn’t grasp the grate to pulled it out because her paws were burning badly. She held them up to the light and stared at in horror as a tide of blue washed over them, flowing up her arms like quicksilver. She screamed!

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!………………………….”
Judy was left puffing and gasping, bent over in excruciating pain, as the waterfall of ultramarine toxin washed over her body towards her head, covering her completely until she was a statue in pure lapis lazuli stone. Her eyes snapped open to reveal only the pitch black of eternal night in a field of midnight blue fur.

She screeched and bolted into the bushes that lined the road, her call fading as she receded into the brush.

“SKKKrrrrrrreEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE………..”

Judy woke with a start, panting, her breathing rapid and strained. She lay on her side for only a moment, staring into the daylight lit room, before jerking her paws up to her face. She stared at them for a long while, as her breathing slowed and her heart stilled. Her paws were normal. There was no blue anywhere on them.

She was not Savage. Not now...

She shuddered, as waves of anxiety and stress slowly rolled down her slight frame. Oh, that was a bad one, she thought. She shivered, more from the after-quakes of terror than the cold, but it was cold under Hugo’s coat.

She looked at the black coat in puzzlement. Where is Hugo? He’s not in the coat. Where did he go?

She sat up, gathering the coat around her frame. As her ears perked up, she could hear Hugo speaking. Wait, did he just say my name? She hopped down off the couch, and wandered back through the kitchen, following the sound of Hugo’s voice.

She poked her head through a door and peeked in. It was Hugo’s office. On the left were shelves of large books, bindings thick and heavy. Scattered in among the books were pictures of Hugo and other mammals. Accepting awards, a lot of mountain climbing photos, and pictures of what looks like patients. On the other wall were embossed diplomas and certifications, gilded in gold, and set in dark teak frames.

Sitting in a high backed office chair in front of a large oak desk was Hugo. He was turned away
from her such that she could only see his muzzle and the side of his body. He leaned back comfortably in his chair as he chatted with who ever was on the other end. Her ears quivered as she recognized the voice on the other end. Finnick.

Hugo asked a question, “And when does the good Professor want to meet?” He paused as he listened, “Well today is out for me and her, and you say you have court Friday, so how about Sunday morning? I’m completely free then. That give you enough time, Counselor?” He smiled on the phone for a moment, and then stiffened. He turned his head fractionally in her direction. His chair slowly spun in her direction as he turned to face her.

He put the phone down on his furry chest as he greeted her amicably, “Good morning, conejita. Would you like some breakfast?”

She was puzzled for a moment. How did he know she was there? She thought she was being quiet, and he was talking on the phone, so did he hear her? His coat covered her, and should have masked her scent. What gave her away?

The moment lengthened, pregnant with purpose and poise as he awaited her answer. She snapped back once she realized this, “Sure, in a bit. That would be great.” She shivered under the intensity of his gaze, as if he expected something more from her, but she couldn’t fathom what it was.

She gestured at the coat, “Where are the spare blankets? I’m kinda cold.”

He pointed down the hall, “In the closet in the bedroom. Let me finish my call here, and I’ll get them for you.” he smiled at her.

It was a bit unnerving, that smile. Full of weight and irony. Judy backed away, “Sure. I can wait.” She turned and walked down toward the bedroom, leaving him to finish his call with Finnick.

She walked into his bedroom. This was one room in the house she hadn’t been in yet, mostly because she hadn’t been invited in. In her former profession, it was always polite to wait for the invitation, unless of course she was in a dominating mode with a more submissive client and then she would walk in like she owned the place.

Had he invited her to go in? Or did he just tell her to wait? She stopped as she looked around. The
bed was sized for mammals larger than just him, so he must either move around a lot in bed, or he’s had partners who were larger than him.

Partners. Partners? That’s what was missing here. As she looked around the room, she was struck by the sterility of it all. In one sense, it was all Hugo, tastefully decorated, with a large painting of a tropical river valley on the wall behind the bed, but fairly asuture otherwise. There was the obligatory dresser, with more photos on it, but nothing that indicated that somebody other than him had ever lived in this room.

She walked to the closet, opened the sliding doors, and stared into a pitch black well. Where’s the light switch? She turned around and spotted it’s small orange spark on the opposite wall. She flipped it, and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling lit the small space.

_Geeze, Hugo. Don’t you own anything other than black suits?_ She asked herself with a small laugh. She strolled into the enclosed space, running her paws along the coat arms. The scent of clean cotton, starched wool, and a faint hint of leather emanated from the hanging items. _No, wait, nestled in the back of the closet are other shirts, including one that…_

She stopped in shock, before reaching in and pulling a light green shirt out of the company of polos and tee-shirts. Her mind ground to a halt for a moment as a memory cascaded unbidden through her mind eye. She held the button down shirt up to the light with her paws, her mind reeling, _Why does Hugo have Nick’s green shirt? No, wait, it’s not. It’s the wrong size; it’s much too wide._

It wasn’t Nick’s shirt, but it was the same green palm leaf pattern he had worn when she had first met him, a lifetime ago. She held it up with her left paw as she traced her paw across it’s surface; it even felt the same as Nick’s old shirt.

Her muzzle lit with a wisp of a smile as she pondered that recognition. With her memory being as spotty as it was these days, it was funny to think that she could remember something as mundane as the weave of a shirt’s cloth under her finger tips. She ran her paw ran across the front of the shirt, stopping at the pocket as she felt the raised pattern of embroidered letters. She held the shirt up to the light and read the golden letters to herself, _Hugo, Bartender, Palms Casino and Resort._ _Huh. That’s funny. He must have been an employee there or something, except that I don’t remember this shirt ever being used by any of their bar staff when I was hanging out my escort shingle there._

“Hey there, conejita.” A quiet voice sounded behind her.

Her heart leap up into her throat as she spun around in a panic, Hugo’s coat and shirt sliding off her
back as they fell to the ground, the loss of that comfort causing her to clutch the shirt to herself as if it was some sort of shield against the threat of the unknown. Her brain skidded to a halt, her fight-or-flight reaction halted, as her senses recognized Hugo standing calmly in the doorway, dressed only in his black slacks from the night before, leaning to one side as his wide paw gripped the doorjamb. She stood there, her mouth gaping, her thoughts in turmoil as once again her anxiety and her libido had an immediate sparring match.

***We didn’t even hear him sneak up on us! He’s blocking the exit! We’re trapped!*** Her anxiety screamed at her while her libido moaned, ***That’s sooo not fair! He’s not even wearing a shirt! Just look at all those muscles!*** In the midst of that tumbling mental chaos, all that she manged to get out of her mouth was a slow, “Uhhh...”

“That doesn’t look like a blanket to me.” He smiled down at her shocked form. “I forgot to tell you that they’re on the upper shelf. Here, let me get them down for you.” He walked into the closet and turned to one side, reaching up to the shelf above her head. She crowded back up against the far wall of the closet as he loomed above her. He pulled a cloth stack off the shelf in his arms and turned to look down at her.

_Her ears are flushed?_ He wondered about that for a moment, before realizing that she’s probably embarrassed to be caught rifling through his clothing. He smiled at that, seeking to reassure her about that, but as he peered down at her over his pile of blankets at her, her ears dropped down behind her head and he caught a whiff of fear. Now that was a scent he commonly associated with rabbits during his interactions with them, but he didn’t understand why she of all rabbits would be afraid of him, that was until he realized that he was looming over her as she pressed her back against the wall. His mouth went to an “O” shape, and he quickly stepped back. _You should know better, Dr Wiedii!_ He admonished himself, _Encroaching into her personal space in such a threatening manner!_

He turned, and quickly left the closet, walking out into the bedroom. He needed to recover from his own embarrassment, and she probably needed a few moments to recover from hers. It truly never occurred to him to think that her flush may have had another source.

Judy was trying to recover, but certainly not from embarrassment. She was ashamed that she had reacted so badly to his presence, expressing both her fear and her arousal so visibly, each recursively compounding the effect of the other on her body language. She stood, breathing heavily with her back to the wall, trying to get herself under control. She looked down at the shirt she was holding, _I’ve got to hang this up and get out of here, or else he’s gonna come back looking for me, and then what will I do?_

But as she looked up, she was at a loss because she couldn’t remember where she had pulled it out from. Where should she put it? _Just hang it on the end, Judy!_ She pushed the shirts at the end away so that she could hang the shirt back up, but as she reached up toward the bar, she felt something
odd pressed under her paw, something stiff and rough. She turned look and realized with a start what it was. A grin broke across her muzzle as she ran her fingers down it’s length. I thought I smelled leather in here, her thoughts doing an 180 hairpin turn in her head, But this? Doctor Wiedii, I never! Well, the things you learn about some mammals...

It had been a long time since she had last seen a flogger of that magnitude. Cured crocodile leather. It’s gotta be expensive, she thought as she fingered the fells, Rough texture but still so very flexible. And what’s this? Her brows went up as her finger tips went down, Weighted tips, Doc? Ouch! That would so break me! Her tastes in recreational pain definitely didn’t run that hard core. She wasn’t even sure she could lift that monster, much less swing it. Now, the question is do you use that beast, or does it get used on you? She wondered.

“Are you alright in there?” He called from the bedroom.

“Yes!” She yelled back, almost shrilly. Good Gravy, now she was embarrassed! It’s like when you realize as a teenager that your parents still had sex, and you don’t know how to talk to them anymore cause the thought of them boinking absolutely icks you out. She quickly pushed the hanging shirts back together, hiding the black reptilian monstrosity. She looked down at her other paw, and realized she was still holding the green Palm’s Casino shirt. I never put it back! She realized.

Keep it! She admonished herself. You’re gonna need something to talk about, or else you’re going to go out there and promptly shove your foot down your throat with awkward questions! Like… Gee, Doc, gone to any good BDSM clubs lately? She shook her head, trying to get her tongue in working order.

Why was this so hard to do? I can be professional and discrete! I’ve done this kinda stuff before, many, many times, with many different kinds of mammals. Except that every time I get into this kinda situation with him, it’s like I’m fifteen all over again, crushing on some older dude because he’s caring and mature, like some kind of latent father figure, making up for the lack of a functional dad in my life.

Judy groaned to herself, AAAARGH! Now I’m definitely going down the whole BDSM rabbit hole! Who’s you Daddy, Judy? Her ears were flushed bright pink down their whole length now, as that entire thought train embarrassed the hell out of her.

Escape! She rushed out of the closet and thrust the shirt into his paws. Hopping up on the bed, she grabbed a fuzzy blanket from the pile and quickly covered herself with it as she sat down. Smooth, Judy, smooth! He’ll never notice now!
Hugo was at a bit of a loss as to what to do with his old bartending shirt she had given him. Maybe she was trying to tell him to cover up? He took it off of it’s hanger, and threw it on his torso, but as he tried to button it up he realized that it wasn’t wide enough for his torso anymore. It was too tight under his arm pits and across his chest, so he had to leave the last few buttons at the top undone. He announced to her, “It’s alright, Judy. I’ve put the shirt on.” Maybe his partial nudity was causing her to be uncomfortable, although with a previous career in pornography, he didn’t think she would be this shy about it. Was Finnick actually right about her having an attraction to him?

Her muffled voice wound its way out through the folds in the blanket, “When did you work at the Palms? I thought you were always a doctor?”

He looked down at the shirt. “Palms? Oh, I was a bartender there during one of my summers in medical school. It was just for a few months. They let me keep the shirt afterwards, since it had my name on it.”

She peeked out of the blanket at him, thinking everything on that masculine torso of his would be nice and covered now. NOPE! Sweet Cheese and CRACKERS! The shirt stretched tight across his bodybuilding frame, the poor buttons straining to keep the taunt cloth together, crushing his fur flat across his broad chest and arms, and emphasizing the underlying muscles. Oooo no, he’s got to smell her now, cause she could certainly smell herself. Ohhh this bad.

She hadn’t reacted this way with Skye yesterday, so she didn’t understand why it was so bad now. Skye had plainly wanted her yesterday, so if it was just a matter of scratching that itch, she was pretty sure the vixen would have said yes in a heartbeat had she offered. But no, she had to tell the ready vixen to wait, while she tried to climb sleeping Mount Hugo instead. The only thing that stopped that valiant attempt had been his hydraulic powered cuddle mode. It had been like trying to make out with a car crusher.

Maybe that was it. She just wanted what she couldn’t have, and what she could have she put right on the back burner. GAH! Stupid brain! She need to talk to a shrink or something, talk this all through, except the only one she knew was Finnick, and he was absolutely no help to her last night. Plus, how would she pay? She had, what, six bucks on her?

***Even if she did find one willing to talk to her, they’d still try to throw her in a padded cell just as soon they figured out how loopy she really was.***

Shut Up, Anxiety! She yelled back. She took a deep breath, and looked back up, but instead of looking at him, she tried to look anywhere else. No, there. On the dresser. Photos of cats. She reached a paw out of her blanket cocoon and pointed at them, “Who’s that?” She asked.

Hugo reached across to the dresser, and picked up the largest photo frame to hand to her waiting
paw. Setting it down in front of her, he point to the mammals in turn, “This is my parent’s holiday photo from a few years ago. I was working in Zootopia at the time and couldn’t get away to join them, so I didn’t make the photo. Anyway, the little margay in the front, dressed in the gray suit, is my papa, Hugo Senior. He’s the postmaster in my hometown. Standing behind him in the green dress is my mama, Olivia. She’s the tallest jaguar there. She runs a empanada restaurant downtown. The shorter, more hunched over jaguar in the traditional dress is my abuela, Mama Aracilia. She mostly runs the household and annoys my father. The next two in the white suits are my brother Pedro and his husband Ernesto. Ernesto is an ocelot, while my brother, well you can see that his body is my opposite. He’s tall like a jaguar, with a jaguar coat but built like a skinny margay, where as I am short like a margay, but with a jaguar’s build.” He gestured to his body. Pointing back to the picture, “The two little cubs playing on the grass are Ernesto’s cubs, my nephews Enrique and Jamie. My brother and his family live in a big city on the coast, which is more liberal than the smaller town my parents live it. Ernesto is an architect, and my brother is a house husband.” Hugo finished.

Judy traced her paw across the photo, “So your mother is a jaguar then! Marilyn and Finnick had talked about that yesterday, but I didn’t know if they were pulling my leg or not.”

“Si!” Hugo nodded, tapping on the photo, “That is my familia.” He tried to wiggle his arms a bit, and frowned at the tight fit. “I am going to change my clothes. This shirt is much too tight. I don’t know why I kept it.” He walked off to the closet and slipped inside, partially closing the door.

Judy almost said something along the lines of please don’t, but she managed to keep her mouth shut before her tongue totally embarrassed her again. Instead she called out to the closet, “How does that work, anyway, the whole margay/jaguar thing. Marilyn had talked about it, but I didn’t quite understand. She something about who the mother was.”

He stuck his head around the door, “How what works? Oh, mi mama.” He pulled his head back in, but continued to talk, his voice carrying out to her. “Yes, yes… Margays have 36 chromosomes, and jaguars have 38, which is close enough that they can interbreed. But a margay mother isn’t large enough to carry a jaguar hybrid kit, nor is can she carry them long enough for them to develop properly. Now, as a jaguar, my mother was big enough to carry a single full sized cub for the right amount of time, gestation wise. The problem was the I was in there to with Pedro as well, competing with him for space inside her, but they didn’t know I was in there. When Pedro was born prematurely, they though he was going to be sickly since he was so skinny. And my birth was a complete surprise to everyone, except maybe Abuela, who was keeping careful watch. She had thought there were two cubs inside, but no one believed her, not even my mother. When I was born, I was so small that my lungs hadn’t fully formed and I couldn’t figure out to breath, so my Abuela took me from the midwife, who was having to deal with my mother’s heavy bleeding, and she gave me breath.” Hugo stepped out of the closet, dress in his comfortable white Tai-ji pants and robe.

He tightened his belt before continuing, “She had to breathe for me for 15 minutes before I figured out how to breathe on my own. If she hadn’t, I would have died.” He sat down on the bed next to her, and looked at the photo. “They split the load, Mama and Abuela, in raising us. Mama was
bedridden for while because the blood loss she suffered during my birth, so she could only take
care of Pedro, and Abuela took care of me.”

Hugo paused for a moment before continuing, “Papa was horrified. He had thought he was going to
loose his whole family that day, both his sons and his wife. So a month after we were born, he went
to the town clinic and got a vasectomy, which very unheard of in those days. But he wasn’t going
to risk losing her again.” He smiled sadly at Judy, “That’s why it’s just Pedro and I in our family.
Twins without any siblings.”

Judy pushed the blanket back over her head. She had a lot of siblings growing up which she took
for granted. But in Amazonia, they tended to have large families. To just the two of them must
have lonely. “But you got better, right?”

“Oh, yes. Once Mother’s milk came in, we both started to put on weight. But Pedro’s always been
skinny, and I’ve always had lung issues.” Hugo allowed, “Well, not lung issues. I was just allergic
to my home.”

“Yeah, Finnick said something about leaf molds.” She added.

“Ah yes, Finnick...” Hugo smiled a quiet, and very wry, smile

*What’s with that smile? She wondered, “You were on the phone with him?”*

He nodded, looking down at her, his eyes penetrating hers, “Yes. We had a nice long talk, he and
I.”

“Oh, cool. What did you talk about?” She said off-paw as she tried to lighten the mood, which had
gotten heavy all of a sudden.

“You.”
Thursday Morning: Revelations Part 3

Chapter Summary

The Wrap up of Revelations. Judy and Hugo find out how they kept missing each other in the night. Judy ends up having an ghostly experience. After Hugo finds her, Judy convinces him to teach her about his family religious beliefs, and Hugo agrees to show her the Ritual of Healing.

Chapter Notes

You can find the Ritual Circle mentioned in this chapter over on my Deviant Art account.

I'm sorry this took sooooooo very long, but a number of real life factors intruded into my writing schedule. I was sick for a week, and I found that my writing while on Musinex was incoherent. I ended up throwing out 3500 words because of that. And then I had family in visiting from out of town for a week, so my writing time disappeared during that week. So I'm a bit behind. :( Oh, and this is the third complete rewrite of this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday Morning in the Snowy Hills

“ME?!?!?!” Judy sat up inside her blanket in alarm. ***Shit! What did they talk about?!***

“Well, I did ask him to explain the whole Skye situation to me, after the vixen tried a dominance display. But I think I understand the situation better now, since it appears she is your ex.”

“Uh… Yeah?” Judy looked confused for a moment, “Dominance? Skye? Wait, when did you meet her? Was this last night?” Damn it! I must have fallen asleep and missed all of this! Judy fumed.

“Yes, when Finnick dropped you off at the Hospital.” Hugo explained to her. He reached back to her and picked up his family portrait, placing it back on his dresser. His eyes, tinged with disquiet, lingered on the visage of his Abuela, as his thoughts drifting back to certain things said by the little fox.

“Skye doesn’t do the whole dominance thing! It’s a turn off for her.” Judy objected, as she pointed to his paw.

Hugo chuckled softly as he turned back to hold out that paw for her to examine “She tried to test my paw strength. It didn’t go the way she expected, I supposed. She’s a strong vixen, no doubt, but I do a lot of rock climbing in addition weight training so my grip is very strong.”

She reached out with both paws, and gently held his paw, tracing her fingers over the wide pads.
He continued, “From what Finnick told me of your relationship, in hindsight I can now understand how Skye might react that way, what with the two of you being former love mates.”

Judy stopped her exploration of his paw, gripping it with both her small paws as she tilted her head to look at him. As she did so, the blanket slipped back from her head, pooling about her shoulders. She looked up at his face with a frown, “Finnick sure is full of opinions when it comes to my personal life.” She opinionated. Her libido chimed in ***Sure, you say that now, except that the annoying little fox is actually right.***

No, he’s not! Hot denial echoed through her mind.

***Really? Then why haven’t you let go of Hugo’s paw yet?*** She quickly looked back down at his paw, a play of hunger, guilt, and embarrassment playing across her facial features.

With the exposure of her fur to the open air, Hugo was hit with the aroma of feminine rabbit, and in light of what he now knew he was smelling, he mentally kicked himself for not recognizing her past body language as arousal. He was simply not as well versed in this aspect of mammal interaction as he should be, and he was still trying to figure out what he was supposed to do in this situation. “He certainly is, but he is an experienced counselor and a fox as well, so I trust his judgments on the matter.”

He gently withdrew his paw from her reluctant grasp, and sighed. He took a deep breath, and stepped back. He smiled down at her with a sad quirk to his lips and went to pick up the rest of the blankets from the bed. Turning to leave, he asked over his shoulder, “Would you like some breakfast? I still have some sliced veggies left over from Tuesday night that should be eaten.”

She looked down at her empty paws for a moment before looking back up at him, “Sure.” Worry and doubt played across her features momentarily in the face of his apparent rejection.

He nodded, and walked back down the hallway. She stared at his retreated back, her mind puzzling through the last few minutes of conversation. Finnick… Wait! Did Finnick talk about my attraction to the Cat with Hugo?! Is that why he’s so uncomfortable with me now? ARGH! That little turd! He outed me! He had no right to do that! I hate that little ankle biter! She scowled at the floor as she gritted her teeth.

Oooo... I am so gonna step on his little pecker now! That sudden visual made her burst out in a fit of giggling that trailed off into a sigh. Oh, face it, Judy, it’s probably for the best. Getting all worked up about the Cat isn’t helping me get along with him, especially since I don’t really want to sleep with him. Plus with Skye back in the mix, the two males probably think I’ve somehow been claimed by the vixen, and Hugo’s gonna probably be all paws off now. And the truth be told, I wouldn’t mind be claimed by her. I still miss her something fierce.

She looked up from her introspection and realized that he wasn’t coming back to the bedroom. Duh! Move it, you dumb bunny! You can’t stay in his bed! She laughed at the irony of the situation. Gathering the blanket around her thin shoulders, she jumped back down and followed him out.

***

She found him rummaging around in the refrigerator. He pulled out the plate of left over veggies and set it on the counter top. He unwrapped the cling wrap from the plate, and carefully folded it before throwing it away. Judy caught the little OCD display and suppressed a smile. Yeah, he must be uncomfortable, if he’s being that neurotic about throwing cling wrap away neatly folded.

She pulled a pepper slice off the plate and before she started to munch on it, she asked him, “So,
Hugo, startled from his disquiet, jerked up. “Ah, yes. The vixen. After the whole paw thing, she kind of stalked off, and Marilyn went to talk with her. I talked a bit with Finnick before heading home.” Hugo stopped a moment, considering his words before asking her, “Did you two break up before or after you lost your job at Dee’s kitchen?”

“Huh?” What the hell? She thought. How does he know about Dee’s? “Um, before. She moved back in with her mom about six weeks before.” She furrowed her brows before she demanded, “How do you know about me getting fired? Skye was gone! She didn’t know that!” She demanded to know. “Were you there?” She was sure she would have remembered if he had been there, of all places!

He shook his head, “No. Not me. Sorry. No, Mork was there.”

“Mork… Mork…” That name sounded really familiar, as she struggled to recall who that mammal might be. The scratch of pencils on paper, giggling, and… “The porcupine pervert from art therapy?! ” She stared at him, her mouth agape, “Why was he there of all places?”

Hugo nodded, “He was a student at the Gateway Bay Art Institute, working on his drawing skills. He had managed to get a two year scholarship there.”

“Really?” She grabbed another cucumber slice and bit into it, “Shit!”

“Yes, and he was on campus when he first saw you on graduation day, but apparently you didn’t hear him call out. Too many mammals rushing around in gowns, trying to graduate.” Hugo elaborated.

“Oh…” Judy swallowed before continuing, “Yeah. I was there that day, cause my roommate Moni was graduating. Huh. Damn, I missed him. I take it he was there to learn how to draw porn professionally?” She smirked at him around her cucumber.

Hugo shook his head, “No, he had gotten serious about his art. He’s since graduated from there, and he’s now doing editorial cartoons for a newspaper up north in Redwood City.” Hugo leaned on the counter, “Any way, he saw you there, and after asking around, he managed to figure out where you worked. But before he could contact you, he watched you had some kind of altercation with a pair of canines, and run off.”

Judy looked away, sheepishly. She grimaced and shook her head. “Yeah… Not one of my brighter moments, I suppose. Kinda blew up in my face.”

“Might I inquire as to why?” Hugo asked. He was pretty sure of the answer.

“Sorry, doc. I don’t really want to go into it…” Oh, that’s the last thing I want to talk about right now. A life no one would remember but me. I don’t want him to think that I delusional. “It was a pair of female coyotes, I don’t think you know them. Well, you might know one, but I kind of doubt it.” She trailed off. “I don’t think she came back here after she got married.” She shrugged.

“I see…” Hugo did, actually. It had to be Cheryl. She had been talking to Cheryl. His mind started to lurch in another direction, down a path he had not explored since his youth.

Priestesses and their acolytes. Gods and legends. Powerful oaths given and fates decreed. That all sounded so simple in my youth, but now?
The scientific portion of his brain rebelled at that very thought of Fate. For years, he had carefully walled away his past faith, and instead had turned to science to explain life’s mysteries. Unlike his friend Emmanuel had found a way to reconcile his beliefs with his medical knowledge, Hugo had turned away from his old beliefs of his youth. This decision had in turn led to many arguments with more spiritually minded individuals, like Cheryl, on the nature of mammal intelligence and the path of the mind versus that of the soul. Good nature arguments to be fair, but it was still something he grappled with in moments of reflection and self doubt.

And now, like Cheryl, I am getting hammered about the head by powers unseen that I have long denied. He sighed.

“Alright. Where did you go afterwards, if I may ask? Mork said you never returned to the school. And I know that you moved out of your apartment, by the way. The landlady said you didn’t leave a forwarding address.”

Judy nodded, “Yeah, the lease was up and I couldn’t afford to stay, certainly not without a job. So I packed up my stuff in my truck and took off.” She frowned at him, “Hang on! How did Mork figure out where I lived? Was he stalking me? That’s kinda creepy, to be honest. Totally Mork, I get that, but still creepy.” She grimaced.

Hugo held out his paws in supplication, “Ah… No, sorry, that was me. I had flown in as soon as he called to tell me that he had found you. I had gone to the restaurant, and after some attempts at gaining information from the management, I was finally given your address by another waitress, an aardwolf. So I was the one who tracked your home down. I’m sorry if that upsets you.”

Judy grabbed another veggie slice off the tray and waved it at him, “Nah, you’re good, Doc. You’re not a pervert like Mork was.” Well, not THAT kind of pervert, anyway! She smiled at that thought. “So, Ayan helped you out. Good for her. She was a good kit.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry that we missed each other.”

How different would my life be right now had he found me then? How much heartbreak would I have avoided had I just known he had been looking for me? She pondered this for a moment.

He broke that train of thought, “Well, I almost ended being a permanent resident there.” She quirked her brow at his statement. Hugo elaborated, “I’m sorry, I jest. I had gotten lost in the fog, trying to to return my rental car at the airport before flying back home.”

“Oh, the fog is incredible there!” She nodded. Beautiful too, in the moonlight...

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I had to pull off at this biker bar and ask for directions.”

Judy’s ears went up. Biker bar? No way! “By the airport, you said?” He nodded. “Misty Visions, maybe?” That’s too weird!

He nodded, “Big neon sign in the fog, sounded like a dance club?”

“Ah… Yeah…” She looked away as she chewed on her lips.

“Do you know it?” He looked at her in confusion.

She nodded, “Yeah, I know it.” She drawled. “It was Skye’s favorite night spot. Bikes, babes, and booze.” And a bunny… “We went there often.” She finished off her slice before continuing, “I went there after my day from Hell and tried to drown my sorrows in beer. So… If you were there trying to get directions, I was probably still inside at the bar.” She looked back at him, her expression unreadable. “That’s really weird. What are the odds, ya think?”
The scent of passion flowers in the mist...

Hugo wasn’t a gambling cat, but he understood what she was getting at. “I didn’t go inside. There was this food truck serving Amazonia food, so I got a couple of chicken...”

She interrupted him, “Empanadas?” Now it was Judy turn for her mind to lurch in a new direction. *If he had been there, then... Oh... No...!* Her ears fell as she drew her paws up her mouth.

He nodded, “They were very good. Very hot too, so I was wandering around waiting for them to cool and looking around the parking lot. It must have been the stress of the day, and perhaps I was seeing things, but I had been sure I saw rabbit ears across the parking lot so I walked over to investigate. Except that instead I ran into a really aggressive jaguar or panther and he warned me off.” He shrugged.

Judy nodded, “His name’s Frank, and he’s a Jaguar. He was the bouncer for the, um, other side of the club. He was walking me out to my truck when he spotted some dude eating an empanada.”

She gazed across the kitchen at him sadly, “I’m guessing that was you he saw in the mist.” *So very close...* She leaned her head back, her eyes closed tight as tears began leaking through.

Hugo also had the same thought. *So very close, except... Wait! A jaguar intercepted him, and warned him off? Why? If he was supposed to find her, as he had alluded to in his conversation with Finnick, then why had he been frustrated at every turn, blocked, turned away, misled, lost? For years, even?*! *To come ever so close, and yet to always fail??*

*For what purpose?* He could feel the answer was there, it had to be there, but it was just out of range. It was like he was somehow stuck in sucking mud, unable to move forward except in slow torturous steps. He looked back at her, as she tilted her head back and let the blanket slip from her grasp. He looked at her standing there, tears leaking down her cheeks, as she struggle to control her emotions, dressed in only her dignity and her pants.

*Pants. Wait, where were her clothes? Ack! They’re still in the garage!*

He held up a finger and pointed at her, “You must be cold. Let me go get your clothes.” He grabbed his keys from their wall hook, and trotted down the hall.

She opened her eyes to watch him disappear down the stairs. *Wait? What? Where are you going? No, Damn it, Hugo, no! Come back here! After all that crap, I really need a hug! Why are you running off now, of all the possible times you could have, you stupid Cat?* She scowled after him.

*You would think that he’d have better bedside manners or something. It’s not like he’s never seen me naked. Shit. What’s got him so twitterpated now?*

Leaving the food on the counter and the blanket at her feet, she hurried to follow him down the stairs. But as she turned the corner at the bottom landing, he opened door to the garage and cold air came tumbling down the hall in slow waves, as the heat of the house tried in turn to escape. She shivered in the onslaught and retreated, not back up the stairs, but down the lower hall to the dark room at the end, driven there by the chill.

As she ducked in to the room, the door to the garage closed with a click sealing out the cold, and for brief period she was alone in his house. It was strange unsettling, standing as she was in the dark private grotto of a powerful jungle predator, his masculine scent resplendent through out the space, filling her nostrils. *Yes, now that Skye mentioned it, I can smell the jaguar mixed into his scent.* She paused as she wondered, *Which room is this again?* She inhaled. Wood smoke, faint upon the still air. *Ah... Sandlewood... Incense...* She knew now where she was. She smiled at the memory of that night. *Oh, look the light switch.*
She started across to the doorway to reach the switch on the other side, but between the jambs the hackles on her neck suddenly raised, as if to alert her to some hidden menace. Some deep instinct told her that she was no longer alone in room, as a faint cool exhalation, slow and long, wafted across her fur. Her ears snapped up to full extension, swiveling on her head, tracking, seeking, and finally finding the source.

She listened to the sounds of slow deep breaths, as if they were echoing downing a long cavern. There, in the center of the room, something was watching her, she was sure of it. A spike of fear flooded her mind, as she slowly turned her eye to the center of the room. She beheld nothing but impenetrable darkness, ponderous and slow, thick like molasses on a cold day. Her eyes felt the slow movement of the air, ebbing and flowing across their moist surfaces, cooling and drying them, causing them to twitch. She blinked quickly, trying to bring her nervous vision under control. As she gazed back across at the inky expanse, she beheld small pin pricks of light, flashing into existence, streak across the ebony emptiness, and just as quickly vanish. Like meteorites on a clear winter’s night.

It was as if Night itself was in the room with her, watching her, stalking her, hunting her…

***LIGHT!***

She stabbed for the light switch, it’s orange glow lighting her grasping paw for a brief moment before it blinked out to be replaced by a warm light coming from the walls. Hidden lights set behind conical reflectors of brass mounted to the white walls shone a pale yellow, like a primitive torch set within a sconce. She quickly looked back to the center of the room, but saw no one there.

She was alone.

*What the Hell! This is just the room that Hugo was doing his Tai-ji in. Look, there is the fireplace, and all the candles on the stone mantle. But where was the bloody breeze coming from? She walked across the wooden floor, her paw held out as she sought the slow moving chill. Oh, it’s the fireplace. The flue must be open or something. Sweet cheese and crackers! It scared the crap out of me.*

*Geeze, Judy! Getting jumpy again?*

She heard the crinkly of plastic bags behind her, and she turned to see the dim outline of Hugo come back to the dark hallway as he carried in all her shopping bags. She smiled as she observed, *How very male, to be so efficient and load it all up in one trip.* He set the bags down, and rifled through them before pulling out something. He looked up, and saw her standing in the far room. He strode up the hallway to her, and as he came into the room, his white robes and golden fur glowed in the light cast from the brass sconces. *Like the rising Sun…* She thought.

He held the blue knitted cloth out to her, “Would you like a sweater?”

*Ack! Hugo, it’s cold!* She thought as she took it and shook it out, before quickly pulling it on over her head. As she pulled her ears through the collar, she noticed Hugo loose some of his tension as his stance relaxed. *Is he that bothered by my fur?* She wondered, frowning, *That’s depressing. I had thought that after yesterday’s shopping, he’d be okay with it all. Guess I fucked that up last night, when I tried to cuddle with him. Way to go, you dumb bunny. You pushed too hard, ran over a boundary, and now you made him uncomfortable.*

“So you alright?” He looked at with concern etched on his muzzle, his whiskers moving forward. She stood nervously in front of him as her paws grasping the hem of her sweater.
Am I alright? She looked up, at him. God, that’s loaded question, Hugo. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just got spooked by the draft, thought somebody was watching me or something.” She stood to the side and pointed at the fireplace.

He raised a brow as he gracefully glided over to the chimney, “The flue is leaking. It pops open sometimes when there’s a pressure differential in the house, like when I open the garage door, or the wind blows just right.” He reached behind the screen, and jiggle the flue handle. The draft vanished.

Mildly embarrassed at the thought of being scared of a drafty chimney, she briefly cast her eyes down toward his feet, and then realized that she had completely missed what was painted on the wood floor underneath. Hello! She pointed at his feet as she asked him, “What’s that?”

He pointed to the floor beneath his paws, “The symbols? That’s my family’s ritual circle. It’s traditionally placed before the hearth of the home for good luck.”

She looked down at the painted circle, actually two large circles, one inside the other. The inner circle was empty, but was joined to the outer circle by a 7 pointed star, and in each the peaks of the star were strange blocky symbols. Outside of the circles were three much larger rectangular symbols. Those aren’t hieroglyphs or kanji, she realized. She didn’t know what they were. She had never seen those designs before.

“Good luck? You believe in magic, Doc?” She stepped up to one of the outer symbols and knelt to examine it, “I didn’t know that! Aren’t you Catholic or something?”

Believe? Ah... What did he believe? That was a difficult question for him to answer. “No, I’m not Amazonia Catholic. My family is pagan, mostly. My father was excommunicated by the Church for marrying my mother. He’s mostly an atheist these days. Mother, on the other paw, is very superstitious and believes in most everything. And my Abuela is a shamanist; a priestess, if you will, of a very old cult.” He smiled down at the curious rabbit, “It made religious discussions at the dinner table very interesting growing up.”

“Your Abuela? Your grandma, right? Didn’t she raise you? Uh... Can I ask what cult?” She looked up at him expectantly.

He nodded, “Yes, she did.” He took a deep breath before telling her the rest, “El Orden del Señor de los Muertos Infinitos.”

Judy eyes opened wide as she straitened up and her paws flew to her lips. She knew what that was! That’s so cool! “She was a priestess of Death? Lord Jaguar, right?”

Now he was curious as he looked down at her, “You’ve heard of it? It’s not all that common, even in Amazonia. Practically unheard of here in Zootopia. In fact, I’m probably the only...” Believer? Practitioner? Priest? What are you, Hugo. Those are excellent questions; exactly what do you believe, Doctor?

“She taught me the circle, and made me promise that I’d always have one where ever I lived. I painted this one when I move in here.”

“Oh.” She looked down at the circles, and then excitedly she turned back to him. “Do you know how to use it?” She hadn’t known that he practiced magic.

“The rituals? Yes, I suppose... Although I haven’t done one in years, not since I moved in.”

“Could you show me? Please?” He looked dubiously down at her as she implored him, “I know so
little about you, and this...” She pointed at the circle, “This is so... strange...” She reached down to touch the paint. “But it’s really important, right? To you? To your family?”

As Judy was touching the circle, he was struck by the memory of his conversation with his Abuela Monday night. ...Have you done your rituals today, Gatito?...You need to go! You will meet somebody who needs your help, somebody nice! You’ll see! Promise your Abuela you will go, por favor?...

**Rituals.** He sighed and shook his head. *How does she always know? Simple, you stupid doubting feline! The same way Cheryl knew about Judy and Tundra Town. She was told by the Divine Aspects. And as much as you’ve tried to ignore that part of your past, it keeps coming back, only this time, this time They made sure to get your attention in a way you could no longer ignore.*

In his mind, he heard her cackling laughter as she scolded him.

*Gatito! Gatito, te estás estancando! You’re stalling!*

*Sí, Abuela. Sólo lo soy, porque tengo miedo. Yes, I know that, Abuela. I am afraid.*

**Afraid of what this means. Afraid of what this will change.**

*Nonsense, Gatito! There is nothing to fear! You walk with Death now, and He will protect you. So do your rituals now, so that you may commune with him and learn from his wisdom. He will tell you what you need to know! Have Faith, little one!*

...

*Yes, Abuela. I will do my rituals.*

* * *

“I suppose I could. Although I am puzzled by your interest. I didn’t think your family believed in other, less conventional faiths. I know that your parents are Bunny Baptists.” He walked to a trunk sitting in the corner, and opened it up. He started taking items out, and beckoned her over.

She followed him, “They are. As for me, Doc, well... You’d be surprised what I believe in.” It was one thing to believe in the Divines, she knew, and quite another to have actually met one of their Aspects. Of course, she had been dead at the time, but still, it had been a unique experience. *Yeah... You’d be surprised, alright.*

He turned to meet her knowing smile, “I can see that. Here.” He handed her a small tea pot. “Please fill this with water. There is a mud room next to the garage with a sink in it.” He pointed down the hall.

She took the little ceramic pot, just a plain little gray stoneware thing, and carried it by the handle out of the room and down the hall. She found the door, half way between the garage and the stairs and opened it up. He started taking items out, and beckoned her over.

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She took the little ceramic pot, just a plain little gray stoneware thing, and carried it by the handle out of the room and down the hall. She found the door, half way between the garage and the stairs and opened it. It swung open to the right and she gingerly stepped into the dark space. She had only taken a couple of steps inside to search for the light switch when the overhead lights came on automatically.

She stopped, momentarily dazzled by the brightness. *What? She blinked. Why the automatic lights? There aren’t any in the rest of the house. She looked back at the door. Oh, Duh! I suppose if you have dirty paws, the last thing you need to do was slap around the wall for a light switch. That would get your walls all dirty.* She saw that the sink was a deep mop sink, but sized for a small mammal like her. She turned on the water moment, just to get it running steady, before she
put the open pot under the trickling stream.

While she was waiting, she looked back up at the nearly empty space she was standing in. There was a toilet next to the sink, and beyond were connections in the wall for a washing machine and dryer, but there weren’t any hooked up. In fact, there was nothing else in the long room except a couple of totes, and a door at the far end.

*What’s down there?* She wondered.

“Did you find it?” He called out of the other room.

Jolted out of her wandering thoughts, she called back, “Yeah! Just a sec!” She turned back to the sink, where the water was now overflowing the pot. She turned off the water, and drained out the excess water. She pulled the pot out and turned to take it back to Hugo.

She stepped back into the room just as he was laying out two small mats in the middle circle. His ears swiveled back as she walked in, and he turned to take the pot from her, “Thank you.” He pointed to the mat closest to the fireplace, “Please, take a seat.” He put the pot down on top of a little brazier, next to a carved wooden box set in between the two mats, as she sat down cross legged across from him. He knelt on the other mat.

He started with, “I’m going to show you *El Ritual de Mil Lágrimas* as taught to me by my Abuela. It’s her most common ritual, used to help grieving relatives find peace. I’ve watched her do this particular ritual many times as a child.”


He quirked his head at her. “You speak Amazonia?”

Judy nodded, “A little. My capybara roommate back in Gateway taught me some. Moni like to talk about her paintings, and in the process of explaining them she taught me a lot about her culture and language.”

“Ah!” Hugo was enlightened. *So, she does have some knowledge of this then. Good, it will make explaining it easier.* He told her, “Relax, and seek peace.” Hugo stood and walked over to the fireplace. He lit a thick beeswax candle with a match, and set it on the diamond shaped symbol behind her. “Matza’ - The Northern Star. Our steadfast guide and companion in the night. She will show us the way.”

Judy looked back at the symbol, at the four little rays coming of it. *Yeah, it does look like a star. These must be really old logo-graphs then.* Judy felt a thrill run down her spine as she stared at the candle.

Hugo lit the next candle from the first and took it to the next symbol, more than halfway around the circle, walking counter-clockwise around the circle. The symbol was a low slung box with one rounded corner and twin connected spirals inside it. “Nas – The Earth. Our home and hearth. To which we must always return.” he intoned.

He set the candle down on the earth symbol, and returned to the mantel to lit a third candle. He took it to a symbol just to her right, next to the star symbol, a double nest box with three dots in it and a slash in the corner. “Suw – The Sun. Our warmth and light. The herald of truth unto the people.” He set down the candle in the middle of the symbol.

The forth candle he took around the circle and stood before a symbol just to the left of the earth. It looked like a box with three horizontal stripes across it, and a short diagonal strip behind them.
“Tzap – The Dawn wind. Bearing the joy of a new day. A promise of things yet to come.”

As he returned to get the fifth candle, Judy sat bracketed by candles on either side of her. She looked at the symbols painted on the wooden floor, *A star, the sun, the dawn, and the earth. It’s all very pleasant, and not at all morbid. I would have thought they were representations of demons or demigods or something. But they’re not. They’re just every day things, I suppose.*

He stood before a symbol next to the sun that looked like a table with a table cloth draped over it, and two dots on the cloth. “Tuj’ - The Evening Wind. Guardian of the storm. Provider of the rain that nourishes us all.”

The sixth symbol that he went to next was just to her left, and it did look a mammal’s skull with two eyes and an upper jaw, or maybe a tombstone. *We’ve gotten to the evening, so is this finally Death than?* She wondered. But that wasn’t the case as he intoned, “Poy’a – The Moon. The sage of truth. Showing us path of wisdom through the darkest night.”

The final symbol in the circle that he put a candle on was a rounded box with a circle in the middle of it. “Nu’pin – The Sea. The cradle of life. She nourish us body and soul.”

He stepped back inside the circle to stand on to his mat. He raised his paws to the ceiling and roared, “Máako’ Báalam! Lord Jaguar! I stand before you in humble entreaty! Hear my plea, I beg of you! I, Hugo Carlos Júnior de Mérida y Montaña, Acolyte of your Priestess Aracilia Montaña, petition you for your wisdom and your understanding!”

He swept his down to point at Judy, “Lord Jaguar! Before you sits Judy Laverne Hopps! This humble mammal seeks your peace in her time of need. She is beset by pain and suffering and begs you to lift her burdens from her shoulders!”

Hugo dropped lightly to his knees. Opening the wooden box, he pulled out a small stone bowl with a small paint brush and a plastic bag of brown powder in it. He dumped the powder into the bowl, and added a measure of water from the steaming pot. He stirred the powder with the water using slow strokes with the paint brush, evenly mixing it before setting the bowl aside. Judy leaned forward to look at it, and as she did she smelled a familiar scent. *Oh! It’s henna. That’s interesting. I wonder what that’s for?*

Hugo pulled out two stone cups out of the wooden box which he set next to the brazier. He took another plastic bag, this one filled with dried herbs, and dumped it’s contents into the little pot. Placing both bags back into the box, he set it aside. He reached over, and picked up the stone bowl with his left paw, and with his right paw he grasped the paint brush. He sat back on his haunches for a moment and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, and let it out.

He opened his eyes, and taking the brush, he smoothly drew a circle on the wood floor in front of his mat. Dipping the brush back into the pot, he then drew a horizontal through the middle, cutting the circle into two equal parts. He filled the lower half with henna, and left the top half empty. Reaching across, he set the bowl next to Judy. He sat back up and gestured down at the circle in front of him, “Names are important, for they are given to us by those who love us, but they are not all that we are. Much of what we are as mammals is hard to describe as just a name, and for that my ancestors would also use symbols to describe themselves. This is the symbol that I have chosen to describe me.”

He traced the circle with his paw, “I am a feline of dual natures. As a margay, I seek the light, found in the highest branches of the tallest trees.” He pointed to the open space on the top part of the circle, “My heart sings in time with the dance of sunbeams through the leaves. I yearn to
slumber in the morning light. And as a jaguar, I seek the dark quiet places, found deep underground.” He pointed to the bottom half of the circle. “My pulse quickens as I stalk the hidden shadows. I desire nothing more that to chase my quarry through the undergrowth.”

Judy shivered as he spoke the last statement. Cats, silent murder in the night... Unabashed predators, proud of their killing nature. She looked back up at him. And yet, here and now, I have never felt safer to sit in front of one. Why is that?

Hugo caught the ghost of a shiver through her fur and was amused by her reaction. Well, she wanted me to show her a death ritual. Careful what you wish for, conejita. He pointed at her, “Your turn.”

“My turn?” In confusion, she looked back at him. “Am I suppose to draw something? What do I do?”

“Yes. No words or letters. Paint a symbol that represent for you your essential being, or what bring joy in your life, if you will. It can also include things that another mammals used to describe your essence.” He paused for a moment before clarifying. “In truth, this is a very subjective symbol for every mammal. But by including it in the ritual, you place that essence before Lord Jaguar as your identity, your personal meaning, that you are bringing to this ceremony. Rest assured that there are no wrong answers.” He tried to reassure her. The symbols he was talking about were deeply rooted in his home culture, and he wasn’t sure she understood what he meant.

Judy paused as she considered this, before she reached over to pick up the brush. She stared at the brown stained bristles, trying to identify the last time she had felt joy. Huh. Not a whole lot of that lately. Certainly not on the streets. Or anytime in Dawn’s company. Maybe some of the times I spent with Lance, but that was more contentment, not joy.

No, I was at my happiest when I was with Skye. Skye... Oh! Wait! Skye! She painted my surfing logo on the side of the Beast. Yeah...

Judy’s mind drifted back to her experiences surfing on the Big Sur. The smell of salty sea air, the roar of the surf, the sensation of warm water on her fur. The exhilaration of riding a long tube, the racing board beneath her feet running the razors edge between control and wipe-out. Even just sitting on a rocking board in the gentle ocean swells, watching the morning sun rise was enough to make her heart soar.

Joy.

Judy leaned forward and quickly painted a representation of her short board on the floor, just like Skye had done, two broad arcs meeting at a point on one end and the other end capped by a short chevron. She considered adding in the bunny head, but paused. That’s my family logo, but that’s not really me, not any more. Well, not all of it, anyway. Maybe the ears? Skye always loved my ears, because they defined my bunniness to her. And they are the most expressive part of me.

She smiled at that as she dipped the brush back in the henna, and then reached over the surfboard to draw two ovals representing her ears, the tips angled out to signify relaxed contentment. She sat back and considered what she had drawn, tapping the end of the brush on her lips. Hum... Do I need to add anything more to the surfing motif, maybe some waves or something? It really was the best time of my life, at least in this one. Wait. Time! The best time to go surfing was in the morning! That’s it!

Replenishing the brush, she added in three more line straight lines, one vertical line between the ears, and the other two at a forty five degree angle on either side of the ears. It’s not supposed to be
literal, right? It’s supposed to be an abstract symbol. She frowned.

While she had been busy with the henna, Hugo had prepared some tea for them, and had poured out two cups. Setting one cup beside the henna pot, he turned to look at what she had created. “Interesting. Are you done? May I ask what it represents to you?”

“Um… I used to go surfing a lot on the west coast, even when I was dating Skye. We’d go camping on the coast, and before she got up in the morning I would go surfing. And when she left, she gave me her truck and painted something like this on the side, to show that I was a surfing bunny. The board, with my initials under it, and over the board was my family’s farm logo. I haven’t talked to them in years, so I kinda abstracted it into just the ears. And the lines represent the sunrise, since that was my favorite day for catching the waves.”

“Do you want to add anything else?”

“I don’t know? I guess? I want to include something of Skye into this, for some reason, but it’s suppose to be about me, not her. That’s funny, you know?” He raised an eyebrow. She explained, “Skye used to call me her surfing queen, which was ironic since she was terrified of the sea. She hated watching me surf, cause she was sure I was going to drown. But she never stopped me.” Judy shook her head. I miss that vixen...

“Queen?” Hugo asked. Judy nodded in affirmation. He held out his paw, “May I add something, then?” She shrugged and handed him the brush. He dipped it in the henna, and drew a long box under the surfboard, followed by two little boxes under it. He put the brush back into the pot, and sat back.

“What’s that?” Judy asked, pointing at the three boxes.

“It’s a throne. The symbol of royal authority among my ancestors. Does that work?” He asked her.

Judy furrowed her brow as she concentrated, but she nodded in affirmation after a moment.

* * Somewhere Else * *

Lord Jaguar chuckled softly as he stood in the dark hallway behind Hugo. He found the thoughts of his little priest-cat deliciously ironic. His voice rumbled low and deep, tumbling down the hall, shaking the the very foundations of space time even as it stayed unnoticed by mortal ears.

“Oh, gatito, how little you understand what you have wrought for your conejita… You sought to impress her with your knowledge of pagan magic, even as you doubt it very existence... But your lack of faith matters not, for I have faith in you... You gave Me your oath thirty years ago, and have never been released from it... So to Me, and My purpose, you are still bound...”

The Master of the Infinite Night slipped out of phase with their reality as he slowly stalked to the room, and paused at the threshold as he continued to chide Hugo.

“You have called me, bade me come hear your plea, and so it is by the power of faith I have come... But not your faith, little cat... No, no, this here is not what your Abuela meant when she asked if you had done your Rituals, for those are the Rituals of the Acolyte, which are for you and you alone... This Ritual of Healing that you have wrought is only for a Priest or Priestess to enact, never an Acolyte... And so under the most ordinary of circumstances, you should have failed... Failed to summon me, for you lack the training, the experience, the oath of priesthood, and most importantly, the faith to accomplish this...”

Invisible to their eyes, he slowly walked around the circle, and as he passed each candle it flared
briefly for just a millisecond before settling back down. He paused behind Judy, and leaned over her shoulder.

“No, it is not by your faith that I was called here, but by hers!... It is that very faith that has sustained her all these long years, an indelible faith that there is far more to life than just suffering... For she knows the truth having died once already, and having met Our Lady she found faith... No, little cat, it is by her faith that I am called to this Ritual of Healing... Through her, you shall regain your faith, and through you she shall regain her sanity... And together, you shall find a new calling, a new purpose...”

He continued around the circle, and knelt behind Hugo. He leaned into whisper in to a little ear.

“You should have remembered your lessons, little kit... Remembered that Names are profoundly personal, and if you change another mammal’s Name while inside a working Ritual of Power, you have Changed their Name, and hence Changed their very Nature...”

“You have forgotten that magic, born of faith undying, always works...”

“Always...”

He sat back down on the large symbol behind Hugo, the one with a spiral and four dots. He folded his powerful ebony legs under him as he relaxed and let his power flow into the Circle.

“Hugo Carlos Júnior de Mérida y Montaña, I accept your petition!...”

“Know that in enacting this Ritual of Healing, you accept My Power!... Know that in accepting my Power, you accept My Purpose!... Know that in accepting My Purpose, you accept My Priesthood!...”

“Know that through My Power, though My Purpose, though My Priests, Judy Laverne Hopps shall know healing!... She shall know change!... She shall find peace!... She shall find meaning!... She shall find purpose!... She shall find her destiny, as it has been foretold by Our Lady!...”

“She shall became your anointed Queen, just as you shall become her sanctified Priest... And together with those that answer her call, you shall work wonders untold even in the oldest of legends.”

“You must...”

His voice dropped to a tense whisper, tinged with notes of urgent concern, “For if mammals are to have any hope to survive that which is to come, RABBIT MUST LEAD!...”

Chapter End Notes

From Wikipedia "In religion and theology, Revelation is the revealing or disclosing of some form of truth or knowledge through communication with a deity or other supernatural entity or entities."

There had been some confusion from some of my fans who equated revelations with confessions. That cannot be the case, since Confessions is the name of the next current day chapter.
**Flashback: Back to Work**

Chapter Summary

Judy gets a clean bill of health at the clinic, but as Lance takes them home, his migraine gets worse. Judy tries to help him find his medication, but she's unsuccessful. So she accepts help for another gym mammal, Benny the Hippo, who gives her something special for the big rhino. She leaves Lance to sleep it off while she goes off to a shoot.

The big Black Rhino never makes it to his bed.

Chapter Notes

To all my dedicated fans, I'm sorry that this has taken so long to get done. At first I got hit with family time and holidays, and I didn't have time to write. And then getting back into the writing was difficult because after one hundred and sixty six thousand words, I hit burnout. The writers block was fierce, and I couldn't get through this chapter. It must have been rewritten at least five times, and I couldn't make progress. But thanks to the gentle encouragement from some of my fellow authors, I pushed through it, and started to write again.

So here is the next chapter. I hope you enjoy it.

**Flashback: 4 years earlier in Angels City**

Lance sat quietly in his chair as he waited in the reproductive clinic’s waiting room. He tried to focus his attention on the large print magazine held in front of him, but he was having difficulty focusing on the words. He squinted and strained, but he couldn’t make sense of the type, and the eye strain was making his headache worse by the minute. He sighed as he rubbed his forehead with a beefy paw. He dropped his paw as the scent of angry bunny doe wafted over to him from across the room. Judy was done with her appointment with the docs and was stalking up to him.

“So, what did the doc say?” The big black rhino leaned over and quietly dropped the magazine he was reading back on the over-sized corner table next to his chair. He turned back to gaze down at the angry black and crimson striped bunny at his feet, her arms crossed over her pink bodycon tube dress as she impatiently thumped her foot. *God, she’s adorable*, he thought, *like a little black raging storm cloud all dressed in hot pink.*

Judy scowled up at Lance. “Well, on the bright side of fucking life, as of today I am officially STD
free. No more God-damn stupid gonorrhea. I can finally go back to work now.” He stood up and
stretched, as she huffed and puffed. “That’s the good news, anyway. But the shitty news is since I
didn’t notice anything for like almost two months, the PID ended up spreading into my uterus and
Fallopian tubes, and now they’re all full of scar tissue. The doc doubts I could conceive even if I
wanted to. Not without a whole lot of medical help, anyway.” She stalked after him as he strode
from the waiting room.

Lance held the clinic door open for her as they walked out into the sunlight. Judy muttered, “Damn
asshole dingo and his stupid gonzo shitty porn. I should never have worked with him.” She shook
her head, “I mean, it’s not like I even care about ever getting pregnant or anything; it’s just that I
could have done with out all that fucking pain.” She glanced up at him, and saw his grimace. “Hey,
it’s no big deal, Lance. The antibiotics did their job, and I’m healed up now. No more pain.” she
tried to reassure him.

He slowly shook his head, “That’s not it.” He fished out his sunglasses, and slide them over his
face, “It’s the damn sun. It’s just too bright.” He stood for a moment as he massaged his temple
with a big hoof.

She placed her paw on his leg, “Lance, are you having another migraine?”

“Yeah,” he groaned. “It started this morning. It wasn’t bad in the waiting room, since it was so
peaceful and quiet, but out here in the sun it’s just getting worse. Shit... I hate this. Let’s just get
home.” He grabbed the grips of his chopper and slid his massive leg over his seat as Judy bounded
up behind him, jumped up, and settled down into her place in the rear saddlebag. With a single
kick from Lance, the giant iron beast rumbled and roared to life.

After a few minutes dodging Angel City street traffic, they rolled to a stop in front of his stucco
clad apartment building. Lance winced as he slid off the chopper, and he quickly strode into the
dark lobby as Judy hopped off the bike and scurried in behind him. Sighing with relief to be free of
the bright afternoon light, he stood in the middle of the lobby with his eyes closed.

Judy lost sight of him momentarily while her eyes struggled to adjust to the dark chamber, his
black crocodile motorcycle leathers and his natural dark gray skin causing him to disappear into the
void. She smelled him before she bumped into him, his powerful masculine scent mixed with the
scent of leather and motor oil. She stopped for a moment at his knee, her small lapine form dwarfed
by his muscular leg. She quietly laid a tender paw on his thigh.

“Hurts?” she asked him quietly.
“Yeah,” He responded just as quietly. “I really hate this shit.” He rubbed his brows, “Come on.” He invited her to walk with him as he made his way down the ground floor hallway to his apartment. He unlocked the door, and lead them into the apartment. Judy struggled to shut the door behind her as Lance strode quickly down the hall to his bathroom.

He rummage around in his medicine cabinet for a moment before calling out in a surprisingly gentle voice, “J.J., babe? Have you seen my Tramadol lying around? I can’t find the bottle.”

Judy’s ears perked up as she heard him speak. She quickly skipped down the hall to his side, “No, I haven’t. It’s not up there?”

She watched as he poked around the large cabinet, the size of her wardrobe back at her place. “No, it’s not. Shit, I must have left it laying somewhere. I just don’t remember where.”

She grimaced as she racked her brain, trying to remember where she last saw the trash sized container. She had a thought though, “Did Rudolf take off with it?”

He turned and squinted at her, as a ghost of a smile leaked through the pain lines on his snout, “You know he hates that nickname, lil rabbit.”

She snorted back up at him, “Yeah, well if he didn’t keep getting smacked in the nose and knocked out, I’d call the dumb moose something else.”

Lance grabbed a couple of over sized naproxen tablets from another pail. “Hey, Hey… I know you don’t like him, but he’s okay, J.J. He really is. He’s a great roommate, better than most of my previous ones.” He quickly washed the tablets down with a cup of water.

Judy frowned before answering, “Well, he’s an ex-addict and juicer. I don’t trust him.”

Lance lead the way back out of bathroom to his couch before easing himself down and replying, “Well, he’s clean now. And he’s gotta stay that way, if he wants to compete in his weight class at the gym.”

Judy cocked her head as she had an idea, “Gym? Wait a minute, did you leave the bottle in your gym locker?” she asked him.
He groaned as he laid his head back. “Uhhhh… I don’t know? Maybe?”

She quickly hopped up on the couch next to him, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, “Wait here. I’ll run down there and take a look. I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

“Babe, no… You don’t need to do that…” The only reply was silence. He looked up and realized that he was alone in the room.

She was gone.

Judy stood in the gym’s hallway to the changing rooms, staring up at the over-sized blue lockers that lined the wall in bewilderment. It was one thing to tell her rhino that she was going to do something, and quite another to appreciate the scale of the problem at paw. She was simply too short to reach the six combo dial on Lance’s locker, and there were no paw holds she could jump up to grab onto safely on the door. She need something to boost herself up another three feet.

She looked back down the hall, but there weren’t any chairs she could drag over, just the benches lining the wall and they were bolted to the naked concrete floor. Maybe some cardboard boxes? As she walked down the hallway toward the janitorial closet, the shower room door swished open and an organic solution presented itself.

“Yo, Chica! Whatcha up to?” the freshly showered lobo asked her, a towel draped over his broad shoulders and clean red gym shorts hugging his muscular legs.

“Carlos! Carlos, please! I need some help!” She turned back to him, and held her paws out in entreaty.

“Okay?” the suddenly wary wolf asked her. “Whatcha need?”

Judy turned and pointed a black paw at Lance’s locker, “I need to get into Lance’s locker, cause I think he might have left his migraine meds in there, but I can’t reach the dial. Could you please give me a boost?”
“Sure!” The wolf turned affable, secretly relieved that she didn’t want go a round or two in the ring with him. The rabbit had a mean round house kick, and he wasn’t really in the mood to have his jaw dislocated today. He wandered over to the locker, and cupped his paws together to give her a boost up onto his shoulders.

She scrambled into his paws and up his chest to stand on his shoulders over his head. She reached up to the six inch wide dial with both paws, and slowly started turning it, click by click.

“You know his combo?” Carlos asked from below.

Judy paused for a moment as she started turning the dial the other direction, “Yeah.”

“How do you do it? I don’t understand.” He asked her in confusion.

“What? Unlock a locker?” Now she was confused.

“No, I mean Lance. You come down in a panic, looking for his meds, like you really care about him.”

Judy pushed back from the locker for a moment as she gazed down at the wolf between her feet, and met his eyes, “I do care about him.”

“Yeah, but like you love him or something, not just as a friend. I know you two look like you date and all, but I always thought that was just an act for the cameras. Not anything real or nothing.”

Judy smiled down at her friend, confusion evident on his muzzle, “Yes, I love him. And we really do date.” She patted her paw on the side of his nose, before returning her attention to the dial.

“Yeah, but how? How do you that? I mean, he’s fucking huge, and you’re this itty-bitty rabbit. Like, how do you even have sex?”

Males... Judy giggled to herself. “Sex is pretty much impossible for us, and that’s okay.” She
sighed contently, “We’re porn stars, ya know? The last thing we want to do after a long day on the set is fuck.” *One last turn, and it should open…* “We’re just like everyone else. We want somebody to come home to at night, to hold us when we need comforting, to talk and explore and share a life with. It’s really not all different from what you and Olivia, right? She from a wealthy family, but she loves you anyway, even if you’re only...”

“A dirty gutter wolf...” He mumbled, his ear reddening slightly in embarrassment.

Judy smiled back down at him, “Exactly, and that don’t matter to her. Carlos, I learned long ago that size doesn’t matter either. It doesn’t matter if you’re predator or prey, furry or hide bound, big or small. You love who you love. It’s that simple.”

*Clunk...*

“That’s it!” Judy exclaimed as she dropped her paws from the dial to the large sliding latch below. She lifted and pulled, and the door popped open. She hopped from his shoulders to the ground, and pulled the door all the way open. It swung out to expose a cavernous expanse to the flickering florescent lights of the hallway, or so it looked to Carlos. Judy was already crawling into the bottom of the locker, searching through the jumble of gloves and headgear piled there. She sat up suddenly and held up a black bag. “I wondered where that went!”

“What is it?” Carlos asked her as he leaned in. It didn’t smell too bad, not like other mammals lockers did. Perhaps that was the mark of Lance’s professional nature, that he kept his locker neater than most of the other fighters.

“It’s my AV swag bag! How did it end up here?” She frowned, before tossing the bag out of the locker and returning to her search. “Hurm… Nothing here that looks a pill bottle. Do you smell anything.”

Carlos grunted, “You kidding me? All my nose can smell right now is sweaty rhino.” He looked up past the hanging shirts and towels and pointed, “J.J., there looks like there might be some stuff up on the top shelf.”

She scrambled out of the bottom, and turned to look up, “Great! That’s what, seven feet up there? I can’t reach that by standing on your shoulders.” She frowned.

“Yeah, and if you try to jump up, you’d probably smash your head on the door frame.” He nodded,
“Then you’d land on my poor head, and I don’t want another concussion this week from you, rabbit.” He squinted his eyes as he stared down at the ebony bunny.

“Har, Har.” Judy stuck her tongue out at him, “Learn to duck better, and next time we spar I won’t land on your head.” She stood there with her paws on her hips before she turned to him, “Isn’t there a ladder in the store room or something?”

“Yeah, but I don’t got a key. Hang on, let me go get one of the big guys to help ya.” Carlos jogged down the hall to the gym, leaving Judy to stare at the out of reach shelf in frustration.

It felt like an eternity to her, but only a couple of minutes later she heard heavy footsteps coming towards the hall. She turned to see who the large mammal was. *Oh, it’s just Benny, the cop wanna-be.* She frowned at her sudden dark thought, *Stop it Judy! Benny’s a nice hippo, and you can’t get mad at him just because he wants to become a cop instead of an EMT. Just because you could never be a police officer doesn’t mean you should resent those who can and strive to be.*

The rotund hippo rolled down the hall, his towel wrapped around his neck and his workout pant cinched at his waist, stained with sweat. “Yo, J.J.! Carlos said you needed some help!” He stopped a few paces from her, and turned his head to the side, taking in her dark mood, “You okay?”

Judy looked up at the rotund mammal and forced a smile onto her muzzle, “Yeah, I’m okay. I’m just worried about Lance. I’m trying to find his pain meds, but I can’t get up to the top shelf. Could you please lend me a paw?”

He shrugged and nodded, “Sure, I guess.” He walked up to the locker, and peeked into the dark cubby, sticking his paw into feel around. “Nope. I don’t see any medication boxes or bottles up here.”

She looked up at him, her brow furrowed, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, pretty sure. There’s his jock strap, if you want that, but not much else.” He pulled his paw back out.

“Eww… No thank you.” Judy shook her head.

Benny slowly closed the locker door, a look of careful consideration crossing over his face, “He run out or something?”
Judy shook her head, “No, he just misplaced it. And since he’s started training again for competitions, money’s been tight for him, so I don’t think he can get any more. But this migraine is just killing him, and I hate to see him in so much pain.”

“Humm…” Benny thought for a moment, “Well, I got something he might be able to use, if he’s really hurting. It should help him sleep, at least.” Benny moved down to his locker, spun the dial and opened the door. He cast a quick look down the hall, before reaching into the bottom and opening his med bag. He pulled out a 10 inch long narrow box and held it out to Judy.

“Here. It expired last month, so I can’t use if on my patients, but it’s still good.”

“You sure this will work for him?” Judy cradled the box in her arms as she tried to read the oversized letters on the label, *Etorphine Auto Injector - 2 milli-grams.* “Two milligrams isn’t much.”

“Trust me, it will put him right out.” Benny laughed. “They make the stuff for large mammal paramedics, so they can control patients who get out of control and try to fight them. The auto-injector just means they don’t have to worry about dosage. Just punch and go.”

“Oh.” Judy remarked, “Kind of like the XAK tranq guns the cops use.”

“XAK? That’s a little hard core, even for Angel City cops. Nah, the docs use that shit in surgery. I don’t know of any police force that does that hard core stuff.” He shook his head. “You can’t believe everything that you see on TV, lil’ bunny.” He shook his finger at her, “You be careful with that, okay? It ain’t no a toy.”

“Okay…” Judy shook her head as she struggled to remember, *I thought that XAK was the drug we used for our tranq guns in Zootopia. I’m sure of it. Wasn’t it?* She looked back up at him, “What, are you worried I might try to use it?” She smirked back up at him.

He laughed, “No, not really. Hell, if by some chance you could even press hard enough to get the auto-injector to fire for you, the needle alone would punch straight through you. It’s mean to go through elephant hide, not bunny skin. And if by some chance you live through that and don’t bleed out on the floor, the two milligrams in the injection solution there is more than enough to kill you instantly. Ain’t nothing you would want to fuck with, lil’ bunny. That’s for large mammals only, like Lance, ya hear?”

She nodded back at him gravely, as she slipped the box into her swag bag and slung it over her
back, “Thank you!” She waved goodbye and turn and ran down the hallway.

Benny stood by his locker with a smirk on his face as he quietly replied, “You’re welcome.”

“Lance, baby, you okay?” Judy crooned as she pushed open the over-sized door. It hadn’t latched behind her when she left, which meant that Lance hadn’t followed after her to make sure it was shut. He was always careful about that, and if he didn’t check he must really be out of it. She was really starting to get worried about the big lunk.

She padded quietly into the living room, and sighed with relief. Lance was right where she had left him, lying on the couch, his arm thrown across his forehead, his chest slowly rising and falling as he breathed. She placed the bag on his lap, and climbed up next him. He pulled down his arm at her touch, and beerily looked down at her.

“I couldn’t find your Tramadol, honey. I looked in your locker, and I even got some of the other mammals there to help, but they couldn’t find it either. So I asked Benny for help, and he gave me this.” She reached over to the bag, and pulled out the box. He took it from her, and tried to read it.

She explained to him, “Benny said it should knock you out if you have problems sleeping.” She put a paw on his shoulder, “I’ve got a shoot this afternoon with Herbivore Honeys, but if you need me to stay, I can reschedule.” She gazed up at him, worry etched on her features.

In spite of his pain, he smiled down at the little bunny. She was always so good to him, so considerate of his needs. Not like the other porn starlets he had dated, “Nah. It’s okay. You’ve been out of work for a couple of weeks, and you need to get back to it. Besides, it’s just a migraine, not brain cancer. It’s just pain, and I can handle pain.” He nodded at her, “Go, I’ll be fine.”

She cocked her head at him, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “I’m sure. I’m gonna just sleep this off.” He added, “Tell ya what, if I do need ya, I’ll call. Does that work for you?”

She nodded, and then stood on her tip-toes to kiss him on the snout. She jumped back down off the couch, turned briefly to wave good bye to him. He held up his massive paw, and twisted it slightly before letting it fall back to his lap. With a last glance at his face, Judy turned and left the room.
Lance listened to the padding of her feet as she slipped out the room before he turned his attention to the box held in his paw. Frowning through the pain, he opened it and dumped the injector into his other paw. He glared at the long thin cylinder before slipping it back into it’s box. S weet Cheese and Crackers, J.J.! he scowled, You know I hate needles! I love you, but I’m not gonna take this shit, and certainly not from Benny’s greasy paw! I trust that hippo only as far as I can throw him! Who knows what he really gave you! No, a nap, that’s all I need right! The Naproxen has to kick in soon, and then I can sleep this screaming migraine off!

He struggled to his feet, almost blacking out in the process. He stood for a moment, holding on to the side of the couch, his vision reduced to a narrow spot as the pain made him cry. He lurched out of the living room into the hall, holding on to the wall as he put one foot before the other, trying to make it to his bedroom.

He never got there.

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