Helpful

by 6wingdragon

Summary

So... it all comes down to this, doesn't it? And what a journey it's been, such words unspoken and tales untold... That foxes are Trustworthy. That rabbits are Brave. And to each other, they are Loyal. This is Helpful; take heart in the final moments that never were.
“Join me, my love,” Judy Hopps sang.

“Join me, my love,” her companions responded, in traditional shanty fashion and meter.

“On an adventure for two.”

“On an adventure for two.”

“With derring and doing.”

“With derring and doing.”

“For hearts strong and true.”

“For hearts strong and true.”

The round-robin verses continued throughout the blazing hot and humid days spent on Zootopia’s roadsides until, at last, Judy turned to her choked-up crew as a whole and braced her heart. “As you all know, today is my last day… and it’s been rough for all of us but we got through it, didn’t we?” she said to some grunting acknowledgments, “This has been amazing, you guys and I will miss each and every one of you…”

“We’ll miss you, too, Judy,” a particularly gruff-looking and weather-beaten fossa said, to some more grunting acknowledgments, “and hope to see you again real soon.”

“But not too soon!” an oryx standing just behind him said, her fur covered with freshly-dyed tattoos. The rest of the group laughed, including Judy herself as she winked and wagged her finger. “Stay outta trouble, Jude.”

“No promises!” the bunny said as she waved, even standing up onto her toes when the rest of them piled into a bus with their foremammal and were driven off. She sighed wistfully and looked up at her dear friend and partner in the ZPD, Nick Wilde.

He pulled the Pawpsicle from his mouth to gesture while maintaining his iconic smirk, “You do know that your community service was supposed to be a punishment, right?”

The rabbit rolled her shoulders in a shrug and hummed fancifully, accepting the second Pawpsicle he handed to her and savored its cool, cherry flavoring on her lips. “I paid my debt to society for abducting and interrogating Duke Weaselton during the Pred-Scare; there’s nothing in the law saying I can’t make friends in the meantime,” she then slipped the homemade wrapper into her pocket, “Plus, all the trash we picked up made Vole Gardens look that much cleaner, so I call it a win-win.”

“You would,” he scoffed and turned on a heel toward the buildings of northern Savannah Central, lapping and slurping his own blueberry-flavored treat, “They practically had to toss you out of trash-pick-up; even got time-off for good behavior, not that you accepted it. Curious little diddy you were singing, though. Any particular reason for it or did you forget your iPaw?”
Judy was apt to follow as casually as she cared, giving her shirt’s collar a gentle flap to air out the especially fluffy fur underneath with a soft huff at the daily warmth, “It’s just a simple shanty to keep everyone’s spirits up while working as a unit; something I learned when dealing with big groups on big projects. ‘A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down’, as they say.”

Nick bit off a piece for some thoughtful crunching. “Sugar makes many things better but that song must be of special significance to you.”

“It’s one of the few I can sing off the top of my head that isn’t Gazelle,” she unabashedly admitted, “‘If You Would Come With Me’ is a lullaby written by my great-great-aunt Laverne and it’s something us Hoppses grow up on. Are you familiar with it?”

“Nah, only in passing,” he denied and then smiled, “I was just curious, is all.”

She eyed him sidelong. Nick couldn’t lie to her but he certainly seemed apt to try, lately. Not for any particular reason, either, only to… avoid some topics of conversation. He hadn’t been like that since before the Pred-Scare when they first met, and Judy knew what was bugging him… but didn’t want to poke that sore spot.

The fox swallowed his chunks of flavored ice when those green eyes darted away from her. “Jeez, I'm fried,” he duly avoided, quickly marching to a less sunlit alleyway off the sidewalk, “Let's get out of here and find some shade.”

“Mind if we stop by my apartment?” Judy requested, gnawing the red Pawpsicle as she pointed to one of many stops of the city’s shuttle bus system, “I need a shower and a change of clothes before I do anything else.”

“Knotash really provided for you, didn’t they?” the fox queried implicatively, remembering when the rabbit still showered at the precinct for lack of better accommodations.

Gentle slurping of the Pawpsicle paired with a smug inference, “I think Graham had more to do with that than anyone else, truth be told. Don’t get me wrong. The Grand Pangolin Arms was great and all -- you know I savor my autonomy -- but that greasy-walled ‘apartment’ was more like a dormitory and only meant to be temporary, anyway. Where I’m at now has its first and last months paid for, an obscenely discounted rent, plus my own bathroom and kitchen. It’d be pretentious to not accept it.”

“Big enough for two, I wouldn’t wonder.”

“Low head clearance, Slick,” Judy teased as he rolled his eyes in good humor, “but yes, as soon as Bo finishes his training with Phil, he’ll be moving in with me and then will head into the MMA; I hear that old goat is even coming out of retirement to coach one last shot at the championship, as well.” They stood at the shuttle stop patiently, vastly unnoticed by some of the larger mammals nearby; despite the notoriety afforded to them from previous endeavors, it seemed to them both that their fame was still low-key enough that they were not swamped by admirers at every turn (much to their combined relief).

“If that bunny’s not careful, he might get as big as Lanny one of these days,” Nick said with a laugh. Many ears perked at the newly arrived shuttle that sighed and coughed against the sidewalk, its doors folding wide open, “After you, Ms. Hopps,” Nick said with a theatrical bow and ushering of his finished Pawpsicle.

“Thank you~” Judy accepted in all due pomp, and then reminded, “Don’t forget, we have dinner at Gid and Lory’s tonight.”
‘Eh,’ he dismissed, soon following her to hold a low-hanging handle as he gnawed on the blue popsicle stick, “Pass.”

Sidelong-glancing purple eyes transitioned to a head-on gaze. “Gid will be cooking, you know.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” the fox dismissed in his avoidance, “I’m sure he hasn’t ordered take-out once since coming to the city. We really should introduce him to some drive-thru or-”

“Nick,” she beseeched, and then folded her ears back to exhale as he studied his curled toes and wrung his grip; the both of them marginally jostled with the bus’s lurching movement. She pursed her lips a moment and reached around the pole on which their respective handles hung to bat at his elbow, saying in a slightly lighter, if gently teasing tone, “Everyone knows you’re crazy for Gideon’s cooking. It’s like you’re not even trying to hide your intentions.”

His tail gradually untucked from around his ankles. “You’re right, that was a lousy excuse for an excuse.”

“So…?”

“I’ll be there,” he said, smiling as best he could, “He is my cousin, after all, it’d be rude of me not to visit.”

Judy proceeded to beam. “There’s a distinct possibility he’ll be making curry.”

Nick softly whurf-ed, ears pricking. “I do like curry…”

“And…” Judy baited, “I might have heard that Lory, finally, found something out about Mack but can’t make heads-or-tails of it-”

He smirked with all his wryness. “Okay, now you’re just spoiling me.” Nick then huffed and shook his head, smiling somewhat flattened as he released the bus-handle to, instead, hold the pole a bit lower.

Her paws exchanged grips to hold his arm, instead. “It’s not your fault, you know.”

His paw rested thankfully on hers. “It might as well be; I practically let it happen.”

“You did everything you could…”

“Not every thing.”

Judy sighed… and removed his paw from the bar to secure the base of his thumb such that only she was anchored to the bus. Nick stepped a bit closer and draped his tail about her frame but not in the embrace or shield as was so common in the past, rather, as would a kit wrap their tail around a parent’s ankle; this, he did, throughout the bus ride.

Underyard Gardens was a newly built, lower-to-mid-class gated community designed for the living comfort of smaller mammals, both predator and prey alike, that are also individually larger than those of most rodent populations. It, as is common with garden variety architecture of small mammals, was circular in shape and bulged upward at the center with solar panels erected to resemble an art-deco sculpture which, at first blush, appeared random; upon further inspection, the gradual shift provided an optimal collection of solar energy that shone around and through the surrounding buildings.
“Swanky,” Nick observed.

“Wait until you see the inside ,” Judy boasted.

“You never struck me as the ‘swanky’ type, Carrots, at least to this degree.”

A paw swatted casually as they entered the lobby, “I’m also not the type to wear a dress until I found myself in one and -- not to toot my own horn -- didn’t look half bad. You know that the only type I’m not, Slick, is one who shies away from trying new things. Besides, I learned from you to ‘go with the flow’ and ‘never just let an opportunity pass you by’.”

“So,” he leered, “what we have here is a very convenient bump in lifestyle. Far be it for you to not take advantage of that,” the fox then chuckled and flicked his finger to launch the thoroughly licked popsicle stick into a nearby trash receptacle, “I’ve taught you well, young padawan.”

Judy wrapped up her own length of red wood to toss it into that same bin. “I could never surpass the master, though,” she teased, waving to the rabbit receptionist (who, in all due professionalism, spared a warm smile and a single ear twitch when spotting Nick and his casual grin). The lobby was busy for the time of day with the comings and goings of other rabbits, some squirrels, and even a mole or two as they checked their mail, came home from a long day at work, left for a long night of work, or met up with their own visitors.

The common area, to and from which all the apartments branched, was something akin to a park with squat trees and shrubbery about a garden path, and a modest fountain affixed into the immense pillar holding the marginally shifting, art-deco solar cells. While it certainly wasn’t a hard-fast rule, it was clear by the stylized door frames that the ground and first level apartments were primarily inhabited by rabbits with the squirrels up on the second level; it was also clear that the moles occupied the apartments just below street level and varying modifications were made to the aesthetics to reflect the species.

“You weren’t kidding,” Nick said as he ducked his head through Judy’s rabbit-eared doorway and thusly closed it again with a nudge of his heel, “I hereby promote this place from ‘swanky’ to ‘posh’. Heck, I can barely feel the ceiling on the tips of my ears.”

“Well, if you’d stop slouching…” she kindly suggested.

“Oop, there it is,” and then chuckled, “It’s almost like the Hopps house back in Bunnyburrow. Golly gee, that felt like a lifetime ago…”

Judy shared in the chuckle, “You’re telling me. Go ahead and grab something from the fridge; I’ll only be a bit,” she then offered, disappearing behind a wall in the minimalist layout.

Green eyes scanned the wholeheartedly quaint interior decoration of warm, welcoming earthy colors (something prominent with small, burrowing mammals, it seemed) but Judy’s tastes were bright amongst the bookshelves and pictures hanging about. Nick stooped, ears flicking to the sudden running of the shower, and examined a row of shiny, metallic frames depicting a grand photo of her family centered on her parents, a tender picture of her and Bo, a playful one of her and Nick, another playful one of her and Gideon, one that she snapped of her flexing on top of the shoulder of an also-flexing Lanny, and then a glamor shot of her and-

Nick glanced about some more, first at the mini-fridge with its no-doubt mini-snacks, the counter and stove and table with a few mini-chairs, and then at the mini-L-bend-couch in front of a mini-TV. Just… everything was small there. So, instead, he skulked over to the ajar door of what could only be her washroom and flopped against its frame, one leg crossed over the other with his paws
folded lethargically on his trim stomach.

“Not sprawled on the couch, Slick?” the bunny asked over the running water.

“Nah,” he curtly dismissed.

An awkwardness manifested amidst the pattering of the shower until it mutedly squeaked off. “How are we doing?”

“Fine.” His answer was both practiced and immediate.

An unconvincing scoff vocalized her standing opinion.

“Hey Judy,” the fox struck up in conversation, “Ever wonder about stuff you might’ve done differently?”

Soft, wet paws walked across a tiled floor before a towel was pulled from its rack, each sound clear and concise, aside from the occasional, residual drip. “Are we talking about… recent events?” she carefully (if hopefully) tread.

“Just in general, like, ‘whole-life’ kind of things.”

“An example wouldn’t go amiss.”

Nick hummed and bounced his foot in thought, “As you know, Mom and Dad were ‘Mr. & Mrs. Foxglove’ back in their heyday and… part of me wonders if my little kit brain figured that out somehow and tried to emulate them. The best way I could do that was by joining the Junior Ranger Scouts which, as you know, showed me how the world really was and yada yada. How ever… my big tod brain wonders what might have happened if I had actually stayed to my ‘shifty nature’, i.e., kept to other foxes and small predators, instead of trying to earn the trust of prey.”

The fur-dryer acted in short bursts between towel-ruffling. “And?”

“And… it’s possible that I might’ve done what most mammals do without a life goal: go into the family business,” Nick said, craning his neck towards the ajar door, “What if I apprenticed under Dad and became a tailor, instead of a popsicle hustler? Apparently, I showed some aptitude with a needle and thread back in the day; even had an eye for fashion,” he paused for only a half-beat, “How about you? I know you still would have resisted the path of the carrot farmer, even if you hadn’t donned the uniform.”

“Well…” she continued to tread, and tread right out through the door, one towel binding her ears up and another her torso in, “I often wondered how life would’ve been if I pursued a career in singing, instead of law enforcement. I had the voice for it and likely could’ve seen my name in lights instead of on a ZPD shield.” The rabbit then smirked, “As I recall, there’s a Chronicler proverb for doubt-riddled situations like this.”

Nick rolled his eyes, good humor in full force, “Yes, ‘I am where I need to be when I need to be’. All part of a ‘grand plan’, I’m sure,” and then muttered under his breath, “If some big, cosmic lion really is working behind the scenes, then I guess this is what everyone else around me has to deal with whenever I enact one of my crazy schemes…”

“Feel better?” Judy asked, hip cocked.

A clawed finger tapped the back of a ‘gloved’ paw. “I’ll get back to you on that. One more question?”
“Shoot.”

His gaze returned to her. “Do you… remember the news conference, right after Cliffside?”

The rabbit cringed as she turned to her bedroom, “Talking about stuff I might’ve done differently…”

“When you asked me to be your partner,” Nick then said to her halted back, propping himself up, “Was that… was that what you were really going to ask me?”

Judy continued to her door and then paused, halfway in, to answer, “No… I was going to ask you out for coffee,” she said, purple eyes cast over her bare shoulder… and then excused herself as kindly as she was able, “I’ll just dip in here for some pants; it won’t take a sec.”

“Right, of course,” he allowed, and scooted along the floor to, instead, lounge on the frame of her closed door, “So… why didn’t you ask me out for coffee?”

Shuffling through clothes sounded within the sleeping chambers. “I’ll admit, Slick, you were charming and handsome -- fox though you were -- and we formed a rapport over that experience. So I thought, ‘Hey, maybe a bunny/fox couple would be an excellent symbol of cooperation for all species’ … and then continued to think ‘He’s still a hustler and I’m a cop, so I should steer him back to above-board activities’ and ‘Is this just me being nervous about all those reporters?’ and I felt that… it wouldn’t be a good way to start a relationship. Not in that circumstance. So, I remembered the last time that I…” she hesitated, “…requisitioned the aid of a fox, and since she went on to become a lawyer, I figured you could… join me in making the world a better place; on the force of the ZPD.

“I looked it up, you know, relationships between officers,” Judy then hastily continued, extrapolating through the door, “It’s… generally frowned upon but so long as they’re the same rank, not partners, and it’s okayed by their commanding officer, then it’s allowed,” the rabbit promptly explained. “But then… the news conference happened… I practically accused you of being a predator… and started the Pred-Scare…” She then exited, wearing a peaches-and-cream v-neck tee and a pair of simple blue jeans. Though it was not clear whether the exposition weighed heavily on her still (not even to her partner’s keen eyes), she was undeniably okay with herself as she stood and smiled, softly as it was.

Nick’s thoughtful gaze focused on her, soon smirking with a wiggle of his finger, “You’ve got some dulap showing.”

Judy attempted to smooth the fluffier fur around her neck common with many female rabbits at that time of year, “Do I really? I hadn’t noticed,” she softly grumbled, “So how about you, was coffee also on your mind?”

“It was,” the fox reported, rolling to his feet to follow her back through the apartment, “I thought about it the entire Otterton case, off-and-on but more so towards the end; figured I’d enjoy a month or two, break it off nice and easy, and then get back to my shifty, low life. I’d dated a rabbit before,” he revealed, earning her pause, “I was young and foolhardy and she wanted to upset her ex-boyfriend, parents, and probably everybunny that knew her, which I was all for. It lasted… about a week, maybe ten days?”

“You sure know how to pick ‘em,” Judy teased as she turned to exit again.

“More to the point… I was happy that you come back,” Nick said, stopping in the middle of her living room and slooshing again as his arms crossed awkwardly, “I caught your scent when you got
out of the truck at that old industrial park and ran through everything I wanted to say to you, whether to be happy or mad or crying…” The fox then took a seat on the couch (his tail occupying a good chunk of it) as Judy sat beside him. “Everything going on in my brain suddenly clarified when I…” and in one of the few times of her life, saw Nick’s ears burn hot red, “I smelled some other bunny’s scent on you. So, I decided to be prickly about it and remembered everything you said at the press conference in the worst possible light. It was unfair and mean but… I felt justified and maybe it wasn’t half so harsh as what you did to yourself…

“I also didn’t think it was going to last, whatever you had with this other farm-bunny, and I guess I just held out hope that because I couldn’t always smell him on you then that meant maybe you were still available, but then we were partners and I heard all kinds of horror stories about ‘partners’ in more than one sense of the term,” he rambled and wrung his paws, “And thought ‘I don’t need that in my life’ and ‘I finally made something of myself, so don’t screw it up’ but ‘That doesn’t nix the possibility’. When I found out about what Bo meant to you, it was something of a relief,” he admitted, “You know how bad I am with decisions; I mean, I can still be decisive when I want to be,” he explained unironically.

Judy groaned and held up a finger, her own ears warmer. “Hold up, go back a few paragraphs,” she requested, “Did I hear you right, you ‘smelled’ Bo on me?”

Nick sighed and rolled his eyes, “I smell most of your family on you, some of it’s stronger than others and I honestly thought he was a brother, at first, until it was very clear that he wasn’t, but again, I didn’t think it’d last long—” He then paused at her horror-stricken face and could not subdue his smirk any longer, “Oh, you didn’t know that?”

“No, I didn’t know that! I deodorized-!”

The fox snorted derisively, “Please, your pitiful bunny deodorants are the cutest things ever. I’m pretty sure every canine and most of the other predators in the precinct could smell it. Honestly, it’s something of a running gag in any self-respecting community that prey species think they can deodorize everything; these schnozzes are far more sensitive than most believe,” he boasted to her moaning dismay, “If you really want to send some noses for a loop, buy predator brand stuff.”

Long ears flicked and swayed as she rubbed her temples. “Stars above, Slick, why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner? Who knows how many cases we might’ve compromised because I thought I was undetectable…”

A clawed paw reached around to rub her shoulder. “There there, Fluffikins, the reason why I didn’t say anything is that an absolute void of one’s scent is by far more alarming than some random, nearby bunny. Don’t you trust me that I would’ve told you if it were an issue?”

Her arms crossed, but with indignation, “I don’t know, you seem keen on not telling me plenty.”

“Well…” he hesitated, a finger held up as a point of order before inverting the whole of his palm to explain, “I’m telling you now what I wouldn’t have told you then.”

Judy’s ears and eyelids sprung up to relax her other features, even leaning forward some as those bright, purple eyes studied him. “So… you are feeling a bit better?”

His fingers pinched the air with a high groan. “Well enough…” and rubbed her back thoughtfully as she scooted closer, “I was also glad when you introduced us, me and…” he sighed for a long minute, “Me and Esther.

“I have trust issues,” Nick confessed, “in that, I trust too easily (which I got from my Dad) and take
betrayal of that trust too harshly (which came from Mom). Those eventually reversed as I got older and cocky, and then reversed again after meeting you. I could tell, though…” he continued, “there was something about Esther like you chose her for me.”

The rabbit furrowed her brow with concern. “Nick… I’m not an oracle, I can’t ordain anyone. I trusted her, she crushed on you, and I felt my two fox-friends would make a cute couple, that’s all…? Which, in hindsight, might’ve been a teensy bit patronizing…”

“Ah, you trusted her,” he instructed after a quick chuckle, “and if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times: trust is super-duper important to foxes. I’m pretty sure that’s also a Chronicler proverb.” Nick then leaned forward and folded his paws between his knees. “It’s why we mate for life because losing that kind of trust… I hear it’s like losing a limb or an organ.”

Her gasp was muffled by a palm as she almost swooned at the poeticism, “Like… losing your heart?”

Nick thought about it. “I always interpreted it as, like, losing a lung or a kidney. You could live without it but… you wake up every morning and remember it’s gone, knowing there’s nothing you can do except get through to the next day without it. Finnick’s dad lost his mate… Goliath lost his… I’ve known others and some don’t ever recover…” His tail and ears could not sag any further as he braced his forehead into a palm, and peeked out the corner of his eye when Judy held his arm. Nick took a breath. “Do you remember when Kela chewed me out last week?”

She nodded solemnly.

“I was messing up… and when the alpha wolf called me out on it, I challenged him; looked him dead in the eye and stood my ground… and how I wished I blinked…” the fox murmured, “just backed away, rescind everything and cower but his eyes were locked on me and I knew there was nothing I could do that he did not allow. Something in the pit of my stomach wanted to curl up and wet myself and it was all I could do to not break down into tears as he burned a hole in my skull… He said that I couldn’t lie to him… that I wasn’t ‘okay’ or ‘fine’ and that nothing was ‘hunky-dory’.” Nick drummed his fingers against his own brow. “I don’t remember how or when it happened, but I was under our desk, behind the wastebasket… and you were in my lap, holding me. He was right, though… I am ‘distraught’…”

“Nick, you can’t blame yourself.”

“I could have saved her…” he argued, frame tightening before slumping, “Esther’s been gone less than a month and it hurts… physically. Why… why does it hurt so much…?”

**Last Month**

“Don’t mind the mess,” Esther assured.

“What mess?” Nick asked.

The vixen sighed awkwardly and gestured to the whole of her (mostly vacant) studio apartment, made substantially more inhabited with the addition of his suitcase. “The unmade bed, the trash can full of takeout boxes, the clutter on my desk, the clothes strewn about, that pile of mail, the non-perishable groceries I didn’t put away before leaving for Bunnyburrow last week…” She did eventually stop when Nick reeled her in by the waist, tail wrapped about her thighs.

“All I see is a stream of comfortable chaos in one’s own home,” the tod said, and then guided her
around the corner of the apartment she occupied, “You’ve got lounging sweats sitting in a pool where you stepped out of them or otherwise slung over the edge of your bed; and despite all of these take-out boxes, I can see by peeking into your fridge that you keep leftovers in plasticware for later consumption; most of this mail is advertisements and yet the seemingly important stuff is kept inside folders and other such organizers; to further prove my point, I would say that you keep your closet in exquisite order, what with all of these pressed, lint-free business suits sorted by… I want to say color and fabric?” he said, feeling one of the sleeves. “And most crucial of all, your parakeet’s cage is immaculate.”

“Well… Horatio is very important to me,” she cooed, earning a fervent chirp from the azure bird as she made kissing noises towards the cage, opening it up to a slight fluttering before inching her paw in. The feathered fellow hopped onto a finger as she pulled him out for proper introductions. “I had a neighbor look after him while I was out of town until Ma and Pa returned, so even with everything that happened I still got back in time.” She pivoted to introduce him to Nick but found that her newly mated tod was, instead, sifting through her closet again. Esther cleared her throat.

Nick glanced over his shoulder, grinned, and pulled out a slinky, sparkly, cocktail dress. “This.”

“Blue…”

“Hmm?”

“Do you not like birds?” she coyly inquired on approach.

“I have no problems with birds,” Nick responded, casually laying the dress on himself before her standing mirror, and then muttered under his breath, “Yikes, this isn’t flattering _at all_ …” and hung it up again.

“Do _they_ have a problem with _you_?” she wondered, perching Horatio upon her shoulder as she reached around Nick to pull out something a bit frillier. “This one.”

“Oh, how provocative,” he mused, it also laid across his lanky self, “Truth be told, I never had unique experiences with birds until I faced a tribunal of ravens — which still gives me both the heebies _and_ the jeebies, if more so the former than the latter -- that’s not to mention the eyewitness accounts Bo gave me of an eagle almost flying off with a fellow bunny. So, let’s just say that I have a newfound wariness of flying things with talons and beaks,” Nick explained, sidelong glancing at the suddenly nearer parakeet. He grunted as it nipped his ear.

Esther trilled in approval and nosed Nick’s neck. “That means he likes you.”

“Does he give out free piercings to all who earn his favor?” the tod snarked.

“Love me, love my bird.”

Subdued grumbling preceded any audible answer. “And I do love you… quite a lot, in fact. I _suppose_ there’s enough for your bird, as well.”

“Darn tootin’.” They shared a chuckle and then a kiss; Horatio nipped at Nick’s ear again, causing a muffled yip from him and a snorting snicker from Esther. “So… which dress for the Kings’ luau…”

Nick groaned indecisively, “I think I’ll keep it simple and wear an ugly floral shirt… un buttoned,” he then added to dissuade her momentary dismay.

“Oh~” she cooed, “Like the one I picked out for you at the TBR?”
“I might go with something a little more up to date and a little less restrictive at the armpits,” the tod pondered aloud, “It’s not for another week, after all.”

“And…” the vixen anticipated, her tail around his waist, “you said you can get backstage passes for Gazelle’s performance at said Luau…”?

A suave rumble rolled about in the back of his throat, grinning all the while. “I know a guy.”

Another trill voiced her abject approval. “You spoil me.”

Nick scoffed playfully. “This is nothing, you should see what happens when I try.”

The coffee maker bubbled to life in the twilight-burgeoned apartment, a single red light (for sensitive, predator's eyes) blinked as boiling water poured through finely ground beans. Esther rose from her pillow to yawn, fur and bangs skewed in the weirdest directions as she nudged the nigh-lifeless lump of crimson fur beside her; it groaned a groggy groan. “C’mon, Blue, up-'n'-at-'em.”

“I could get used to waking to a coffee-maker,” Nick commended, nostrils gathering the aroma of rich percolation to kickstart the brain, “Sadly, I am enchanted to sleep another hundred years without true love’s kiss,” the tod prattled on, paws reaching in the general direction of his vixen, “Free me from my magical slumber, fair princess.”

A grin formed beneath blue eyes as the bangs which framed them were brushed aside, so to not obstruct the delicate process of leaning her mouth in toward the presented, puckered lips… and exhaling a lungful of breath directly into the nose. Esther laughed as Nick coughed and flailed right out of bed, collapsing to the floor with exaggerated choking. “I’ll let you have the bathroom first since I know you like the strong stuff at the bottom of the pot.”

“Counterpoint: you need to get in there and brush, girl, because da-” he wheezed, and then flailed again when a pillow was dropped on him. Nick was quick to sit up again, though, and tossed the cranial cushioning back onto the bed as he strode towards the offered cleaning station. “What time is it?” he asked of the vixen.

The vixen turned on the kitchen light and studied her BUNNY coffee maker’s clock. “About a quarter ‘til.”

He belched his disgust. “Early.”

“It’s almost 8, hun.”

“Early,” Nick asserted through the ajar bathroom door.

“PM,” Esther called out, pouring herself a steaming hot cup of joe into the awaiting cream at the bottom of her prepared mug. “And if we want to catch Giddy’s train when he arrives, we’ll need to hustle.” She first checked her breath, found it wasn’t as acrid as she was led to believe, and then flicked her ear to some rhythmical humming between the telltale brushing of fur emanating from the bathroom. Esther figured his hips were swaying to some outdated disco song if only because Nick would not idly pass up a pun, and so a smile erected her ears as she leaned on the counter to sip coffee and read up on some night time headlines.

It was only a few days since they moved in together, sharing her studio apartment in a fox community that the vixen wrangled for pennies on the dollar because, years prior, there was horrendous electrical interference that repelled mammals sensitive to such things (it was a rarity when she was glad to not see North as well as the rest of her kind). The electrical issue was
resolved but Esther kept her rent low by helping out the landlord and the other tenants with minor legal issues otherwise too daunting for private citizens who did not dedicate themselves to practicing law.

Suffice to say, Esther was ecstatic that her baby (half-)brother had plucked up the courage to make the trip into the city… that she wouldn’t be the only city-fox in the Grey family. She “understood” why they couldn’t attend her graduation from law school (even if they had a stupendous reception awaiting her return, which all of Preds’ Corner came for); after all, her mother Ruth was exceptionally sensitive to electrical interference and so the city was practically a death trap for her; her father Goliath was an escaped slave from the drug empire Reino del Sol, so its (not publically) known connections to the city of Zootopia was always a deterrence (Esther admitted gratitude that she was underdeveloped for her species of the large fox, allowing her to blend in better with normal-sized vixens); and her brother Gideon… he could never have made the journey himself, not with his mental state… something she only recently learned was leagues worse than any one actually knew… The baker of farmyard-renown wasn’t making the trip alone that night, however, for his newfound pastry-deliverer and sweetheart had come along for the ride (and according to Nick, with her own business to tend to).

The late-night train was the earliest that Gideon and Lory were available, what with his newly bustling bakery and the permission she needed to get from her pack, being the runt and all; wolves were always sticklers for rules in that regard, Esther found. So late an hour wasn’t such an issue for the likes of predators, who boast active night lives anyway, but since the two city-foxes worked full time and wanted to show the newcomers a great first night, they napped a few hours after work and set the coffee maker to wake them accordingly. It wouldn’t be long after their caffeine infusion that a quickly-groomed Nick and Esther traversed the bus lines to Savannah Central Station (and lamented that Judy could not join them; her newest living arrangements had a curfew, apparently, which she had to submit exceptions in advance for until the end of her “new tenant probationary period”; in that regard, wolves could not hold a candle to the stickling of bunnies and their rules).

What lightened her heart the most about her brother’s arrival was that he’d be joining them for the “Dress in Drag and Do the Hula” charity luau held by the Kings each year. The awareness it arose for the plight of missing children some decades past was no longer its sole issue to raise, but thanks to the many donors involved, it continued to act as a source of revenue for youth centers and schools across the city; it was also one of the biggest parties and since it was the twentieth, it was due to be even bigger. Esther’s excitement was palpable, knowing that she and her group of friends would get to go backstage to meet Gazelle and her Tigritos (a thought which tickled the vixen, considering Mr. January and Mr. July of her calendar; a parallel tickling was the pair of sparkly shorts she spotted in Nick’s drawer of the dresser).

Nick then groaned disapprovingly over her shoulder.

“What?” she asked.

“That,” he pointed out, and then scrolled the screen of her phone to the next news article:

**SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**

*Doug Ramses and Dent Wooler implicate nothing on Magnus Hopps*

A ram whose deadpan perpetuated ever since he was marched into Precinct 1; the Pred-Scare Sniper, the Gravedigger, officially named the city’s most dangerous criminal. His associate, a ram with a chunk missing from his horn and ear whose notoriety inflamed when he came into the spotlight; the “Ba’ad Shepherd”, as some bleating Meadowlanders decried him as, already nailed
with a record of forming wayward flocks to join in activities of the Black Sheep Market, whether it be drugs, stolen goods, or mammals that needed gotten rid of. He was one of the disciples of the late Cyrus Bellwether, it was told, and endeavored to actualize his vision, especially after the Pred-Scare failed. Finally, a rabbit who...by any historical metric, could be classified as a “genocidal tyrant”. Of him, Doug said nothing; Dent could hardly shut up but, ultimately, said nothing. Magnus was safely locked away pending his trial.

Esther shared her tod’s visible concern at the prospect that such an open-shut case against the villainy of those in the article was proving less open-shut than they’d originally expected, but Nick voiced his consolation first. “I guess no news is bad news, ‘eh?” he discreetly snarked, “It’s only been a few days, babe, besides, there’s a mountain of incriminating evidence and anything short of their own deus ex machina will land them all in the slammer for consecutive life sentences.”

Her visible concern did not lessen. “I thought so, too… but then I heard chatter in the legal circles that they’re being defended by Shyster & Sharky.” Esther informed Nick, whose slow blink and flat frown spoke far more than words ever could, “Nothing I can substantiate but I’m sure you know who they are.”

“Of course I know who they are,” he said not unkindly and certainly not directed at her, before adding under his breath and glancing away, “I might’ve needed nonspecific services in a former life,” and then conversed with the vixen again, “Okay, that just means this whole thing will take longer, but the DA is persistent and ruthless, if nothing else. Those weaseling rats,” he then added, speaking quite literally about Shyster & Sharky, respectively, “will have a hard time playing their slimy games with Conner Shere. Plus, it’ll make for some excellent courtroom drama.”

“Yeah…” she ceded.

Nick pressed close and nuzzled her frown into a grin, “Hey now, none of that grumpy-wumpy stuff; imagine what your brother would say if I can’t even bring a smile to my mate’s lips. I have a reputation to uphold, you know.”

“Perish the thought,” she scoffed but chuckled, nuzzling back all the same with a renewed smile, “Besides, I’m far too excited for this weekend to let anything get me down,” but then paused from the confidence to teeter her paw through the air, “The presence of the Supais notwithstanding. I really hope Gazelle’s not okay with performing for them.”

A decisive slurp (and approving sigh) preceded Nick’s scholarly exposition. “Honestly, Gazelle isn’t doing anything for them, no matter what those drug-dealing llamas might think. She is raising money for kids not only in the city but across the world; they are ‘honored guests’ of Tycho King who -- for the record -- is not the official host of the Luau, that would be Memphis and Sarah King, as it has always been and will be. Now I know what my Uncle Corbin said about their target being you,” he continued, “how ever, I would like to point out that Finnick heard from Mr. Big himself that the Supais are here for the party and only for the party. As for us, we’ll just stay away from the VIP box, even while backstage. Couldn’t be simpler.”

“You have such a sly lilt to your voice when you talk like that,” Esther cooed and flicked a disheveled bang from her face as she strode from the kitchen and to the bathroom, “I think I’ll go brush up.”

He sipped again (if less decisively) and then spoke with assurance. “May I watch?” A single sweep of her tail was all the answer he needed. There were times when she caused his brain to skip a thought or two but he’d learned from his father, John, that his mother, Jackie, did that to him all the time; that’s how a fox knew who their mate was, someone that they could drop their defenses
around in totality and yet still be at peace. It was a serenity and serendipity that transcended rational thought or explanation; easily downplayed as a tautology that, “It works because it does”, a foolhardy state that was idiotic when viewed from the outside and yet… once attained, was something no fox worth their moxy would let be lost. As for Nick, he would never let anyone or thing take Esther away from him. *Never.*

Chapter End Notes

“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down” is an iconic Mary Poppins quote.

“iPaw” is the Zootopian analogy of the Apple iPod.

When Judy asks if Nick is familiar with the lullaby, she knows he’s lying but not how or why. He is familiar with the song as it is a lullaby Jackie sang to him as a kit, back in Brave, chapter 3.

[“Jeez, I'm fried … Let's get out of here and find some shade”] comes from Timon and Pumbaa in “The Lion King”.

The [Grand Pangdolin Arms] are from the movie, wherein Judy first lives in the city. Even though the walls are less greasy and bed less rickety, her neighbors are still plenty crazy if not as loud.

“Underyard” is a pun referencing both mammals that typically live in or around lawns, or "under the yard", and mammals who are shorter than 3ft.

Phil Octaves, based on Phil from “Hercules”, trained MMA fighters before "retiring" to a bar out in Preds' Corner. Bo gives him hope that there's still a chance to get a fighter to the championship.

"BUNNY" is a Zootopian pun on the "Bunn" brand coffee makers.

The headline, “SILENCE OF THE LAMBS” is a reference to the 1991 film of the same name, along with Magnus's parallels to Hannibal Lecter.

[Shyster & Sharky] references two characters from the 40s and 50s, both rats named "Sylvester" who are also lawyers; for the record, Floyd Gottfredson, who took over the character of Sylvester Shyster after Win Smith, officially made him a rat and not a weasel. For the sake of this story, however, Shyster will remain his original species of the weasel.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

"You'll not find a mammal as inviting or repelling as the raccoon, as they are paradoxically upfront with their slyness. Compare their behavior with the fox, who will lead you on a merry chase into your own demise if you're not vigilant; or the weasel, who convincingly insists that there is hardly any deception to be had, at all. A raccoon, on the other hoof, will forthrightly shower you with greetings and gifts and all manner of pleasantry that they, and every member of their extended family, will readily join in on. If you are not careful, however, you'll find that a good deal of the finer stuff of their celebration of you came from your own purse."

Excerpt from "Solid Advice for the Frequent Migrator", by Chad Elkenson

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Savannah Central Station, the main hub for high-speed rails to all of Zootopia and its outlying areas, like Bunnyburrow. 8:35pm, three minutes after the last train divested its evening passengers unto their awaiting friends and/or family. Plentiful chatter persisted about the recent Tri-Burrow Reunion, a once-in-a-generation event that brought rabbits from all over the city and country to celebrate the roots of rabbithood (and everyone else was welcome to join in the festivities, of course). Also prevalent were the Zootopians happy for their return to the big city, with its towering skyscrapers, an abundance of paved roads, and a significant decrease of “farm smells”. Larger mammals had since cleared the platform as Nick and Esther (who held a sign saying “BANGS”) waited alongside an anxious group of raccoons and a kangaroo Zuber driver tapping a wide foot to some music in her headphones.

Gideon Grey and Lory Mallupe maintained the death grip on each other’s paws to make that final, tumultuous step into the city, even if they only just hovered on the platform. “It’s all a bit dizzyin’, ain’t it?” he observed, starstruck by only the train station as his blue eyes flitted about, “I-I-I-I seen this place on the TV but it don’t do it a lick of justice…”

“Sure is…” Lory warily managed, nostrils flaring and breathing in a whole new world of scents, “That is to say, I never experienced a thing quite like this before…” The wolf’s accompanying raven (sporting a rather snazzy, if simple collar) quietly cawed, talons gripping into the sturdy shoulder pad harness strapped crosswise on the chest (with a matching bracer on the same-side paw); the fox boasted a similar setup of shoulder pad, bracer, and raven (even if his chest-strap looked a bit tight).

“Gideon!” the group of raccoons suddenly exclaimed, raising a hidden banner from amongst them as others pulled poppers to shoot confetti all about. He who was named vaulted his height-and-a-half straight into the air, dropping his suitcase and Lory’s paw (which was trying to calm the ravens) to erect every strand of fur from his ears to the tip of his tail, gripping his heart and heaving as the ringtailed lot of small predators converged on him (along with a laughing Nick and Esther). Of the group, a girl younger than Gideon but certainly an adult sprung forward to wrap her arms about his neck (and earned a look from Lory).

“Bangs, may I so humbly introduce you to the Roses,” Nick introduced as he clapped his cousin’s
back and gestured to the majority of the bright-eyed raccoons (some were, in any case; others seemed to just be along for the ride). Unlike Nick’s devil-may-care polo shirt and slacks or Esther’s v-neck-and-skirt combo, or even Gideon’s fair-and-dark flannel with jeans and Lory’s perpetually single-strapped overalls (even if she was wearing what looked like a nice blouse), the raccoons were not garbed in any singular theme other than “mid-town casual”, “waiting to head out the door”, and “prepared to stand around”.

Gideon’s blue eyes blinked their startle away as he looked into the raccoon girl’s face and then to the grizzled visage of the large raccoon behind her, chuckling and smiling as he held her paws. “Trisha! And Mitty, I ain’t seen you in a year and then some,” he declared and then addressed his sweetheart wolf (whose expression softened) to continue the introductions, “Lory, you remember, I told you about her?”

“Oh!” she politely recalled, her own eyes brightening before she gasped, “That’s right, you escaped from Tad that night, didn’t you?”

Trisha nodded and then looked up at the older male raccoon -- or as he was designated, “Mitty” -- that put his paw on her shoulder, “We’re eternally grateful that you looked after my daughter when she was stranded in Bunnyburrow during the Pred-Scare, Gid.” Gideon bashfully rubbed the back of his neck with some mutterance or other. “With all the news about predators ‘going savage’ for no reason, Trisha not answering her phone… that was one of the scariest nights of my life and when I found out where she was…”

“I’m grateful you talked him down from grounding me for eternity,” Trisha added, “and I can’t ever thank you enough for saving me.”

“It wasn’t until we found out just what that Tad Wooler was,” Mitty then said with a snarl as he and several older raccoons spat on the ground (as well as a few of the younger ones who tried to join in on the gesture of disgust), “did we realize just what you rescued her from.”

“Try though they might,” Esther tacked on, “I’m sure there were some in the media that would rather Tad’s association and involvement in the TBR’s troubles be kept quiet.”

“Luckily, I was able to spread the word,” Trisha said and then smiled to the vixen, “with Esther’s help, of course.”

“As soon as Tad’s name was released on the news, I got a call from Trisha and Mitty,” she then explained, “I felt it was my duty to inform them, at the very least, as to what all Mr. Wooler was doing back then; within my legal allowances, of course.”

Nick picked up Gideon’s and Lory’s suitcase, “Fast forward to tonight and we have yours truly pulling together your biggest group of fans to give you a proper greeting to the city,” he explained and leaned in for a theatrical whisper, “I hear tell they want to throw you a little welcome dinner.”

“Say what now?” Gideon asked.

“It won’t be big,” Mitty explained, wrapping his own arm around Gideon’s back (with only the faintest flinch from the farm-fox), “Just a little something-something. You’ll join us, right?”

Gideon groaned for roughly a second-and-a-half before beaming and nodding, “Well, bend my tail, I ain’t gonna not walk down a red carpet rolled out for li’l ol’ me. You betcha I will!”

Mitty clapped his back. “Great! Nick’s already got the address, so we’ll meet you there in the hour. Don’t be late, alright?”
“Perish the thought,” Nick assured.

“We’re not goin’ with ‘em?” Gideon asked his cousin as the raccoons left the platform, some waving over their shoulders or while hopping backward, to which he waved in turn.

“*Our* chariot is over yonder,” Esther directed, her finger pointing towards the Zuber driver putting their suitcases into the back of her vehicle.

Nick grunted high and sharply as the raven on Gideon’s shoulder reached to nip his ear. “Hey Bangs, tell your little friend to keep his beak to himself.”

The farm-fox also grunted but in a much lighter tone, for he had remembered something very important and fanciful if his disposition was any indication. “He ain’t mine, Stretch,” Gideon said, unhooking the shoulder-strap from his broader physique as the raven hopped onto Lory’s forearm, "I was jus’ carrying him here."

Esther’s head shook to deny her mate’s escape as his dismay grew and grew (in direct correlation to her amusement), bracing his back and lifting his arm when he attempted to reject the snakeskin accessory being strapped around his chest (and finding that it fit him rather comfortably). “*No,*” he outright denied, ears pinned back and eyes bugging as he was made the perch of the collared raven which gave a curt caw, *Nick*.

“*Yes,*” his mate insisted, “We got your dimensions from your dad and this snazzy get up will actually match the colors of that suit he’s making (which I’ll be picking up tomorrow, as it so happens).

“Conspirators!” Nick declared, glaring at the three exchanging smug and delighted expressions gesturing with his newly-equipped arm, “I don’t even know what to do with a raven!”

The wolf giggled as Gideon ushered a pouting Nick over to the idling rideshare, “You don’t do anything you don’t wanna, Nick, it’s more like the raven chooses you just like mine chose me,” she explained, reaching up to pet the ebony bird on her shoulder, which cawed with an approving, Lory, “According to Grandpa, he was the first that found you after you and Esther were kidnapped and we figure he took quite a shine. Always was clever, that one, had a knack for getting out of his cage but could always close it up again; no one was the wiser for the longest time.”

“Swell,” Nick griped, resigning to his new life as a bird owner.

“And I’ve got all his registration ready, Blue,” Esther said as they proceed to climb into the car, she pulling out her phone with a digital form already on the screen, “All he needs is a name.”

“I’m not naming him.”

“Don’t be such a grouch,” Gideon jabbed, “It’s not ev’ryday that a raven chooses a fox; ain’t that right, Lory?”

“Tha’s right,” the wolf confirmed, getting Nick’s attention, “Sure, we Mallupes sell ravens for tracking and stuff, and some of the cost is for acquainting them with someone’s scent. But if a raven does it of their own accord, well… there’s not much else we can do about ‘em except let ‘em be.” She reached up to open the door and allow the three foxes inside the car before climbing in herself. “It’d mean an awful lot to us if you’d name him, Nick,” she then requested, “I don’t think he’d come back to Preds’ Corner without you.”
The backseat was covered beforehand because Esther, in her conspiring, phoned ahead about the addition of two birds when the Zuber was requested; the kangaroo was actually the third attempt since the first two didn’t allow for pets. The fact that she received top marks from Nick’s Captain, Alphonse Kela, when he partook of her services the week prior told him everything he needed to know about her diligence, demeanor, and discretion (even if the tidbit about a pet cover was kept expertly hidden from him).

“Well…” he considered, wincing as the raven lightly preened behind his dark-tipped ear, arms crossed as he was buckled in, “I suppose it would be rude of me to reject a gift with so much sentimental value… and uncouth to not wear this harness with the suit that Dad is making for me since they obviously go together. I mean, why wear a shoulder pad if not for a raven’s perch, am I right?” he conceded, straightening his back and ignoring the continued preening. “And if a name is all that’s needed then I… I do hereby dub him…” he paused for effect, “‘Baron Von Edgelord’.”

Baron, it cawed.

Confusion filled the backseat of the vehicle while snickering snorts filled the front. “Oh my gosh…” the kangaroo muttered as she revved the engine and proceed to follow the GPS (even if she knew the city well enough to not need it until the last leg of the trip).

“‘Baron’…” Esther ceded, typing the new name into the city’s pet registry (the rest of the form already filled out).

“‘Von Edgelord’,” Nick nonchalantly insisted and then leaned over his vixen’s shoulder to watch her spell it out. “With a space in the middle. And now hit ‘submit’.” She sighed as her finger hovered over the green button. “‘Submit’.” The phone chimed as the button was pressed and the form completed. Nick smugly grinned. “And now your feather-baby has a buddy. We’ll go shopping for them later this week,” he decided, reaching up to stroke a single claw into the bird’s fluffed plumage.

Lory leaned over to whisper to Gideon. “Wasn’t this supposed to be something like a prank on Nick?”

To which Gideon whispered back. “Yeah, but Nick ain’t the type to just let stuff get to him, or at least let it show,” he chuckled, “Don’t worry, we got him good.”

“I figured Esther would’ve been a bit happier about it…”

“She is, you can tell because how her ears are pointed.”

“It’s not yet obvious to me, then,” the wolf accepted, “I guess city-foxes are a good deal diff’rent from farm-foxes, huh? I’m only familiar with you and the Tweeds, so I have plenty more to brush up on.”

“I can help ya’ through it; whether city or farm, a fox is still a fox,” Gideon assured, smiling as her own ears perked but he then shifted about as Lory’s nostrils proceeded to flare and sniff excitedly, pointing where he sat and then at the floor, “What’s the matter?” he asked aloud.

“Everything okay back there?” the driver asked, no doubt aware of the shuffling since she glanced in her rearview mirror at the wolf peeling back the seat cover, no doubt for some smell trapped under it.

“Everything is under control,” Nick placated and then whispered sternly, “Whenever you’re finished with whatever you’re doing, Lory.”
“Mack’s been here…” she reported, “I’d know his scent out of a thousand…”

Nick’s brow furrowed, for Mack was still in the wind after the TBR ended under the presumption that he was returning to his family farm in Preds’ Corner. Captain Kela had invested a great deal of trust in Mack Mallupe only to have it thrown in his face and he was still extraordinarily cross about it. Nick checked the driver first and then his fellow, equally curious foxes, “But?”

Lory sat back down and straightened out the seat cover, “Sorry, just caught a wild smell, I guess,” she pleaded of the driver.

“That’s weird, I just had this thing cleaned a few days ago…” and then shrugged at the ready dismissals behind her and returned to driving.

The wolf leaned over again, “Mack’s been here -- right where I’m sitting -- I’m sure of it but… I don’t smell his hat.”

“That’s not too unusual,” Esther reasoned, “The fact that you can smell him but not his hat is amazing, I must say.”

“It is, actually; unusual, that is,” Nick countered, “What I know about Mack, he wouldn’t be caught dead without his hat, if not nearby, at least. It means he either lost it…”

“Not in this lifetime,” Lory voiced.

“Or he entrusted it to someone else for a hitherto unknown reason.”

Gideon hummed. “Well… it could only be that Chess fella, can’t it?” he suggested, “He works with hats, and from what Aunt Jackie said, he and Mack are thick-as-thieves and saw each other while we all were back at the homestead.”

Nick playfully scoffed. “I was half-a-second away from that exact conclusion.”

Esther playfully leered. “It was nice of you to let him have it.”

“Hey!” her (half-)brother argued, “No fair, that was my point…” and then looked up to Lory, “Right?”

Lory canted her head and furrowed her brow. “It’s no one’s point if y’all can’t figure out why Mack went to Chess because it surely wasn’t just ‘cause he needed his hat fixed. It sounded to me that they weren’t on the best of terms, the way Ms. Jackie put it, besides,” she then continued, looking plaintively to Nick and leaning in a bit closer to whisper lower, “We’re more worried about that lockbox he showed me, ain’t we? Whatever’s in it must be dire for him to up and vanish as he did.”

The vixen pondered it. “Point goes to Lory. You still haven’t found where it’s supposed to be, Blue, even though she sent you that picture of it the day Mack disappeared into thin air.”

“And we’re already in the city,” Gideon mused to his scowling cousin, “So no surprise reveal outta you, cous’.”

“Au contraire, I happen to know where it’s not,” Nick defended with absolute certitude, “which is everywhere normal lockboxes are. And by ‘normal’ I mean ‘legal’, and by ‘know where it’s not’ I mean ‘am waiting to hear back from a guy or two I know’. And while I had very little information to go on from that scant photograph -- even if its serial was plainly visible -- I can point us in the right direction, at least. So,” he then continued in a normal, conversational tone,
“that aside, we are going to have a fun night tonight, right? Raccoons in large groups are notorious partiers.”

Esther than leaned over Nick. “Speaking of parties, you two will be staying in Zootopia long enough for the Luau, won’t you?”

Both farmyard predators softly groaned as they exchanged doubt. “I’unno, we weren’t planning to say here too long, not that I packed anything… luau-y. And the bak’ry is just picking up business,” Gideon then added with a nod from Lory, “The Hoppses said they’d be happy to keep an eye on things but I can’t jus’ drop it on them; it ain’t right.”

“And we’d be such a bother, staying with you for that long.”

“Oh, not at all, Lory,” Nick assured, “and even I can bake a pie with how well you document your recipes, Bangs, so if you ask nicely then I’m sure a fluffle of bunnies could keep your bakery afloat until you get back.”

“And please, Giddy is family,” Esther said, smiling to the wolf, “and you practically are, too. I know my landlord’s occupancy rules back-to-front and there’s really not much anyone can say about who I decide to have stay in my apartment,” and then humbly boasted, “I endeavor to know everything about wherever I am.”

It was college all over again. Judy’s friends were out having the time of their lives… while she was cooped up, studying. As per the norm, a good chunk of it was her own doing and she did not regret the progress she made at a breakneck speed but still… she wished to have been out there with them. Darn curfew… at least it’s only for another week, she grumbled, violet eyes reflecting either her laptop or flat-screen television, depending on her glance, and it was a close call just to get the night out for the Luau, too!

Judy’s anticipation flared up again at the prospect of Nick’s backstage passes to see Gazelle, so she squeezed her carrot-shaped memo-pen and kicked her feet. “Memo to self:” she prompted, compressing a button on the pen, but rather than any important matter of notetaking or insight, she simply squealed with delight. Okay, back to the case, and tapped the writing instrument on her chin, Clawhauser said that the Pollen cache from the other night and the military-grade explosives weren’t connected but that’s hard to believe. Finnick also said that Mr. Big said that a drug war wasn’t coming to Zootopia, but see previous statement… she pondered, Could the Supais really only be here for a birthday party? They made public contributions to several charities across the city… almost too public.

As Nick would say, ‘Nothing is quite so misleading as an obvious answer’, even if he’s rather vague as to what qualifies as ‘obvious’, she considered and checked the address of the apartment complex from the case against a sort of list that she compiled… And there we are, one of the places Mr. Wilde told us about, the rabbit confirmed, Once again, his information hits the nail on the head, now we just need to keep a lookout for any routine calls near these other locations. She took a moment to swoon, I wish I could have heard the whole story about how Nick’s parents met… stars above, it sounded absolutely amazing! And to think, it was because of them that Louis ‘Loose Change’ Chang was brought to justice in the Lions Gate Sting! It’s considered the cornerstone case to oust not only the corrupt Chief Hemion but Mayor Waters too! My partner is the son of two of the most influential and mysterious figures in Zootopian law enforcement history. No wonder he so readily joined the force, it’s in his blood to serve and protect!

The rabbit momentarily blazed with pride and righteous justice, Watch out, criminals of Zootopia, Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde are on the job! She then changed the channel of her
background TV noise to something a little less distracting but also entertaining before returning to her notebook and the information it contained. As soon as she learned just who John and Jackie Wilde were and what they did to save missing children across the cityscape, Judy had to find out more… She lamented the short time they really knew each other (grateful though she was that they could communicate on FuzzBook) but exchanged a story for a story with John, namely, her adventure through Knotash for his adventure out of the Knottedwood. It was then that she found out about how John Wilde tracked down her uncle, Magnus, and more importantly, about his eidetic memory.

Utterly amazing, she awed, and this is only what he could remember about City Center. According to him, it will take several days more to sort out his memory with any accuracy but it might be dated information by then if it isn’t already, especially with Magnus’s arrest, Judy considered, recalling the news article she read earlier and how it could cause his operations to retreat underground, And yet… I can’t shake the suspicion that it isn’t enough to keep him down. Everything I’ve heard from Mr. Wilde, she then snickered and rolled her eyes, I suppose I should call him ‘John’, shouldn’t I? He’s already on a first-name basis with me. So, John and Oswald agree with each other, whether they know it or not, that Magnus probably has contingency plans for the End of Days, thus, something as quaint as his arrest won’t stop his machinations; which is nothing to say of his ‘signature’, as John described…

It was then that Judy’s phone rang, as she suspected it might since her parents called her nearly every night when she first got to the city, not as often as the months went by but it was still a regular occurrence. What wasn’t regular was who called her, so she closed her laptop and turned off the TV in a twinkling. “Graham!” Judy delighted, paw to her chest as she joined the MuzzleTime conversation, studying his partially-bandaged face, “Oh my lucky stars, how are you doing? Well enough to operate a phone, obviously, but I mean… hi!”

“Effervescent as always, Judy,” he critically complemented, grunting some as he adjusted where he lay in his hospital bed, holding up a paw to a nurse that reached into view, “No no, thank you, I’m alright,” he assured, his fingers nimbly manipulating some sort of panel such that the screen through which he was visible adjusted and focused on his bust; his ear then flicked. “Oh?” Graham asked of the nurse, “Yes, that would be lovely, thank you. Pardon me a moment,” he endeared to the screen.

“Take your time, I’ve got all night,” Judy permitted, smiling softly as she watched the delicate process of unraveling bandages from his face until both eyes and a wiggling nose was visible again, either ear allowed to freely swivel, and his jaw unhindered.

Graham touched his cheeks and chin. “How do I look? I had some minor reconstructive surgery after the… ‘accident’.”

‘Accident’ my white cottontail, Judy quietly simmered, Magnus beat you within an inch of your life for saving mine, for helping me escape the Manor in Knotash… Maybe in time, you can be more open about what he did to you, “Oh? I can’t tell,” she truthfully said, ignoring the clearly shinier part of his right bucktooth for it, like the scars, would eventually fade, ‘Fur covers a multitude of sins’, as they say.

“Most of the damage is from the neck down; that healing will take more time by far,” the butterscotch rabbit extrapolated, “With daddy-dearest behind bars, it’s up to me to handle his affairs and I want to look my best. But enough about my pity-party, how are you faring, Candleflame? I see that you’ve settled in at Underyard,” he inferred, canting his head some as if to peer over her shoulder.
Judy stood and gave her farm-cousin a sweep of the living arrangements. “I’m still unpacking a lot of ‘housewarming’ things that I had to keep boxed up at my last apartment because there wasn’t anywhere to put anything. Thankfully, this curfew will give me all the time I need to do that.”

He playfully tsk ’d, “Now now, rules are rules; don’t we want to set a good example?”

“And it’s not like I’m locked inside, or anything,” Judy dramatized, “I still have free rein of the campus, I just can’t go past the frontgate.”

“Perhaps I might join you for a walk in the garden, then?” Graham requested, “I wouldn’t mind a bit of fresh air, stretch my legs a bit.”

A hospital bed can get a bit stifling, can’t it, she accepted, fetching her earbuds to make the conversation a bit more private before adding the forward view camera to the call as she closed her front door behind her. Hearing Graham’s voice was… never, ever something she’d expect to lighten her heart. He was a bully, manipulative, spoiled, and at times, down-right sadistic … until she saw the broken child hiding behind it all, who became a monster to survive his own parentage… A part of her remained wary of his new leaf turned -- as well she should -- but it was quieter than the voice that wanted to “welcome him into the warren”, as it were. Judy always had a keen sense of what others felt, emotionally sensitive as she was, empathic, and what she felt when talking to Graham was… as though he tried to be good; that was all she asked of him. “So, I would say you had a paw in getting me in here, didn’t you?”

“I might’ve twisted an ear,” Graham mused, “Really, though, they could hardly deny Judy Hopps a tenancy.”

“Oh, please,” she offhandedly denied with a wave of her paw, rolling her eyes as she kept her phone up, walking along the garden path toward the faint, prismatic lights of the fountain. Judy wasn’t alone in the twilight-lit garden, even if it was well after dark; there was an otter couple admiring fish in the pond and a chipmunk sprawled upon a picnic blanket, tuning out the world with their headphones as they worked in a sketchbook. “That’s small potatoes to your influence, I’m sure.”

“Well…” he admitted in a subtle boast, “I suppose since I did design its solar collector, they could hardly deny me, either.”

Dark-tipped ears sprung skyward, stopping at the base of the complex’s towering centerpiece to gawk at it. “You designed this…?”

“Not all of it, only the panels’ positioning and the timing of their movements. My workshop has a diorama that mimics the sun’s path through the sky, you see, and-”

“You designed this…?” she repeated, standing next to the fountain immediately beneath but admiring the many load-bearing legs of the pillar overhead.

He scoffed, if playfully. “Don’t believe me? Check that column on your left, near the bottom, you’ll find my monogram on a plaque.” Indeed, upon closer inspection, there was an unmistakable cursive “G” and “H” (whose exaggerated loops were stylized into a pair of bunny ears) over what could only be two simplistic shooting stars with crossed tails; it was a symbol that marked their identical birth times, one that he quite clearly upheld and utilized more than she. “The pillar itself was something of a pet project of mine; even if you took out half of the columns, it still wouldn’t fall without ample warning to the residents. I’m well versed in architecture and engineering, you know.”
"I didn’t know…” Judy said, But stars above, to think that Graham could be this prolific… if I were a city-bunny, I might’ve known more about him, I guess… “Hopps Manor must be one of the best schools in Zootopia, hmm?” she then teased, walking over to the burbling fountain to sit.

Graham was quiet a moment. “I spent a lot of time alone in Mother’s library, studying. Other rabbits were… uncomfortable around me,” he placidly recalled, and as the awkwardness dragged on he then picked up, “But that’s neither here nor there. Tell me, how is Bo doing? I hear he’s a deputy out in Bunnyburrow; quite the achievement, only the fifth in as many decades!”

Judy’s legs shuffled a bit before pulling them up under her knees, sitting upright and grinning. “He was, yes! Only temporarily, though, so that we could…” she glanced about and whispered into the mic on her earbuds, “you know, handle any evidence on some certain someones while operating within the law,” and tapped the side of her nose. To this, Graham nodded furtively and even looked like he leaned in to do so before she spoke normally. “He’s gone back to training for the MMA, really putting himself through the Abyss to break through his plateau.”

“How is he handling the news…?”

She bobbed her head in a shrug. “Finding the identity of his parents was a life-long obsession that he gave up hope on several times…” she implied, “And who they were was… meteoric, to say the least.”

“And to have the answer thrust upon one so spontaneously,” he inferred, “Perhaps truly why he’s ‘putting himself through the Abyss’. He really is a rabbit, isn’t he, burying himself in work rather than directly assessing the issue…” Graham considered, “When my cousin finally pulls his head out of the dirt, I would very much like to speak with him… make amends for all the wrong that I and my family did him.”

Violet eyes smiled. “He’d like that. By the way, seeing your signature reminded me of something I meant to ask you while I was at the Manor. The Fourth-Leaf Cloven you had on your shirt…” she began to say.

The dark purple of his eyes deepened as his mouth curled into a leer… and then softened. “Wishes do come true,” he said and relaxed back into his pillow, paw angling oddly to adjust the screen accordingly, “You are the cleverest bunny I’ve ever the pleasure (and nuisance) to know, Candleflame, and though my body was broken, the only thing I agonized over that day was how to properly communicate to you that I was on your side.”

Judy grinned with hooded eyes and a quirked brow. “Message received. Now, tell me what you know about the Scarlet Clover because not even Bo, huge history nerd that he is-”

“The what?” Graham interrupted with a pretentious chuckle but then groaned as he braced his rib to mutter under his breath, “Laughter is not the best medicine, in my case…”

Whatever concern or annoyance she felt for the butterscotch bunny mutually negated one another. “According to Bo, the ‘Fourth-Leaf Cloven’ and the ‘Scarlet Clover’ are one and the same. You didn’t know that?”

He rubbed his chin, eyes flicking to… probably another part of the screen since he brought up a touch-screen keyboard and typed away at it. He groaned curiously. “So it is…” he marveled, “How utterly peculiar.”

“Why?”
“Scarlet’ could reference the blood upon the first Fourth-Leaf Cloven, a fact you beautifully induced by studying it for scant minutes at the Manor’s artifact room,” Graham commended to her shying smile, “but let me ask this: are you familiar with cursed family names?”

The bashfulness melted into impatience as her eyes curtly rolled, “Of course I am,” Judy said and then gasped, “Wait, is ‘Scarlet’ one of those names?”

“It is,” he confirmed, the gentle beeping of his heart monitor rising, “Assuming you and Bo are correct, it makes me wonder why ‘Scarlet’ persisted as a descriptor when ‘crimson’ and ‘bloody’ would have worked just as well… perhaps the Fourth-Leaf Cloven began with a ‘Scarlet’?” Graham excitedly postulated, and then turned to some nurse or another fussing over him as he sat up some, “I’m fine and so is my blood pressure … Do that later, please, I’m busy,” and then lay back again, “Very sorry about that, Judy, I’m not sure which is worse, the tests or the constant need to administer them…”

‘Began with a Scarlet’? Judy wondered, “A name like that may be an obvious answer but it makes me think that it was a fox which found it or some other red-furred mammal… since we know that it was found on a slain rabbit. Unless the rabbit was named ‘Scarlet’,,” she then blurted out, “but that’s not likely, ‘Scarlet’ isn’t a rabbit name.”

“It is,” he repeated, earning a severely quirked set of violet eyes, “A cursed rabbit family name almost as old as ‘Midgett’.”

‘Midget’…?

His own eyes quirked, as well, joining Judy in a long, tense silence broken only by his groaning realization. “You haven’t read Hector’s journal yet, have you?”

She cringed and smiled awkwardly. “I’m getting to it…”

The pace of his EKG slowed such that it sounded almost… disappointed. “Judy… please read it, as soon as you can. I know it will be hard, especially for you but it is imperative. Uncle Ozzy returned it to you, yes?” he asked, speaking about his uncle, Felix Oswald Lapis, of course.

“He did,” she confessed, remembering how a Hexward courier -- one trusted in such deliveries as life-saving medicines -- had brought it directly to her; as a sealed, unmarked package, no less. Yes, it’s been busy but clearly he went through a lot of trouble to get me that book… I shouldn’t avoid it like I’ve been doing, “I’m sorry, Graham, I’ll read tonight.”

Graham’s eyes were pleading her through the screen. “Thank you. To further entice, I’ll reveal a twist in Hector’s life: he went by ‘Hector Howard’ but that was his mother’s name… his father was a ‘Midgett’ and it nearly broke him when he found out; an infamous name, even back then.”

‘It broke Hector’…? What could be so horrible to do that…? “I’ll admit,” Judy said, “I’ve not heard the name ‘Midget’ outside of a size descriptor.”

“Ahh ha,” he articulated and held up the appropriately enumerated fingers, “For your records, that’s ‘Midgett’ with two ‘t’s.”

“And… Scarlet?”

“One ‘t’.”

“Har har.”
Graham chuckled… carefully.

“Is ‘Scarlet’ really a cursed bunny name?” she asked.

“It was deemed worse than Midgett, for a time,” he confirmed and then mused unironically, “I’d be surprised if you knew of them, actually, you’ll not find a rabbit of good company that does.”

“And why’s that?”

“Legend has it,” he began, “that the Midgetts captured -- and even raised -- other rabbits for their feet and the Scarlets committed the unforgivable atrocity of associating with foxes.”

Judy reviled.

“I’ll assume that reaction is for the former,” he teased, “Great pains were taken to have them both scrubbed from history and buried where they’d never be found.”

“No kidding,” she groaned.

“Candleflame,” Graham then beseeched, one paw rubbing the knuckles of the other, “You told me that I wasn’t a monster but I didn’t believe you… you said that I was doing good, and with the introspection I was afforded over this last week, I am begrudged to accept your assessment; I fought against my father at every opportunity… which must be worth something,” he then smirked some. “You reached… plunged into the Abyss for me… and I only ask that you extend the same mercy towards Hector, devil that he is.”

‘A lost cause is the only one worth fighting for’, huh? Judy decided and then wryly smiled, “I guess I have even more dark history to catch up on, so I should let you get back to resting while I do that.”

“My nanny will be most appreciative,” Graham kindly said, “Good night, Judy.”

“G’night,” and ended the call. She stashed her phone and coiled up her earbuds, trekking back to her apartment and bee-lining for one of her yet unpacked boxes. A deep breath sufficiently filled her lungs before a pile of things was removed from cardboard flaps to unbar passage that she might reach inside for a bundling towel. Judy exhaled and clenched her fist to steel herself before revealing the dark cover of Hector’s journal.

How it weighed in her grasp, knowing who was in it… recalling a dream she had, of Hector; of whom he really was. Of a shadow on the past not only for rabbits but all mammals, one disguised as myth and ghost stories about the boogierabbit, “Bag-o’-Bones”; obscured for reasons she could only speculate on… In that same dream, however, was her great-great-aunt, Laverne Hopps, who faced down adversaries like a lighthouse in the storm, whose voice was soft as a bell and strong as a horn. ‘You are brave’, she remembered, and tossed the towel aside to return to her sofa, lay out a different notebook, inserted her earbuds to crank up some operatic death metal, and then cracked open the black book. “Let’s do this.”

“I thought Bo was in the city?” Gideon asked, munching into a greasy slice of mushroom, tomato, and grasshopper pizza, huffing a bit for the cheese was still kind of hot (and quickly sipped some ice-cold Cowca Cola to soothe the roof of his mouth). Both he and Lory still reeled from the car ride over, utterly aghast by the bright lights, towering architecture, and bombastic nightlife of Zootopia, so the abundance of food and party favors did them both a world of good.
“Nope,” Nick answered, “not according to Judy, at least, and she’d know if he was within thirty miles of her, what with her super-bunny-empathy… thing. Why, did you see him hop a train?” He sat one seat apart from his cousin as he reached across to grab a medium-sized order of Bug Burga fries from a serving tray.

The Roses, along with their neighboring raccoon families, certainly knew how to welcome a guy to the city, what with their keen understanding of the best take-out places within spitting distance. Noodles, rice, and wontons from Bamboo Palace; footlong sandwiches from Cubway; and a few pizzas from Papa Fawn’s. There were also plenty of chips and cupcakes and other easily eaten finger foods to substantiate any solid excuse to throw a celebration; the arrival of a “hero” was as great an excuse as any. While Gideon was certainly the focus of the party, he was not as utterly swamped with admirers as he feared he would be on the drive there; the humble farm-fox was secretly grateful.

“No,” Gideon said, pouring some garlic butter onto his pizza slice, “He just been on about it ever since… you know, that night at the notary,” he significantly implied, and then smiled, “We did talk about that super gross bunny curse cure thing he thought up, gave me the formula and I gotta say, there ain’t much hope for it.” Nick snorted derisively and doubtfully, to which a chuckle responded. “That don’t mean I ain’t tackling that li’l puzzle of his, I just need to figure out how to make it yummy.”

“I haven’t tasted it, Bangs,” the taller fox said, “but what I heard from Judy, if anyone can get it past the taste buds, you can.”

He smirked and shied away. “Well shucks, cous’, I didn’t figure you thought so highly of me. Where d’you suppose Bo is at, did Jude say anything?” From behind him popped up a raccoon, a young guy, and his friend or cousin, putting their arms around Gideon’s shoulders (with a flinch in a long string of nervous ticks that diminished as the night progressed); a smile most natural spread his crimson cheeks as a thumbs-up popped for their selfie. “Never thought city folk could be so friendly, present company excluded, of course,” he observed after they departed.

Lory continued along her hoagie, watching the raccoons come-and-go with passive interest, and then swallowed her bite. She sat on Gideon’s other side and had been invited to join in the selfies but declined as politely as she could, sharing in her older brother/family’s wariness of photography… she did pose for a few when they insisted, however. “I think he said he was going to the city eventually,” she reminded, licking tangy sauce off her fingers, and Gideon muttered a thoughtful affirmation, “but as I recall, he’d been down at Phil’s… except without the smell of cider.”

“Ah ha,” Nick decided, “that would be his hero training. Finnick followed a few of Octaves’s fighters, back in the day, they were real powerhouses from what he told me… too bad about his quote-unquote ‘curse’.” He then leaned in across the empty chair between himself and Gideon for a stage whisper behind a taco-laden paw, “Just a little reminiscent of a certain evil bunny rabbit, wouldn’t you say?” The two then shared a chuckle.

“Hey, Nick,” the wolf then said, “You know everyone, right?”

“So it says-” he began to boast, sitting upright again.

“Who’s that one talking with Esther?” and then her head proceeded to pivot but was promptly stopped.

“Don’t look,” Nick casually warned, his eyes flicking up to the back of some raccoon’s head as they spoke with Esther, both standing on the other side of the room, her with a short stack of
cookies and him with a chimichanga, “What can you tell me about him?”

“Well, I can’t really see him…”

“You have… other means,” he reminded.

“Is this a cause for concern?” Gideon asked.

“Depends on who he is.”

The wolf sniffed at the air, filled with the scents of dozens of raccoons, pungent foods with grease and salt and ketchup and hundreds of other olfactory triggers. She sniffed again. “He’s got motor oil on him… he’s gotta be a mechanic, and I should know,” Lory determined, for she was no stranger to the internal combustion engine.

Nick pondered… and then leaned over to get his mate’s attention and made a signal with two fingers before beckoning her back over. A flick of her blue eyes and one ear confirmed the message, and so she brought the mysterious mammal over to the table so that she might sit between her mate and brother, and he on the other side of Nick. “Rocky Cooper…” the city-fox suavely identified, “I hardly recognized you with that eyepatch.”

“Nick Wilde,” Rocky responded, sitting heavily with a flap of his black trenchcoat, leaning on the table with one elbow before taking another bite of his deep-fried, wrapped food, “Almost didn’t recognize you without your mouth full.”

“Kits,” Esther coolly warned, setting her cookies down to scoop some more chow mein onto her plate, “I hope there aren’t any heads I need to kick some sense into tonight.”

Rocky chuckled. “I’d pay to see that.”

“Her legwork is poetry,” Nick confirmed.

“Hun, I can crush your skull with my thighs.”

“I would die happy.”

Gideon snickered.

“So you’re this ‘Gideon Grey’ I’ve heard about,” the raccoon pointed out, leaning over on the table as he poured himself some soda, the plastic container hissing its carbonation with a saccharine grape odor, “You’re not as tall as I thought you’d be.”

“And you’re some Rocky Cooper tha’s been mentioned,” Gideon countered, “Cept there ain’t a tree branch tucked into your pocket.”

The unpatched eye shot a critical glance at the farm-fox as he topped off his beverage and then reached into his shirt to pull out a chain with a lacquered length of wood, dwarfed by his thumb before he slipped it back inside its holding place. “I keep Grooper with me.”

“What happened to your eye?” Lory suddenly asked.

Rocky grunted as though he’d only just noticed the patch, touched it, and then shrugged. “Got swollen after I left a contact lens in it for too long; a bit of tech I been fiddling with. Should be fine after a few days,” he explained with a sip of soda, “As I was saying, Esther, watch out for the Supais.”
“And as I was saying, Rocky, it’s all under control,” she said between bites, “I’ve scoured Zootopia’s laws for loopholes and technicalities, so unless I walk into their windowless van on the promise of free candy, there’s no legal way they can catch me or Pa.”

“But what about il legally?” Nick dramatically and coyly prompted.

“All of my movements this past week have been careful and calculated with my hyper-observant mate keeping a weather eye. I’ll be at the biggest event in the city on their last day here, broadcast to every corner of Zootopia in real time,” Esther explained, one leg crossed over the other, “they would have to pull off quite the magic act to spirit me away.”

“But surely, they would go after dear old dad, instead?” Nick dramatically and coyly prompted once again.

“Not with what just happened in Bunnyburrow, in Preds’ Corner during the TBR,” she dismissed with a flick of her wrist, “No, anything the Supais attempt would threaten an international incident with our nation and theirs, and while Reino del Sol has a certain…”

“Reputation for ruthless rambunctiousness?” her tod wondered aloud.

“They don’t have the spine or firepower or risk any kind of war with a military ten times stronger,” Esther cooed, “Not that I’m so pretentious as to think that armies would be raised for a citizen or two but relations have been…”

“Tersely tense and trying?”

“Let’s just say that some private grievance over thirty years ago wouldn’t be worth it,” she agreed, dipping a wonton in soy sauce before placing it in Nick’s open jaw, “They can sling their arrows and toss their nets but they’ll never catch me.”

Nick shuddered and swallowed. “Say that again.”

“Can’t catch me’,” she whispered into his ear.

He bit his dark bottom lip and chuckled.

“Get a room,” Rocky scoffed, “but seriously, don’t underestimate those llamas, Grey, they’re not the biggest drug empire in the world for nothing.”

“Oh, she hasn’t underestimated them,” Gideon assured, letting the last drops of cola fill his cup before screwing the plastic cap back on, “We Greys have always been wary of them llamas, Pa taught us that since we were kits.”

“I’ve already been kidnapped once this year,” Esther added, “it’s not happening again if I have anything to say on the matter.”

“Hear hear,” Nick concurred, “So, Rocky, not that I would ever doubt the sincerity of your actions but why are you here?”

The one-eyed raccoon finished off his chimichanga and rolled up the wrapper to, instead, grab a chocolate-coated ice cream bar from a cooler on the table. “Uh, I’m a raccoon? This is a raccoon party? D’uh?”

The taller fox quietly munched some orange chicken… and then looked over his shoulder at his compatriots while gesturing with his chopsticks. “Did any of you buy that?”
“Nope.”

“Nah.”

“Not for a second.”

Green eyes turned forward once more with a permitting gesture of his eyebrows and eating utensils.

Rocky rolled his eye. “John asked me to.”

“D’uh?”

“I said I was ‘busy’,“ he air-quoted, “but then Jackie asked me to, so I wandered over and got some free food,” he said, glancing about and then speaking lower, “Are you really ‘Johnson’? Like, the Johnson, the uncatchable fox?”

“Not to anyone within earshot,” Nick denied, also low.

Rocky glanced at Gideon; less critically, speaking still in a voice low but not a whisper, as one should talk when they didn’t want to be heard at a distance, “And you really survived Dr. Cleopatra Lapis?”

Gideon blinked, claws dragging on the table a bit, but also spoke in as discreet a way as he could. “Tha’s leavin’ a lot of stuff out, but more or less,” he answered.

The unpatched eye swept to Lory. “Someone who the Sparrow actually trusts and loves more than himself or that stupid hat of his,” and then his eye landed on Esther, “And you… you met Mr. Never… saw inside his vault and got out again.” Rocky sipped his soda, turned his head to belch, and then set his cup down so that he might sling an arm over the back of his chair. “You wanna know why I’m here? I’m here because this doofus poked his nose where he shouldn’t have,” the raccoon warned, tossing a thumb at a skeptical Nick, “lucky for him, I caught wind of it before anyone else and… to ice this cake, I just so happen to have an answer for you.” And then he smirked quite daringly at the taller fox.

Nick tapped the ends of his chopsticks on his paper plate to align them before setting them onto a skewed, folded napkin. “Ah,” he enunciated and turned toward his rapt listeners, “As our buddy-pal Rocky here has deftly alluded, that safety deposit box which Mack sent you to find is nowhere else but in Mr. Never’s vault,” he casually explained, glancing first to Lory and then Esther.

Esther groaned and cringed. “Ay, caramba…”

“Luckily,” Rocky added, “the vault ain’t going anywhere, even with the havoc you and Finnick caused… the service entrance disappeared off the face of the planet so you’ll just need to go in through the ‘client entrance’,” he said, “you know, the one a bit deeper in Underland.”

“We’ll deal with that after the Luau,” Nick decided, and then turned to Lory, “Will that be alright?”

“Oh, sure,” the wolf abided, brushing some crumbs and stray bits of lettuce from the especially fluffy fur around her neck, “As I already told your folks, I wasn’t expecting them to take Mack’s job, far-fetched as it is, and this lockbox is no doubt connected to it. If it doesn’t get done, Nick, I’d understand, really I would.”

“But…” the farm-fox continued as he looked from his girlfriend to his cousin, “it still could be
Nick glanced between Gideon and Lory, and then smirked as Esther, “I might have to postpone next week’s rock-climbing lessons, babe, something just came up that’ll need my undivided attention.”

Esther playfully scoffed and batted his chest. “Fine … but you owe me.”

“So, ‘a guy I know’,;” he then said, turning back to Rocky, “I might need your help with that.”

“I got my own stuff to deal with,” the raccoon dismissed, breaking off some of the ice cream bar with his teeth.

Nick shrugged and smiled, sparing a glimpse to his fellow foxes, “Fair enough, I wanted to give you first shot of this job but I’ve got other hackers I could ask… one who’s actually been in there, for instance.”

Rocky snorted and thrust his half-eaten frozen treat forward. “Yeah, ‘Johnson’? Well, I got news for you, there ain’t no thing like me ’cept me!” He then glanced at Gideon before turning his attention to Nick as he settled back on his seat. “I can get you in there, front door and everything, but I’ll expect something in return.”

“I’m sure,” the fox responded.

“How?” Gideon asked.

“You let me deal with that,” Rocky boasted with a smirk, “You just… stay in touch.”

Chapter End Notes

The raccoons represented in this chapter and Zootopia at large draw directly from Studio Ghibli’s "Pom Poko" (distributed by Disney); I found their mirroring of human society while coexisting betwixt it excellent for how raccoons might live amongst a diverse assortment of other mammals. For the curious, those in "Pom Poko" are actually raccoon dogs, a difference worth distinguishing but interestingly enough, they are closer in relation to foxes than raccoons.

[a kangaroo Zuber driver tapping a wide foot to some music in her headphones] Zuber is the Zootopian Uber rideshare service, and this is the same kangaroo driver as at the end of Loyal.

[Trisha! And Mitty, I ain’t seen you in a year and then some] Trisha Rose was introduced back in Brave, chapter 14, as an almost-victim of Tad Wooler's, local voyeur and pedo, narrowly escaping after running to an unknowing Gideon's. This is the same chapter that Lory references about the first raven spotting Nick when he was being chased by the local Burrow Watch and found by Ed Mallupe.

Louis “Loose Change” Chang and “The Lions Gate Sting” comes from the flashback in Loyal, chapter 17, along with the key points of John and Jackie’s influence with then Officer Arthur Bogo. It’s not that they were identified in any way, only that police officers are observant folks (by their profession) and when an upstart rookie
starts being in the right places at the right times to bring in all the wrong mammals… well, it raises questions. Luckily for him, his unknown informants’ cleverness combined with his superior’s cooperation (Sergeant Daniel Clawhauser) kept Officer Bogo out of hot water. It bears noting that “Mr. & Mrs. Foxglove” weren’t the only altruistic tattletales of this sort, only the ones represented in this story.

Felix Oswald Lapis explained to Judy how Magnus is a chessmaster back at the end of Brave, a premise cemented by what she found out from John (who mentioned his pursuit of Magnus to Nick back in Loyal, chapter 19, who then relayed this information to his trusted partner, Judy).

The “dream” that Judy references is from Trustworthy, chapters 18 to 24, wherein she is affected by the NH drug and dreams that she is her great-great-aunt, Laverne Hopps, set back in a fictional kingdom “The Burrow”. Later on in the dream, she becomes a vixen with an “outside looking in” perspective on rabbit society; it’s during this time that Bag-o’-Bones is introduced into the story, and at the end of Brave we find out more about him and how his journal influence Graham’s development.

The majority of the food places mentioned at the raccoon party Zootopian analogs. “Cowca Cola” is Coca Cola; “Cubway” is Subway sandwiches; “Papa Fawn’s” is Papa John’s Pizza. The exception here is “Bamboo Paradise” which is a stir fry restaurant mentioned back in Trustworthy, chapter 8.

Rocky Cooper was first introduced in John’s flashback (Loyal, chapter 14) and is based on Rocket Raccoon from "The Guardians of the Galaxy". His surname comes from his voice actor in the movie, Bradley Cooper, and his aesthetic is based off SHIELD Director, Nick Fury. What he says at the end, “there ain't no thing like me 'cept me!” is from the first GotG movie.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
“Alright, settle down.” The patient tones of Chief Bogo struck through the raucous whooping, table-slamming, whistling, trumpeting, and howling of the ZPD’s Precinct 1 officers, if largely ignored until punctuated by a commanding, “Cork it! We’ve a few items on the docket before getting to everyone’s chore lists.

“First, someone let the cat out of the bag; Bob,” the Cape buffalo critically announced, and nearly the whole room flinched as his sharp, furrowed gaze focused on Officer Johnson to then say with a casual, almost congenial demeanor that did not break his standard placidity, “congrats on the new cub.” The lion was applauded by some and wrestled by others, but managed to hold his own until quieted down again.

“Second, I’ve been told by the Moose Room that I’m ‘not welcoming enough’ towards our new recruits and since we have however many joining today…” Chief Bogo dully recounted and then pulled out a noisemaker to give it a single, hearty blow only to toss it into a nearby wastebasket; his officers chuckled.

“Lastly, we give credit where credit is due. I think I can speak without hyperbole that Zootopia’s been besieged by NH Pollen. That said, every officer here has proven themselves stalwart in not only thwarting those who would distribute it but more importantly, protecting innocents from its influence, and serving those suffering its affliction so that they can receive the help they need.” The room was quiet for one proud, solemn moment as his deep eyes swept the lot of them.

“Assignments…” he then carried on, glasses perched on a broad schnozz to read off the names, locations, and duties to Zootopia.

Nick Wilde, being taller and (currently) more attentive than his partner, rose onto the very tips of his toes to reach his and Judy Hopps’s assignment and lead them both out into the hall. “Looks like we’re hitting the streets and copping the beats of a quaint little…” he began, ushering his partner around a corner by means of his tail to close the folder and crouch beside a ghastly rabbit,
“Carrots, you okay?”

Purple eyes blinked. “Yeah! Yeah…” she insisted and then held her own ears aloft with a forced smile, “See? No drooping here, no sir.”

The fox propped an elbow onto his knee to answer with a flat, hooded stare.

“I might’ve read something… disturbing last night,” Judy admitted, letting her ears droop so that she might wring her paws a bit.

Green eyes hooded a bit less as the overhead brow arched expectantly.

“It was some of the worst atrocities one mammal could do to another that I’ve ever had the misfortune to know about,” Judy explained, “described down to the finest detail. I’m thankful it wasn’t illustrated… very well, anyway, some of it was sketched in.” She groaned and huffed as her resolve returned, bit-by-bit, “It wasn’t objective like the coroner reports I breeze through, either, so I internalized a lot of it but couldn’t skim it. You see, Graham really wanted me to understand something and… I’m still not sure what he expected me to get out of it but we’ll talk tonight, and I could always convene with Esther since she read it, too.”

“You just need to get through today,” Nick inferred.

“Which I will accomplish by helping my fellow mammals, the compassion of my partner on the force, and coffee,” she brightly determined, already looking and sounding more like herself.

“And,” Nick baited with a wiggle of his tail, “we’ve still got the Luau coming up— That should be enough anticipation to bolster your spirits.”

Judy muted a squeak as her buck teeth poked through in a grin. “Alright, let’s have a look at our beat,” she instructed, walking past the standing fox to reference her notebook and the list of locations pinpointed by his father thirty years prior, “At this rate, we might be able to knock off the whole of City Center by the end of the month, so long as we’re careful about it.”

A bushy tail swept and buoyed with each step as the fox attached to it peered into the folder once more. “Half of it is already nixed, what with the passage of time and change that comes with it. Okay… is there a Mulberry Avenue on there?” he asked.

“Mulberry… there is!”

“Mark it as ‘probably not’, unless Magnus bought Hooflocker,” he promptly dismissed.

“It shall get a box with only one slash through it. Next?”

“Let’s see,” he thumbed a few, “Already did that one… that one’s an empty lot… how about Tique Street?”

“No Tique Street.”

“Guava Lane?”

“N— yes! Guava Lane, right here.”

“Put an empty box next to it, Officer Fluff, because we’ve got some snooping — I mean — policing to do,” Nick declared, clapping the folder shut as Judy marked it accordingly so that they could scurry off to the cruisers before all the good ones were swiped up.
What a night. Lanny should have known better than to take on that extra shift at the Pridelands loading dock, but someone from his pride popped a disc and was in no condition to move anything, so it was on his shoulders to pick up the slack (being the alpha and all). Extra work wasn’t a big issue, in of itself, except that it butt right up against his shift at Lions Gate General Hospital; nothing an energy drink or two couldn’t fix. What made it more of an issue was that Lanny also picked up another nurse’s shift because they had a family emergency (as in, a member of their family came into the emergency room and didn’t really have anyone else to bring them home). It wasn’t the first time Lanny would work through midnight and into the morning; nothing another energy drink or two couldn’t fix. The really big issue was the sudden influx of crashing Pollenheads from an overflow of a clinic in City Center.

The breath-of-life nurse shambled up to his apartment door and found that it was locked. So, he shouldered his duffel bag in such a way that he could reach into a pocket to pull out the necessary keys, of which there were many. It took an awful lot of cognitive power to check the first key on his ring but he seemed to have inserted it into the lock upside-down, and so he turned it right-side-up but that didn’t seem to work either (turns out he had it correct the first time, just at a bad angle); it wasn’t actually the right key, though. Lanny doubted but tried the next key, and then the next with decreasing dexterity (and increasing likelihood that he would accidentally break another key in the knob); all the energy drinks which gave him enough gumption to drive home had left him emptier than if he’d never drank them in the first place.

“Rosa?” he called through the door, leaning against his forehead as he gargled on his exhaustion, “Rosa! I forgot which key opens the door… again.” Lanny pressed his ear against the obstinate barrier (so rudely disallowing him to simply fall through and into his own apartment) but couldn’t distinguish any approaching steps. “Your alpha needs you, Rosa,” he beckoned, leaden eyelids hopelessly flicking up, pawing at the door as it groaned under his weight. The passage miraculously unbarred and he landed on the floor with all the grace of a discarded mattress.

Rosa, a lioness who styled the fur atop her head longer than most others of her species and gender, sighed at the display. “Don’t you fall asleep in the doorway again, ‘alpha’,” she rebuked, nudging his sack-of-flour head with her toe to elicit a groan. Rosa was part of his pride at the docks, a position she exemplified the utmost respect for since it kept things running smoothly, but off the docks, she was his roommate and friend (and at times, older sister, even though she was younger in age). With a powerful physique of her own to boast, the lioness stooped and looped his arm around her shoulders, heaving as the half-dead-weight of the larger lion proved its usual challenge in relocating.

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” Lanny muttered in apology, propping himself up as best he could. Rosa’s winded huff expressed how heavy he was, regardless, she kicked the door closed and locked it to the best of her ability before dragging his sorry carcass down the hall to his room, duffel bag trailing behind.

“Only by a few minutes,” Rosa explained.

He grunted in confusion. “What time is it?”

“A little bit before 6.”

He groaned in sincere dismay, weakly flailing. “Oh no, I need to get up and go to the docks, I’ll be late…”

“No,” Rosa denied and held his torso tighter, “you’re sleeping today, Lanny, we can’t have the other alphas seeing weakness in you; we’ve got a sweet setup,” she then grunted, trying to squeeze their combined masses through his bedroom door, “a sweet setup over on the east pier. They’ve
been gunning for your territory for years and if you can’t even keep your head up, then we’ll be the ones baking in the afternoon sun.”

“Why do they want the east pier, it’s the loudest part of the docks…?” Lanny idly pondered, eyelids uneven until he was nearly thrown onto his unmade bed, surrounded by posters of comic book heroes, movies he saw, concerts he attended, and a dresser with a photo of him and his uncles, Terry and Keith (though they weren’t related to him by blood). It was Uncle Keith whom he followed to become a nurse and from his brother Terry that Lanny won his role as alpha in their pride (the older, wiser lion still handled the nitty-gritty aspects of inter- and intra-pride politics); Lanny grew into the largest lion in the shipyard (if only by a hair’s breadth, in most cases) and became a symbol of strength and hard work for others.

It was no exaggeration to say that the wellbeing of his lions (among other large mammals, like some leopards and an especially sturdy hyena) depended on his performance. This, Rosa was intimately familiar with, and being the “alpha female” (a title as honorary as it was ubiquitous) brought it on herself to ensure that Lanny was in top condition for any posturing that could threaten their hierarchical equilibrium. “Alright, ya’ big lug, roll over,” she instructed, and proceeded to remove his pants in a manner ironically reminiscent of a nurse with their patient, “Did you shower before leaving the hospital?”

“Yes,” he groggily answered, shimmying out of his garment and climbing more atop his bed while she wrapped his sheets around him like an enchilada, “I was puked on tonight; twice.”

“You don’t say,” she reviled, tossing the removed pants onto the foul-smelling duffel bag and the soiled clothing within. “Did you tell your Director about that new job in Preds’ Corner…” she probed.

When Lanny came home from Bunnyburrow with the news that he might be moving out there, Rosa was more than a bit conflicted; he was gone nearly a week more than he’d said and it was all they could do to keep the other alphas at bay. Before that, Lanny had been in a quandary for some months, whether to accept a hospice position from his Director… for the ailing CEO of Pridelands Enterprises, Memphis King, a lion who had a nasty habit of firing his nurses on the suspicion of “poisoning him”. The writing was on the wall for Lanny: his Director wasn’t accepting any more of his excuses but some nurse doubling as a dockworker from Mr. King’s own company would not walk away unscathed (even a fellow lion). Upon his return, however, Lanny planned to use his inevitable termination as a jumping board to leave for some rinky-dink, boondocks clinic… She was almost glad that a top-of-the-line, world-renowned caretaker was flown in from another hemisphere in his absence.

On the other paw… what kind of friend would she be if she held him back from pursuing a better job… a better life? Rosa certainly wasn’t going to spend her prime juggling crates, she wanted to open up a family-run tea shop… Even Terry, the former alpha, stuck around mostly to keep an eye on the cubs that worked after school, even though he had a bachelor’s degree. And from the sounds of it, nursing out in the country would be such a rewarding experience; not some “part-time placeholder” (as a few doctors called him) or the polar opposite position of a dockyard alpha, constantly on guard for the next challenger as king of the hill. The exhausted, rolled-up rug of a lion before her spoke volumes about how much Lanny dedicated himself to the mammals around him, no matter where he was on the totem pole.

“I’ll tell them next we-” he petered off in a worsening cascade of slurred speech, settling into place before thrusting up from his bed, “I’m late for-!”

“No,” Rosa reminded as she pushed and tucked him back in again, “I’ll talk with Nat and Terry,
let them know what’s up; you’ll be fine.”

Lanny nestled into his pillow with a happy mewl. And then jerked again upon remembering that Natalia Boone was the fiercest (if youngest) foremammal Pridelands Enterprises ever had, easily out-posturing every foolhardy alpha that dared play any sort of games with her. “What? No, Nat will get mad at me if I don’t show up again…”

“She won’t,” the lioness assured, shoving his face into the pillow with one paw while the other wagged a finger, “Now stay. Nat’s much more tolerant of your absences than she is of others’,” Rosa explained, ruffled his mane, and then picked up the odorous duffel bag.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the lion argued if somewhat muffled by the comfort of his bed, finding he had enough energy to do so since he needn’t exert any effort to stand, “Nat hates me.”

A coy smirk curled Rosa’s dark lips. “Typical lion. Nat’s sweet on you but won’t ever admit it.”

“No, she respects my work ethic and integrity but she doesn’t like me,” he countered.

“Of course not,” she teased, “and you don’t ‘like’ her.”

A drowsy scowl attempted to peer over his shoulder to quote, “First rule of the docks: don’t court the foremammal.”

The quotation was joined by Rosa as she dumped out his clothes into the hamper, “‘Nothing good and everything bad will come of it’. We all abide by the rules, Lan.” His head collided with the pillow once more and so the lioness tossed the duffel bag to the floor and bit her bottom lip with a grin to no one present as she whispered, “Which is a shame~”

“Wait…” Lanny repeated and so Rosa groaned as she turned away from the door but before she could berate the assumed final attempt to go to work, she stopped and looked at his imploring face, “Have you heard back from Manny, yet? About… you know…”

Rosa put both her paws to her sleeping-shorts-clad hips and sighed, the tight sleeping shirt sagging some along with her; she was something of a go-between for Officer Manuel Delgato, her older brother, as he helped Lanny find out more about his parents’ circumstances since all he could remember of them was a car accident or something like it. “Not yet, he said it’d take longer to dig up any records but he’ll keep looking; he’s always been dependable,” the lioness reported and then flicked her head to toss the excess bed-fur from her eyes, “But what I would have given to see that Nick Wilde’s face when you told him that you were rooming with a sister of the ‘guy he knew’. ‘Sly fox’, indeed.”

Lanny half-muttered, half-chuckled while curling up in his covers a bit more. “At least he’s good for backstage passes to the Luau.”

Vague affirmation and some sarcastic scoffing were muffled by the closing bedroom door… until Rosa flung it back open, eyes bugging. “You have backstage passes to the Luau?” she demanded through her fangs.

“The lion sleeps today~” Lanny melodiously murmured, face turned away from his seething, bristling roomie as he drifted off.

Rosa, and the doorway she braced against, vibrated as she gave such an evil eye to the reposed alpha lion. “You’d best take plenty of selfies with Gazelle, Lanny Wild, or so help me …!!” she fumed and then slammed the door.
“Faster,” the old goat bleated and started the timer again, “and harder.”

“Yessir,” Bo answered.

“Don’t talk, Briar, punch!”

Bo bellowed before the next command and swung with every ounce of might his muscles afforded him to punch a hole through the sandbag, its granular essence erupting out the back in a grisly spray. The brown rabbit heaved and gripped his knees, shaking from toes to ears and sweating everywhere in between, even though it wasn’t yet late morning and he only wore a pair of shorts and some paw-wrappings.

Phil looked on with a dull concern, referenced the stopwatch before pocketing it, and then handed his newest (and likely enough, final) rookie some water and a towel. “What was that just now?” he stoically asked.

A trembling paw accepted both, getting the liquid exertion off his face before popping the cap and dousing his thirst. That night at the notary haunted him still, ‘We’re plenty similar, you and I…” Magnus taunted, ‘You need a little steel is all.’ That sharply-dressed bunny packed a mean wallop and his gut still felt bruised from it. “I guess…” Bo said with a shrug, “I just meant it, is all.”

The goat’s red nose idly flared as his arms crossed. “C’mon, let’s sit, have a rest,” he offered, pulling a pair of boxes from under the shelf in the expansive storage room which they were so that they could both take a load off, “I know I asked you this before but why do you wanna fight in the MMA?”

Further ruffling of the towel preceded any other action to better dry off the trainee, and then in proper fashion, the fur was stroked down as neatly as it could get. “I fight so that I can get noticed for my hyperatrophy formula,” he explained, sitting himself down.
“Na’ah ,” Phil bleated, “I ain’t psychic but I can tell that ain’t why you’re fighting.”

Bo bashfully frowned. “I mean… it was why, until I found out that I could probably just hand my formula to Hexward if I really wanted to,” he admitted, “I’m already pretty famous as it is… or I will be once I permit Knotash to tell the rest of the city about me. The MMA would give me the right kind of notice, though.”

“Fame, huh…” the goat said, “There are easier ways to get fame than punchin’ someone else’s lights out. Same with glory and money, things that could fall away when pitted against that primal fear lurking in all of us. So what is it, what puts steel in you?”

Brown eyes flickered and blinked in confusion. “Isn’t that what the training is for…?”

“I can’t put you steel in you,” Phil admitted matter-of-factly, “no one can except you. It comes from a reason to go that distance, to put up yer dukes and give not even an inch. Used to be soldiers and warriors fought for their lives,” he explained, “when they were backed into a corner and had nowhere to go but forward. That puts steel in a mammal. The MMA… it’s not a life-or-death thing and someone your size doesn’t have the luxury of scrapping for the thrill of it; you gotta make sure that your reason can stand a punch or else you're beat before stepping into the ring. It’s a hard pill to swallow, bunny, but you’ll be going up against mammals that favor ‘fight’ over ‘flight’.”

Bo thought on it some more, even shrinking some as he ruminated on the well-known and documented reactions to surges of adrenaline in some species. ‘I do what has to be done when something has to be done,’ Magnus echoed, so Bo shook his head. “I fight for… all the bunnies who have the same disorder as me,” he then decided, sitting upright with his chest out, “To show them that—”

‘All the bunnies,’ Phil challenged, “Can you picture them?”

He paused in continued thought. “I… can picture… twelve of them,” he then solemnly resolved, “I know their names, their faces, how many breaths they took before…” and then halted.

Phil frowned, leaning forward a bit to study the disparaged face. “I might be wrong but I don’t think tha’s how bunnies remember those they lost… assuming these bunnies you remember are lost.”

“They are,” Bo said, “And it’s not, I mean… I wouldn’t be fighting for them… I guess I wouldn’t even be fighting for myself… I always wanted to be like Captain Warren but that isn’t quite it, I don’t think… Judy!” he then excitedly declared, “I will fight for Judy.”

Bushy eyebrows arched with an accepting bob of the head. “She needs fighting for?” he idly wondered, “Strong girl like her, seems like she’s the one that’d go a few rounds in the Septagon if need be. Besides, you thinking of her prob’ly puts butterflies in your stomach. Them goo-goo eyes won’t do bupkis to your opponent.”

Bo’s ears went pink and pinned back. “What do I fight for…?” he asked, brow furrowed and jaw set, feet slowly thumping the air, back and forth before his ears then sprung and nose wiggled, the plastic bottle crinkling in his grip somewhat as he looked to Phil, and then about, and then to Phil again. “I have… a friend…”

“Yeah?”

“They … understand a part of my life that I only just found out about…” he carefully explained, “I
never knew who my parents were and... well, my mother...” the rabbited groaned under his breath, “She died at childbirth.”

“Oh...” Phil paused, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Bo shook his head, “I wasn’t looking for sympathy, Mr. Octaves, don’t get me wrong, I just wanted to preface that this friend is in a... similar situation, in that regard, and how she -- they handled it, growing up. They set out to be the best at everything they could whether it was school or sports or... whatever, because they felt like they needed to live for both themselves and their mother; to make her proud for the life she gave. She -- they aren’t quite in the same boat as me because their dad is still alive but I think there are parallels that I can draw from.”

Phil’s bearded jaw tilted in a sort of smirk. “Is this ‘friend’ of yours Esther Grey?” he asked and was answered by a nervous flinch and denial, “Don’t worry, I heard about it from Goliath; and knowing who you know, it wasn’t a hard leap to make. So, you want to give your folks some life by being the first bunny to win the MMA belt?” The old goat huffed and smiled, “As far as reasons go, it’s not bad, something to work with, I think. Can you picture them?”

“I can, yes,” Bo quickly said, “Mr. McTwisp gave me a photo of them, a few photos, and even some videos! I’m still...” he paused, “still getting to know them, I guess. I found out that my father... he was going to become the first rabbit cop before he died.” Saying it out loud filled Bo with such a weight that he could hardly believe that he hadn’t broken through the floor and fallen through to the center of the planet... yet it only proved to harden his resolve. “I... I want to do something amazing like that... for him. But I won’t live very long past my prime... so whatever I do, it can’t be long term, like joining the sheriff’s office or police force,” he then couldn’t help but chuckle, “So... I guess it is for fame but... not for me.”

The horned head curtly nodded, for the conversation of Bo’s hyperatrophy was already said and done. “I’ll be honest, I wasn’t sure how a rusty, washed-up trainer like me was going to get a bunny to the championship, especially since it’s not too far off; most’ve already been training for the last month. Plus I never knew you to be an aggressive species, but,” he reconsidered, “after talking with a few of the Burrow Watch, I learned that bunnies can be real brawlers when it came down to it. You just need... the right thing that’ll prime your pumps, but I’ll tell you what I tell all my rookies: a hero fights as if it were their last and a fiend fights as if it’s their first. Think on it,” he philosophically waxed as he stood, “That’s enough training for today.”

“Actually, I’m feeling okay, Mr. Octaves, I think I can-”

“Na’ah,” he bleated again, huffing, “Rest is just as important, you know that and some schmuck punched sand all over the place,” he pointed out, “Clean up this mess and then yourself, we’ve got to get this watering hole set up before any of my regulars arrive.”

Bo stood and saluted. “Yessir!”

Even though there were two other places where cider and hard spirits were available in Preds’ Corner, they were either more of a micro-brewery (or locally-owned distillery, depending on whom was asked) or was newly sprung when pro-predator sympathies became something of a passing fad immediately after the Pred-Scare, and so the Brambles experienced a minor wave of gentrification. A set of black wolf triplets originally owned Shady’s until they moved on when it was then bought and renamed as Phil’s, to mixed reviews. With the denizens of Preds’ Corner returned from their cruise, Phil expected his normal assortment of customers to fill his bar stools once again. He wasn’t expecting anyone until the afternoon, however.

“Well, speak of the devil,” the old goat said under his breath, if amiable, still righting stools as the
late-morning sun peeked in through the open door, “Wasn’t expecting you this early, Goliath.”

The large fox shrugged and smiled behind the curtains of his bangs, a hefty duffel bag set down beneath the bar on which he leaned while smoothing out a flannel shirt of weathered blue and dreary gray. “Only stopping by to pay my tab; the usual,” he explained, pulling his wallet from a denim pocket to sift through the bills inside, “I could be getting some juice for the road, though.”

“Is it that time of the month already?” the goat teased, waddling around the permanent fixture of Erym, a pitch-black boar, on one end of the bar, “You look like you need something to calm your nerves,” Phil said, readying a drink with a single drop of something hard that was diluted with a mix of cranberry juice and strong iced tea, soon exchanged for the cash to close out the tab; per the norm.

“You’re a lifesaver, Phil,” Goliath said, nodding his thanks to the barkeep and received his change before raising the glass in a toast and downing it with a grateful sigh. An ice cube was then slipped into his mouth to idly suckle and crunch on.

Bo -- promptly rinsed, dried, and clothed -- popped into view with an eager wave. “Mr. Grey, hi!” he said, causing the large fox to about vault from his fur.

“Bo!” he exclaimed, coughing and spitting the chunks of ice back into his glass. He wiped his mouth and eyed the brown bunny. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here,” he happily reported, to which Phil begrudged a grunting nod, “part-time, anyway, and Phil’s training me,” Bo continued, demonstrating with a hopping stance from side-to-side and a few quick jabs at the air. It was then he noticed the duffel bag. “Where’re you going, didn’t you just come back from a cruise?” he asked.

The large fox cleared his throat, “Yeah, I got a call about some business a ways off,” he explained, giving his bag a gentle kick to rattle some of the tools inside, “Something that wouldn’t do anyone any good by bringing here.”

A brown mitt of a paw flicked at the wrist to point with a wink, “Ah, gotcha. Be sure to snap a picture of it, I’ll want to see what this big thing turns out to be!”

Goliath nodded. “Yeah, I’ll see if I can,” he said and then smiled some, as it looked like the brown rabbit was about to ask something else, “Actually, Bo, you’re from the Honey Hills, aren’t you? Ma,” and then chuckled, “Sorry, you know her as ‘Ruth’ -- has been trying to get a hold of them all morning about ordering some honey but her usual contact isn’t picking up. Could you possibly put her in touch with anyone there?”

“I definitely could!” Bo assured with a bright grin, “In fact, let me just finish setting up a few things and I’ll hop on over.”

“Just go ahead with the tables, Briar, the chairs won’t break my back,” Phil said.

The large fox chuckled again. “Thank you, Bo.” He then shouldered the weight of his baggage and left.

3…

The sun had set. The day was done. It was time to go wild.

2…
The moon rose. Beams of silver clashed like swords with the spotlights dancing to a faint thunder of music.

1...

The stars above joined the stars below, teasing one another across the streaming gradient of wispy clouds.

“Hello, Zootopia!”

The “Dress in Drag and Do the Hula” Luau for Lost Youngin’s was in full swing, hosted by the King family at the Zootennial Arena for a charity concert while simulcast to four different venues across the city, music festivals wherein anyone was welcome to join in the merriment. Above all was the Lions Gate shipyard, cleared and set up to project a hologram of the stage across the bay during each performance through the night.

Gazelle had only just returned to the city from a months-long tour of the nation, coast-to-coast, inspired to spread the love of a reunited society after the Pred-Scare nearly rent it asunder. Her Tigritos, clad in flapping floral shirts, and leis flanked her on stage, she in a prismatic beach dress styled to resemble a formal gown with a slit up one side; her curling horns were adorned with blossoms and scant fronds, strings of shells to match the assortment down her curvaceous physique. The “Angel with Horns”, radiant and fair, sang amongst her dancing entourage, each step, flex, arch, and tail twitch timed to the music...

Let us show~ the world~ the stre~ngth inside us all...

Sta~nd with me~ Raise your voices to the sta~rs!

We sing!

(We sing!)

For tho~se who cannot spea~k

We dance!

(We dance!)

To a fu~ture where we can be~

True~ to one another...

Ju~st to one and all...

Join me si~ster, bro~ther...

In sta~ndi~ng tall~

Toge~the~r!

(Together!)

Hoo~f in paw~

Toge~the~r!
(As one!)

*Love will never lead us wrong...*

The bridge and verses continued in vibrant magnificence until the music grew solemn and the lights all focused on center stage. It opened as Gazelle gracefully waltzed to the side and up slowly spun a grand piano adorned with a tropical fare, upon which she hopped onto the end of and sat in all her beauty as the pianist, an older lion in a subdued shirt, joined in rich baritone…

*Toge~ther~r...*

*Though the road was hard, was long...*

*We'll sta~nd uni~ted...*

*A bond, by hearts, made stro~ng...*

The maned head leaned back as two of the tigers tossed a flowered lei around it each as, in an instant, the stage lights burst into exquisite colors all across the arena, the music peaking to a heart-pounding crescendo as the lion stood from his piano bench and electrified the keyboard, the LEDs on his shirt alive with dancing spectrums around each flower petal design as his roaring low was joined with Gazelle’s angelic high…

*Toge~ther~r!*

*(Together!)*

*We sing!*

*(We sing!)*

*For tho~se who cannot spea~k*

*Toge~ther~r!*

*(As one!)*

*We dance!*

*(We dance!)*

*To a fu~ture where we can be~*

*True~ to one another...*

*Ju~st to one and all...*

*Join me si~ster, bro~ther...*

*In sta~nding tall~*

*Toge~ther~r!*

Sam Wild, a legend amongst the music scene and famed lounge singer, continued in the vivacious duet with Gazelle to the cheer of the crowd and the dance of the *Tigritos* …
Nick donned the most ostentatious luau shirt he could find (quite possibly in the whole city), the colors clashed, practically warred in their obnoxious brightness but he wore it without care and, as he promised, completely unbuttoned.

Judy’s shirt was colorful but caused less corneal discomfort by far, depicting sand dollars and conch shells in cheery hues. Each ear boasted a feather-light clip of dainty blossoms up each edge to the very tip, and teeny seashell bracelets sitting at each base.

Esther had her own beach dress, a casual assortment of wavy blues, foamy greens, and sandy whites (if, perhaps, a bit low cut in both the front and the back).

Bo… was unable to make the trip due to his training, on such a tight schedule as he was. He sent his happy wishes, though, and wanted to hear about everything after it was all over.

Gideon was purchased some “luau-y” clothes, something with curling seashells of white-on-white embroidery with only the faintest hint of a seashore blue which he, like his cousin (who insisted on how it was worn), left unbuttoned. He was also convinced to wear a humble sarong, even if he wasn’t told that it was only a tropical waist wrap while nearly everyone else wore cargo shorts of some variety.

Lory found a shirt that went well with her overalls… until she was escorted into a changing room and was not allowed to come out until she finally agreed to wear a comfortable coral-and-sunset beach dress (though unsure how one was supposed to “get about in such a thing…”). Any compliment Gideon might’ve given was incoherent amidst his stuttering.

Lanny’s shirt was reminiscent of a seaside cliff overlook, with greens and grays and whites that invoked a feeling of calm more than excitation. When he saw Gideon’s sarong and mentioned that he considered wearing one himself, the farm-fox felt less self-conscious.

Benjamin Clawhauser was “surprised” with the seventh of Nick’s backstage passes, quietly trembling with anticipation not ten feet away in the break room, one fateful day… He’d just heard Officer Wilde loudly wonder to Officer Hopps as to whom he could possibly give the extra pass on such short notice (the one it was intended for seemingly dropped out last minute). Benny wore his finest palm-frond shirt to the event, barely able to contain his abject excitement.

Arthur Bogo was “totally not bribed” with the eighth and final backstage pass that Nick could get his paws on, thus allowing the three officers (and one chief of police) the night off to attend. His shirt was something he found in the back of his closet, probably unworn in ages (not that he remembered or cared when he’d first gotten it).

The night continued with tables of food, interchanging bands on the stage, and numerous charity auctions (all silent) to raise funds for scholarships, youth centers, orphanages, underprivileged families, and children’s hospitals, not only in Zootopia but across the nation and world. The group had dispersed in the early part of the evening to mingle, admire (or bid on) the auctions, eat, or to simply dance to those performing on stage.

Several selfies and pictures were snapped, filling their phones as Judy, Esther, and Benny fangirled over the outfits worn by Gazelle (each displayed in a posing, antlered mamequin) with associated… pieces for her Tigritos that went up for auction, depending on the concert, event, or photo-shoot.

Lanny managed to convince Lory into joining him in the moshpit area while AWOLFNATION took the stage, finding a shared appreciation of the band and the dance-invoking rhythm. The band itself was not known for its… tropical or easy-listening stylings but to hear their particular brand of
music played on the ukelele was certainly a novel experience.

Arthur remained stoic and detached, nursing a coconut drink as his dull gaze drifted from one group and then the other while Gideon stayed nearby, munching on delectables. They conversed with one another, from time-to-time, and there were some that recognized and chatted with the Chief of Police; any small talk was concise (some might say “curt”), and news cameras that hovered about were agreed as “too much of a nuisance”.

Nick was… some where, ducking in and out of the crowd, seen schmoozing with one mammal or buddying up to another. He was a will-o’-the-wisp, appearing only long enough to be noticed, remembered, and then out of mind the next instant only to pop up somewhere else entirely. Before too long, and as the final act was nearly upon them, he’d gathered and ushered the lot of them backstage. “Alright, everyone, I’ve had to pull several strings and owe plenty of favors to get you all here, so as a common courtesy we’ll be meeting my ‘guy I know’ to give him proper thanks.”

“Ooh , the ‘mysterious benefactor’, ” Judy mused, “and here I thought a magician never revealed their secrets.”

“Well, it’s because I love each and every one of you,” he said with endearing smiles and finger pointing all around (Benny paused his electric anticipation long enough to reciprocate the platonic love with a cheek-puffing moan). His ear flicked as he turned about and wrapped on the backstage door, “Everyone got their passes?”

Everyone confirmed that they did, and in doing so, coincided with the door opening to reveal Gazelle’s stage manager: a towering tiger of snowy white fur and deep, piercing blue eyes, his frame nearly filling the passage as he opened the door. Unlike the festiveness out in the open, his was an austere utilitarian wardrobe, an olive polo shirt and khaki cargo pants, headset and tablet, cap and digital watch. He did wear a lei, though. His gaze went first to Nick and it was as cordial as could be, grinning to bump his cement block of a fist with the fox. “Nick , you tricky punk, how are ya’?” he greeted.

“Ty , we should meet up more often than the biggest party of the year,” he retorted, “Guys and gals, may I introduce Tyler Pounceski, a friend since grade school and close confidante.”

“Pounceski?” Esther and Judy said together and then the former asked, “Kris’s son?”

The tiger groaned in dawning and amused realization. “This is not the first time that I’ve been heard of,” he said to them both as he checked and confirmed their passes with his tablet, a merry chime sounding for each walking with ease beneath his outstretched arm holding the door open. “It seems I’m at the disadvantage here,” he joked.

Both Gideon and Lory checked their passes, greeted, and walked under his arm without so much as needing to duck their heads. Benny followed, if more energetically and needing to wiggle through, boasting a bit more girth than they. And then Lanny approached. His crimson, fiery eyes locked with the cerulean, icy ones of Ty and all assumed niceties were dropped, especially since the tiger’s striped limb crossed the lion’s maned chest… until it released the door and held out a palm for his pass.

Lanny, experienced in the ways of the concert goers and club bouncers, removed the lanyard from his neck to hand it over to the monochromatic gatekeeper. They both stood straight and tall, shoulders squared and chests thrust out, jaws and brows locked in place, eyes hardly quivering to relinquish an iota of attention. How quiet it grew, the buzz of conversation and partying nearly deafened, mixed with the activity of setting up the Luau’s final act as Ty checked the profile on his tablet. And then Lanny’s face. And then his tablet once again with a grunt of affirmation. Only
then did he swipe the pass, and not until the light chimed green was it returned. The maned head nodded succinctly, barely jostling a degree as he received it and looped the lanyard once more around his neck.

“Jeez,” Gideon was about to criticize before a chittering hush from his cousin swiftly intercepted him, Nick then made the slicing notion near his neck to emphasize what a supremely bad idea it would be to intervene.

“This is an alpha thing,” Lory whispered directly into her boyfriend’s perked ear, who was herself adept in the mannerisms of alphas, born and raised in a wolf pack, “Tha’s just them shaking paws, is all.”

“Nothing that the likes of us foxes and other small mammals need to worry ourselves about,” Nick added behind his paw.

“But isn’t it fascinating?” Judy marveled, “It’s like they communicate through thought alone! This must be Ty’s domain, so since Lanny is a visitor he must abide by his authority. I bet this would be an entirely different scenario if we were at the dockyard.”

“Evening,” Arthur greeted, holding up his pass for the tiger to succinctly check and then proceeded onward (even as Ty nodded his head out of the way of the buffalo’s horn).

Gideon pondered. “That was another bit of alpha-ing, I wager,” he suggested to Lory.

She giggled. “I think so.”

“So,” Ty then said, closing and securing the door before walking around to the front of the group to lead them away from it, “I’m not sure of all that Nick’s filled you in on but you’re not here for a tour, necessarily. You see, no one is allowed to come backstage without Gazelle’s express, individual approval.” The group collectively stopped and caught their respective breaths (some more than others) and Ty turned about to address them… and Nick directly, “You didn’t tell them?”

“I…” he responded, ears flicking awkwardly before casually answering, “knew Gazelle could veto any sort of guests but from the way you put it, she has specific reasons for meeting us… individually. Or am I reading that wrong?”

The tiger’s lopsided smile paired with a quirk of the eyebrow. “And here I thought the night wouldn’t be interesting,” he chuckled, “She’ll receive you in the green room. This way.”

“Nick,” Lory beseeched, hurrying up behind him, “It seems silly to ask but I’m jus’ tagging along, right? She can’t really know or wanna see me … right?”

“Don’t worry,” he assured, “Whatever happens just keep cool and play along, it’s probably just interest by proxy.”

“Wilde,” Arthur then intervened, “What are you playing at?”

“Nothing,” he insisted, “I only got us back here, any reason Gazelle would want to see you is your own darn fault.”

He snorted hot breath to sift the scarlet fur. “I agreed to come along because I knew the Supais would be at the Luau but if I find out this is another of your tricks …”

“Sir, please,” Nick argued, “I just spent all of my political capital and then some on boasting about
how well connected I am; if I wanted to pull a prank on you I wouldn’t go to such lengths as this when a phone call would be far more efficient and funnier. Plus, Captain Kela is keeping an eye on Precinct 1 and he’s already in a huffy mood, so making it worse would be the stupidest possible thing I could do.”

It was then that Esther threw herself at her mate, arms about his neck to kiss his lips with an elated trill. Simultaneously, Judy also grabbed him around his neck and kissed his cheek while Benny hoisted them all, burying them into the shirted cushion of his belly in a gushing hug as his cheeks rubbed on the embracing trio.

“Oh, Blue!” Esther praised, “I couldn’t have imagined that I’d actually get to meet Gazelle! I don’t know how you did it but you truly are amazing!”

“I know it’s a long list to choose from, Slick, but this has to be one of your most incredible feats!” Judy declared, eyes bright as spotlights, “I figured we’d get to see her and the Tigritos just before they went on stage but I can’t have imagined a face-to-face!”

Benny let out a whooping yowl of exultation. “Thank you, Sly, this has been my dream ever since Gazelle released her very first single! It’s like every birthday gift ever, all rolled into one!”

Lanny crouched down to whisper implicatively to Gideon. “She doesn’t want to see us.”

“Nah,” Gideon agreed in a whisper, “Like he said, ‘int’rest by proxy’, it’s them she wants to talk to and we’re along for the ride, is all.”

“This is going to be the best night ever!” Esther exclaimed.

Chapter End Notes

Chief Bogo references the Precinct's nickname for the Mammal Relations/MR (Human Relations/HR) office, and the officer who sits at the desk is actually a moose, thus, "The Moose Room".

“Hooflocker” is the Zootopia analog of “Footlocker” (I imagine this is where horseshoes are made and, rather than nailed to the hooves, they are slipped on and fashioned, just like human shoes). The purpose for such an invention would be to prevent lasting damage to and from hooves.

Keeping in the theme of Prideland Enterprises analogizing "The Lion King", Natalia Boone is Zootopia's mirror of Nala ("nala" = gift in Swahili, a synonym for "boon" or "Boone").

Officer Manuel Delgato is a character designed by my friend, Nievelion, in his Zootopia story, “To Mend a Broken Heart”, and used here with permission.

The Mammalian Martial Arts circuit (analogous to the Mixed Martial Arts circuit) is fought in a Septagon instead of an octagon (presumably because 7 is luckier than 8).

In Trustworthy chapter 12, there were two other “watering hole” places that Bo points out to Nick on their way to Phil’s and they are better described here. Additionally, the previous tavern is a reference to the Cerberus from the movie “Hercules”, and the
name rhymes with "Hades", the same movie with Phil (the Satyr who trained Hercules) and Erym (the giant boar that Hercules fought).

["a hero fights as if it were their last and a fiend fights as if it’s their first"] This is similar to a quote Chess told John in a flashback of Loyal, chapter 18.

["Dress in Drag and Do the Hula” Luau for Lost Youngin’s] was first mentioned back in Brave, chapter 11, and is based off Timon & Pumbaa from “The Lion King”.

[Zootennial Arena] Is one of the original names for the venue of Gazelle's concert at the end of the movie.

[mammequin] is a pun on "mammal" and "mannequin".

[palm-frond shirt] This references Clawhauser's original character design in an initial draft of the Zootopia script. Additionally, Lanny was originally in a sarong (like Gideon) but I decided that, or reasons that will make more sense in the next chapter, to put him in jeans, instead.

[AWOLFNATION] is a pun on the band AWOLNATION.

Sam Wild was first mentioned probably in Brave, chapter 11, and is a reference to Samson, from the movie "The Wild".

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
"Foxes don’t lie to each other, and they don’t keep secrets from each other."

-Nicky Wilde ("The Neverwere Moments", Volume 2: "Brave", chapter 1)

The glitz and glamor fell as the backstage pass-holders became privy to such nitty-gritty of so grand a production as the Luau. It was no surprise to some as pulleys were pulled, spotlights lit, and stage crews staged the next performance; Judy, Esther, and Benny were avid concert-goers (of Gazelle, specifically), as was Lanny (though not of her, necessarily), and Nick was simply the type to be found in the woodworks and scaffolding in his previous life of a backstreet hustler. Lory was no stranger to mechanical whatnots but was still absorbing the big city and all its splendor (and whatever reason Gazelle had for seeing her); Arthur was ever stoic (and a little peeved in that he still suspected Nick’s intent for enticing him with a backstage pass). Gideon was, perhaps, the most out of his depth; luckily, he had a grip on Lory’s paw, for mutual emotional support.

Ty touched a finger to his headset to listen in, paused from grasping the green room door. “They’re beginning the main auction of the evening,” he reported to his charge while checking his watch, “a little late… I guess that gives us a bit more time to breathe,” the tiger then mused.

Benny trembled with anticipation and lament. “A chance to dance on stage with Gazelle and her Tigritos… I would so be out there bidding but I’d never win,” he pouted in tandem with Judy and Esther, “The hype’s been a wildfire all this month and I know that opening bids would be way above my budget… Oh well!” the cheetah excitedly accepted, “No one out there will get a one-on-one with -- Gazelle!” Benny squealed.

“Provided we don’t have long to wait,” Arthur passively critiqued all the while he played rearguard as Ty held the door open for the lot of them to enter. He about ran into Lanny, however, who about tripped over Lory and Gideon, who about collided with Benny, who almost steamrolled Esther, Nick, and Judy; so, the Cape buffalo grunted his annoyance as to what everyone was stopping for but before he could voice any concern…

“Gazelle!” Benny squealed, his fists bundled under his cheeks as he, Judy, and Esther gawked at the starlet reposed upon one of the cushioned chairs of the modestly lavish green room. It seemed to be a permanent fixture of the backstage area since it was furnished more like a living room or break room, complete with a functional mini-kitchen and a wall-mounted, flat-screen TV (which had a muted display of what was currently happening on-stage).

“Alright, let’s all get inside before we faint,” Nick chastised, he and Lanny ushering the three starstruck mammals further along so that the stage managing white tiger could close the door.

“Huh, so it was the celebrity kept waiting, this time,” the buffalo observed under his breath, eyebrow arched with genuine amusement towards the “Angel with Horns”. Gazelle was not done up in any manner of prestigious attire but rather a simple robe securely tied and covering to her knees (if with a luxurious plush of mane around the collar), her bouncy locks were pinned back and make-up mostly removed, at least down to the foundation. Still, she had a certain homely radiance
about her as she stood, seeming so much smaller off-stage, even accounting for the heeled shoes that played into her iconography at any other time.

She smiled, a sweet and modest curl of the lips that, paired with one hoof held out and the other at her waist, gave her the appearance more of a humble housemaid than Zootopia’s biggest star. “Hello,” Gazelle said, and by that single word caught the breath of three specific mammals, “Please, come in, sit. Make yourselves comfortable. There is water in the fridge if you are thirsty or perhaps you would like some soda?” The air hung a bit before she approached and greeted each one individually while the others dispersed some to make room.

“Gazelle~” Benny repeated, eyes shimmering as she leaned in and grasped both his paws in her hooves, “It is an honor beyond words to finally meet you…” he revered.

“The feeling is mutual, Benjamin Clawhauser,” she said to his utter shock, “I recall that you are not only the foremost but a founding member of my fan club on FuzzBook, and moderator for the page,” the starlet said, causing his ears to pin and blush as he gnawed his dark bottom lip. “You also won the ‘Dance for the Chance’ contest some years back… I only regret that the age limit kept you from accepting the grand prize…”

“It was meant to go to school kids anyway…” the cheetah rued but smiled all the same, “I mean, I already had my degree and was at the ZPD so I didn’t need a full-ride scholarship.”

“Yes, and even though an exception was willing to be made on your behalf you ceded to the runner-up, allowing them to dance with me, and was even the first to promote their video on ZooTube,” Gazelle admired, “You’ll be happy to know that they are being scouted for the Royal Ballet in Liondon and will be graduating soon.” She then said to him and the group at large, “So, I would like to extend an invitation to you and your friends to dance with me in the closing number for the Luau tonight.”

The air in the green room was all sucked into the gasping lungs of the combined Benny, Esther, and Judy (the latter, whose powerful empathy projected on others like a beacon, became a rebounding tidal wave of elation, such that even Bogo cracked a smirk). After the initial shock, however, Nick, Gideon, and Lory each declined as politely as possible (and Arthur with as guttural noise as was in him to make… while also maintaining a certain etiquette).

“Much appreciated, Gazelle, but I’m not a dance-on-stage-in-front-of-millions kind of fox,” Nick assured with an easy smile, “but I would be happy to watch from back stage all the same.”

“Aye, me, too,” Gideon agreed, “Thank you for the offer, Ms. Gazelle.”

“And me,” Lory meekly said, “Well, wolf, but you get what I’m saying. Thank you, Ms. Gazelle, but I’d just freeze up faster than spit in winter.”

Gazelle nodded and giggled as she invited everyone to sit with her on the chairs (which Ty had just finished rearranging so that they could all see each other). The starlet was joined on a couch by her three biggest, brightest fans while Gideon and Lory shared one with Lanny, and Nick and Arthur each had a chair of their own (the former comfortably sprawled and the latter patiently crossing his arms).

“So, that explains Benny,” Nick observed, “but I find it hard to believe that we were all called in on his account; logically speaking.”

“Nick,” Judy nearly hissed behind her paw to his shrug.
“It is alright, Judy Hopps,” Gazelle said, earning her attention, “He is correct, I have my own reasons for seeing… at least most of you,” she mused -- judging by at whom she looked, it was evident that both Gideon and Lory were very relieved -- and then shot the tiger a playfully withering look, “Ty would never permit backstages passes to anyone who was not given a thorough background check, and it was then that I discovered whose great-great-niece you were.”

Violet eyes widened and sparkled as Judy cupped her mouth. “You’re talking about Laverne Hopps?”

The horned head inclined in a single nod. “Laverne Hopps is a legend; in an age before stereo equipment and sound mixing technology, she filled an opera house with her voice and spirit alone. I was delighted to find out that you are her descendent and though I’ve only ever seen her likeness, I’ve studied all forty-eight of her written works and every piece of literature I could find… I know her story very well. It is because of Laverne that I sell my outfits for charity, just as she did with her opera gowns.”

Judy shied dramatically. “Well, Aunt Lovey never actually mated so I’m not descendent, per se, I’m just related…”

“I daresay you inherited her spirit. She did the right thing because it was the right thing to do… and after I heard about the machinations of Dawn Bellwether,” Gazelle continued, and so dropped her gentle demeanor for only a second to project indignation and disgust, but promptly returned, “I came to realize how the whole of the city was manipulated and played for fools…” she then turned in address, “Esther Grey… I know you, too, are a fan of mine… and might I say that I am a fan of yours.”

Esther muted a squeak. “But I…?”

“When I started my journey, I vowed to never let hatred and anger take hold in my heart… for it would surely taint my message of love and forgiveness. But…” she admitted to some minor protests, “I felt nothing but contempt for Leodore Lionheart, however deceived that he was the villain of the Pred-Scare, I rose my voice against him… and then after Bellwether’s arrest… it was not until his trial did I find it in my heart to forgive him. I realized that he, too, was a victim of the Pred-Scare, despite wrongful those poor predators… and were it not for you, Esther, I fear that the justice of the DA would have been blinded not by objectivity, but by rage.”

“Oh… wow…” the vixen quietly voiced, smiling all the while.

Gazelle then stood but bid everyone else remain seated and seemed to shy a bit as she approached, “Arthur Bogo… forgive me my filly’s turn but I must say that it truly is an honor to finally meet you.”

Arthur did stand and held out his hoof to her. “Thank you, Gazelle, and yes, I am a fan,” he admitted aloud, “Not that it’s any surprise to my officers here but there are no thanks needed for my work in the ZPD; helping others is its own reward.”

She grasped his hoof in both of hers and beamed up at him. “True, you have done wonders for this beautiful city,” to which he played as smug dismissal of such a trifle, “but… I would ask it as a favor that you join me on stage… for you see, it has always been a dream of mine to dance with a legend, such as yourself.”

The buffalo’s features fell as he looked her face up and down. “Umm…” he articulated, cleared his throat, looked about at the impossibly brighter and questioning eyes of everyone around him, “I’m… not entirely sure what you’re referring to…”
“Lying,” Nick coughed as discreetly under his breath as he could. It seemed that, to the fox’s great fortune, his boss didn’t catch that particular hijink of his widely-boasted lie-detecting, and so the interaction could continue undeterred.

Both ungulates were guided back to a sitting position with herself on the arm (and Benny looking like he was watching stars collide). “As I’m sure you, one of my dearest fans, are aware that I too trained under William Kazar,” she explained with some mixture of pride and shame, speaking again in that momentary voice of indignation, “Terrible specist that he was… the gnu’s genius in dance and choreography could not be denied. His classes were… and still are exclusive, only a select few learn under him. He scouted talent from all social classes and I was one of his students… as were you. And to my knowledge, he still keeps your likeness up on his Wall of Fame.

“I remember how he would go on about his ‘lost star’, how you ‘threw it all away’ to join the military… and though you came home, still in your prime, you joined the ZPD instead of returning to the stage. Even so, you became the standard for male, ungulate dancers in his eyes.” Gazelle then smiled sadly, as though a painful memory welled up in her. “And… it was only ungulate dancers he ever taught… except for one.

“Whom I speak of was my age and so in my class…” Gazelle said, pivoting where she sat to once more address the group, crossing a leg over the other, “Kazar would have never let him join but how he could turn down the son of…” she paused and considered, “someone of such prestige? He was not a good dancer but he was passionate and willing to learn and learn he did, skill improving to anyone with eyes. Unfortunately, a cub cannot grow hooves…” she lamented, bitterly so as she looked down at her own dainty ones which she lightly tapped to the hardwood floor beside the rug, “Because his paws were padded, silent, his steps could not be timed with everyone else’s and that was one transgression that Kazar could not allow…"

“In the middle of class, that horrid wildebeest brought that young cub forward, in front of every one and said he could never dance… that his legs were meant to pounce and stalk, not to prance. That he could never teach him to not be a predator… he destroyed that poor cub’s dreams and made sure they could never be built up again… The other students jeered and mocked him all the way out of the studio… and I stood by and did nothing, too afraid to earn that same, vile wrath,” Gazelle confessed, “It wouldn’t be until years later, when I realized what it meant to stay silent in the face of such cruelty that I vowed to never let that hatred in my heart, and that my voice would be for those who cannot speak.

“I learned that Laverne Hopps held those same ideals, even though in her time she stood for what was right, no matter whose ire she would earn, it is why I follow her example in my own singing career,” Gazelle then continued, standing with poise and grace, “I admire many mammals across this crazy city, across the world (some have said ‘too many’) but when I heard that a hoof-ful would be gathered here tonight, I knew it was a divine chance for me… one I would be foolish to pass up-”

“We’re cutting close, Gazelle,” Ty succinctly and courteously warned after checking his headset and watch, earning a nod of her horned head and a quick bit of gratitude.

“My invitation stands,” she reiterated and unpinned her mane to let it fall over her eye, “I would love to have you all up on stage with me.”

Lanny found that the changing room was actually quite spacious, considering the Tigritos, it wasn’t too far a leap that it could house him just as well. He whistled softly as he fiddled with a grass bracelet and flicked an ear to a knock on the curtained doorway. “Yeah, come in?” he allowed and so in popped a blue-eyed fox face.
“Hey Lan, how’s it goin’?” Gideon asked and stepped in fully while keeping the curtain closed.

“Well enough. Could you tie this?” he requested, offering his wrist so that the grass bracelet could be secured.

“Sure thing,” he abided and then leered, “So, what was it that Gazelle was so secret about during them selfies?”

The lion quirked a smirk. “What was it I heard about foxes and their noses getting poked where they don’t belong?”

Gideon went about tying the other grassy bracelet, too, quite nonchalantly. “You’re confusin’ foxes for cats and curiosity for snoopin’,” the fox said, “If you don’t wanna say then I won’t press ya’, but I get the feelin’ you wanna.”

“Maybe a little.” Lanny admitted, the excitement in his voice subdued as he checked his wrists, “So, Gazelle made time to give everyone a selfie that wanted one, right?”

“And Benny about fainted when she kissed his cheek at the last second,” Gideon laughed, recalling how she posed for their camera-phones and then signed each one with the tip of her hoof as the stylus, “and I noticed she blew a kiss for yours.”

“Well, that’s because it was for my roommate, who’s also something of a fan,” he explained, “She wanted to give me my reason in private… turns out I wasn’t just ‘along for the ride’, either, and I have to admit… I’m a little nervous. In a sort of… good-slash-bad kind of way.”

“Why?”

“I’ve gone to a lot of concerts trying to get Sam Wild’s attention, figuring he was my best bet at finding my parents since we share a last name; I’d already stopped bothering a long while back, though. Well… turns out stagehands talk and Gazelle wanted to give me a chance to speak with him after the Luau,” Lanny went on, scratching at his neck, “The weird thing is… when she talked about that cub in the dance class? It almost sounded… familiar.”

“That is weird…” Gideon concurred, “Did you know him or somethin’?”

“That’s what I want to figure out. The cub was Ryan Wild, Sam’s son. And Sam is from the Lions Gate end of Gnu York, right around South Savannah, so maybe… maybe I knew Ryan before my amnesia? Unfortunately, he isn’t here tonight but if I could meet Sam…”

Gideon’s tail swept over the floor behind him. “A long shot, if ever there were.”

A begrudging nod accepted as much. “But it’s a shot worth taking.”

“Yeah,” the fox beamed, “So, uhh… what was I actually gonna ask you about… oh, right, what was going on between you and Ty? Is there bad blood, or…?”

Lanny chuckled and shook his head, picking up the grass headdress which came with the costume. “It’s nothing like that. Just some friendly posturing between alphas; I let him know that I was a guest in his territory and that I wasn’t up to any trouble, is all.”

“Tha’s why you were standin’ up all straight with your chests out and stuff,” Gideon recalled, “Yeah, thinkin’ on it, I seen it with wolves and deer and the like. It always seems like they’re about to kiss if I’m bein’ honest,” the fox snarked, “At least they would be if they weren’t scowlin’ and stuff.”
The lion scoffed a laugh. “Posturing doesn’t lead to that, thankfully, mostly it’s just putting on a better show, not backing down, that sort of thing.”

Gideon blinked and softly groaned at some realization, leaned over to peek out of the curtain, looked about, and then addressed a curious Lanny. “Alrighty, no worries, then, I’ll let you get back to changin’,” and proceeded to leave.

“Gid, I’m all set to head out on stage,” and earned a bewildered glance as blue eyes looked him up-and-down, “…What?”

“It’s nothin’,” the fox assured, “You’re a guest here, as you said, and no one’d think anything of it.” He then continued at the quirked brow over inquiring scarlet eyes, “Y’see, I heard from Nick that Ty out there stands in for them Tigritos ev’ry now and then -- like if they twist an ankle or have some fam’ly thing? -- so they do him up in orange and sparkles and he dances. Turns out, he’s actually on that ‘Hot Dancer’ app with Gazelle; Nick showed me that if you say ‘Ty Pounceski’ when it asks for your name, it don’t take a picture of your face to put on his body. Anyway, Ty was roped into dancin’ tonight, as you know, but he’s goin’ in the full costume,” the fox extrapolated, gesturing to the much more modest shirt and cargo shorts he still wore.

“…Oh,” Lanny said and quietly cleared his throat, “Thanks for tying the bracelets, Gid, I’ll just put a few things away in here and meet you out there.”

The farm-fox gave him a thumbs-up and a smile as he left the changing room, gave a quick wave to his city-fox cousin, and then mildly scampered over to Lory and Esther talking with someone he actually recognized, standing next to an expansive snack table. It was probably the first time that night that Gideon was quietly starstruck when he saw, “Tim & Bob!”, butting into a brewing conversation with his sister, his girlfriend, and Zootopia’s biggest shock-jocks.

“Oh hey, this must be that brother you were talking about,” Tim O’Nare said, a meerkat wearing a cheap grass skirt over his cargo shorts, a loud shirt, and equally loud flowers on his head, “A howdy-do, pleasure to make my acquaintance, I’m sure,” he continued in good humor, paw extended (and quickly grasped to shake) as his other paw held a fruity beverage with a skewered grub and a teeny umbrella.

“Hiya!” Bob Pigg blustered, taking his turn to shake hooves with Gideon with a wide, tusky grin, the jovial, floral ensemble a bit stretched around the warthog’s rotundity, “Don’t mind my buddy Tim here, he’s just upset that he didn’t win an auction.”

“I was this close but someone sniped me at the last second,” the meerkat griped after a sip, “You’d think a Luau would be more laid back but there’s just no helping some mammals, I guess; wound up like clocks, all the time. So, what’s your story?” he then asked of Gideon, “These charming young ladies got me all kinds of curious.”

Blue eyes implored. “Wh-What’d they say?”

“Nothing. That’s why I’m curious.”

He rubbed the back of his head and smiled. “Oh, ain’t much to me, I’m jus’ a li’l baker from out in the country. I’m a huge fan of yours and Bob’s, though, listen t’you ev’ryday since I was a kit.”

“Wow, don’t I feel old,” Tim said from behind his vivacious drink.

“Esther was saying how you were the first fox in the TBR,” Bob pointed out, “I remember going as a piglet so long ago; a wonderful experience.”
“And as I was about to reveal, my dear baby brother here is the very same fox whose pies were ‘weaponized’, as I believe you both put it,” Esther boasted, leaning on her stouter relation in a sort of hug.

Tim spat his drink back into its glass as Bob squealed. “You’re kidding?” the meerkat disbelieved and handed the stemware off to his partner-on-air, “Hold this, I need to properly shake this fox’s paw.” Gideon, taken aback as he was, accepted the more eager gesture all the same. “Shame that you’re only out in the country, Gid, I heard from Nick that your pastries are to die for,” the meerkat commended, “So you’re the one who had the little run-in with Ramses; sorry about the ‘sniping’ comment, hope I didn’t trigger anything.” Bob huffed at the back of Tim’s head such that his headpiece fell onto his eyes. “It was an innocent slip of the tongue, I swear!”

Regardless, Gideon was laughing at the whole exchange (and Esther just seemed pleased as punch about it all, especially when her mate slid back into view). “Hey hey,” Nick said, appearing out of nowhere with a smile, “what’s all this fun being had without me?”

“You were off doing who knows what, so we had to entertain ourselves in your absence,” Esther suavely countered, scratching under his chin to make his leg twitch, “I can only assume you were making yourself useful in that time?”

“When am I not useful?” he rhetorically asked and then looked up at the approaching Lanny and Judy, “I was just checking on some of our onstage dancers in their new get-ups. They’re adapting quite nicely if I do say so myself.”

Esther endeared upon her rabbit’s more traditional ensemble of the female hula dancer, complete with silk grass and leaves done in a fanciful but modest design, along with a more colorful tube top (which Judy adjusted for what looked like the umpteenth time). “It’s too bad you won’t be joining us up there, Sissy…” the bunny rued in her heart-wrenchingly warm manner, “I know how much you wanted to do this.”

“Well…” the vixen abided and brushed her knuckles on the gray-furred cheek, “Are you going to dance extra hard for the both of us? Yes, yes you will.” Purple eyes brightened along with the smile as the bunny nodded her response.

A smirking Tim looked Lanny up and down. “You’re a braver mammal than I.”

The lion attempted to cover more of his legs with the grass skirt but wasn’t doing a very good job of it. “It’s only millions of mammals watching me on live television…” he rationalized, “and it’s not like I’ll be the center of attention or anything.” He cleared his throat again and whisked his tail, “Do we know when we’re going on? I thought it was ‘cutting close’.”

“As soon as Yzla’s ready, to the best of my knowledge,” Bob reported, both matter-of-factly and without interest, “The other auction winners are all set, though, despite her last-minute plea to be included.”

“It feels like half of this Luau was for the Supais and yet you can’t get within a hundred feet of them; the bunch of snobs,” Tim critiqued and then sipped his drink again.

“Which you never said,” Nick suggested.

“Never said what?” Tim agreed, “I mean, if you wanted to go pal around with the matriarch of the richest family on this seaboard, she’s right over there,” the meerkat said and tossed a thumb over his shoulder at Sarah King, lounging in a prop hammock of a mobile beach backdrop, her foot braced against a fake boulder to rock back-and-forth while chatting up a scruffy, old kangaroo
mouse janitor.

“Yeah, Reino del Sol’s kinda uptight; they make Tycho look like a real party animal,” Bob tacked on, tossing a hoof over his own shoulder to point out the younger brother of Memphis, whose yellow-green eyes, dark mane, slender figure, and prominent facial scar were all but visible as he talked on a Bluefang earpiece and into his tablet, accompanied by a trio of ever-present hyena bodyguards.

“Why would anyone starch a *luau* shirt?” Nick idly observed of the lion hovering near the VIP area.

“*Beautiful* culture, Reino del Sol, aside from the ruling llamas,” Esther added, dreamily and forlornly so, “Not a lot of information on them, unfortunately… I did study some of their dances and outfits when I was younger.”

“All dancers to the staging area!” Ty’s voice boomed, so Lanny and Judy bid the rest of the group a fond farewell and were bid good fun as they scampered around one of the massive, dividing curtains. Lanny’s gait was, perhaps, restricted but it wasn’t too noticeable since he kept pace with Judy’s much shorter stride.

The rabbit was, nonetheless, beside herself as she hopped, skipped, and nearly jumped to outpace the lion. “This is going to be *amazing!*” she gleed, “It’s like one of those dreams that I never knew I had until it came true!”

“I suddenly don’t know why I’m doing this,” Lanny regretted, smiling as best he could when the entirety of the dance area suddenly came into view.

“Don’t worry, big guy, it’ll be fun! *And*, I even heard that there’s a charity drive going on *right now* based on ratings, likes, and shares,” Judy buoyantly exposited, “Just think, shaking your tail will earn pennies for the community box. Besides, if you’re feeling nervous you can always stick near me and watch what I do,” she teased, lightly batting at his knee.

More familiar faces were gathered about a collapsed Benny but before either the concerned Judy or Nurse Lanny could rush over to tend to him, Arthur peered over a broad, bare shoulder to uncross his arms and hold up a placating hoof. “Don’t worry, he only fainted after his selfie with the tigers,” he explained as said tigers, who with their sparkly fur and full luau regalia, were aiding the spotted feline to his feet, and to further answer the brewing question of those just joining, the buffalo did smirk, “they saw Gazelle’s photo and decided to ‘follow suit’.”

“All at once,” Ty added, handing off his headset, tablet, and watch to an antelope assistant. He, Arthur, and Benny had all opted to go “full costume”, as well, and though the large cats, chief of police (even at his age), and the first bunny cop all had physiques to boast such an outfit as a hula dancer, they could not compare to the confidence radiated by the rotund cheetah, *combined*.

“Oh, *Judy*, you look *fantastic!*” Benny adored to her blushing, “Strike a pose, bun, no one would *ever* believe that you put on a skirt.”

“Why is everyone so surprised when I wear girl clothes?” she inquired of no one but joined her fellow cop in a selfie all the same.

Lanny crossed gazes with Ty; Ty measured the lion up-and-down; Arthur flared his nostrils and turned an ear towards the brewing questions of one of the *Tigritos*. “Ty, we thought you weren’t going to-?”
“Of course, I would,” the white tiger immediately cut in.

“You could’ve worn your shorts,” another said in a mounting amusement shared by the other three dancers.

“All of the auction winners are wearing their clothes.”

“And ruin the aesthetic?” Ty calmly argued, quirked eyebrow and smirked lips speaking far more than his words did as he shot a glare at his fellow tigers.

“Can’t have that,” the buffalo quietly considered of his own choice of attire.

Ty looked at Lanny again, who seemed to share some manner of… bristling demeanor as he came to a simultaneous conclusion that swept the group in stony silence… especially when amidst the distant din, a pair of muted snickers were heard from behind that massive dividing curtain. Judy’s ear turned toward Nick and Gideon peeking into view, biting back laughter and clapping each other’s paws in the triumph of tricksters before disappearing again.

One of the Tigritos snapped his fingers after studying the lion for the entire time he arrived. “Mr. August!” he suddenly exclaimed, causing the maned faced to harshly blanch, so he explained, “I almost didn’t recognize you, you were wearing more clothes for that photo shoot, ironically enough. I was Mr. January for that calendar and Ty here was Mr. July.”

“O. M. Goodness, of course!” Benny exulted, peering up at the lion’s forced smile (as well as Ty’s).

“It was just a one-time thing,” Lanny quickly, nervously explained, backing up a bit as his whiskers tightened, toes curling against the floor as his eyes darted between Ty, Benny, and each of the Tigritos. He then noticed the still closed main curtains and the preparing cameras, as if only just realizing how many “millions of mammals watching on live television” actually was.

“I think,” Judy interjected, a paw reaching out to brace the tawny calf and stay its retreat, “we should familiarize ourselves with the dance steps, yeah?” She learned that Lanny spent most of his cubhood avoiding notice, what with a group of crazies singling out young, male lions over the past two decades, and it became quite obvious to her that the anxiety of suddenly being in a spotlight of any kind was running his nerves a bit more than he expected it would. Luckily for Lanny, Judy was adept (some would say “masterful”) at the art of identifying and soothing emotional distress.

“Well… we should,” Ty explained after a long exhale (and a withering look at the orange tigers, who responded with varying degrees of playful apology and defiance), “Chief Bogo, Benny, Lanny, and I will be dancing one step down from Gazelle, the auction winners, Yzla, and you, Judy,” he explained, “Since ‘dancing with Gazelle’ was part of the big hoopla for this whole Luau, it didn’t seem right to just hand out spots when so many others couldn’t win the auction. So, we’ll be dancing with the Tigritos on the lower ring and you’ll be on the upper stage with Gazelle as the single exception.”

“Four of us, four of them, got it,” Benny determined, counting everyone involved, “Alright, let’s get our hula on!”

“About those dance steps…” Lanny beseeched, somewhat calmer than he was a few seconds prior.

“Don’t even worry about it,” one tiger said in a thick accent, “We’ll be spinning around LED torches so you likely won’t draw too much attention.”

“Still,” Arthur countered, “knowing a few moves won’t go amiss. Clawhauser, with me,” he
instructed and the cheetah dutifully complied, “I spoke with the choreographer and got an idea of how it’ll go. Wild,” he said, snickering out the corner of his mouth at his habit of saying the identically sounding name of one of his most infuriating officers with -- currently -- unintentionally strained patience, and then returned to his scholastic stoicism as the lion approached, “Watch me and put your feet like this.”

“Okay.”

“Arms out like this.”

“Got it.”

“Squat down, knees like this.”

“Uh huh…”

“And move your hips like this.”

“Okay…”

With a certain sense of anticipation and satisfaction combined, Judy entrusted the welfare of her friends as she approached the group of auction winners and Gazelle, they wearing grass-&-ti-leaf skirts over their clothes and she outshining the whole of the stage. Her dress was a spectrum of seafoam green done in shimmering fish scales and fins that resembled a gown, flowing behind her but was fully open in the front to show her legs decorated in subtle wave patterns. The skirt itself was low cut and she wore only a pair of ornate seashells of violet and aquamarine across her chest. Once blonde hair was instead a deep, coral red as it cascaded down one shoulder and over her back, adorned with small seashells and flowers.

The rabbit’s skipping gait paused to admire the starlet… and stopped when she spotted Yzla Supai. If she did not know who she was, Judy would have figured her for another energetic teenager with rich parents, even though her outfit was reminiscent of a princess of some tropical kingdom, almost outclassing Gazelle’s own ensemble in its sheer audacity. The rabbit steeled herself with the knowledge that, in so crucial a moment as they were about to enter, paired with all the effort they made in recent days to be shone in a positive light to the populace at large, that any nefarious attempts on behalf of the Supais were, as Nick put it, “idiotic to the nth-degree”.

How ever …

She still convened with Chief Bogo and Officer Clawhauser that, if those llamas did try anything, then they were at the ready to spring into action… that three cops and several large predators dancing within fifty feet of their youngest daughter would amply deter any foul plots. Not only for Esther’s sake but for the sake of anyone who might have gotten in their way…

Gazelle turned to address Judy, smiled, and as the curtains began to rise, said, “Let’s dance.”

Gideon and Nick had just returned from confirming the success of their prank, guffawing all the way back to Esther and Lory. Tim and Bob already excused themselves to join the King family in one of the VIP boxes to watch the last dance which the remaining group politely declined in attending, opting to stay behind and receive their friends after it was all over.

“Enjoy yourselves?” Esther cooed.

“Immensely,” Nick answered, sliding up to grab her waist and bump their hips with a twining of
their tails, “Nothing quite like seeing alphas get all flustered and shuffle their paws to remind a fox that they’re exactly like us, just ten-times bigger.”

“He could still punt you from here to Tundratown,” the vixen warned and licked her mate’s nose.

“Lanny won’t, nice guy like him. Ty might, though.”

“It’s too bad you couldn’t dance on stage, Essy,” Lory said, crouching down a bit to speak discreetly, “What with your… girl stuff.”

She thanked the wolf with a flick of her wrist. “That actually ended yesterday -- thank goodness -- but as much as I wanted nothing more than to join Judy and Gazelle in the limelight… while also shaking my tail in the face of Yzla Supai, well…”

“‘Not out of the woods, yet’, and all that,” Gideon said.

“It would have been a great chance to see those kickboxing, ballroom-dancing legs in action,” Nick mildly lamented, “but we didn’t play it too safe over the past week just to get caught at the last second; there’ll be plenty of time to celebrate after those nasty llamas skip town which -- if my sources are correct and they often are -- should be as this thing with Gazelle finishes up; they won’t be attending the after-party, you see.”

There was then a scent and sound in the air, or rather, an unnerving absence of the former and approach of the latter. The four turned to find that a squat, hyper-deodorized canine had waddled up with a fancy-looking folder and horn-rimmed glasses, whose fur color was very similar to Esther’s except hers was more vibrant. He was shorter than anyone there by nearly a foot and, if his sharply-fashionable suit and accent were any indication, likely hailed from Reino del Sol. “Ms. Esther Grey?” the bush dog inquired.

“I am she,” Esther responded succinctly and professionally, then receiving an extended envelope… “A subpoena?” the vixen doubted, opening it only far enough to examine her name and information on the top and then unfolded so to see the official stamp at the bottom of the paperwork, something she witnessed many a time at her law firm.

“Sí,” he answered, not cracking a smile or scowl of any kind as it was closed and thrust back at him, “Señor Supai requests your presence immediately, Ms. Grey.”

“Señor Supai can blow it out his ear,” Gideon snapped.

“Nice try, stubs,” Nick sneered, a paw around his mate’s shoulders, “but you’ll have to work a bit harder than that to catch a fox.” He then gave Esther a light squeeze when she didn’t respond immediately. “Right?”

The vixen grumbled some.

“Right, Cherries?”

“Blue…” she muttered, touching his chest with assurance, “It’s a subpoena, I can’t just dismiss it. I only skimmed it but it’s got all the signatures that I could see and… if my immediate presence is requested then I have full faith that the due process of our legal system will protect me. I wouldn’t have a job if I didn’t, right?”

Green eyes focused a bit… and then he nodded. “In that case, I’m coming with.”

“And so am I,” Gideon determined.
“Me too!” Lory ascertained.

The bush dog looked about at the larger predators and shrugged. “Follow me, then.” He led them away from the snack table and over to an elevator leading up to the VIP area (both Nick and Gideon buttoned up their shirts along the way, for it seemed that there was business in need of doing). They could hear the music and stage churning with excitement as everyone else at the Luau and across the city unified in celebration. The elevator ascended and its door opened; down one hallway, the group could almost see a pair of hyena guards patrolling the way to the King’s box. There was, at least, someone nearby if anything went wrong, even if they were around the curving skyway above the Zootennial Arena.

And then they saw the guards standing outside the Supai’s double doors, a pair of giant anteaters who not only towered over the foxes but Lory as well, with shaggy fur groomed and tied back, wearing pitch-black suits with a faint golden inlay. They eyed the smaller mammals intently; one opened the door for Esther and the bush dog but the other held out a paw to bar passage with claws like pickaxes.

“Yeah, hi, I’m going in there,” Nick informed and swiftly ducked under the then grasping claws.

“No, you are not,” a terse, clear voice warned. The giant anteater stepped back, opening the door they kept closed to reveal a rye-wooled llama overlooking the performance, his long neck twisting as an elbow was hooked over the back of a couch. The VIP box could have easily outpriced most penthouses in the city by its furnishing alone, but its soundproofing was abundantly clear as he pressed a nearby remote to mute the outside world. “Oh,” he then said and rose from his seat with a flick of his cigarette, straightening a pristine turquoise suit with an obsidian lining and vest, the gold inlays of his guards magnified in complex embroidery at the cuffs of his sleeves, lapels, and coat-tails, “I’m getting the strangest sense of déjà vu… Have we met before, fox?” Señor Zevon Supai asked as he circumnavigated his couch, each stride a pretentious march as he soon dwarfed the scarlet predators at his entryway, the gray-and-black one still in the hall, and even his flanking bodyguards. “Ah!” Zevon then announced before Nick’s open mouth had a chance to reply, “I recognize those eyes, that fur, that smug self-righteousness… so unless I’m very much mistaken you are… Nick Wilde?”

“I do recall meeting your father the last time I was here, provided you are from that particular breed of foxes,” the llama swiftly cut off as Nick attempted to say something else, his voice cordial but harsh like a brick covered in honey, “He was a… hoofshiner, wasn’t he?” Zevon leered with so knowing, so malicious a look as he mouthed his cigarette.

Gideon’s fur bristled as he remembered the story of his Uncle John and the degradation he endured from that foul llama to get the seeds of a unique fruit from Reino del Sol… it was a story that Gideon would remember for his entire life and uphold as to the lengths that a fox would go for the sake of their loved ones. “He’s a tai-tai- tailor, you-!” he barked.

A single finger and a patient glance from Nick paused the outburst. “Thank you, Gid,” he quietly said and then turned back to the reigning Supai with a casual grin and both paws folded behind him, “A tailor’s assistant, as you might recall, and as I recall he told a story so funny that you burst a seam with laughter. In fact, it got all your siblings laughing quite an awful lot; ain’t that right, Zevvy?”

The embers on the llama’s cigarette burned brighter as his eyes narrowed… so he took it out of his mouth with a cloud of smoke and put a hoof into his pocket. “So I am profusely clear: you are not coming in here and neither are they,” he coldly responded, flicking a bit of ash in the direction of Gideon and Lory, “You see, Esther was summoned according to the laws of Reino del Sol as they
are enacted, to their fullest extent, in the territory of Zootopia. So, to borrow a phrase you’re all too familiar with,” he explained with a shooing of his hoof, “‘scram before I call the cops.’”

Nick stood his ground and braced his hips. “For starters, they’d be on my side, and for finishers, you can’t kick me out of any sort of legal proceedings because I am her mate,” Nick proudly stated with a jabbing pair of fingers.

“Are you now?” Zevon wondered with his most seemingly genuine demeanor and snapped his hoof to instantly be provided a tablet from the bush dog, which he referenced at his own pace, “Let’s see… ‘Esther Grey… known, living relations… father, step-mother, half-brother… a pet bird…’” and then grunted in confusion as he scrolled back and forth, “No mention of a husband…?”

“Mate,” Nick reiterated and crossed his arms.

Zevon groaned in discovery, “Ah ha, ‘Nick Wilde… mated in the Chronicler tradition’, how quaint but I’m afraid that doesn’t count. Now, if we go over to Nick Wilde, I can see that you have a marriage to your name but it’s not with Esther,” he saccharinely endeared.

“That was an arranged marriage back with I was six that my parents never knew of or agreed to,” Nick answered and which Esther curtly corroborated with. “And… the other one?”

“Which ‘other one’?”

“That one was a clerical error for a ‘Nick Wild’ without an ‘e’,” Esther extrapolated and then whispered to her mate, “I already sent in the paperwork to have it corrected, they just haven’t updated the records, yet.”

“That ‘other one’,” Nick quietly rue’d, biting into his knuckle, “I knew I should’ve done something about that sooner…” before speaking out loud as both tod and vixen turned to the llama, “And what’s this about Chronicler mateships not counting? The S/CARE-”

“Only applies to specific circumstances that the broad brush of the law doesn’t cover,” Señor Supai sneered, looming over the fox couple, “whereas the laws of Reino del Sol supersede your adorable little tradition.” He tapped at the tablet to the continued defiance and handed it over with an impatient tsk, “Still don’t believe me? See for yourself. I can have it translated for you-”

“I can read it,” Esther snapped, swiping the tablet and scrolling through it, muttering under her breath with decreasing doubt, “Yeah, the laws of Reino del Sol are pretty clear, I’m afraid; direct family only and… nope, the S/CARE doesn’t apply,” she said matter-of-factly and handed the tablet back. Esther took a breath and finally scrounged up the courage to look at Nick’s crestfallen dismay, raised a finger to close his wagging jaw, and then held his shoulders to kiss his lips with a whisper, “Don’t worry, I’ll get out of this. They can’t touch me.”

“Now wait a gosh-durn minute!” Gideon then interjected, finger thrust up at the long-necked tyrant, “Wha’s this I’m hearing about a ha-ha-half-brother? You’d sure as shootin’ let Pa into this clown show, bein’ direct family and all, and I gots as-as much genes in common with Essy as he does, so you can’t very well keep me out, now can ya?” he argued.

Both Nick and Esther quietly beamed at such audacity and pluck from Gideon, even though such traits as “audacity” and “pluck” were unbecoming of a fox in many situations, he demonstrated his slyness through them superbly… And then Señor Supai held his stomach and dropped his cigarette
as he guffawed with cruel merriment, stomping out the ash burning into the rug with an elated moan. “What an entertaining diatribe, I sincerely didn’t think he understood half of what he was talking about but I must admit, he managed to state his entire ‘gosh-durn’ case using words under three syllables,” the llama chuckled, standing upright once more, “Well, except for the ‘ha-ha-half-half-brother’, but I appreciate the effort it took to sound it all out; good on you. Let him in, it will be infinitely more fun,” Zevon permitted.

The giant anteater lowered his claws for Gideon and him alone, and as he walked in Nick pivoted and braced a paw to his chest to quickly whisper, “You’re overlooked, underestimated, backed into a corner and in front of your loved one… foxes were made for times like this and you’re one of the Slyest I’ve ever known,” and clapped his shoulder to usher himself and Lory just outside. There they stood, the fox’s defiance a stark contrast to the wolf’s doubt as she plaintively reached for Gideon, “Don’t worry,” Nick then told them all, loud and clear, staying strong for Lory and himself as he looked to his mate, “we’re not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you are,” Zevon commanded over his shoulder, “Discard them before their stench offends me any further.”

They were both pushed along the hallway but Nick slipped past them with deft footwork and as they tried to swipe for him, Lory launched herself onto one of their arms with a howl. Nick’s composure dropped just enough in his attempt to reach for Esther before a third guard inside slammed the doors shut and the outside world was mute once again.

Here we are, I guess… Gideon wondered.

“Such a fuss,” Zevon critiqued, picking up the remote to blacken the windows of Gazelle’s encore with her dancers -- both professional and amateur -- only to haphazardly drop it on a cushion as he sat down, one long leg crossed over the other. “Let him in,” he then instructed a guard of a far door, retrieving another cigarette from a case he stored in his coat pocket to set it in his mouth for a goat attendant to light.

He’s pretty cocksure of himself, ain’t he, that Señor Supai?

Esther and Gideon turned to the opening door to find, “Pa!” Both elated and confused, they ran to meet their father and he to them, garbed in simple flannel and denim such that it conflicted with their vibrant clothing. Gentle tears were shed and licks shared as Zevon casually blew a stream of smoke into the air.

“Kits, what are you doing in this place?” Goliath asked of them, cupping their cheeks and caressing with his thumbs.

“We could ask the same thing of you!” Esther countered, bracing a paw to her father’s chest.

Jus’ what’s this all about, anyway? I thought the Supais were goin’ after Pa…?

“Shall I tell them?” the rye-wooled llama wondered aloud, both elbows around the back of the couch as he flicked some ash to the floor and blew more smoke towards the ceiling, neck twisting the slightest bit to peer at the family of foxes behind him. “No? Then let’s… how do you say it up here? ‘Have a sit and chat’?” His head turned forward again as he looked about, “Maybe I’m not being the most gracious host, I haven’t even served drinks or snacks… but then, this isn’t a luncheon.”

He sure seemed intent on gettin’ Essy alone, didn’t he, but practically welcomed me in… did he
“It’s a ‘trial’,” Esther shot back with all the sarcasm in her, gripping the large paw protectively, “That’s what the subpoena was for.”

The llama laughed again, high and merrily. “You think too much of your prowess, Ms. Grey, this is a tribunal wherein I am judge, jury, and executioner… or rather, it can be if you all decide not to cooperate so I suggest you sit down.”

“You promised you wouldn’t touch her if I-!” Goliath argued, holding his kits closer.

“I promised nothing!” Zevon hissed, launching to his full height and twisting his neck and torso around to face them, his eyelids retracting into his skull with a sneer to show off his incisors. His nostrils flared as he put a hoof into his pocket, face calming as he took another drag from his cigarette. “Sit. Down,” he ordered, pointing the hot tip towards the other end of his semi-circular couch.

There’s a rotten smell about all this… Why set up so fancy a trap if they could’ve spirited Essy or Pa away whenever they wanted, even before what happened in the TBR?

The family of foxes made their way over to the designated spot, Goliath sitting closest to Zevon, and then Esther, and then Gideon. Only then did the llama, also, sit. Both of the Grey tods remained nervous and vigilant while the vixen put her experience as a defense lawyer to its greatest display. “So,” Esther began, “before I file charges for coercion of one Goliath Grey, as I presume you lured him here on some hitherto unspoken ‘promise’ and-or threat to my wellbeing, Señor Supai, I would like to know what claim you could possibly have to an escaped slave and his daughter. I’m sure you’re well aware that any enslaved mammal is immediately freed as soon as they step foot on Zootopian soil, a law that not even Reino del Sol can supersede. Additionally,” she continued, “there have been no extradition orders made, at least, that I’ve been made aware of and believe me, I would know.”

Must be something about Nick he doesn’t like… something more than what happened with Uncle John all those years ago because he seemed pretty cocksure about that, too.

Once again, Zevon laughed as he snapped his fingers, the subpoena conjured into his awaiting hoof as he set the cigarette into an ashtray. “You really didn’t read the whole thing, did you? Ms. Grey, I am sorely disappointed but profoundly amused,” he chortled, opening it up entirely and handing it over, picking up his cigarette to hold it in one hoof while gesturing with the other, “You are being charged with dereliction of duty to your nation, Señorita Tamaya Rivera.”

Blue eyes delved into the paperwork with a thorough fervor, blood draining from her features the more she read, “I’m… an ambassador?” she doubted, even more so at the conviction of the name the llama had just used for her.

“Yes, appointed as such before you were kitnapped by this…” the llama then reviled as he gestured at a withering Goliath, “criminal.”

It can’t be because Nick’s a cop, he doesn’t seem too worried about that. It’s gotta be something that he does that I ain’t expected to, else why risk letting me in?

“You appointed a newborn kit as your ambassador?” Esther argued, “You can’t just retroactively declare something so preposterous!”

Zevon sneered again. “Watch your tongue… I actually can and, more importantly, did. We were
relieved to find you alive and well as a successful attorney, in one of the highest-profile cases Zootopia’s ever known, the Ex-Mayor Leodore Lionheart,” Zevon dramatically revered, even acting it up a bit, “I suppose it is a tad harsh to accuse you of ‘dereliction of duty’ but… I am a forgiving mammal, so long as you return with us to Reino del Sol immediately.”

“Essy…” Gideon then frightfully whispered, a trembling finger pointing at the yet perused list of the requested information in the subpoena: 13.) Look what you’ve done… “Magnus must’ve set all this up,” he reasoned, biting back his own terror.

“The Supais can’t be in the city blind… weren’t they in cahoots with Magnus back in the day? I think that’s what Uncle John alluded to. They must know everything about everyone, so they’d know exactly how Nick would fight back. He is always boasting about how he ‘knows everyone’ but that can’t be it because there’d be no one he could call in this room, so what else…

“Stop these games, Zevon,” Goliath declared, if shakily, sitting up with ears forward, “It’s me you want, not her, we both know this.”

The llama snorted with such derision. “You? What use are you?”

“I can still grow the wolf apple if anyone ever got the seeds—”

“You foxes always think so highly of yourselves; unique in all the world,” Zevon groaned with a roll of his eyes and head, “You are thirty years dry of the lobeira plant; several generations of harvests and carefully designed diets and breeding for our aguará guazú have made your dated physiology worse than useless, a detriment to anything we produce today; maybe you could grow a generation before the crop withers and dies. No… you would do the world a favor by quietly returning to your sad little corner of your sad little village and fitter away the rest of your sad little life.”

Nick’s got a silver tongue that could beat out any fox in the city, I’m darn sure of that… but what good would it do on its own… unless there was some lie that this llama don’t want known. Nick’s always on about how he could smell a lie from a mile off…

“Then what do you want?” Goliath barked.

The hoof snapped again for the goat attendant to provide a fancy box with a fancy rope tied around it. “Of course, how rude of me, I completely forgot that this was meant to be a negotiation, an exchange, if you will. You see, I understand that as Señorita Rivera’s only living guardian you have some say to her fate, even by Reino del Sol’s laws, so, I am offering a more than generous price. Think of it as a… a bridewealth, to borrow a term.” He untied the box and pulled out what all present recognized as the elusive and secretive wolf apple to set it on the nearby table, “This should be enough for you to maintain a small grove of your own so that the remainder of your life is long and healthy. I’m sure you’ve already experiencing the symptoms of malnourishment, considering you’ve been away from this fruit for thirty years. So, do we have a deal, Inti Rivera?”

It would have to be a doozy of a lie…

“Another false name, Supai?” Esther suddenly argued, bristling for many reasons, it seemed, “Like how you titled him ‘El Chupacabra’ on that wanted poster, as though he were some kind of monster.”

Zevon looked on with a cant of his head, smiling as he laughed a cold, cruel laugh, striking the tip of his cigarette into the ashtray to smother its spark. “You foxes claim to not ‘tell lies or keep secrets’ but are, in truth, the worst offenders in the world and your father committed that dire sin
your entire lives. Shall I tell them, Inti, and lay bare what you could not these many, many years?

“He is a murderer,” the llama accused with a jutting hoof, “and he earned the name ‘El Chupacabra’ for the terror he wreaked on the palace servants, goats who sated his bloodlust long before you were even born. You see, he willingly consumed the lobeira flower and became a wild dog on the end of a chain, every day from sunrise to sunset, a dumb hound in service to the Supai family,” Zevon exposited, “It was a risk to keep you savage predators in the palace but it was a necessity and the only way to soothe him was Nina, his beloved mate… isn’t that true, Inti? She brought him back to his senses after the flower’s toxin ran its course, and it always worked… until one day it didn’t,” Señor Supai coolly continued, crossing his legs to lounge, “And here is the worst lie he ever told you, Señorita… that your mother died in childbirth.”

While it was true that the room’s soundproofing technology was topnotch, it was not the reason why the world deafened for Esther. Her heart went cold as she waited for some response from her father, some denial, some backlash or retort or anything to disprove such a horrendous claim. Each eternal second she waited dried her throat worse and worse until it was painful to breathe because all her father did was wring his own pants and bite back sobs, looking not at her but down at his paws as they trembled along with his entire body.

“He came to, eventually,” Zevon reviled, his eyelids retracting into his skull with a sneer to show off his incisors, “but he’d already torn out her throat by then… and oh, how he wailed.”

She just wanted to hear him say something.

“And howled.”

Anything.

“Liar!”

The voice echoed like overhead thunder, omnipresent such that its source was indistinguishable until all eyes turned to Gideon.

“What did you say, fox?” Zevon icily demanded, sitting straighter.

“Y-You’re a liar!” Gideon accused, jumping to his feet and advancing with a waggled finger, his sister and father pale, empty shells of their former selves as they watched the scene, detached from it and distant. There’s that lie I been keepin’ an eye out for, ever since you left the room, Nick, jus’ like you would’ve done and why this fool of a llama didn’t want you listenin’ in. I bet you would’ve figured out that tell of his as soon as his eyelids went back and teeth went out but it took me a bit longer, Gideon determined, I dunno why he wants Essy so bad but he could only get her if she went willingly, which means cuttin’ that heartstring with Pa to sap the fight outta her… jus’ like how Magnus got rid of all them mammals who meddled in his affairs. Well, this has his rotten stench all over it. “It means you know you ain’t tellin’ the truth-”

Señor Supai rocketed to his full height once again and furiously buttoned his coat. “I know what it means, you stupid hick,” he warned, “How dare you accuse me when there is no possible way you could-!”

“You said so yourself,” Gideon swiftly cut in, “Why else keep Pa on a chain unless you wanted him in the palace? A bit more than your sister’s ‘pet’, no doubt to keep your goats or whoever scared and controlled by fear. But the lobeira flower don’t last forever, now do it? No way; so you gotta keep him on it which I s’pose you could do with some fancy manipulation,” Gideon articulated with a swaggle of his head, “What good’s it do if you can’t control when he’s on and
off it, though? Well, tha’s why Nina hung around, ain’t it? I’d bet my fluffy red tail that you meant it when you said that she was the only one that brought Pa back, maybe in the whole palace or even the kingdom.

“And I daresay, Mr. Supai, tha’s why you had her offed, ain’t it?” the fox further accused, finger waggling still as he took another step, “Because she knew that no one else could control him, that she’d be the only one unharmed if he ever got off his chain. Nina had lev’rage on all you woolly snobs and that jus’ wouldn’t fly. But why?” Gideon idly wondered, “Why keep her or Pa around if they’s -- as Essy would say -- just a liability? Well, why else?” and pointed back at his sister while keeping his eyes on Zevon, “You wanted Essy then just like you do now for whatever Aslan-forsaken reason, but you couldn’t control her Ma… and since you already had your hooks in Pa, all you’d need to do is make him think he killed her and you’d have yourself a broken fox to do whatever stupid thing you wanted. Except you weren’t expecting he’d make a run for it with his newborn kit, now did ya?” he crossed his thick arms over a puffed-up chest, “Go ahead, correct me wherever I erred.”

The rye llama stared at the farm-fox, his eyes raising to spot his kin regaining the color in their faces, ears, and gazes. “You… bone-gnawing… idiot,” he spat, neck curving to address Gideon directly, “I will not suffer your slander a moment longer, so count your dismal blessings that you are not and never were a citizen of Reino del Sol or I would be within my right to imprison and execute you for such treasonous talk.” He stood upright again and swept the air in front of him, “Remove him from my sight,” he ordered his guards, “and if he should fall down a flight of stairs, well, that’s his own fault for being so clumsy.”

“Don’t you touch him!” Goliath growled, standing upright and interposing himself between his son and the llama, fur bristling up his neck as the color in his eyes shifted from docile blue to their furious silver. The guards were already mobilizing as the llama reeled back with a single step of retreat.

“Don’t you touch me or I’ll have you skinned!”

“Pa, wait!” Gideon beseeched, arms around his waist in attempts to restrain him.

“Did you kill Nina only to make me think that I did it?” Goliath demanded with bared fangs and hot tears, “He’s right, I could never hurt her, even under the flower’s influence, but I agonized these many years thinking I did until I saw your face just now. Why?”

“As if I owed you any answers, mangy cur,” Zevon spat, bounding backward over the couch in a few nimble motions, for his legs were long and hooves keen of step. He straightened his coat and snarled. “My patience grows thin for you foxes and your trickery,” the llama warned and then ordered of Esther, “so I suggest you obey your emperor and heed me now or else I will simply take what is mine and be done with this affront.”

The vixen was already sauntering around the table and then the couch to stand adjacent, looking up at him with a lean of her hips to point. “Señor Supai, with all due respect, you do not have nearly as much power as you think you do. If I correctly remember the design of this stadium, that door in the back certainly leads to a private helipad and no doubt an awaiting copter,” Esther continued with a nod of her head, “And if you wanted to forcefully take or harm anyone, you’d have done so by now except you still have to adhere to Zootopia’s laws not only here but, to a certain extent, back in Reino del Sol or else face scrutiny from the World Heraldry Soc-”

“ You will know your place,” Zevon harshly bleated at the end of his patience, his hoof suddenly grabbing her wrist and wrenching it around at her pained yelp… However, before either Goliath or Gideon could pounce him, or his guards intervene, the llama had collapsed to the floor… No one
saw the snap of Ether’s leg from a perfectly executed thrust kick… and his leg was bent in the entirely wrong way. There was a sickening crack and a dull thud and then when the pain finally reached Zevon’s brain… oh, how he wailed.

Esther stood over him, slightly stooped with her paws bracing her knees and tail swaying. “Goodness gracious,” the vixen cooed in her sweetest country drawl, “Y’see, we in the legal biz call that ‘assault’… which I just defended myself against, Mr. Supai,” she explained and held up a pair of fingers, “So, I see this going one of two ways: first, you try me in a proper, Zootopian court of law for this grievous bodily injury (spoilers: I’ll win); or second, you bring me back to Reino del Sol as your precious ambassador and we all walk away from what happened here, lick our wounds and let bygones be bygones,” and then flicked at the air under his chin with a single finger, “Which will it be, cupcake?”

The guards hovered, stopped by a trembling hoof as the rye-wooled llama straightened his neck as best he could to keep a death glare on the vixen’s stalwart face. “Have Yzla meet me at the hospital,” he said as calmly as he could through the agonized seething, “a momentary stop on our way home after I slipped and fell. Now, help me up,” he ordered the nearest guard.

“But Your Highness…?”

“Now,” he bleated, glare turning on the giant anteater, wincing as he was carefully lifted and then commanded, “Ambassador Rivera, to me.”

Esther started as minutely as possible, ears pinning at what was, quite possibly, not the answer she was expecting but quite obviously the answer she got. “Then… may I say goodb-?”

“No.”

Goliath and Gideon watched as their daughter and sister was escorted out of the room and they prevented from joining her, even stepping closer. Her confidence from only a few moments before whisked away like the morning mist after dawn with the realization that she was, in fact, little more than a prize to be won for the emperor of Reino del Sol… and won her, he certainly did, even at the price of such an injury. The guards were broad and she could not see around them very well but with what she could manage, she let her father know that she loved him and then told her brother… “I’ll be waiting”.

Chapter End Notes

Used throughout the story, “FuzzBook” is the Zootopian analog to “Facebook”.

Back in Brave, during Judy’s mindscape adventure in “The Burrow”, it was mentioned that Laverne Hopps did, in fact, sell her opera gowns for charity.

Bogo’s dance training was alluded to back in John’s flashback in Loyal.

I previously mentioned that Lanny originally wore a sarong, even though my initial plan was to write him in pants for this part of the story (which I then returned to). My rationale should make more sense in this scene because the transition from cargo shorts to grass skirt seems like a more drastic contrast than a tropical waist wrap to a… slightly more revealing tropical waist wrap.
“The Lion King” references should be rounded out with Sarabi and Scar, along with his hyenas, Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed.

Lanny’s aversion to the stage refers back to Brave; for more information, recall the “Prince’s Guard” or the “Lookers” and how they relate to Simon King, as well as Loyal, to reference how he endeavored to not be caught by them.

Gazelle’s dress for the final dance directly references Ariel from “The Little Mermaid”.

Yzla is the name of the only mentioned sister of Zevon, son and daughter of Yzma from "Descendents". In this, Yzla is named after her aunt.

For those curious, giant anteaters can grow over 6 feet long on average. Additionally, bush dogs are the only living relative to the large fox/maned wolf (Esther’s species). These are all species native to South America.

“Hoofshiners” are analogous to shoeshiners but exclusive to ungulate species. There are similar "pawbuffers" for other mammals who don't want to leave claw-marks on the floors of places they visit and wish to get the dirt brushed out of the fur and pads on their feet.

The story that Gideon refers to is when John Wilde confronted/was confronted by Señor Supai in DeCoyote’s tailor shop, back in Loyal, chapter 18. In that, they eventually became starkly aware of who the other mammal was and their intentions, so, Zevon offered the seeds of the wolf apple to John only if he licked them off the floor after he crushed the fruit under his hoof (one seed was stuck to the underside).

["Look what you’ve done..."] Is something of a catchphrase first seen in Loyal, chapters 13 and 19, and said by Magnus himself in the climax. It's meant to accuse the victim that their circumstances (either right before their death or witnessing the death of a loved one) are the result of their self-righteous meddling in affairs bigger than themselves. The inspiration for this came from “The Lion King”, immediately after Mufasa’s death when Scar confronts Simba with “What have you done?”. "Tamaya" is a name in Quechua meaning "in the center" and "Inti" means "sun"; the former feels appropriate because it seems that Esther seems to be in the center of all that’s happening and the latter runs parallel to his mate’s name, “Nina”, which means “fire”. "Rivera" is a reference to Héctor in Pixar's "Coco". Additionally, "aguará guazú" is the local term for "large fox".

For those curious, a "bridewealth", amongst its other names, is something like a dowry but instead of the family of the bride paying the family of the groom, it is the other way around.

[That was an arranged marriage back with I was six that my parents never knew of or agreed to] This is a reference to when Foxy Loxley attempted to marry his daughter, Fuchsia, to Nick when they were kits, mentioned back in Loyal, chapter 24.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’ll be waiting.”

Waiting for what, though? Nick asked, To be saved? Saved by whom, me? Judy? Gideon? The National Guard? King Richard? Waiting for the signal? Waiting for the planets to align? Waiting for the Supais to realize that they’re a bunch of tyrannical jerks and turn a new leaf? Waiting for their enslaved population of large foxes to rise up in glorious rebellion? What’re you waiting for, Cherries, why would you say that? What were you thinking?

Thousands upon thousands of questions plagued Nick the night he got home from the Luau without an answer in sight. He sprawled upon the bed once shared with his mate and stared at the ceiling with its nocturnal glow of outside light peeking through the blinds, for the empty space where she should have been was too painful to comprehend. Nick kicked the covers off and sat in the chilly Summer night before morning, striding into a flustered pace for the umpteenth time…

Both Gideon and Goliath were crushed when they came down the elevator, he recalled, I was surprised to see him and not her, admittedly… and Gid finally managed to explain everything, as best he could, anyway… Nick growled with self-admonishment and repeated his restless pattern of the prior hours, stalking past the large bird cage purchased for Horatio the parakeet and Baron the raven, they quietly snoozing, I should’ve tried harder to get in there. I could’ve snuck in, slipped past the guards, called Finnick to bug the room, do something more than get thrown out on my tail…

Lory needed support, though, Nick assured, And wow, she really put up a fight, didn’t she? Girl’s got some serious chutzpah. More than me… And those hyenas in front of the Kings’ box, calling us ‘a bunch of trespassers’… jerks, they could’ve been more helpful. His path diverged towards the window, yanking the blinds open to rest his head against the cool glass and simply stare across the low-story cityscape, the remorse in his green eyes shifting to outrage. “You could’ve been more helpful…” he grumbled, jabbing a finger at his reflection, “You were mated a whole week but didn’t even bother to make it official. Just what kept you, huh? Couldn’t settle on who gets whose name? Wanted a kit to join the party first? Could’ve saved everyone a metric butt-ton of trouble if you just made her your wife. Putz,” he scoffed and dropped the blinds again, “Useless, can’t do anything right…”

Nick sighed and flopped back into bed after checking the time on his phone, Should get some sleep before work, I guess, he thought, Don’t you worry, Esther, I’ll come for you, whatever it takes. Give it a week, maybe two, you’ll be back in Zootopia yucking it up with all our friends like this was just the best and worst party of the century. ‘Hey, remember that time we got so wasted, that you were kidnapped by the drug cartel from Reino del Sol? What a weekend that was!’ Yeah, we’ll look back on this and laugh, have something to tell our kits and grandkits about, Nick decided, curling up under his sheets a bit and feeling, at least, marginally better as the weariness of all his worrying finally caught up with him, Just got to keep it together until I figure out how to save you.

As dawn came, so did a quick breakfast at the diner near the motel where Goliath, Gideon, and Lory had a rented room. They… discussed what happened and by what the Grey tods were able to relay, Nick assured everyone present that “Esther has things under control” and to which Gideon agreed, “Essy’s planned it out a dozen steps in advance, sly vixen like her”. Both Goliath and Lory remained doubtful. Regardless, Nick saw them all off at the train station for their return to
Bunnyburrow (they still had businesses of their own to take care of, after all, while Nick had a
damsel to rescue; with the help of his plucky sidekick, of course). Officer Hopps covered for her
partner during the morning assignments and they continued along their list of “things to do,
mammals to see, plots to foil”; it seemed that their meddling was gaining notice as less and less
suspicious activity came from their “just so happened to be in the neighborhood” investigations.

Everything else went smoothly during the first week of Esther’s absence. Nothing and no one had
gotten to Nick Wilde, as far as anyone knew… except for Goliath, anyway, who shared some
mutually internalized guilt with him, and Judy, from whom Nick could hide nothing. He remained
his usual, vigilant, flippant self as an officer of the ZPD, protecting and serving those in need, and
despite his soul-shaking hit, he kept on chugging. He even called her law firm, Bagh & Little, to
let them know that Esther would be out of office for… an undetermined amount of time. How
surprised he was to discover that she’d already called them to let them know, considering the last
thing he heard anything from Esther was before he was escorted out of the VIP area.

“Did she get a last phone call or something?” Nick inquired of his reflection, overlooking a
cityscape on a different night and wearing a different pair of shorts, “If so, why didn’t she call me…?

What was she thinking? Did I do something to…? You know what,” he considered, confidently
crossing his arms and smirking, “It’s all part of her plan, whatever it may be. All I need to do is
make sure she has a safe place to come home to… and maybe prep the runway for her, you know,
smooth the transition a bit. Piece of cake.”

By the end of the week, everything in the apartment reminded Nick of Esther… her fading smell
only emphasized the fact that she wasn’t there. Gideon called every day to check up on him. Nick
called his parents to get some kind of advice about how best to handle such a dramatic change in
his life. He also spoke with Ruth and Goliath… difficult though it was. Judy was always there for
him, whether a phone call away or… just within arm’s reach. As it so happened, no one blamed
Nick for what happened to Esther… no one except that fox in his reflection.

“What’s wrong with you, you’re slyer than this!” he berated of his hazy image in the nighttime
window (it was easier than talking to the bathroom mirror), “Dad would probably be in Reino del
Sol right now, sweeping Mom off her feet and hitching a ride on the next biplane up north and
everyone would be all ‘Oh, John, did you just get back from somewhere? You have such a healthy
glow about you’ and he’d be all ‘Nah, just stepped out for a bit with the missus’. But you,” he
mocked and sneered as he closed the blinds again, arms crossed and turning away, “You’re barely
holding it together. Pathetic.”

He got out his laptop and sat at the kitchen counter as the coffee maker perked to life (takeout
boxes were piling up in the trashcan again). Alright, time for some nose-to-grindstone thinking
outside of the box to make your dreams come true, et cetera, Nick determined, opening up a
notebook with a pen since it so often worked for Judy, Okay, I’ve had ideas so bad on how to save
Esther that they’re actually going into a negative count but that’s because I’ve been approaching
this the same way I always do; idly poking around and stumbling over clues. Well, nothing’s going
to be just revealed to me so I have to dig it up. Easy, Judy and I do this all the time, I simply need to
brush up on the Supais and their ambassador… -ial law? How could Zevon just make her an
ambassador without her permission, anyway? Nick growled and jumped off the kitchen stool to
pour some coffee, This would be so much easier if I sat in on that stupid chat with that stupid
llama and saw his stupid face when he said his stupid things!

Dawn broke and Nick was no closer than when he started. The laptop battery had drained and his
notebook was filled with scratched-out ideas that didn’t make sense to anyone, especially himself.
Nick’s bag-laden eyes jolted open as he scrambled for his phone. “Chunky fudge on toast, I’m late!
” he exclaimed, noticed the date, and instantly relaxed, “For my day off. Good, yes, that’s why I
was okay with staying up last night… he told no one.” Nick then looked over at the birdcage, “I’m telling you feather-babies that it’s my day off, right?”

**Right**, the raven answered.

“Right… Judy’s got her community service today so I… need to clean the apartment; can’t have Esther coming home to a landfill,” Nick decided. Well into the afternoon, the trash was taken out, surfaces and floor polished clean, rugs and furniture vacuumed, windows were washed and open to air out any stuffiness, and the laundry was folded and put away. Nick, quite proud of himself, leaned over to his pet raven perched on the back of a chair and casually spoke behind a paw, “Pretty spick-and-span if I do say so myself.”

**You don’t say**, the raven answered.

“I certainly do say, Baron,” Nick boasted, “You know, I would never apply this much elbow grease for anyone else… maybe Judy, whenever she gets on my case about keeping my desk tidy (which is often). But *he*y, I did this all of my own accord because Esther is a very special vixen; just ask Horatio, he’ll squawk on-and-on about her. Not bad for a bache-…” Nick’s eyes fluttered a bit as he breathed in, held it, and then exhaled to correct himself, “a mated tod living by himself only for the time being. Yeah.”

**Yeah**, the raven answered.

Esther’s scent was gone from the apartment. Even the clothes and bedsheets she left behind had only the freshness of a spring day (or so it said on the side of the detergent). Nick sat with his back to the window. “How long’s it been, ‘eh?” he asked of the night, “A year? Five? A lifetime alone and a lifetime more to still live without her,” Nick waxed poetic and then grunted, “That was pretty good, I should write that down…” He stood and shambled through the empty apartment -- Baron snuck back into his cage with a fluttering from his parakeet roomie -- and the glow of Nick’s phone bathed his weary face as he flicked through his ‘Recent’ list. The phone rang… and rang… and was picked up.

“Heya, Stretch,” Gideon said, “What’s up?”

“Hey, Bangs,” Nick replied, returning to his window to lean against it and the forlorn fox therein, “I was just wondering how that thing with your bakery is going?”

The baker groaned a bit. “Could be better. Turns out all that stuff the bunnies found while they were running the place was pretty bad.”

“Example?” he idly wondered.

“Termites… mold… mostly in the livin’ space overhead so it hadn’t gotten to the bak’ry part yet but… it ain’t lookin’ too good for the ol’ place.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s really kinda *my* fault because when Stu and Bonnie first rented it to me, I said I would get it checked out but the mouse crew they recommended was a bit… pricy and I wasn’t too certain how long I’d last, all things considered. Pa had a friend who knew what to look for but… I guess it was worse than we thought. The Hoppses said they’d be happy to send their produce anywhere in Zootopia, so long as I help cover the cost of shippin’, so there’s always Preds’ Corner…”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming.”
“Thing is, Lory don’t wanna go back to her pack,” Gideon then whispered into his phone, “she
wants to stay with me since she’s jus’ a runt to them but… she’s happy with me.”

His ears actually perked at the information. Why doesn’t she want…? Actually, no, this is perfect,
Nick thought as he sat up some, “Hey… it sounds like you need a place to live and… work out of?”

Since Gideon was Esther’s direct relation (and Esther established an auto-payment system for her
rent for the next few years…), he and Lory hooked a trailer to his van and made for the city (she
followed along on her scooter since the van was a bit tight for her, especially with all his stuff).
Baron and Horatio would be better in the wolf’s experienced care and the stouter fox had a modern
(if unused) kitchen to bake in. Nick already hyped and marketed to the local fox community about
“Gideon Grey’s Really Good Baked Stuff”, convinced the landlord that allowing all of it would be
the best possible course of action of his entire life and packed up Esther’s belongings for storage in
a rear closet. As for himself…

Nick moved into the room his parents prepared for him for the entire time they were estranged… it
provided somewhere that didn’t remind him of Esther. It helped; he got some of his pluck and
cheek back, but she was always on his mind, or as his dad, John, would say, “His tail was never too
far off the ground”. Jackie, his mom, fussd over him just enough to keep him clean, fed, and
punctual but also gave him plenty of space… even though he would insert himself into some of her
occasional doings (whether it be errands or sewing jobs), or as she would say, “Found a use for all
his usefulness”. Baron visited on a regular basis (which Lory said would happen, clever bird that
he was).

At the end of the second week, things finally started getting to Nick. His snark was less in good
humor. His observations sharper, harsher. He was terse, almost always. Critical and passive.
Mostly of himself. He got Finnick to help Gideon with his and Lory’s living arrangements. The
fennec was good at paperwork. Maybe not as good as Esth-… well, he was still good. Gideon
already had potential customers. Lanny was one of them. So was Benny. He couldn’t sell yet, not
until the permits went through. Lory was put in touch with Rocky. Turns out she had a good head
for engines. And tools in general. She wanted to set up a little workshop in the apartment, to fiddle
around in. Gideon enjoyed the noises of her tinkering. Lory enjoyed the smells of his cooking.
They really worked well together. Good for them.

It got worse for Nick. He made mistakes. He denied them. He wondered what happened to his
desk. Turns out the precinct moved him into Judy’s cubicle. They told him it was happening,
apparently, and he seemed to agree. They took up less space together. Judy was always there for
Nick. Made sure his paperwork went through. Nick got in trouble with the pack. He defied Captain
Kela. Really defied him. But he was all bark, no bite. “Insubordination,” said Chief Bogo. Judy
stood up for Nick but it wasn’t her call. Nick and Judy weren’t partners anymore… not until Nick
got his act together. He was made a parole officer for white-collar criminals. A “cubsitter with a
badge” to sign the forms.

The third week ended.

The fourth week began.

Es-… she was still gone.

Nick asked his Dad for help. Dad offered to train his son. He was a keen martial artist, after all.
Best in the Knottedwood. He trained kits all the time before he left for the city. Kits who needed
guidance. Something to take their mind off things. Put their energy to use. They trained on the roof
of their house in Conifer District with its towering evergreens. The needles were rich in scent and
the cone nets shook with their falling quarry… it helped.

“Try again, Nicky,” John instructed, the supple length of his switch springing after it made contact with his son’s haunches due to another fumbled maneuver, the older tod deftly circling with sliding steps and a waggling whirl of his training implement, “Don’t rely so much on your heels until you have a decisive victory. Why?”

“‘Heels are anchors’,” Nick recited in a groan as he rubbed under his tail and got back to his feet, “‘toes are riggings’; use them to get where you’re going.”

“You’ve got strength and speed in your movements, kitto,” his dad commended, “I hear from Judy that you even developed a feint-disarm technique… which I’ve yet to see,” he teased and waggled the switch again.

Nick’s “rudder” swayed and spun as he dashed forward in a zig-zagging motion across the cardboard of their makeshift mat, coaxing his dad into attacking as he feinted… and John feinted, so Nick counter -feinted and swept a leg at the older tod’s planted heels. Those heels weren’t planted any longer as his knees bent to shift his center of mass over his toes… all while his erect torso remained absolutely stationary before it bobbed the slightest bit. John standing-somersaulted over Nick’s shoulder to tap the younger tod’s back with the length of the switch, thoroughly face-planting him into the cardboard.

“Nicky…” John sighed as he tucked the implement under his arm and held out a paw to hoist his son up, “What’s bothering you?” Those glaring green eyes were so like his, except they hid specks of a slightly different green, a trait of his mother’s; and like his mother, he had an obstinate streak a mile wide. “Am I forced to tell you what you won’t tell me?” he rebuked of his grown kit, cocking his hips to rest his paw on one.

“…No,” his son answered. He wrung his paws and glanced at the ground in the early morning light, “This training… it’s been great, Dad, really.”

“With marked improvement,” John beamed, standing straighter with his paw held behind his back, much like an admiral, “Your ducking-&-weaving was raw, untamed and even though it’s been less than a fortnight, and at your age, I think there’s a lot of potential. Bucketloads, I daresay. However…” he prompted.

“Yeah …” Nick huffed and rubbed his nape while holding his waist, and then scratched his bare chest as he looked at a house across the street, grumbling and groaning, and then addressed his father’s expectant face directly, “Dad, listen… I know you can do a… a thing ,” he began and lightly snapped his fingers to demonstrate, “that has to do with memory.”

“I can .”

“You did it for…” Nick petered off.

“For Esther.”

“Yeah,” he quickly continued, choking up the slightest bit, “you brought up her memories for her. Does it go… the opposite way?”

“It can ,” John said with care, “it’s part of the repression process for traumatic experiences. I’ve helped children forget the worst parts of when they were kidnapped before getting them to a proper therapist, as one administers first aid so that a patient can survive the trip to a surgeon. It’s not an exact science but…”
“Right, yes, of course,” Nick dismissed, breathing deep and clenching his eyes before asking with a misty gaze, “But is it possible… could you… could you make me… forget her?”

**Present Day**

“I was looking directly at him but didn’t see it coming,” Nick admitted to Judy, still on her couch in Underyard, bracing his forehead with one paw while the other held a (tiny) can of soda, dumbfounded at the memory, “It wasn’t hard enough to knock me on my tail but it sure made the world spin. He never struck me before. Ever… his discipline was more the stony, silent disappointment type. *Mom* would swat my tail with a wooden spoon when I was a kit, though, but never hit my face,” he continued, “And then he dropped his switch and hugged me. He just… held me, told me to ‘never say that again, never think that’. That I needed to stay strong for Esther, I most of all because I’m her mate… it’ll hurt and be awful but… I just need to hang in there.” He looked down at the paw gripping his arm with a strength unbefitting of a rabbit. Nick smiled… genuinely so.

“You’re stronger than you know, Slick,” Judy said, scooting in as he lifted that arm and wrapped his tail about to embrace her.

“I’d like to think that, too.”

“This is the first time you’ve opened up to me in a month… So what happened after that?”

“We went back inside to get cleaned up and dressed for work, of course,” the fox said, and then looked at a spindly, flexing arm, “Also… I’m thinking I might do some of those exercises that Bo gave me because I look at him, Lanny, Ty, *Dad*… even *Gid’s* got more meat than I do. Speaking of, we should probably head off, he and Lory waiting for us.”

“*Nick*…” Judy kindly rebutted and tugged his tie to keep him in place, “you said you’d tell me everything.”

He sighed and set the soda can on the coffee table as his lower back was rubbed. “Last month was a blur, all just melded into a single glop of self-pity… right up until Dad slapped some sense into me. I still don’t have an answer as to why Esther left, though, only that she most likely expected Señor Supai to take her to court instead of Reino del Sol and… there’s a part of me that can’t shake the feeling that something *I* did -- or *didn’t* do -- drove her off.”

The rabbit stood and went about disposing of the aluminum beverage container. “She loves you, Nick, despite all the reasons a sane mammal can’t stand to be around you,” Judy teased, “And you were mated a week; *Mom* and *Dad* were mated, according to the Tenets, for half-a-year before they made it official with the city,” she continued, “The S/CARE protects the countless traditions of Zootopians while also maintaining the city’s laws; Supai unjustly exploited its wiggle room, is all, and Esther would say the same.”

The fox chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t know, she was being all secretive before the Luau, nervous… she tried to ‘fix something’ on the toilet and it’s not like I don’t trust her with the plumbing but…” he paused with a grunt, “I don’t have a way to finish that sentence, anyway, the point is I can’t help but feel like I don’t… quite know her as well as I thought I did. If I just had a *clue* as to what she was going through her mind when she left with Supai, I could be of more use. All I’ve got is that she *wanted* to go and… that’s what has me so upset, I guess.”

Water ran through and was drained out of the can before Judy pulled off the pop-tab to put into a
jar while the can itself landed into a blue recycling bin. “I didn’t get anything of the sort from her when we discussed Hector’s journal… other than that it rattled her far less than it did me. She is passionate but can be cold as ice when it comes to the law, and from the sounds of it, Magnus set it all up to catch her specifically,” she pondered and then attempted to return to the conversation, “What I heard from Gid is that it sounded terrifying to be in there with that llama… and what Goliath shouldered all these years… I can’t even begin to imagine…”

“By the way, how’re things going with your ‘new partner’?” Nick probed with a timely change of subject, knowing the precursor signs of Judy internalizing distress as she, no doubt, tried to visualize being in on the conversation. After all, she’d almost broken down in tears when she met with Goliath that night and tried to shoulder his despair… as was her way.

Judy feigned annoyance. “Chief Bogo assured me that it was temporary, only-”

“‘Only until I got my act together’, yes, as I heard from him, you, Kela, and Clawhauser,” Nick bantered and then twisted about on the couch to smile in his more charming air of condescension, “Is Fitzpouchrick keeping up with the first bunny cop?”

“Oh, Maurice is doing fine, he just needs to get a feel for his own pace,” Judy said with a flick of her wrist, “It’s fascinating to work with a marsupial, I just kinda wish wallabies are a bit bigger.”

“What, are you and he relegated to the three-wheeled joke-mobile?” Nick teased.

“We’re in one of the smaller cruisers now, yes,” she admitted and walked around the counter once more, “And no matter what anyone says, Nick, you’ll always be my partner on the force. So… how’s the whole parole officer thing working out?”

Nick groaned and about collapsed back onto the couch.

“There are worse mammals to rehabilitate.”

“None as high profile and that I am directly (if partially) responsible for incarcerating…” the fox groaned and rolled to his feet with some apt gesticulation, “Bogo’s just taking it out on me after the feds swooped in and yoinked Doug Ramses. Why else assign Leodore Lionheart if not out of unadulterated, malevolent spite?”

“At least he’s not Dawn Bellwether.”

Nick cringed.

“C’mon,” Judy beseeched, ushering him through her rabbit-eared doorway and into the cool, summer night, “Let’s wrap your brain around that mystery Rocky found for Lory.”

“Thanks, I’ll need it.”

“Onion, chicken, turmeric, coconut milk,” Lory detected, sniffing deeply.

Gideon grunted with excitement and pride as he waved his paw to waft another cloud of steamy aroma toward her nose, “Go on.”

“Tomato, apple, chili peppers, butter, garlic… banana?” she guessed and he grunted again, so she breathed anew, “Coriander… lemon juice, I think, and… grapes, no… sultanas.”

“Yeah!” the tod exulted and then chuffed in good humor as he untied her blindfold, “I thought I
had you with them sultanas, too.” His smiled brighter as she beamed back at him but when he
turned to butter the cornbread, Lory swiped a spoonful of the curry (only to be shooed out of his
kitchen, giggling all the while). “Set out them napkins and stuff, hun,” he instructed, “they’ll be
here soon enough. And put on more than them hotpants,” he kindly but sternly reprimanded, “We’s
fancy city-folk now, y’know, can’t go paradin’ about when company’s over.”

The wolf stuck out her tongue but strode to their sleeping area to change all the same, “I seen girls
the other day wearin’ less than this; at least I still got a tee on.”

“My tee, which you’re stretchin’ out.”

“That don’t sound like complainin’ to me, Moonpie,” she teased from behind a foldable dividing
wall that earned them some privacy in the studio apartment, “That was awful nice of Travis to take
me shoppin’ for proper city-folk clothes, too… even if I’m scared half-to-death that something so
pretty is gonna get ruined just by me wearin’ it.” Lory stepped into view again in a modest, hot-
colored tie-dye tunic that was snug about the chest but loose around the abdomen and billowy at
the sleeves nearer the elbows. “Though I can’t for the life of me imagine why any one would buy
new jeans that’re so faded and torn; I don’t have pants that’re this banged up… and they’s got
holes in places that’d never get worn out.”

Gideon tsktsk ’d with his rice scooper, “Now now, accordin’ to him and Quinton, them’s some
mighty fashionable lady clothes you got on. Besides, all them holes make you look like a real
action hero,” he grinned, patting the white rice set into a large wooden bowl, placing a lid on it to
keep the steam in as his girlfriend gathered up napkins and utensils from the kitchen drawers.

“You really think so?” she asked, a slight blush hiding in her ears and a half-twirl in her step, her
nose then nodding at the short-sleeved silk button-up of an off-kilter diamond pattern of alternating
yellows and greens, “Well, what he picked out for you could put you on the front of a magazine or
a big boat; y’know, a private one that you hold parties on.” She commended to his own warming
ears. “I can’t wait to see how you’ll look after John makes your suit, though, you’ll be just like Mr.
Foxglove.”

“Shucks, Lory, I won’t look that good…” Gideon dismissed, hiding his swooning as best he could.

The wolf’s ears then pricked mere seconds before the fox’s. “They’re jus’ about here!” Lory
declared, scurrying to the table to set all the places as the food was set about in a quick-like
manner. She straightened her blouse, bolted off (was momentary stopped by Gideon so that he
could secure the tie-string in the back), and then flung open the door to immediately cease the idle
banter between Judy and Nick (the former’s arm was raised to knock, so instead, spread from a fist
to wave in greeting). “Hi!” Lory announced, tail wagging as she stepped aside to allow them entry
as they vibrantly exchanged pleasantries (the wolf’s new blouse, for example).

“Told you she was right at the door,” the rabbit boasted to the fox.

“I didn’t dispute it, I simply wondered why you were bothering to knock,” the fox questioned of
the rabbit.

“It’s polite to knock.”

“In that case, I suggest you step back outside and do so,” he jabbed, smirking at her playful
glower. “Love what you’ve done with the place, I hardly recognize it!” Nick admired aloud and to
his hosts, standing nearly in the center to get a proper scope of… the mismatched grab-bag of
furniture clearly arranged for convenience rather than design, “I simply must speak with your
decorator.”
Gideon swept at the air in bashful dismissal. “There’s a thrift store jus’ down the street where we got near all of it, along with some right friendly neighbors. That hope chest is from Mrs. Blanford down the hall.”

“Not sure what one does with a hope chest, so I keep some knickknacks in it,” Lory added, “Beautiful bit of craft, though.”

“Pa’s made ‘em before, s’posed to be wedding gifts or somethin’,” Gideon said and then ushered his guests to the table, “but enough of my blatherin’, you two must be famished.”

Nick breathed deep the homely aroma of freshly-cooked food, thus raising his spirit the highest it’d been all month (a change obvious to anyone with eyes and ears). It was no challenge for Gideon to cheer up his cousin, it seemed, but rather to hold him back from diving into the pot of hot curry. Both Horatio and Baron were certainly happy to see Nick again.

“Rocky’s been a blast to work with,” the conversation continued, courtesy of Lory, as they cracked open Gideon’s latest concoction of “Eat Your Blues” blueberry pie and hand-whipped whipped cream (notably lacking any manner of unbeknownst narcotics), “I don’t think I could ever learn as much as half as what he’s forgotten about engines and the like,” she happily recounted, and then whispered, “As it turns out, ‘Grooper’ is now some kind of fancy AI. It’s like I’m teleported into the future!”

The taller fox shrugged amiably and shove another forkful of crumbly-crust and sweet azure into his gob. “It’s been a pleasure to introduce you to the modern century,” Nick said, “By the way, you mentioned you had something of a thing for me to look at?”

She nodded vigorously before biting the fork while addressing her (new) phone, thumbs tapping to hand it over. Gideon looked eagerly as his cousin received it, humming while licking his own utensil clean. “Well?” the stouter fox asked after a length of expectant quiet.

“A fox cant,” Nick decided and showed it to Judy’s head-bobbing agreement.

“A fox can’t what …?” Lory wondered in her confusion.

“Not ‘cannot’, a ‘cant’,” the bunny explained, “It’s a cipher. I’d reason that this particular cipher is part of an encrypted catalog -- considering that serial number -- so we might simply be looking at a name on a box but it’s as good a starting point as any.”

“Rocky got this from Mr. Never, a.k.a., ‘the late Felix Loxley’?” Nick pondered aloud, “Fortunately for us, most all fox cants are interchangeable -- if he were a weasel or raccoon, this would be a good deal trickier -- and accounting for dialect is easy enough, considering he and I are both from Conifer. How ever …?”

“We need a keyword for this,” Judy concluded and her partner snapped a pointing finger in confirmation. She then clapped her trusty notebook and carrot pen into Nick’s open palm, exchanging it with the phone as he flipped open a blank page and began jotting stuff down. “Also fortunate for us, Nick knows just about everything about the fox formerly known as ‘Felix Loxley’,” she boasted with a smirk.

Gideon then sat up a bit straighter. “Because Mr. Never won’t think that anyone knew about his past life, so any sort of secrets he needs to keep-”

“Will be about Mr. Loxley, not Mr. Never!” Lory then finished.

Nick proudly huffed and smiled, “My slyness is contagious, it seems. Really, though, if we were
trying to get into the super-secret vaults of anyone else, I would not be able to break this mystery open over my first slice of blueberry pie. As it stands,” the taller fox bragged and underlined what he wrote, setting the pen down and sliding it all over to Judy, “I think I know what Mack found.”

Judy gasped, ears reaching for the ceiling. “In credible… no wonder he was so desperate to find a lion that might not even exist…”

“I’ll admit, I had to go through a few keywords to make it fit but then I recognized what had to be ‘Lionheart’ in the cipher,” Nick explained between bites of his dessert, “I’ve certainly seen it enough, recently…”

A paw wrapped around Lory’s to steady her as she nearly leaned over the table.

“According to this … it’s a royal pardon,” Judy explained, setting her notebook down to drum her chin in thought, “presumably for the first Mallupe. It must be signed by King Richard himself or… need an heir to legitimize it. But no one of the Liondon Parliament could do such a thing because their powers were relinquished (thus preventing a bloody civil war for inheritance amongst the four direct lines). The fifth cub of King Richard, though…”

“He was thought not to have any cubs of his own,” Gideon recalled and then speculated, “but if he did and no one knew about ‘em… they might still have right to the crown?”

“That’s the theory.”

Lory grumbled a bit. “If only Mack were here, he’d be able to tell us all he found out… Still, this is the closest my pack’s ever gotten to their freedom, so I’m definitely happy for that. Thank you both, you have no idea what this means to us Mallupes.”

A gray paw waved through the air with a broad smile. “Oh please, I just held the notebook. All credit goes to Nick for this one. Ain’t that right, Slick?”

Nick made a soft hissing sound through his teeth and lips to dismiss any glory from such a trifle. “The work is its own reward, truly, and we’ll see what Dad can come up with in terms of any long-lost heirs of the Lionheart Crown; something like this will definitely light a fire under his tail. As for me, I think I’ll pay a visit to the little fox’s room. Is it still right over there?” he asked of his hosts, lazily pointing over his head.

Gideon chuckled and nodded. “Sure is, Stretch, and we even kept that mirror over the sink. Pa made it for Essy, you know, even paid to have it shipped out.”

Nick did know that. He knew a lot about Esther, like how her first night in the city, with her own money, she purchased a whole cake and ate it all by herself… half of it by herself, the rest went into the trash and about a quarter of it came back up. She always wanted to do something like that after living in a strict, tight-belted household like the Greys, and after she did she felt no urge to ever do it again. She would still splurge every once in a while, having a disposable income and no other obligations… except what she sent back home, of course.

There was a shop on her way to work that specialized in the whatnots any new parents would need. Diapers, cribs, blankets, onesies, bibs, high chairs, bottles, shoulder-slings, binkies, pacifiers, chew-toys, mobiles, strollers… It was only ever in the backdrop of her daily routine until Esther was gazing past that vixen in her reflection at the prospect of a kit, waiting just beyond the storefront. As though in a daze, Esther Grey had a sizeable order gathered on her way through the aisles and displays, snapping out of it only when the cashier asked where she wanted it delivered.
Without a car, she would have to carry it all herself; without a kit, she didn’t have any real need for it… so she chose a charity that the store kept in contact with and had it all sent there, instead. And after she did she felt… like she would never again mock the idea of her “ticking biological clock”.

They told each other many things, Nick and Esther, things they could not bear others to hear. Secrets that echoed between his ears as he stared at that bathroom mirror. The mirror he once covered with a sheet because he was the only fox in it… because Esther’s arms weren’t slipping out from under his own and fixing his tie. Because there was a single tail, his tail, whisking about behind him. Because her face hadn’t popped up on his shoulder, pressed into his neck. Because he could not smell her or feel her on him… or him on her.

Nick braced himself against the porcelain basin, the pelt drawn tight over his knuckles as he glared into his green eyes, the fur spiking from his ears and down his neck to the very tip of his tail. *I was doing just fine…* he accused, black lips curling to reveal his fangs as his nose crinkled in a snarl, *I had a grip on it, I did! I could’ve lasted the night, but no! I can’t even have that!* he fumed, eyes clenching shut as he recalled that single detail that was too much for him, the keyword to Mr. Never’s cipher: “Fuchsia”. *Of all the words that stupid fox could have used, he had to be so sentimental and choose the name of his daughter. Idiot… I almost… I almost made it…* And oh, how he wanted to strike that stupid fox in the mirror, the claws he readied in his paw curling into a fist…

“Almost made what, Blue?”

It was all he could do to bite back a yelp and remain standing after his heart skipped several beats. Nick stared at Esther, sitting on the closed toilet seat, dressed only in a purple, silk tailored shirt, his mind playing some wonderful tricks as to hear her voice and smell her scent again. *That’s it… I’ve finally gone insane…* he decided, knowing full well he had not been exposed to Night Howler of any kind in the previous weeks… but he did not care. He nearly fell upon her, knees anchored into the bathroom mat as he lay his head upon her plush, bare thighs. He could almost feel her claws sifting through his fur as she hummed that lullaby they both knew…

*I’m sorry…*

“What for?”

*This wasn’t supposed to happen…*

“You can’t control everything, you know.”

*I can’t control anything. Everything I touch is ruined,* he decried, lifting his eyes to look into hers, claws raking the toilet bowl as he breathed in her scent, no matter how faint it was, *You were supposed to be the one part of my life I got right, Esther, the one mammal I didn’t hurt.*

She smiled sadly at him.

*I drove Judy to depression and suicide… I put a target on Gideon’s back, Lanny’s too… Fuchsia walked into Pred-Therapy and I did nothing to stop her… Honest John went up in a ball of fire… Finnick… jeez, Finnick, how many times did he almost die from my mistakes… the fox rued, tears streaming down his cheeks, But you… you were kidnapped because of me… twice! In as many weeks! And then you went right into the worst place in the world just to get away from me… because I couldn’t help you… just like Fuchsia…* He lay his head upon her legs once more but realized that it was only the plush seat cover. So, instead, he stared at the empty space mere inches in front of his eyes until the crying petered off. He could still smell her; almost.
Almost.

Could almost still smell her.

Nick’s sinuses cleared with another snort as his ears and tail pointed to the heavens, nostrils flaring as he did smell Esther… a mere echo of a scent but… she was there. His keen nose pointed and sniffed around the toilet, nearly crawling behind it, tail wagging as he pinpointed where it was coming from and so his long arm reached, groped around to find something wedged into some hiding place behind a busted tile.

He pulled it out and sat against the tub, hardly registering what it was as he uncurled crudely pinched wrapping and breathed Esther in to brighten his world. But as soon as it came it immediately went, a single whiff and all its memories drained onto the tile beneath him. Nick inspected the packaging, attempting to smell her one more time and realized what it was. A pregnancy test. And what sort of odor was on a pregnancy test.

“What am I doing…?” he asked no one and, indeed, no one answered. Nick glanced up at the mirror on the wall, waiting to show him some fox he didn’t recognize as the Nick Wilde. Some other, broken fox who couldn’t last a month… couldn’t hold it together for a single night without his mate. “What were you thinking…?” he, again, asked no one as he curled upright, gripping the wrapped test with all his weakness and let his mouth hang open to exhale. He wasn’t sure if any sound came out. He didn’t much care.

So, Nick remained on the bathroom floor, against the tub, arms crossed over his head and tail wrapped about his scrunched legs to… maybe not prepare to face that mirror again but wait until he heard Judy knocking on the door. He gave some bland affirmation as to his condition and that he’d be out shortly; as the pregnancy test fell from its open wrapper to mutedly clatter on the floor, he crumpled the remains and blindly tossed it towards the trash can.

There stayed the fox for some amount of time longer, answered another knock on the door with another bland affirmation, and then decided to bite the bullet in an attempt to stand. If anything, Nick needed to throw the wrapper away properly, since it was on the floor and not in the trash can, which he accomplished by crawling over to it, picking it up, and dropping it directly into the waiting receptacle. The mirror was also waiting for him. Maybe there was something else he could do down there, some other use he could provide before shouldering a world-weight of facing that other fox in his reflection.

Nick turned about and picked up the pregnancy test to toss it into the trash, too. He missed. It bounced off the rim and landed nearby. He picked it up and half-heartedly let it fall from his fingers, only for it to bounce off the rim again. It was something, feeling annoyance when all he otherwise felt in the previous, eternity-spanning minutes was absolutely nothing, so the fox picked up the test for the third and final time to dangle it directly over the wastebasket… and stared. The results stared back at him.

From the trash can was that wrapper retrieved and then compared, slowly pointing his brighter and brighter gaze from one to the other as she stood to his feet… and met his reflection eye-to-eye.

“…Oh,” the other fox agreed.

“Nick!” Judy called, pounding on the door and jiggling the locked handle again, “I gave you plenty of space and time and all it’s amounted to is you shutting me and everyone out!” she rebuked, “If you don’t open this door right now I will bust it down myself. Don’t think I won’t!” Her ear pivoted to the approach of Gideon and Lory, the latter with her box of tools to pop the simple lock
of the bathroom door. How ever, such actions were not needed as Judy’s ear swiveled again to Nick’s appearance in the doorway, not suave or apologetic or smug but… aware, perhaps. “ There you are-!” Judy continued to rebuke but flinched as something was placed in her indignantly outstretched paws.

“Stretch!” Gideon declared, half about ready to strangle his cousin and embrace him for all the worrying he was put through but before he could get another word out, a single finger was raised to quiet and then direct him.

“If you all would follow me, please?” Nick calmly requested, “No need for the tools, Lory, I think we’ve got everything we need.”

“Esther’s pregnant…” Judy breathlessly wondered as she looked up from the test, mixed with bewilderment and celebration, “She’s pregnant!”

“What!” Gideon responded, nearly getting whiplash as he looked between the bouncing Judy and the striding Nick.

“Today,” the taller fox patiently urged over his shoulder, “Go ahead and throw that away, Carrots, it’s told me all it’s going to.”

“Essy’s with kit!” Lory jubilantly joined, setting down what she carried to keep pace with the rest of everyone else, “But wait… tha’s made all of this so much worse!”

They all stopped when Nick did, him bracing his waist and rubbing his chin. “Maybe. She was riding the s-train that whole week before the Luau so why not tell…?” he muttered as he paced but then laughed and clapped his forehead, “D’uh, obviously! She was going to spring that on me afterward so I couldn’t possibly do anything except propose! And in front of all our friends, too,” he cooed and leered with a dainty rub of his chin, “Utterly devious, Esther, probably had all the forms at the ready, too. I shall have to get back at her for that one… and get back at Supai for ruining so exquisite a prank…”

“But just a few minutes ago you were beside yourself with grief that they swiped yer mate,” Lory argued, “and now that you find out that they have your unborn kit too, all of a sudden it’s a ‘maybe’?”

“Yes,” Nick immediately answered, to the wolf’s bewilderment, “Remember what Gideon said that Supai said? They didn’t want Nina and Goliath, per se, they wanted their kit.”

“Right, Essy…” Lory began and then caught her breath with lips and paws as everyone else looked expectantly at her, “But they… they don’t want Essy, do they? At least not now.”

“They want Essy’s kit,” Gideon concurred, continuing with revulsion, “That Zevon fella about near boasted how the large foxes down there now were ‘bred’ for their crops. They must want Essy for the same which means they could prob’ly pull any local tod…” he shook his head, “But that won’t be the case if she’s already got a bun in the oven.”

“Esther must be banking on her ability to talk reason with whomever that ‘local tod’ is,” Judy then figured, “It’s risky no matter how you slice it but that way, she can stay down there for… for months without drawing suspicion. But why? What does she plan to accomplish?” the rabbit proceeded to speculate, “Did she just play along to keep the rest of us safe?”

Nick vibrated in his patience as his paws clasped behind his back, chest puffed up and about to burst with what he was about to tell. “She’s fluent in the language and culture,” he then said,
“Esther can read and understand the laws of Reino del Sol… Guys, those stupid llamas just welcomed the harbinger of their destruction with open arms!” Nick rejoiced as he began to pace anew with an energetic wheeling of his tail, “And they made her an ambassador… holy smokes, did Esther realize all of that when she kicked Zevon’s knee out?”

“Hold up,” Lory beseeched, “if she’s intent to bring it all down around her, why say such a thing like ‘I’ll be waiting’? Something dangerous like that, you’d think she’d have an exit plan of her own, right?” the wolf critically remarked, but shifted to wry deference, “Then she’d say some witty thing like ‘Wait for me’ or umm…”

“Bangs, your girlfriend is remarkably astute,” Nick commended, “I’m glad you asked that, Shortcake -- I suggest you brush out the crumbs from your fur a bit better,” he kindly pointed out, “because it is an excellent question.”

The wolf promptly brushed out the shortcake crumbs from the fur of her neck. “So you’ve got an answer?”

“No, not yet anyway, but I might need to go through some of her stuff to get a better idea of… what…” he paused and stared at Judy, and then at Gideon, and then back to Judy, “Carrots, remember when you were held hostage in the Hopps Manor at Knotash?”

“I’ve mixed feelings about that, but yes,” she patiently answered and thoughtfully twitched her ears, “One might say that I, too, was in a precarious situation that a single misspoken word could spell tragedy.”

“Essy ain’t the type to jus’ blurt out conclusions like Stretch here, cool-headed lawyering type like her,” Gideon added.

“Do you propose that Esther also sent out a secret message, to you?” Judy asked with burgeoning excitement, “But… I practically had a whole paragraph to say what I had to, Slick, so unless she hid some verbal fox cant in three words…”

Nick grumbled in agreement as he and Judy paced only to abruptly stop. “Gideon!”

“Whu-huh?” he blurted, vaulting back at the finger and approach suddenly thrust at him.

“You said that Esther said ‘I’ll be waiting’, right?”

“Y- yeah, tha’s right.”

“But why would she say that in front of Supai?” Nick asked rhetorically, “Why give away any notion that she was expecting some big rescue? I’m convinced she went down to Reino del Sol willingly.”

“Otherwise she would have put up a legal battle to go down in history,” Judy reasoned.

“Exactly. So if she was expecting us to come get her rather than escape on a helicopter -- like Judy did -- she must have a reason for it… Why would she say…” Nick thought aloud and groaned, “Jeez, I’ve been an idiot… What did she say, Bangs, the exact words?”

“Like I already told you, ‘I’ll be wait-’,” the stouter fox began but then rubbed his chin as he considered his cousin’s expectant expression, “Tha’s what she meant…”

Nick brightly grunted in urging anticipation.
“You’re right, she wouldn’t say so fool a thing for that llama to hear,” Gideon agreed, “As you know, me and her have ourselves our own ‘cant’ and one of the first things she ever taught me was ‘I’ll be waiting’; y’see, when I was really little, Ma or Pa would give me an extra sweet if they didn’t know I got it from the other, so Essy would have me ask and give her my extra. But I don’t know what good that bit of gibb’rish will do ya’, Stretch.”

“Let’s hear it anyway.”

“Oo-de-lally.”

Nick studied the broad-shouldered shrug of his cousin in a daft exchange. “‘Oo-de-lally’,” he dully repeated, groaned and scratched his head, “That’s right, Auntie Ruth sang you and Esther the same lullaby that Dad taught Mom to sing to me; it’d be easy for you -- as a kit -- to learn it.”

“And why’s that significant all of a sudden?” Judy probed, “Wasn’t that just a diddy to help you with your fox-flu?”

“Because,” the city-fox answered, looking to Judy, “that ‘adventure for two’ song you taught your fellow community workers? I’m not sure where your Great-Aunt Lovey got it -- maybe even from her own housefoxes -- but it’s a fox lullaby.”

Judy would have been less startled if a two-by-four clocked her between the eyes. “It is? she almost squeaked, “And you never said anything?”

“I never actually heard you explain why you sing it until today, Carrots,” Nick apologetically elaborated, “and, as you mentioned, I shut everyone out this past month. Honestly, it’s the raddest thing in the world that your great-great-aunt popularized a fox lullaby,” he beamed, and she gradually shared in the sentiment, “If that song is as integral to rabbits as you say it is, there’s no greater point of pride for a fox than knowing that something of theirs is passed around with such impunity.

“Now, about ‘oo-de-lally’,” Nick continued, “After staying with my parents this past fortnight I learned (or re-learned) a few things. Those of the Knottedwood used songs as pneumonic devices to help them navigate the bio-magnetic minefield that is the surrounding forest; Dad can’t hold a tune to save his life but he has his eidetic memory and perfect pitch to fall back on and knows all the songs by heart, even if he can’t sing them himself. One of the phrases, ‘lee-de-diddy-dee-doo’, is the companion to ‘oo-de-lally-loo-lee’; apparently, it helped young kits adapt to the Knot but it also carried with it a very old tale.”

Judy cooed excitedly, “Slick, I think you’re about to realize something really cool.”

“‘Oo-de-lally’ was passed down by the Knottedwood foxes even before our Grandpa landed there,” Nick explained, gesturing to Gideon, and indeed, his own excitement was nearly palpable, “It came from an old vixen who -- according to Dad -- heard the first-hand account of the original Mr. & Mrs. Fox.”

Gideon gasped. “Essy’s favorite story! The noble rogue saves the fair maiden from the clutches of the usurper king… So… she does want us to save her?”

Nick blinked and stared a bit blankly at nothing in particular. “It must be a city-fox legend that the ‘noble rogue’s name was (supposedly) ‘Robin of Loxley’; that’s why it carries so much weight and renown. And until the TBR, I always heard that he was history’s greatest outlaw -- the ‘king’, some say -- centuries ahead of Captain Piberius Savage… but by a slim margin, categorically speaking,” he mused, “More importantly, it wasn’t just Maid Marian that was saved,” he quietly
came to realize, “they saved the entire kingdom. Esther’s set on rescuing the large foxes of Reino del Sol. All of them.”

Chapter End Notes

Most health and safety inspections are performed by crews of mice and other small mammals since they can access areas others cannot and are usually more thorough; contrast with larger mammals who rely on scent to detect the worse violations and possibly put themselves at risk. Some inspections can get costly with the introduction of transportation and hours spent, depending on the size of the building.

Officer Maurice Fitzpouchrick is a wallaby, a new recruit to Precinct 1 introduced back in Loyal.
This chapter is not meant to delegitimize the parole officers out there, only to emphasize that Nick's been forcibly transferred between departments.

This curry recipe is brought to you Brian Holley over at GeniusKitchen[dot]com.

The "Travis" mentioned here is “Travis Blackfoot", introduced back in Brave, but never given a last name in the movie; I decided to give him his surname since he is a blackfoot ferret. Quinton is a porcupine and his husband, mentioned back in Loyal.

Blanford fox is a species closely related to the fennec fox.

[(notably lacking any manner of hidden narcotics)] A reference to what happened back in Trustworthy, kicking off this whole story.

[dressed only in a purple, silk tailored shirt] references Nick’s Dawson hallucination in Trustworthy, chapter 8.

Lots to unpack here: Judy's depression/suicide after the Pred Scare, covered in Trustworthy, chapter 6. Gideon and Lanny being target are covered in Brave chapter 1 and Loyal, chapter 22, respectively. Honest John’s fireball was back in Loyal, chapter 6. Fuchsia's pred-therapy was also covered in Brave, chapter 7.

[riding the S-train] As mentioned in the previous chapter, Esther underwent "girl stuff" which, for the females of Zootopia, is known as "estrus" and is analogous to the human menstrual cycle. The difference between the two is the polar opposite states of fertility; the similarity is the use of pads and other such feminine hygiene products to mitigate certain anatomical situations and, for the females of Zootopia, nix the smell. Several euphemisms exist for estrus including but not limited to: "in heat/season", "riding the s-train/-bus", and "Taco Tuesday".

[Oo-de-lally] was first mentioned as part of a lullaby back in Brave, chapter 3.

“The First Mr. & Mrs. Fox story” was first mentioned back in Brave, chapter 16.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

[Author’s note: Reino del Sol is an amalgamation of Latin and Mesoamerican cultures, and for the sake of the story, I’ve refrained from identifying the local language as “Spanish”, instead, borrowing words from it and other, similar languages. Central and South America are predominantly Spanish-speaking but Brazil, the country whence the large foxes/maned wolves originate, speaks Portuguese; Goliath’s original name, Inti, comes from the Quechua language. Any spoken scenes which take place in Reino del Sol will, presumably, be in the local language unless otherwise specified. That said, enjoy!]

It was paradise. The twilight hours were balmy. The evenings, cool. The daytime… air-conditioned. Truly, Esther wanted for naught… except for a one-way ticket back home. Back to her mate. And her family. Her friends. Everything else, though, was abundantly provided at the finest quality.

Fruits so juicy that she could poke through the skin with her claw and sip from it. Flowers so vibrant and sweet-smelling that walking amongst them was as a dream. Birds and frogs with voices that sounded as a symphony of nature. Her clothing was comfortable, fitted to every length and curve her body could provide. Her baths were unparalleled by any thing she experienced in Zootopia. Esther was pampered, doted upon, and treated like a porcelain doll by the palace servants…

Tamaya was pampered, doted upon, and treated like a porcelain doll by the palace servants. That was her new name, after all, “Señorita Tamaya Rivera” not “Ms. Esther Grey” (or “Mrs. Esther Wilde”…), ambassador of Reino del Sol. An ambassador who would return to her duties as soon as she finished her training… and after her maternity leave.

A discreet paw caressed the still trim stomach beneath her dress… Don’t worry, little one, we’ll get out of this; all of us, Aslan willing, she promised, and your daddy will be one of the first mammals you meet. The vixen gazed from her window, over the sprawling estates of the empire’s nobility… and further beyond, the (literal) drop into the surrounding slums, which stretched and wove into the wilderness as though ancient ruins were repurposed and repopulated, with flowing streams and grand trees that made Zootopia’s Rainforest District little more than a quaint arboretum in comparison. Even further beyond hid the winding valleys and grasslands, the cradle of her species… enslaved, isolated… not only geographically but technologically, as well, so that they -- like she -- could not call for help.

They -- those ruling llamas -- would soon return with some local tod, or according to the “hounds” of the palace, a “tribute”. Some sire or other… and it would not be a day too early because Esther could only hide her missing cycle for so long before the llamas would suspect that she was already with kit. She was nervous, of course, and hoped, prayed to appeal to his better nature, whomever he was; that he might heed her and side with her against their oppressors. If not… then it really would all be for naught… at the moment, there was another, more pressing concern…
“Here,” a stoic voice said, perhaps one of the few who fluently spoke the language more common to Zootopia than Reino del Sol (even if he could carry on a terse conversation with the local goats… not that he was known for his conversation), as he set down an earthenware bowl filled with his most recent concoction ground inside a modern, ceramic mortar and pestle, “drink up.”

Esther nodded, accepting the mash and had even come to enjoy the taste of the wolf apple in it. Her physiology had never known the fruit’s nutrients, after all, or even nursed from a vixen that did… so, a specialist in the plant’s chemistry was flown in to prepare her body to bear a “very special kit”. “Thank you,” she simply said and promptly drank it all in a single sitting… knowing full well it was not poisoned.

Doug Ramses was returned the bowl and he went about cleaning it. His tight lips would likely never regale how the Supais managed to sneak him out of Zootopia and into Reino del Sol… only that he was hired on as a “consultant” in the newest generation of the lobeira plant, from which the wolf apple was grown. “How’d it taste?” he asked.

“It was fine,” Esther answered, “a bit more citrusy than usual.”

“Thought I’d try something different. Not too bad, I hope.”

“No.”

The hornless ram gathered up his apothecary equipment after it was all cleaned. “See you tonight, Señorita Rivera,” Doug said and walked back to the large anteater guards who never once let the vixen out of their sight.

She paid them little notice, instead, delved into one of the romance novels she checked out of the palace library. As the capital city of Reino del Sol, it held quite the collection of literature on numerous topics and, without access to much in the way of technology, Esther had to do some thing with all her free time. Thank goodness I heard about Judy’s escape from the Hopps Manor or else I would be completely lost as to what to do… except she slipped out within thirty hours and I’ve been here nearly thirty days… the vixen rued as she perched her reading glasses on the end of her snout after pinning her bangs back, And she had full run of a place filled with bunnies while I have… she glanced at the guards, a trickier assortment of nannies, perhaps.

One thing that Esther was thankful for was that her billowy dresses allowed her to smuggle law books out of the royal library by gripping them between her thighs. She was also glad -- perhaps for the first time in her life -- that she was a notorious insomniac with too much energy to just lie in bed… and knew how to read with the barest available light. The second volume of Reino del Sol’s updated international law lay hidden beneath a floor tile she painstakingly dug up, beneath the rug, beneath her bed, and invisible unless one knew exactly where to look.

Señor… Emperor Zevon Supai was still in the palace, opting instead to send one of his brothers to fetch a large fox. He was wheelchair bound and as far as anyone knew, his knee was mending from a “particularly nasty fall” after the Luau a month prior. Esther wondered how long he planned to maintain that lie but… despite the daggers he stared at her, he was always accommodating… perhaps because she gave absolutely no reason to suspect her. No tricks. No pranks. No fuss. No defiance. Just like Judy in the Hopps Manor of Knotash, Esther was a refined lady… and as Ma would say, “a proper vixen”.

And like “a proper vixen”, like her beloved friend Judy, she kept her head down but ears up to all manner of opportunities. It’s just too bad none yet presented themselves. At least… not until she could wrap Yzla around her finger. Even down here, there’s no changing a Gazelle fan, Esther mused, I’ll buy you as much time as I can, Nick… Aslan, please let him have understood my
The “Eat Your Blues” blueberry pie sat depleted (mostly by Nick), its purpose for existing fulfilled with flying colors, while Gideon warmed up his mother’s apple cobbler recipe to further nourish the bottomless pit that was his cousin.

“All of them…” Judy thoughtfully repeated, guiding a syrupy blueberry about on her plate with the end of her fork (not minding that she used a kit-sized utensil to do so while sitting on a phonebook), “That will require some revolutionary thinking…”

“Daunting?” Nick wondered aloud to express his shared perspective on the topic if behind the pie tin he was licking clean. He then balanced it on the tip of his claw and carefully spun it.

“Stop that, you’ll poke your eye out.”

“It’s round,” he rebutted but set it down all the same, “If anything, I’ll slice my eye open.”

Lory barely touched her second helping but not for lack of appetite. “How’re we gonna save them large foxes…? I know Bunnyburrow is scott-free for any slave that gets here (I mean… there ) but they gotta get there.”

“No way those llamas’ll just let a buncha slaves toddle off north,” Gideon remarked as he waited by the oven, checking on the cobbler, “According to Pa, it was a miracle that those seafarin’ jaguars didn’t throw him overboard when they found him and his newborn kit… But maybe tha’s not what Essy’s expectin’ us to do? She’s gotta have a plan, whatever it may be, even if she ain’t figured it out quite yet.”

Nick’s head propped up. “Plausible but if that’s the case, she might have an idea of how to get them out and we’d need only be able to receive them.”

“And process them,” Judy speculated, sinking the fork into the berry to munch on it with a satisfying burst of flavor across her tongue.

“‘Process’?” Lory doubted.

The rabbit nodded. “This is Esther we’re talking about; any plan of hers could only work to the letter and spirit of the law, even in a foreign country, otherwise the Supais could break it open like an overripe melon and we’d all be in an even worse situation than we are now, due to all the laws we just broke,” Judy calmly huffed, though at no one in particular, “The Felix would be ecstatic to help but he’s got his paws full with everything Magnus did.”

Nick reached over and scooped up a trail of residual pie-filling from Judy’s plate by means of his finger. “Don’t worry, I know a guy.”

Purple eyes flatly stared. “Really? You know ‘a guy’?” she paused at his smug grin licking his fingertip clean and then set her fork down, “Leodore Lionheart headed Doctors Without Species …”

“He sure did, built houses and windmills in third-world countries the world over before hopping onto the City Council, and then the mayor’s office; those good deeds were paramount in his PR campaign. More to the point, he and Buckley Stagmire used their combined wealth and connections to sponsor entire families for emigration from persecuting locales; perhaps not to Zootopia but other, nearer first-world countries. Best of all, he might feel compelled to aid Esther, specifically, due to her work on his trial a year ago,” the taller fox confirmed, gradually inching
Judy’s plate closer (as she chewed on the new information) before rapidly licking it clean and holding it out as Gideon approached with the cobbler, “Finally, I’m famished.”

“Wastin’ away, ain’t ya’? It’s a wonder you haven’t eaten your folks out of house-and-home,” Gideon snarked as he scooped out both the hot, crumbly apple pastry and a dollop-and-a-half of whipped cream, “This’ll make us jus’ like Grampub, won’t it, Stretch? Rescuin’ a buncha slaves and refugees from a war-torn dictatorship.”

Judy received a little piece, per her request, crowned with just a smidgeon of fluffy white. “Bo and I would love to just sit down with Grandpa Savage and hear all of his naval stories; being such a history buff, he’s rent asunder trying to figure out where and when that particular event happened,” she idly mused and then set as she returned to the current topic, “So… all we need now is a way to communicate with Esther and somewhere to house a yet undetermined number of refugees.”

“Such a downer,” Nick said around mouthfuls, “Tell me, Carrots, how goes the clean-up of the TBR?”

Purple eyes rolled away. “Steadily enough, I hear; we are talking about…” she paused and tapped her fork on her chin… and then smacked it on Nick’s knuckles as he tried to reach for her cobbler, “Tens-of-thousands of tents…”

“With ‘lectricity and water, too, jus’ like mine had!” Gideon also realized.

“Each one big enough to comfortably contain a full-grown lion, too,” Nick lightheartedly added, soothing his struck knuckles, “plenty of room for a small family of large foxes.”

“I’ll get a hold of Sheriff Longmare, she should have some pull in Horseshire to make sure those tents stay up,” the rabbit excitedly considered.

“Actually,” Nick interjected, “I might have another task for you, my dear Carrots. Bangs, you’re cozy with the good sheriff, perhaps you’d be so kind as to set up some temporary living arrangements for your very extended family?”

The stouter fox blinked as he set down the still warm cobbler to point at himself with quite the bewildered expression. When Nick nodded and grunted in confirmation, the blue eyes quirked along with his grimace, “Stretch, that’s awful flattering you think I can convince anyone of anything but those tents’re owned by the TBR Board, y’know, the one that Judy’s grandpappy was on before he died? I can’t imagine her influence bein’ less than mine.”

“Sure, sure,” Nick agreed, “but you were the one who talked Supai into a corner, were you not?” he then commended, “Only a most clever and persuasive fox could have managed that…” And Rachel likes you, so convincing that long-hoof of the law will be a slam dunk.”

Gideon gulped but nodded, taking a deep breath as he looked up to Lory reaching over and gripped his paw with assurance. “Yeah, I can do this, huh?”

“You’re a fox; maybe not born with a silver spoon in your mouth but certainly a silver tongue,” his cousin said and winked. The farm-fox smiled and got out his phone to excuse himself.

“That was so touching,” Judy sincerely endeared, leaning on the table and beaming up at her partner, tail flicking behind her as she punched his arm, “You’re such a basketcase of encouragement, aren’t you?”

“Don’t get too smug, Fluffikins, because I reckon you’ve got the hardest job out of all of us.”
“Oh?”

“*You* need to get feet on the ground in Reino del Sol. *Bunny* feet.”

Judy’s face contorted with cynicism… and then she released the breath built up all the while she studied his knowing grin. “You’re talking about Graham, aren’t you?”

“Graham and whatever’s left of his spy network,” Nick agreed and then admitted, “It’s a shot in the dark…”

“It’s a shot into *outer space*.”

“I would entrust so impossible a task to *only* you.” They shared a long silence. “So… think you can do it?” he tried.

“Of course I can,” she offhandedly dismissed, “*and* will, for the record. I was only considering what Graham could possibly want of *you* in return,” Judy said and rubbed his arm, “He’s a better rabbit, Nick, but what Magnus did to Knotash… to every bunny therein… it reverberated through every corner of the city, maybe even in the *country*, and it won’t go away any time soon; Knotash has been on lockdown ever since they brought him in, everything from trash disposal to text messages. What you’re asking… it’s not just about *me* or even Esther… this could ruin tens, *hundreds* of thousands of lives and livelihoods.”

“I know…” he concurred and cupped her cheek, “But… there are already tens, if not hundreds of thousands of lives already ruined… with no hope of getting better.”

“I know,” she concurred and rubbed his wrist, “which is why I can and will do it. I just needed to hear you say that we were on the same page.” Judy smiled and canted her head as she pulled out her phone and waggled it. “Wish me luck.”

Nick crossed his fingers and nodded as she hopped off. He then looked up at the wolf on the other side of the table; in a blink, the fox had joined her. “So…”

Lory picked and nibbled at her cobbler, having only eaten the majority of the whipped cream, same as her pie. “Oh, thanks for thinkin’ of me, Nick, but I won’t be of much use in this, so over my head as it is; I’m jus’ here for emotional support,” she said with a smile, “or if anything needs fixin’ or… delivered.”

“Are you going to finish that?” he politely asked and pointed with his fork.

“Nuh-uh, go right ahead,” she amiably offered, sliding it over so that he could scoop out another dollop of whipped cream onto either half-eaten dessert, to which she then leaned in to whisper, “I love sweets and I love Giddy’s bakin’ but I’m just not that hung’ry right now.”

The fox softly grunted around a mouthful of combined cobbler and pie as he glanced over at Gideon, and then Judy, “Why, anxious?”

“Well, all that’s been happenin’, y’know?”

“Shortcake,” Nick said with a casual smile, “Giddy told you that I’m pretty good at sniffing out lies, yeah?”

Her brow furrowed. “Some might say tha’s bein’ nosy.”

“Oh, definitely,” he offhandedly agreed and shoveled more crumbly crust and fruit filling into his
gob, swallowed, and then looked directly at her with pastry gore plastered on his chin, “Regardless, there’s something you wanted to talk with me about, ain’t that right?”

Lory flinched and pinned her ears. “N-No…?”

“Lory…”

“Yes…?”

“Your body language makes you an open book to a keen observer like yours truly (now that I’ve removed my head from my tailpipe),” Nick explained, “I’ve seen it plenty of times before; not directed to me, necessarily, but just like how I can recognize that you are hopelessly smitten for my jolly cousin Gideon over there, the signs of a mammal that is desperately anxious to get something off his or her chest are equally clear. So… what are you so anxious about, Mallory Mallupe?”

She shrunk a bit, tail curling about her knees somewhat. “I gotta say, hearin’ about that trick of yours and seein’ it in practice are two diff’rent things, Nick… If Giddy hadn’t warned me in advance, I’d be in a right panic to chuck you out the window.”

Nick snickered around the pie, “Haven’t heard that in a while.”

“You’re right, though… I did wanna ask you somethin’ but jus’ couldn’t, all things considered…”

“Too sensitive? Not the right time? Everything else going on?” he coolly listed off and then warmly said, “Being a runt and afraid that voicing your concern will bring unwanted notice?”

Lory nodded and twirled some of her neck-mane around a finger. “I heard… that you’re Alphonse Kela’s omega.”

“That I am.”

“D’you… d’you know what that is?”

Nick directed attention with his fork after cleaned it off in his mouth (along with his mouth). “It’s a mammal brought in from outside the pack that answers directly to the alpha if memory serves. I’m in something of a time-out right now, though.”

“It’s a bit more than that…”

He set the utensil down and pivoted in his seat to face her. “Go on.”

She tugged her neck fluff a bit. “Y’see… when an alpha gets on in years but won’t give up the pack, they hafta prove that they can still contribute to it. So… one of the surest, cheapest ways of doin’ it is… well… havin’ a pup. I am Ed Mallupe’s daughter, not his grand- or great-granddaughter… As it is, us alpha’s omegas aren’t thought too highly of by the rest of the pack when there’re other, younger wolves that don’t need to find a new mate tha’s a third their age. Mack was Papa’s first and I was his second. It’s why we’s runts, even ‘mongst the other runts, but he always protected me… when he was around. And then there’s you, Nick,” she implored, “Alphonse Kela pulled you in and made you one of his. So… you must know what it’s like, right?”

Nick bounced his foot on a knee. “I don’t get sidelong daggers from the other wolves but I know what you’re talking about, Lory. You weren’t anxious to empathize, though,” he reckoned, “Please continue when you’re comfortable in doing so.”
Lory rubbed her arm. “I’m so happy to be in the city, there’re so many diff’rent kinds of couples here... no one thinks twice about a fox and a wolf together... I know my pack would never allow it...” and then added under her breath, “some of them, anyway...” Her eyes darted from the patient fox, back around to those who excused themselves from the table, so that she might whisper, “They’d wonder why I chose a fox to love... as I’m sure many would wonder why I want to be with Giddy, of all foxes, and well...” Her voice lowered until it was hoarse and clenched her face as tightly as she could, claws absentely scraping from elbow to wrist... an action the fox recognized on his cousin several times before, “It’s because he understands, Nick, he understands and... I know... I didn’t go through what he went through but...”

He sighed and held her scratching paw to cause a violent flinch and a surrendering clench. “I think I understand, Lory,” Nick assured, “It’s actually something that’s been bugging me ever since I found out that there really was a third alpha in Zootopia, aside from Kela and MacGrim. I figured Ol’ Eddy was a neutral party to decide disputes but that can’t be the case, otherwise, there wouldn’t be such a conflict between the other two. I’m starting to think...” the fox continued, “You don’t need to answer, just stop me if I say something wrong, but would I be correct in assuming that not every wolf in your pack is a Mallupe?”

She didn’t stop him.

A ‘gloved’ paw carefully, professionally sifted through the fur on her arm, detecting beneath its pelt what he suspected could only be what was also under Gideon’s: scars, numerous scars. “I wager that the MacGrim wolves use the Mallupe pack as a safehouse, of sorts, exploiting the protection that wolf alphas provide each other. They get caught red-pawed within city limits and then claim that they’re part of the Mallupes and get a one-way ticket to Preds’ Corner, ‘back to exile’, thus, Ed’s protection... but I would also wager that Ed, sharp for his age, is not as vigilant as he likes to think he is.”

Again, she didn’t stop him.

“Ferris MacGrim and his ‘Secret Police’ is the strong arm that keeps Underland running, as I’m sure you know,” Nick added, “and Kela’s been after him for years... stopped only by his strict adherence to the Alpha Law,” he then grinned, “That’s what I was brought in for. What I’ve noticed during my time under Captain Kela, my dear Shortcake, are indicators that MacGrim is (or was) involved in all the same places, mammals, and activities as Magnus... an astronomical coincidence that connects him to the Supais. I’d bet my tail it’s how so much NH Pollen is getting into the city, so striking down one means striking down the other; it can’t be helped when dealing with such a wide-reaching, intricate web as theirs and this is the surest avenue available to us.”

Lory sniffed and rubbed her eye. “Then you’ll...?”

“We need to find the lost Lionheart heir,” he stated simply enough and amiably pointed, “Nixing the exile on your family will cut off what can only be an easy smuggling route for MacGrim; no refugee status, no exploitation of its protection from Liondon. Plus, finding...” he then snorted and covered his mouth, “Sorry, I almost said ‘Missing Prince’ but that’s a completely different lion of legend. Anyway, I suspect we’ll get the Supais through the World Heraldry Society since they’re something like the referees for modern royalty (i.e., the Supai Empire),” he added, “which a long lost bloodline of King Richard will definitely qualify for.”

The wolf said nothing... except every thing as she leaned down and licked the fox’s cheek and then the other while gripping his paw in both of hers.

“Stretch, you leave that poor girl to her desserts,” Gideon chastised, “If you wanted more cobbler you’d need only say so.” He huffed and stowed his phone, if a bit smugly, “Anywho, some of us
was bein’ useful and convinced a certain sheriff that them tents should stay up, at least for a few months. They’d need a ‘proper airing out’, after all,” and winked.

Nick flicked his wrists with a double-shot of finger-guns and a light groan of approval, “I knew you could do it, Bangs, slyest tod in Bunnyburrow.” Gideon both swooned and dismissed such a trifle.

Judy’s excited whooping preceded her dashing and hopping back to the table. “Good news, everyone: I just got a luncheon with Graham this week. Had to bend a few ears to do it but he’s more than happy to shuffle some things around to meet me,” she boasted and stashed her phone, “and whatever it is this ‘mysterious project’ that I’ll ‘most definitely need his help on’,” and winked.

Nick trilled with a snap of his fingers. “Someone call the space program because I think we’ve got ourselves a moon shot! I’d say we deserve a little something special,” and then turned to his cousin, arm around his shoulders, “So, Lory taught you how to howl, right?”

Gideon’s face erupted from cheeks to ears in a red that outshone his fur as he choked on his response. Judy stifled her laughter.

“Don’t worry, this’ll be a spirit -rousing howl,” he said with a wink and gently elbowed the flustered fox before looking at the girls at the table, especially Lory, “I think it’s definitely called for in this situation?”

Lory beamed and nodded, tail wagging with no intent to stop him.

When was the last time he saw the sky? The moon? Had a good howl? Had anything to howl about…? Mack “The Sparrow” Mallupe was on his way to the train station, to Preds’ Corner when he was intercepted by an unsavory group of wolves from a rival pack. He set up a rendezvous at the airport to get out of Zootopia until the heat died down, instead, but they weren’t about to let him go so easily… and the tarmac is no great place to hide.

“Wakey-wake, runt,” his warden growled, banging against the barred door. Ferris MacGrim, whose colors and demeanor were of a tombstone caked in grime, was let into the cell to look upon its resident with harsh, yellow eyes.

Mack glanced over a shoulder at his captor and then rolled off the floor-bound mattress, the chain-and-collar around his neck jangling as he assumed the position before the alpha to whom all other alphas defer… the ones of Underland, anyway. The smaller wolf was bruised and bandaged with all his tattoos visible, on account of his nakedness. “Come to reconsider my request for pants? Or a shirt, at least?” Mack weakly asked, defiance still in his voice despite his posture.

“Only if you stopped trying to escape,” Ferris answered in his gravelly voice, “and you’ll get a cavity search if you start walking funny. Again.”

The chained wolf chuckled, eyes never rising. “It’s been a fun month.” Levity was a luxury, indeed, as his head wrenched back, the tresses of his fur gripped in a clenching fist.

“No, it really hasn’t,” Ferris growled, crouched so that his hot breath parted the fur on Mack’s throat and then threw him towards the glowing console provided, “You promised me many things, Sparrow, and delivered on none of them,” he warned.

“Something of my M.O., admittedly,” Mack said, struggling to his elbows as he glanced up at the computer screen, “I’ve outlived more than my share of a few debts.” The irate paw gripped his collar and nearly broke his head through the blinking command prompt cursor.
“Get me into Knotash, runt,” the dark alpha commanded, “Get me into Mr. Never’s vaults. Give me the name of my brother’s killer. Give me all the things you bartered your life for.”

“Your brother got what he deserved—” he bitterly mumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” Ferris demanded.

He spoke louder, clearer, plaintively, “If I just had my effects—”

“No, Sparrow, you lost that trust a long time ago. I am a patient wolf but you have not progressed in the least, only made attempt after foolish attempt to escape or disable the watcher programs.”

He was dropped onto the mat in front of the keyboard as Ferris loomed over him, “Maybe I should break your legs, cut out your tongue, lop off your ears, shave you and brand you… or worse… but I don’t think that’s enough to motivate you.”

Mack subdued his growl and refrained from snarling, knowing better than to provide any kind of challenge. The biggest issue was that his captors were not as dumb and blind as he needed them to be. “Bodily harm is plenty motivating, Ferris—Mr. MacGrim, sir, oh chiepest of alphas,” he assured, sitting up but bowing his head, paws presented, “In fact, I feel the most suddenest of inspirations on how to hack through—”

Ferris barked and snapped his jaws, making not only the prisoner but the guards cower and whine. “Enough games. Were it my choice, I’d end you here and now but your death won’t get me what I want, fortunate favored of the queen. Or else, not so fortunate…” MacGrim leered at the then raised cautious glance, “You’ve been out of the loop for a while, you know, and you might be interested to know that little Lory isn’t under your daddy’s protection anymore.”

The cautious glance exasperated to a horrified pallor.

The fanged leer worsened. “She must’ve outgrown that pretty, red dress Ulaf got her by now…” MacGrim considered and dragged a claw tip under the smaller wolf’s jaw before the whole of his paw wrapped around his snout, “so maybe I should get her a new one, one that would better fit her. I’ll just… walk into that little fox community on Reynard Road, knock on her door, throw her fat, little fox boyfriend off the building and… give her a pretty, new dress,” paused, and then released the trembling mouth, “Or…”

“Or I could get you into Knotash,” Mack weakly negotiated, repressing every urge to snap, snarl, bark, bite, and fight, justified though he would be in all of it, “And Mr. Never’s vaults. And the name of your brother’s killer… in a soonish type fashion.” A rough paw patted his cheek.

Ferris stood to his full height to leave. “At last, we understand one another. I’m glad we had this talk, Sparrow, in fact, I think you’ve earned yourself a pair of shorts. So… I’ll have someone come by later to see how things are coming along.” His smile, though only showing the barest hint of fang, was not comforting as he turned to leave.

Mack sat at his console, sparing glances at the guards and retrieving his cracked glasses from under the monitor. Lory’s “fox boyfriend” could only be that next door neighbor she watched from afar as a pup… the one who was picked on but didn’t bare fang for the longest time. Gideon Grey? Weren’t the Wildes visiting the Greys during the TBR? That meant he must know Nick Wilde. And Nick Wilde meant Alphonse Kela. Maybe she was still protected after all… or better protected than on the farm.

Maybe Mack still had the riskiest ace up his sleeve to make contact with Finnick Faire, his protégé… but MacGrim’s IT was surprisingly competent. The information burning a hole in his
pocket didn’t leave him much choice, though… that Mr. Never knew who could claim the Lionheart crown and sign that royal pardon from age’s past; someone in Zootopia… Why he hadn’t come forward with it was purely a matter of speculation, no doubt waiting for the opportune moment to apply leverage… If the Sparrow wasn’t already on the run when he hacked those secret vaults the first time, he might’ve gotten more than the most common last name in the city, but he just had to save a vixen who probably hated him anyway. “Bugger…” Mack cursed good-naturedly and through his teeth, code reflecting off his lenses as it appeared onscreen, “that’s what I get for being altruistic.”

How odd it seemed that a room so filled with light could be so dark; so filled with noise and yet, so quiet; so packed with warm, writhing bodies and yet… one could feel so isolated. That was just the atmosphere at Joel’s, a rave club in a repurposed industrial warehouse where those lost to the music could feel as though they were dancing in a transcendent void. Clubs and concerts were one of the few indulgences of Lanny Wild; while he did sneak into many as a teenager in attempts to contact Sam Wild (the famous singer but also one of the only possible links to his lost past), he grew to love the joined experience with the rest of his fellow goers.

Immediately after the Luau’s final act, all of the dancers were brought back as the curtain fell. Gazelle extended her grace and admiration for all those who had the courage to dance on stage with her. Lanny was to rendezvous with Judy, Bogo, and Clawhauser but Ty brought him aside to introduce the legendary lion singer.

It was a thrill to meet such a musical powerhouse but he did not give him the answers he sought (other than that he reminded him of Simon, whom he knew as a cub, friends with Memphis King as he was… which Lanny didn’t need to hear for the umpteenth time in his life). Knowing a tanked conversation when he saw one, Sam brought it on himself to extend a chance to meet his son Ryan, who was about Lanny’s age and maybe had more information to tell him. It seemed more an empty gesture of someone who didn’t know how better to salvage a situation but it was a thoughtful gift all the same. Lanny certainly wasn’t one to decline a backstage pass.

He’d have visited Joel’s sooner but… what happened during the last dance shook the lion to his core. To hear what happened to Esther and Gideon and their father Goliath… he’d only known them a fortnight but after everything they’d been through in that short time… Lanny felt like he’d lost one of his pride. His (actual) pride of lions at the dock was always changing, younger and older mammals moving on in their lives, given a first, second, or fourth chance and Lanny had to be alpha to them all. In a way, he felt like he should’ve been a proper alpha to protect Esther… but he was off shaking his tail for the cameras. What upset him most of all was he wasn’t sure why it upset him so much… why he felt like he failed her, all of them… even though he wasn’t her mate, best friend, or brother… like he was missing something he knew or felt, once upon a time… It was many years since he agonized over a vacant memory to such an extent that it ate him up inside. So, the following month showed the dockworkers a much… surlier Lanny Wild than they ever knew before. His betas and deltas and everyone on down were on time more often, gave him less lip, more respect. One of those alpha-wannabes from the next pride over thought to push his luck to get the eastern side that was warmer in the morning and cooler in the afternoons… but Lanny’s patience had run dry, was tired of his games so that other lion was grabbed by the chest and shotput into the water. He eventually swam back with a new perspective on where he was in the pecking order. That bit of posturing drew some attention from the foremammal but Lanny shrugged it off since he effectively squelched any further competition on his territory, thus focusing more on his nursing job.

His nursing job provided little in the way of an outlet after his Director detailed how thin the ice
was from keeping up his new, surly attitude and unkempt mane. So, he was delegated to the high-maintenance, low-gratitude position of tending for Lions Gate General’s most prestigious, longterm residents: Buckley and Doana Stagmire, full-nerve paralysis and a coma, respectively. It seemed that his only company was either their son -- Bucky Jr., who visited on occasion -- or the executor to their estate (another young stag who always found something to complain about concerning the Stagmires’ care, effectively making sport of crawling up Lanny’s tail).

Even Gideon’s new location in the city and reliable access to his pastries only provided temporary comfort to the troubled lion. So, sweet abandon enveloped him as he danced and sweated and forgot the world’s insistent riling… all to the fresh music of “DJ G.G. Recipes”, a name denoting what it takes to make a “good game”, otherwise known as Ryan Wild. It was nearly the witching hours when the next DJ was switched in to ring in the dawn and Lanny came around the back to intercept his fellow Wild lion. There Ryan stood, hoisting his equipment into the back of an olive green crossover SUV and wearing his iconic sleeveless, hooded jacket (worn so that all of his mane was pushed forward and partially obstructed his face) over a short-sleeved turtleneck shirt.

“Here,” Lanny said, sliding up from behind and catching the rear corner of one of Ryan’s cases before it slid completely out of grip.

“Oh, thanks,” Ryan answered, “They’re normally not a problem but I guess I’m a bit tired tonight.”

The case was duly secured. “Couldn’t tell by looking at you, you were burning hot the entire night,” the larger lion chuckled.

Ryan shied some but he reached into his hood and pushed it back (along with the plush wreath around his head) to scratch at an itch behind his ear. The well-known maneless lion smirked some as he rubbed the back of his neck. “You were there the whole night, huh?” he wondered aloud and then leaned in to get a better look, “Oh yeah, I think I recognize you now.”

Lanny’s heart leaped as he fiddled one thumb with the other, smiling from behind the unkempt shag of his bangs, rolling his shoulders some to the open-side tanktop he wore… rather, that hung off his frame like curtains (along with some of the dimly lit glow-sticks, as was custom to wear at the venue). It was the phrase he was hoping to hear nearly all his life, but not in the context he wanted it. He then collected himself, “Lanny Wild,” he introduced and held out his paw.

The DJ paused… and then smiled some as he shook it. “Ryan Wild… Dad told me about you.”

“All good, I hope?” he mused.

“Well, he told me about you a month ago,” he playfully chastised, “I also heard about a ‘Lanny Wild’ from a DJ friend of mine out in Bunnyburrow, ‘Speakrrr’; you might know him as Bobby Catmull,” and then his voice filled with significance, “You helped his brother Gabe, right?”

The larger lion reeled some and rubbed into the mane at his neck, remembering the bit of brotherly drama that he, indeed, helped them through. “How’re they doing…?”

“Better,” Ryan nodded and then asked as he sat in the open trunk space of his vehicle, “What took you so long to see me?”

“Been a rough month,” Lanny avoided with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Well… I’m afraid I don’t have the answers you seek,” he admitted, “I really don’t know what to tell you, Lanny… I don’t recognize you, aside from what happened recently.”

A defeated brow quirked all the same. “Except…?”
Ryan shook his head.

Lanny canted his.

“I know -- probably better than anyone -- what it’s like to be chased down by the Prince’s Guard. Dad’s security detail always kept me close at paw whenever those whackos came prowling around. That said… I can’t help but think you’ve been chased just as much as I have.”

A heavy sigh was released. “Yeah… I usually keep my mane trimmed to draw less attention to it but… like I said, it’s been a rough month.” Ryan scooted over and offered a place to sit, so Lanny accepted it and tested the car’s suspension as he sat down, leaning on the inside wall. “I lost a friend… I didn’t know her very long but she was very important to some other friends of mine and… I’m not sure why but… I should’ve been able to help her. Like… a gut feeling.” His shoulder was grabbed and held by a nimble paw.

“I know what it’s like to lose a friend…” Ryan shook his head as he pulled his legs up, knees jutting out towards the alley behind the club with his arms resting atop them; the entire city knew how he was found inside a shipping container and was the last mammal to see Simon King alive.

“I went to grief counseling and discovered myself in disc-jockeying, long story short. I’ll never not wonder where he is, though, because despite everything that happened to us… he saved me.”

A mitt of a paw patted Ryan’s back and tried to crack some levity into the situation. “It must’ve been an exciting caper, whomever you two were running from.”

“It’s my fault they were after us…” he growled under his breath and pulled his hood up again, arms folded on his knees. The silence was thick until he peeked around the faux-mane at the imploring gaze of the adjacent lion.

“Ryan... you’ve never told anyone about that day at Horseshire, so far as I know…”

“Yeah, well…” he huffed and sharply glanced away with a whisk of his tail, and then looked back plaintively, “Simon had on a brand new suit and I... I was jealous; I hated wearing suits but he had a special tailor, who made stuff meant for cubs to run around and play in, like everyday clothes. He let me borrow it even though I was bigger than him, and then we played hide-and-seek like we always do. It was a big ranch house and I knew all the best hiding spots, but that’s when I heard…” Ryan recalled, curling up a bit and furtively looking about, “Someone talking with someone else. I don’t remember who they were but they were talking about… terrible, awful things. Things I knew I wasn’t supposed to hear.

“I ran away, back to our room where I could change into my own clothes. I didn’t see that Simon had followed me and put his own suit back on, telling me that I shouldn’t just throw it on the floor. That’s when I told him we needed to get to our Dads and tell them what I heard but... they were curling stones out on the back lawn. We were chased off the ranch before we could reach them... I confessed to Simon that they were after me but thought I was him and that he could give me up. He said he wouldn’t let anything happen to me. After that, it was a blur of running and hiding and... at some point it was a good idea to hide inside a Pridelands train car and get back to the city to tell the police. That’s the last I saw of Simon.”

Lanny simply stared with pursed lips, a maelstrom of thoughts roiling inside him. “I always believed you, Ryan, that you were being chased,” he managed to say.

“That’d make you and Dad, then,” he sniffed and rubbed his eyes with a forlorn chuckle, “I guess I made this about me, huh?”
“It sounded like you’ve been holding onto that for a long time.”

“I was… and I’m sorry I couldn’t have been more helpful, Lanny,” Ryan said, “but you got to admit, it was something of a longshot. Even though we’ve got the same last name and species, it doesn’t exactly mean we’re related; ‘Wild’ is probably one of the most common last names in the city, I know a one or two other ‘Wild’ lions, one of them with an ‘e’.”

Lanny sighed in his acceptance of defeat, “Aslan knows I’ve exhausted every other option outside of a DNA test but without anyone to compare it to, I’m up a creek without a paddle.”

Ryan pondered some. “I do have some aunts and uncles on my mother’s side… not much is known about grandpa, though; it’s no surprise that Dad neglected to mention him.”

“Grandpa Wild, you mean?”

“Yeah,” the DJ confirmed, “he and Dad never got along so all I have on him is that he was a circus performer from another continent, always acted very ‘regal’ (as Dad put it),” he then gave a sort of embittered leer, “One thing I can say for certain is that we’re not from any of the Lionheart lines,” and then continued to the bewildered look, “All lion families that can afford it test their genealogy to see if they come from one of the five Lionheart bloodlines.”

A soft groan of understanding was emitted before a grunt of further bewilderment. “Wait, I thought the youngest son didn’t have any cubs?”

“Prince John’s cubs were grouped into a single bloodline,” Ryan extrapolated, “Liondon has them and King Richard’s four oldest cubs on record but us Wilds aren’t from any of those.”

Chapter End Notes

“Grandpub” is Grandfather Piberius Savage, to both Nick and Gideon; the slaves/refugees that he references were mentioned back in Trustworthy, chapter 10. Gideon also mentions his tent having water and electricity, referencing his yellow-striped tent back in Trustworthy, chapter 13.

The “alpha’s omega” talked about by Lory and Nick is a reference to Loyal, chapter 24, specifically where Alphonse Kela is considering Nick’s role in the ZPD pack. The remainder of their discussion is scattered in pack dynamics, like how Nick met up with Edward Mallupe in Brave, chapter 15, as well as the discussion of Zootopia’s hither-to unknown third alpha to whom all other alphas defer (thus upsetting some delicate power balance, etc.); this is the same chapter that Ferris MacGrim was named, based off Maugrim from the Chronicles of Narnia. Additionally, the Mallupe exile – and how they are treated – is also covered in Loyal, chapter 25.

The World Heraldry Society was covered back in Loyal, chapter 24, also and will play some minor role in the transpiring events ahead.

Mack “The Sparrow” Mallupe is a recurring character in Neverwere Moments and is based off Captain Jack Sparrow; in this story, he is a super-hacker and the worst pirate on the darknet (in this scene, we see his tattoos which are based on the ones seen in “Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End”). As a quick recap, Ulaf MacGrim (whose name is based on one of the original names for Maugrim, “Fenris Ulf”) was identified
back in Loyal, chapter 22, and was killed by Doug Ramses (who proceeded to wear his pelt as a suit under the guise of “The Gravedigger”). Mack’s comment at the end references his interrupting phone call with the scene between Esther and Mr. Never in Loyal, chapter 9.

Ryan is based on the character of the same name in the movie "The Wild" and his voice actor was Greg Cipes; this DJ name is simply an anagram of that. ‘Speakrrrr’ is a misnomer (maybe irony) since Bobby Catmull is mute in this story, and the triple 'r' denotes purring.

The “brotherly drama” referenced comes from Loyal, chapter 22, where Gabe talks with Lanny about why he let Dent horribly maim Tad while in the jail cell; it was because Tad had unsightly pictures of Bobby – Gabe’s younger brother – as a cub and is the implied reason as to why he’s mute.

Horseshire is where the King family ranch is and where Simon and Ryan were last seen before they disappeared; only Ryan was found, three days later.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

The difference between farm-mammals and city-mammals can be as night-&-day as the difference between large and small or predator and prey. Such differences between rabbits and foxes and their respective farm/city counterparts are well known but perhaps less so are those between, say, raccoons and horses. As an example, a farm-raccoon is more often than not to run a junkyard, own a pawn shop, or drive a garbage truck while their city-raccoon cousins will be drawn to be computer technicians, programmers, and hackers. Horses are primarily differentiated by the absence of horseshoes, a piece of footwear specific to the equid hoof that slips over the tip to protect it from long-term damage from trotting and galloping on such hard surfaces as concrete and asphalt; additionally, farm-horses are drawn to a life of crops, etc., while the city-horse is drawn to transportation professions like the taxi-driver, trucker, and ridesharing. It is worth noting that a farm-horse's familiarity with "horseshoes" is what's worn by mammals without hooves, a protective and hardened slip worn so to prevent the dreaded debilitation of “plower’s paw” which could easily lead to an infection if left untreated; it is perhaps this key difference that acts as a nettling contention between farm- and city-horses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Were she any other bunny, Judy would have suffered through a background check to drain the blood out of even the staunchest, hardest-nosed bureaucrat that the Federal government could provide. As it stood, Knotash’s impenetrable gates were cracked open for her just long enough to squeeze in after giving some days’ notice for a single luncheon with Graham Hopps (between noon and 2PM at the Hopps Manor; after-meal activity options include conversation with snacks, a garden stroll, and badminton). The user-database app on her phone was updated repeatedly over the last month (and many times tempted her to ditch it entirely, except she knew that doing so would lock her out with the rest of the city) and scoured as she went through the wonderfully smooth process of checking in. While she and her rucksack were, indeed, individually searched and scanned in three different spectrums, it all seemed much ado about nothing until a thought occurred to her…

Knotash truly did lock out the entire city, didn’t they? Judging purely by the width of the corridor coming here, it could have comfortably fit a dozen bunnies across, and yet even on a workday, I’m the only one going in. I wonder how many favors Graham exchanged just to get me through those gates within a week? she revered, That just means it’s all the more important that I not lollygag during this luncheon.

She bid the guardsbunnies and clerks a fond farewell (and they responded with a cordiality both professional and heartfelt) to exit out a pair of sliding glass doors, rather like stepping from a terminal at the airport. She wasn’t waiting very long, if at all, as a driverless car met her on the white curb.

“Hello, Ms. Hopps!” an automated voice chimed when the door slid open, the car lowered to level with the sidewalk, and coolness of air-conditioning wafted across her face upon entering. A holographic, ochre-furred rabbit chauffeur appeared on the glass pane dividing the front seat and
the back, positioned in such a way that he looked as though he sat at the wheel itself (it was apparent that the window, indeed, dipped far enough to complete the illusion that an elbow was hooked over the back; and his face was even visible in the rear-view mirror). “Welcome back to Knotash, I’ll be your driver for this ride, but I can see this is your first time in an automated car. It’s an absolute pleasure to meet you; please, call me ‘David’.”

“Oh, wow, he’s so lifelike...” “Hello, David,” Judy greeted, planting her cottontail into the seat and buckling up, triggering the cushion’s soft buzzing as the contours of her posterior, torso, and neck were shaped around (along with an erected ear-rest), Oh wow, that is wonderfully comfortable. She softly squealed at the opportunity to appreciate such bleeding-edge technology. “And please, call me ‘Judy’.”

“Roger that, Judy! And good news, with traffic accounted for, we are twenty-seven seconds ahead of schedule!” ‘David’ chimed as he pulled from the curb in a smooth motion, his animation matched to the turning of the wheel almost exactly (with only the barest lag, visible if one looked for it). “Would you like a book to read, radio station to listen to, a video to watch, or a massage while you wait?” he offered.

Ooh, the app gives me access to the car, she noticed and pulled up the menu, “Actually, I think I’ll just explore the options a bit, but if you could give Graham a call and let him know I’m on the way, that’d be great.”

“You got it!” His digitized paw reached from the steering wheel to pantomime activating the touch-screen built into the dashboard and dial a number, each tone crisp and merry as Graham’s profile alongside Judy’s appeared on the dividing window along with a sound modulation wave.

“Candleflame, such a delight to hear from you,” came Graham’s voice, “I’ve been all atwitter these past few days that everything else became droll and tiresome in comparison. Do quicken yourself here and liberate me from these perpetual formalities,” he huffed, paused to some background noise, and then continued if away from the phone, “Yes, I know you can hear me, the impact would be otherwise lost, now wouldn’t it? … I would want nothing more than to divest myself of this tedium but then I’d get an earful from everybunny within shouting distance. … Just reduce investiture from Gammameals in favor of DoLaGons and if they complain, remind them that they still haven’t compensated for the shortcomings of the last three quarters. … If they really throw a tantrum then investigate their PR department and all of those ‘petty grievances’ their workforce keeps submitting! Stars above, it’s no great secret that their upper management could do with some fresh blood. … Oh, I don’t know, twelve percent? No need to be cruel … Yes, ‘hoorah, hooray’, now scurry off and have a go at something important, or at the very least, interesting.

“Terribly sorry about that, Judy,” his voice returned, directly into the phone (and her stifled giggles), and he then whispered, “But just between you and me, I think I can understand why daddy-dearest went a little stir-crazy. Only a bit of morbid humor there, no need for a courtesy laugh,” he promptly corrected at his normal tone, “I can see that you’ll be here within a few minutes, and ahead of schedule, no less! You’re really taking to life in Knotash and it’s only your second trip here.”

We still need to work on your sense of humor, Graham, Judy considered but chuckled all the same, “Har har, this is only a courtesy call, letting you know that I’m on the way. I must say, though, these automatic cars are amazing. Just imagine if we could get these things throughout the rest of Zootopia.”

“Attempts have been made,” Graham admitted, “but they work best in isolated systems and the transition is, perhaps, a bit more than a community’s (or an individual’s) budget can handle, so
what you’re riding in is no great divergence from the original model, only a few aesthetic
upgrades; I find it amusingly ironic that the adherence of autonomy is what’s holding up this
technological advancement. Regardless, there’s no point in implementing progress if the populace at
large isn’t all for it. That, and the programmers haven’t quite figured out how to escape the
uncanny valley with the holographic driver. How are things, ‘David’?

“I’m super, thanks for asking!” ‘David’ (sincerely) answered.

“Atta boy,” he endeared, and then sounded as though he whispered, “It’s next-generation tech but
he’ll immediately cease all interaction if you directly ask his opinion on politics, religion, sports, or
green beans.”

“… Green beans?” Judy whispered back.

The butterscotch rabbit on the other end of the call audibly shrugged with a grunt to match. “We
figure the programmer had a vendetta against them but haven’t figured out how to correct the code
without horrific recursion,” his voice then returned to conversation levels once again, “Enjoy the
rest of the ride, Judy, I shall ‘prep the runway’, as they say. Ta for now.”

“See you in a bit.” Judy smiled to the eternally beaming holographic rabbit, I really shouldn’t ask
about green beans, she responsibly decided, But if I weren’t a guest here… Stars above, Nick
really is a naughty influence on me, is he~ and then preoccupied herself with the various options
provided in the car’s menu. Places to hang out, places to worship, places to hunker down for the
night, famous rabbits in Knotash… what else have we got… temperature control, seat firmness…
wow, look at all of these air fresheners. I can even record memos? She glanced up and noticed
two shiny lenses above the dividing pane and two below. “David, are these cameras on?”

“No, ma’am; Knotash respects the privacy of all its denizens.”

Hmm… wait a minute… how can I already have a saved memo, I’ve never been in one of these
cars before? Graham would have told me if his car had one of these; we were trying to escape,
after all, and he was very careful that I not be noticed. Plus, there’s no way this could be the
memo from Nick’s phone, that was before I ever got onto the Knotash servers. “David, whose
memo is this?”

A loading symbol subtly spun in the corner of the dividing window as ‘David’s likeness contorted,
as though thinking. “Ah, that was remotely uploaded to the Bunnyburrow data-sphere by
Reginald Hopps (may his rest be blest),” the chauffeur solemnly said, momentarily doffing his cap
to his chest.

Oh my goodness! she realized, “These… these must be Grandpa Reggie’s last words… but… why
do I have it?” she then wondered, I think I might know the answer, come to think of it.

‘David’ once more paused, as though considering, “The memo was recorded just before his car lost
communication, so it remained in the cloud as an unconverted file type, unreadable unless accessed
via a car similar to his.”

Graham did say that their automated car wasn’t too advanced from its original model so they
might have the same operating system. Is it possible…? “Could I, perhaps, listen to the message
now?”

“You got it, Judy!” In an instant, the message appeared on her phone, awaiting play.

He already spoke with Bo and me that night… did he have more to say, something he couldn’t,
even in the privacy of a hospital room? He did seem awfully put off back then, Judy continued to wonder, biting her bottom lip as her thumb hovered over the faded, forward-pointing button, I must be mentioned in the video somehow and when I gained access to the Knotash servers, it assumed that the message was meant for me. There should be enough time left in the ride to see all of it but… Judy glanced at the countdown of arrival to Hopps Manor, and the time of the video, and then at ‘David’. I should keep this to myself, at least, for the time being, and pulled out her headphones.

[Begin message.]

Hi, Gideon. It sure has been a long time, hasn’t it? Heh… feels like I’ve been chasing you and Judy all over Bunnyburrow tonight. I just missed you at the hospital, but I got to see Bo… I’m glad he’s okay. And I missed you at the Hopps house, too, so… I got your number from Bonnie: figured I’d send you a message since it’s pretty late. Even right now, I’m on my way to Preds’ Corner… maybe I’ll… maybe I’ll get the chance to… umm… maybe you can come to see me in the morning, before that pie-eating contest you’re hosting? I’ll text you the address I’m staying at when I get there.

…

I don’t know if you… remember me, or even recognize me, but I knew you since you were but a sma— well, a young boy, let’s say that.

Umm…

As you may or may not know, I’m Reggie Hopps, Judy’s grandfather -- on her dad’s side -- and I’ve been… on something of an extended sabbatical for the past several years. You see… my heart could give out at any moment… the doctors say it’s only a matter of time, and as it stands, all mine’s borrowed; time, I mean. I’m… I’m on borrowed time.

…

I’ve lived… a long, full life. No… really big regrets, save for one or two… really, really big regrets…

… I’ve seen so many of my children grow up into proud, upstanding members of the rabbit community… Stuart, or “Stu”, as he prefers; you already know him, I hear. Jennifer… Levi… Gerhardt… Naomi…

…

Magnus…

…

So many to name, I could spend all night thinking about them… But that’s not why I’m sending you this message, Gideon…

…

I’m sending you this because…

…Because…
Because I’m a coward, and can’t speak to you face-to-face. I can’t… there isn’t a way for me to apologize for everything I’ve done, even when I’m standing at death’s door, I… I make this video in the hopes that I don’t have to see you…

I don’t know if you’d remember, Gideon… but I was one of the rabbits that…

...I...

...I sent you off to predator therapy. If you… if you even remember it...

Ultimately, it was my decision. The entire burrow was about ready to run you and your family out of town… at least that’s what I heard. I was worried that you and every Grey would be at the wrong end of a pitchfork, and then it’d be all foxes, and then all predators, and then…

I was just a coward, though, too scared to look into it… You know, it’s ironic, but the one bunny that was the least upset about what you did at Carrot Days was Judy. I thought… I heard that you’d ripped her face off, that she lost an eye, that she couldn’t talk she was so scared… but there she was the next day, hopping around with a bandage on her cheek like it wasn’t more than a scrape. I heard your sister wanted to make amends on your behalf so… in a fit of guilt, I convinced Stu and Bonnie to let her, it’s not like she did anything bad…

It was too late, though, you were already shipped off to pred-therapy… It all… it all happened so fast… there was so much conflicting information… it was like I hardly had time to think…

Gideon…

You were never supposed to be there. We just wanted to show you what happens to preds that…

We only wanted to scare you straight, stay for a day tops and then go to a therapist for a few weeks, that’s it. That… that’s it.

I never even knew about it for three days…

That’s no excuse, I know, but I was so busy, and the first time I noticed something was wrong …
Some of the faculty were giving me sidelong glances in the halls, either out of disgust or fear. I finally found out that you were “what happens to anyone that hurts a Hopps”.

...

That’s not what it means to be a Hopps...

...

And then I found out you were in a cell.

Chained up.

Beaten within an inch of your life.

...

I hardly recognized you.

...

My heart almost gave out that day...

...

I have no excuse, Gideon, and “sorry” can’t begin to cover it, so... I want to tell you what happened in there... to you. And not only you but every predator that went through there. Because I know no one else will come forward with it, and you deserve to know the facts... you most of all.

...

...

You were... muzzled... collared... stripped naked...

For three straight days, you were chained to the floor and flogged.

...

“Predator therapy”... in the dark ages... after our primal ancestors evolved but... weren’t quite civilized yet... When recorded history was close enough to those years of savagery that stories were still told of mammals eating mammals... It was believed that predators not only could, but would snap back at any moment, and some were locked up out of fear or to have the “bloodlust beaten out of them”...

...

...

There were... some mammals... usually... mostly prey species that would... pay to see pred-therapy...

...

As “entertainment”...
I found out that the same thing happened to you.

Some predators -- good predators -- were captured, back in those dark ages, and fed what you know as “Night Howler” to stir them into a frenzy, and then they were... brutalized. That’s what happened to you.

I have no excuses, Gideon, and I’m so sorry.

I tried everything I could to get you healthy again. To get you... going again. Because I couldn’t face your parents... or anyone else unless I knew you could walk and talk on your own. We forced your wounds closed, sped up the scarring process so that we didn’t have to use sutures, and forced you to repress every memory of that place with the best technology, psychiatry, and pharmaceuticals at our fingertips.

To cover up our mistakes... our sins.

If it got out what we did... what we were doing...

But that’s no excuse...

...We... what we did... it was for the best... at least that’s how it started...

With “good intentions”...

And “the greater good”...

We just wanted to protect those that couldn’t protect themselves... even if it was from themselves...

We thought we knew better...

But it wasn’t “good”...
My eyes were opened that day, to what was going on, what was really going on, right under my nose. I had to stop it, but to just come out...

There were good mammals in there, Gideon, hundreds of good scientists, doctors, nurses, guards, maintenance crews... in hospitals and wards all across the city that didn't know those dark secrets, but they would be burned at the stake with everyone else. I had to get them out. I had to find them and get them out of that... that Abyss before closing it up, once and for all.

... 

It took me nearly two years to find everyone that either didn’t know or who opposed it. The ones who still had a soul worth saving. And I had to do it without anyone else figuring it out. Made it look like a tax audit, downsizing... Anything that wouldn’t draw suspicion. The rest... I let them fester, cut funding, condensed until there were only a dozen left, and moved them all to Cliffside, as far away as I could get them.

... 

They kept on for another two years before the scandal. And despite my best efforts, there was still some good that fell... and some bad that got away... lots of bad that got away... 

... 

I still have nightmares about what happened in there, Gideon, but I guess they're not as awful as yours... 

... 

I’m glad to hear you’re doing well. And in business with my own son, even! That’s amazing! Fortune smiles on us all, doesn’t She? And the best pastry chef in the Tri-Burrows, right? Who’d’ve thought! Word is your pies are absolutely divine but I actually had the chance to try a slice the other day, well, let me tell you that “divine” does them no justice.

... 

... 

You... I know you should be dead, Gideon. What happened to you... it should have killed you, but it didn’t. For years, the best I could’ve hoped for was that you would be curled up in a hole somewhere, broken and half-mad, but you aren’t. You made it out, stronger than any of the cases I’ve seen. I don’t know how, but you did.

... 

I’m... I’m so happy that you’re alive and well, Gideon. I’m just sorry I’m too much of a coward to meet you. It took all of my courage to even come back to Zootopia, you see, to come out about everyone involved in PredaTherp... and even then, I’ll only be an anonymous tip to the right mammals, so that they can do the right thing. I... I’m not brave enough, you see... my heart just can’t handle it.

... 

I know you and your family will never forgive me and I don’t come seeking forgiveness. I just
wanted you to know that you’re not a bad fox.

...  
It’s me that’s... I’m a bad bunny.

...  
And I... I take full responsibility for everything that happened to you, even if I wasn’t calling the shots...

...
...

It just... happened, over several years, I didn’t even see it until it was too late...

Before I knew it, Magnus had his fingers in everything ...

I... I let him take care of too much. Everything ran so smoothly with him in charge. Productivity... profits... both employee and customer satisfaction... He had executive power in that hospital while I was at the plant, or at the plant while I was at the hospital. He was like my shadow... learned everything I did... And then he... just... took over from behind my back. And I let him.

I let them.

Him and his mate... curse them both...

...
Curse me...

...

Huh...?

...

David, what are you doing up there, we’re drifting out of the lane...?

David?

David!  David, for love of all that’s good and lucky, wake up!  Wake!  Up!  Plea-!!

...Hngh!!

[End message]

“Well...” Graham rued, leaning back in his office chair to study the final frame of the memo, Reggie clutching his chest in a wretched disfigurement of terrified death, “that matches with the coroner report, at least.”

Judy gasped and frowned. “How can you joke about this?” she reprimanded, leaning over in her own office chair as she stared hard at her farm-cousin’s languid face, his dark-purple eyes flicking in response, “I was on pin-&-needles all through lunch just worrying about how this’ll affect
Gideon when he sees it…”

The butterscotch rabbit shrugged his shoulders covered in a pale blue button-down (his jacket already removed). “I know you were not as familiar with Grandpa Reggie as I was, Judy,” Graham explained, minimizing the digital image and copying it into his own folder on the servers, “It is some minor comfort to know for certain that he died instantaneously from heart failure, rather than in the crumpled, vaguely rabbit-shaped heap that they found him.” He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully and then slicked a coffee-spotted ear back to grimace.

She was still a moment and then reached out to brace his trembling arm; it flinched before relaxing. “I’m sorry, Graham. I know you would have been at his funeral if you weren’t hospitalized.”

Lidded eyes looked to the paw and then to its owner. “Just one more thing Magnus took from me; I saw it live-streamed and gave my eulogy, at least. Even though he was missing for sixteen years, my grandfather, he still wrote to me, sometimes. Those letters are long gone, I’m afraid, but hearing what he said in this memo… I can’t help but remember some of what he also wrote.”

“What did he write?” Judy dared to ask.

“Utter nonsense,” he recalled, a macabre excitement buoying just beneath his forlorn surface, “he made allusions to some fantastical place, synonymously-named to ‘Pleasure Island’; and with an expression like that, I’d wager this phrase is familiar to you?”

Judy’s heart lodged into her throat. “Y- yes!”

Graham gestured at the blank video screen. “I suppose to a thorough, well-meaning meddler like yourself, it most certainly must be. I scoured as many of my father’s files as I could before they were seized as evidence, Judy, and in them I found ‘Pleasure Island’… continued allusions to it, anyway,” he scornfully lamented, “Grandpa Reggie must have tried to bring him down and paid the ultimate price so it is on us, his grandchildren, to finally put an end to a mutual enemy and all his machinations. Magnus was their ‘problem solver’, I wouldn’t doubt,” Graham speculated, “he oiled the machine and tied-off the loose ends, made sure nothing could stop it; maybe he even directed it when given the chance. I might be able to finish Grampa Reggie’s work…”

“But…?”

He sighed and scratched a cheek. “The secret partition on Hexward’s severs where he kept every thing… is not completely unlocked.”

Judy choked a bit on her outrage, however calm she remained outwardly. “Even though we have four of the six voiceprints?” she wondered aloud, purple eyes flicking about before her ears sprung in revelation to sail a stream of consciousness, “Passcodes! I had one, you had one, Oswald had one, and Clea… she gave one; is it possible that she has second passcode, one that could fully unlock the rest of the partition?”

The butterscotch rabbit stared as the light in his eyes sparked. “It’s… possible. If Mother had two passcodes she could have kept one secret… You know, I always wondered where that so-called ‘Hector Howard’ profile came from; it just showed up one day and stayed there, unmodified for years (and don’t get too excited, I already tried the recording of his voice in my vault but to no avail). Either he or she must have made a dummy account as a contingency plan; Magnus is still alive, after all, so perhaps she remains under his influence… a month apart cannot so easily erase three decades together.”
“Which matches up with an observation Nick made about her press conference,” the gray bunny added, earning a curious arch of an eyebrow. “He had a friend growing up who was a master manipulator, could cry on command with real tears; well, Nick took one glance at Clea and told me ‘That’s what it looks like’. She must still be covering for Magnus!”

Graham scowled, though, and sunk into his chair. “Fat lot of good it does us, I’m afraid; there’s not a snowball’s chance she’ll turn on him now any more than before, not in any meaningful amount of time since his trial is still months away. When she finally bucks up the courage to switch sides it will be far too late for our dear Esther…”

Violet eyes shimmered some as Judy studied him, thus earning his uncomfortable recoil. “Graham, you said you wouldn’t help us save her and all of the large foxes from Reino del Sol… have you, perhaps, had a change of heart…?”

He smirked. “Candleflame… my heart is unchanged and I never said I wouldn’t help, I said ‘Knotash’s reputation couldn’t handle such a devastating blow’,” his dark purple eyes rolled, “Considering how often you associate with foxes, I figured you could pick up on a subtle hint or three. Did you really think I only had rabbits in my employ?” he teased, grinning such a grin that was sharp but natural, such that if a fang or two popped in at the back of his jaw it would not have been too surprising. “Tell me… are you familiar with the ‘Rescuers’?”

Judy’s heart nearly leaped from her mouth. “Yes, I am!”

His face brightened (if… darkly, somehow) as he sat up in his chair and leaned in on an arm. “They were spies in the employ of King Richard, instrumental during his Crusades; a pair of mice piloting an albatross that could cover ground in a mindboggling timeframe. No plane or helicopter can enter Reino del Sol’s airspace without drawing attention but I, in short order, can have at my disposal teams of aeronauts to airdrop flying squirrel and bat agents into the nation. It will be risky, life-threatening… but it cannot be traced back here.”

A pair of paws reached forward to cup his suddenly startled face as a pair of lips kissed his cheek. “Stars above, Graham, I thought I came all this way for nothing!” she teased in kind and patted the other cheek, “This is amazing. Okay, just say what it is you need from me and I’ll do everything in my power to make this plan a reality.”

Graham was reeling a bit as he sat back and straightened his collar with a clearing of his throat… if softly smiling. “Really, Judy, before you even stepped into my office, you accomplished four impossible things: you found Grandpa Reggie’s last words; you knew about Pleasure Island; you knew about the Rescuers; and perhaps most incredible of all, you earned a fox’s trust enough to learn their secrets. I won’t deny my reservations from the outset of this foolhardy heroism of yours (don’t give me that look) but you’ve proven yourself not only able to accomplish such a task -- as best I can figure -- but extraordinarily lucky.”

“That’s because I make my own luck,” she humbly boasted.

“Judy…do you realize how astronomical you are?” Graham countered, “The Reino del Sol mission will make for six impossible feathers to put in your cap but I must ask of you a fifth before that. As you’ve already been inundated with throughout your childhood, we were born under the same falling stars crossing in the sky,” he narrated, “So regardless of your acceptance or belief, we are fated for great things; it is on that very fate which I will propose a test, to portend the outcome of our… ‘international endeavor’, let’s say. My original idea was to use the locked partition to test your fortune but I have something else, something better in mind.”

She had her turn to quirk a brow and a smirk. “What am I, a crystal ball?”
“You are many, unexplainable things,” he mused, “I will do all that I can to get Grandpa Reggie’s words into the light and the aeronaut teams into the air, but I will need to ascertain exactly how these actions might influence our success. Do you still have Hector’s journal?” It was retrieved from her rucksack and set carefully upon the desk, it and its coverings; Graham carefully unfolded it and picked it up. “You were none too happy after reading it,” he matter-of-factly stated.

“No, I was not,” Judy amiably related, “I was shocked to discover that rabbits were capable of such crimes against nature. Perhaps the most chilling feat that he -- Bag-o’-Bones -- accomplished was the regression and… then control of his half-primal ‘Cursed Crew’ by feeding them his own, intoxicated blood; an old apothecary’s trick, as I understand it, to develop antibodies and immunities to poisons, and then concocting antidotes from their own blood… to see it weaponized like that, though…” Judy shivered in disgust and fear, “He fed his bloodlust -- or its modern name ‘muscular hyper trophy’ -- by eating other mammals, his albinism explained his lack of coloration but red eyes, and he had a congenital insensitivity to pain which is why he could file down his teeth to sharp points; no wonder he considered himself ‘trapped inside of a corpse’. And all those poems he wrote…”

Graham flipped to one such verse. “Some of these are actually my poems,” he explained to her shock, “inspired by reading about his life. I had the original journal for years before reprinting the two versions I showed you, and in a sense, I felt like I became him… this black book is in one of my first, clearest memories… so you can imagine how I felt when Mother presented it to me, as though manifest from my waking dreams.

“It was found with its cover burnt to a crisp, as were the edges, the dates of his entries lost to time. It was not until I found the recording of his voice did I realize that Hector must surely have lived in the past century. Judy… that night when I terrorized you, Nick, and Gideon in the sheriff’s holding cell… I am sorry for that… but I do share Gideon’s nightmares of pred-therapy, even if only viewed through a keyhole of my repressed life. This past month has been wonderfully clarifying now that I’m no longer on those psychotic pharmaceuticals for my condition; Bo’s diet and exercises have proved… useful, if quaint.” Graham sighed and set the book down, “There are pages missing from this journal and like our grandfather’s letters, are surely lost… but I cannot help but wonder if they -- like the journal itself -- hid some secret part of our history, never meant to see the light.”

“And that’s why you wanted to donate Hector’s journal and Lovey’s carcanet to the museum, right?” she prompted, to which he nodded and she smiled, “I’d bet the only reason you haven’t was because you still need the whole story.”

The butterscotch rabbit chuckled. “If I came out solely with this black mark, it would be met with apprehension and disbelief after everything Magnus did; division and hatred would spread all the worse… I feel that there is something more, though; why else would Hector lament ‘shouldering the sword of justice’, after everything in his life? Did he seek some restitution in his final days? And so began my agonizing over that first, clearest memory of mine, where I envision another book…”

“More of Hector’s journal?”

“Another of someone else he knew, most likely,” Graham speculated, “Hector’s journal was charred black, no doubt saved from a fire… I suspect that the other book escaped a similar fate… except one of neglect. By my best reasoning, it must have been forgotten in an attic for years and bleached white by the sun and, like Hector’s journal, its original color unknown. I need you to find this book, Judy, and learn what the world wanted hidden.”
Excitement flared in her heart and her eyes reflected it. “A black book and a white book… how romantic! It must have been from the first mate of Hector’s ship or… a lamentation from Hector himself, more of a memoir than a journal. One question:” she paused, “your faith in my ability notwithstanding, why do you think that I would know how to find it? Or… have the ‘luck’ to stumble across it?”

Graham softly sighed and touched his fingers in a steeple beneath his wiggling nose. “Because I can say with absolute certainty that I saw those books at the Hopps farmhouse in Bunnyburrow,” he explained, and continued at her quizzical gaze, “Do you remember that Magnus and Mother visited Uncle Stu and Aunt Bonnie not long after we were born? It was customary and since Stu was the older brother, they would meet at his home to ‘celebrate’ the great fortune that we newborns would surely bring, what with our celestial symbology.”

“While I am familiar with that custom, I don’t remember what happened with ours,” Judy admitted, “I’m actually surprised (and impressed) that you do.”

“Don’t be too impressed, I doubted that those books ever really existed until Mother showed me the black one as a child (perhaps because I made mention of it to her during our sessions; it’s hard to say how much she knows or doesn’t). I suspect that she swiped the black book from your house at that time… I think she was fascinated with the story of Hector Howard… I assume you’ve pieced together his connection with Magnus, yes?”

Judy shuddered in disgust again. “Not a hard leap of logic after he practically boasted about his true identity while holding Mr. McTwisp, Bo, and I at gunpoint.”

“Quite so. An unfortunate lineage, indeed, but off topic. When I was a teenager and at your farmhouse, I searched for that white book in vain. You found me snooping around, as was your way, and so I asked you to sing for me in the hopes of distracting you.”

“That I do remember,” she playfully scowled, “A ‘white book’, though… come to think of it, Pop-Pop wanted to talk with me about a ‘white book’ a month ago, just after the TBR. He’s senile, sure, but could it be the same thing? I mean, he would identify it by the original color of the book, not what it became. He is over a century old, though…”

Graham’s dark eyes twinkled as they grinned along with his whole face… perhaps a less terrifying image than his usual fare. “Candleflame… I am sincerely baffled how you can question your own luck, even now. Perhaps he found the book in an abandoned attic, read it, and forgot it, along with everything else in his degenerating, aged mind?”

“No need for the barbs, Graham,” she patiently reprimanded, “But… you’re right, it is possible. He said he misplaced it, just like a dozen other things he would ask about that went absolutely nowhere. Now that I have a lead,” Judy wondered and grinned, “I think it’s a string worth pulling.”

A decanter was then retrieved from a drawer of his desk, along with two shot glasses. “I think we should toast our future success,” Graham suggested and poured out a finger of fermented carrot juice for the both of them (before Judy could protest), “Come come, my dear, it’s good luck!”

“It’s an excuse to drink,” Judy muttered under her breath but accepted it anyway.

“Tish-tosh, I’ve heard worse excuses,” Graham assured and with a crisp clink of their glasses, “To the light of truth shown upon the shadows of history.”

She smirked and joined in the gesture. “To the liberation of the enslaved large foxes.”
They threw back (and she cringed) as Graham reached for toggle beneath his desk, a touch-pad bar that he slid his fingers across to deactivate the isolation mechanism of his office. The windows’ tint lifted for indirect, early-afternoon sunlight to stream in and illuminate the towering bookshelves with their encyclopedic cornucopia, scarce plantlife, scarcer portraits, countless tinkering projects and dioramas, an integrated stereo sound system, and comfortable lounging chairs. In gushed the distant clamor of life from the Hopps Manor of Knotash beyond his walls, a joyous and bustling din, “Oop,” he chuckled and further modified the adjustable soundproofing in the walls to a more manageable level, “I guess I left it a little high before activating the ‘total privacy’ settings.”

Judy recovered and set the glass down, smiling as she may with her ears swiveling. “Hmm … I rather like the noise, all of those happy bunnies…” and breathed in to swell her chest while shouldering her rucksack and cupping a paw to each ear, “It’s beautiful.”

A knock came to the door and an ‘overtime’ notification popped up onto Graham’s screen. “Oh, bother all… time for my sponge bath,” he mumbled and unlocked the door for a shapely nurse in a well-fitted uniform to walk a wheelchair in, “I might just throw a party when I’m finally recovered and fully autonomous once more,” and then leaned in towards Judy as she stood, “Could you possibly sneak me out? I promise to behave.”

“Now now, Graham,” she maternally rebuked, “cleanliness is of the utmost importance, here in Knotash.” Judy giggled at his rolling eyes before pointing at the amiably approaching nurse, “Make sure to get behind his ears!”

“You wouldn’t force such formality on either Nick or Bo!” Graham argued as he was carefully assisted from one chair to the other.

She laughed a bit brighter on her way out the door. “Would and have!” Judy said, “Not that Bo or Nick need my help getting dressed. Besides, we both have our jobs, you know, lots to do and little time to do it in, and all that. I’ll get back to you ASAP about what I find out.”

Where did you find this fabric?” Nick asked, running a paw along his brand new sleeve.

John snipped the last bit of thread from a button and took a step back, critically studying his own creation. “From some small, landlocked nation halfway around the world. I had an entirely different fabric in mind for your suit, Nicky, but then a few reams of this utterly magnificent stuff appeared on the market and I just couldn’t say ‘no’,” the tailor gushed, spinning his scissors before sheathing them in a holster at his hip.

“They took so long to get here,” Jackie added, perched in the nearby chair provided for friends or family awaiting those being fitted.

“It’s worth every cent and second,” the tailor assured, holding out his son’s arm to admire the weave, “Made from a rare breed of silkworms that feed upon an equally rare breed of cotton plant and its dye comes from the discarded chrysalis of a butterfly species that migrate in the millions. It has this pleasantly mysterious, hot-but-dark reddish-purple color that just mesmerizes.”

Nick grimaced as he tried to smirk. “Should this be on me or in a museum?”

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times,” the older fox reprimanded, “Suits are for wearing.” Might I say, though, that this stuff was an absolute devil to work with,” he snarled, if proudly and then rubbed the fabric between his fingers, “I’ve been wanting to try my paw at it for years, and who better to strut my second greatest creation about than my own son?”
The younger fox adjusted the tie so abjectly different from his three-piece suit (a pearl white over a charcoal black dress shirt) as he hopped down from the pedestal, “’Second greatest?’ he implied, only to snicker and yank his head away when his cheek was endearingly pinched. “Have you yet told Lory that the raven harness her family made for me no longer matches this suit?”

John cringed. “Not yet but if you can hold off on embarrassing your old tod for another week or so, I’m almost done with the coat that will go with it,” he requested, studying Nick’s other patiently perched guest, a collared raven on a hat rack. When a thoughtful, devious groan of intent was Nick’s immediate answer, John crossed his arms assertively, “Remember, kit, the market value on that suit is nearly triple what I’m practically giving it away for; despite the wait, I’d say it’s an excellent deal all the same.”

“Well…”

“Nicky, stop tormenting your father,” Jackie coolly chastised, standing and retrieving her phone from her purse to snap pictures of the new ensemble in its completed form.

“…I suppose it’s more a need-to-know basis, isn’t it?” the younger tod considered during his debonair posing, after which he slipped his harness back on with a terse whistle through his teeth to summon the pitch avian to his shoulder, “And I wouldn’t say the two clash, necessarily, they just don’t… accessorize.”

The tailor shrugged in good humor. “C’est la vie. You’re a grown tod with your own money and fashion sense, Nickster, I merely make the snappy suits,” John said, viewing the ensemble through the frame of his paws, “Not to toot my own horn but that is a fox in full battle regalia.”

“Speaking of,” Jackie added, exchanging a grin most sly with her mate, “We need to top off this exquisite outfit with its finishing touch. Let’s go pick up your new hat.”

Frigid air sighed into the midday Summer with a sweet chime of a storefront bell as Jackie and Nick Wilde entered Hightopp & Co., once her place of employment and home. As was standard fare for the time of day and year, Mr. Vandersnatch’s shop was not necessarily filled but certainly occupied by youngins trying on hats and caps in the mirror for their own amusement, old ins perusing headwear for some formal event (and internally rebuking the former group’s antics) and both escaping the outside heat, however brief their respite. The present customers meant both Dean and Duncan worked the register and that their uncle, Chester Vandersnatch, could not greet his guests in the preferred and harmless manner of sneaking up on them waiting at the counter.

“Young Mr. Wilde,” the rotund, grayish-blue wildcat adulated, meeting the two in his private measuring room and workshop, eyes brighter than the glare from the windows out front and grin nearly wrapping around his skull, “a customer of mine at long last.”

“Chess, if I were a younger me, I’d’ve surely scampered under my mother’s apron at such a face as that,” Nick bantered in greeting, so Jackie pulled out an apron from a tote bag he carried to casually toss it over her son’s head to complete the gag, and he continued unabashedly to speak through it, “Thanks, Mom. Now then, I hear that a hat of mine is already in the works, unbeknownst to me.”

The hatter chuckled quite jollily. “Almost correct; it is done and needs only a final fitting,” he explained, spinning about on his stool to retrieve a bowler hat from a fox-shaped dummy-head while Jackie collected the apron (and got a sneaky puff of air blown in the ear, repaid with a very light bushwhacking) while folding and stowing the sewing job she carried along for a client in the area. “Jackie, my dear, would you like to do the honors?” Chess offered, standing from his seat to guide it along for Nick to occupy it, instead (thusly lowering it to a more manageable level).
Jackie shied as slyly as she may, eyes batting as both tote bag and purse were set down nearby (after pulling out a small brush). “Well, it *does* seem appropriate, doesn’t it?” she mused, waiting for her kit to usher his pet raven off to into the rafters, away from the noisy air conditioner, and then sit upon the stool.

“I thought we already measured my noodle?” Nick asked, staying as upright and still as possible when his crowning fur was smoothed and groomed. Afterward, the charcoal bowler with its midnight-purple band was set upon his head, causing his ears to flatten a bit.

“It was,” his mother explained, her fingers measuring the gap between the brim and those ears, his brow, and the back of his head, mutely grunting each time, “Snug?”

“As a bug in a rug.”

Her fingers tucked in at the sides, “There is still the unique shape of your skull to take into account, as well as your ears,” Jackie continued, and then muttered to herself, “Might need a bit of padding on the sides here…”

“Actually, if you could keep that free, I’d prefer somewhere to hide convert messages,” Nick endeared, smiling as his head was turned by the cup of her paw for a kiss on the cheek, “I can’t help but notice that rickety air conditioning unit, by the way, and wonder how easy a fix it would be to quiet it down.”

“As astute as his father,” Chess purred, earning a sidelong smirk from his former protégé as she adjusted the short brim using a curler, so that her son’s ears had full range of movement, “I’ve grown accustomed to the white noise while I work but ‘old habits die hard’, as they say. It is a bittersweet shame that you were unrecruitable, Nick; what a Rescuer you might have been, with the right training…” and the cat’s grin widened even more, “which is why you’re here *today*.”

Nick smiled and glanced up as his mother affixed two, small, decorative feathers into the band of his hat: one from his raven, Baron, and the other from an albatross. He then stood and buttoned his jacket as said raven descended from its lofty vantage, “I, as a kit, was kept away from the Watch’s endeavors for my own protection. I, as a tod, can be much more helpful.” He tilted his hat over one eye as he addressed Chess with the other, radiant green, “I will first need all manner of spycraft I can get my shifty paws on. What do you say, Mr. Snatch?”

Chess Vander *snatch* grinned his maddest in *years*. “I’d say King Richard has finally returned.”

Chapter End Notes

"Gammameals" and "DoLaGons" are made-up names and any similarities to anything real or fictional is purely coincidental.

The memo that Judy is referring to was made in Trustworthy, chapter 25, and it was everything she could remember about her drug-induced hallucination in “The Burrow” and the conclusions she reached. In Brave, chapter 25, Graham drove their escape out of Hopps Manor (ironic to this chapter) and, as Judy said, he made every attempt to keep her hidden.

An interesting bit about Reggie’s last message here is that I wrote it during Brave and wanted to use it for some time now but could never find a place where it fit or... even
how anyone could have gotten it. My original idea was to borrow the concept of the contact-glass from Felix Oswald's desk but use it for the interactive glass that you read about in the automated car, a shard of which was found by one of the ravens back in Loyal. There was an entirely different scene where it was Nick who guessed "NECROMANCER" after all the ravens searched Bunnyburrow but long story short, the scene felt rushed, contrived, and just... bad. So, we have what we did with Judy, Bo, and Lanny figuring out the riddle of the ravens and Reggie's last message arriving here.

The “master manipulator” Judy’s talking about is Fuchsia Loxley and she was introduced in Brave, chapter 7.

Hector Howard’s voice recording is of the poem “Little Moth” from Brave, chapter 24. His reference to “shouldering the sword of justice” is chapter 25.

“The Rescuers” is a reference to Bernard and Miss Bianca from the 1977 movie of the same name (rescuing children from the back of an albatross). In this story, they are an extraordinarily obscure legend first referenced in John and Jackie’s flashback (Loyal, chapter 13).

Whom Nick is referencing here is an urban legend he told Gideon about back in Brave; "Mr. Snatch" was known as the worst kidnapper in Zootopian history. It was revealed in Loyal that "Mr. Snatch" was a nickname given to Chess to account for the mammals he spirited away so that they could not get caught by Pleasure Island (or promptly removed traitors to the Watch); he has since retired from that line of work so what Nick uses here is a term of endearment.

King Richard is a widely-known historical figure surrounded in legend, one of which is a gestalt of King Arthur (in the wider cat community, thus Chess’s reference here) in that he will return to finish his Crusade of freeing the mammals still enslaved across the world.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
"Until the cows come home" is a favorite if antiquated phrase from country life, referencing the more common demeanor of most cows to be nagging biddies who are the last but harshest meddlers. In effect, cows are the most likely to tolerate raucous partying up to the point that they could stand it no longer, thus acting as a final determining factor in time and intensity of festive activities. It's also worth noting that "cow" does not only refer to bovines but other large, often prey females.

"The lion's share" refers to how lions (namely males) eat grand meals, a cultural habit reflected in their other activities (i.e., binge-watching and marathon work schedules) that might lead to them laying claim to numerous projects and responsibilities at once (thus, the resources needed to accomplish it all). It is a common misconception, though, as studies have shown that lions do not work, sleep, or eat more on average than other species, they simply do so in greater proportions (if less frequently).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stag’s sharpened prongs waved and jutted just a bit too much and jabbed the lion’s eye. He roared in pain as blood fell down his cheek, twice startling the belligerent executor of the Stagmire estate… if he made any attempt to apologize, it was eclipsed by accusations of further sullying the otherwise imperfect hospital room, imperfections he was more than happy to exaggerate. It was the last straw for the lion nurse, so he pulled his paw away from his face to grab the stag by those stupid antlers, swing him around, and chuck him right out the window… There stood the lion at the shattered wall as the lightning flashed and storm whipped his mane about; he glared to the street below… justice, at last…

“Wild!” Mr. Ron Ghannam barked, his (severely) waxed prongs jostling in the lion’s (placid) facial space (again), “You are not paid to daydream, you are paid to attend the Stagmires,” he reminded, practically his way of greeting the nurse. It was because of him and him alone that being assigned to the Stagmires was nothing short of capital punishment, reserved for only the worst offenders at Lions Gate General Hospital… a fate that Nurse Lanny Wild, unfortunately, found himself doomed to. It seemed thrice daily that Ron threatened to pull any and all funding for the hospital from the Stagmire trust…

“Yes, sir, and they’ve both been washed, their pelts trimmed, vitamins administered, IVs refilled and waste products removed-” Lanny listed off with every iota of waning restraint he could muster, crimson eyes focusing on the smaller mammal’s antler tips swaggling about, “-and Mr. Stagmire’s horns have been clipped, filed, sanded, and buffed to the requested length.” He then cringed, Dang it…

Ron cleared his throat significantly and crossed his arms. “‘Horns’?” he demanded.

Ask any ungulate in a ten-mile radius, you pretentious jerk, it’s not an incorrect classification! Lanny hooded his eyes and looked down at the stag before him, chest puffing and shoulders squaring (against the confining, starkly white nurse’s uniform he wore, rather than his comfortable, teal scrubs); at the docks, it would have deterred any would-be-alpha. “Antlers,” he growled
through his dark, parted lips.

“Don’t you dare posture at me, nurse, or need I remind you just how thin a string you’re hanging by?” he warned, a harshly polished hoof pointing into the stony face, as well, he rising up onto his toes so that his cranial protrusions framed the maned head, “Late, lazy, rude, corner-cutting, and unkempt with no regard to the Stagmires’ wellbeing. Maybe you intend for them to boil alive at seventy-six degrees while you lounge about in your Savannah coat which, might I add,” added Mr. Ghannam, plucking a solitary tuft of lint from the uniform before tugging at a shaggy bit of bright, red (brushed) mane poking out of the nurse’s coat at his chest, “you still haven’t properly trimmed, for someone of your station.”

*I’m not cutting my mane for you, you stuck-up brat*, Lanny breathed, well aware that tying back his fiery locks was acceptable for any other long-furred mammal of the hospital’s faculty (so long as they didn’t work in surgery). Though filled with righteous indignation, set as he was to curl his claws and flex the appropriate muscles for Ron’s defenestration, it all drained out at what… or who Lanny saw swinging from Mr. Ghannam’s antlers.

“Heya, Sport!” a familiar and imaginary bright blue fox said, no bigger than a robin.

*No!* Lanny dreaded.

“Yes!” ‘Dawson’ chirped.

Ron’s face and posture transitioned to triumph with a guffaw to match. “There! Finally, a little respect. Now—” he began to prattle.

*All the Night Howler’s gone, I tested myself every week for a month just to be sure!* Lanny thought, sweating bullets as his stomach twisted loose and dropped down into his feet, through the many floors beneath him and breaking the hospital’s foundation as he tried to recall how he could be having such a hallucination… all while Ron rambled (and self-contradicted) about how the nurse should do his job. *This must be the stress… it’s finally caught up to me…*

“Maybe… or …?” ‘Dawson’ prompted, hanging upside-down from an antler by his knees.

*No guessing games!* Lanny inwardly roared and clenched his jaw, *Say your piece and scram, I have enough nuisances as it is!* he silently bellowed and then proceeded to plead, *Please, just… I don’t need this right now, okay?*

The glowing, floating fox was almost the same as when Lanny remembered him from the last time he was (accidentally) exposed to a new NH strain, complete with his weird fur-markings, powder-and-sky-blue colorations, and a beard hanging from the tip of his chin. “Sorry, Champ, I’ve always been here, just haven’t said much but since you asked so nicely…” a pointed ear flicked and directed to the door as a grin spread his face, “Cue salvation in 3… 2… and~ ”

“Lay off him, Ron,” Buckley Stagmire, Jr. said, a young stag not only tall and svelte but handsome and smart, too, cradling a bouquet of his mother’s favorite wildflowers as he nodded his head to avoid scraping his antlers on the door frame, “Dad would rather boil alive than spend a cent on air-conditioning; I should know, I suffered through enough summers of it,” he mused, earning a glower from the executor. Junior than sauntered over to where his mother, Doana, lay reposed in her coma, and leaned in to kiss her cheek, “I brought some more flowers but I hardly think it necessary,” he then commended, eying the still vibrant blossoms from his previous visit, “They normally don’t last a week but you seem to keep them alive a lot longer than the other nurses did.”

*That’s right, Junior said he would be coming early today and with Ron running late as he is…*
Lanny recalled, *Otherwise, they’re rarely ever here at the same time and for good reason, considering Junior’s still above Ron in the pecking order… thank Aslan for that,* he sighed. “Oh, thank you, Mr. Stagmire,” he said and then glanced at the clicking tongue and double finger-guns of the aethereal fox hovering on the edge of his vision. *I guess I’m being pretty sly right now.*

“There’s no point in defending bad help, *Bambi,*” Ron countered, casually retrieving his jacket from a chair to fold it over an arm, earning his own glower (to which he spitefully smirked) on his way to the door, “My business is concluded here, *anyway.*”

“You’re also running late, I see,” ‘Bambi’ said as he swiped up a tablet near his father’s bed, Ron’s hoof narrowly missing it, “Go on ahead, I’ll take care of surveying Nurse Wild and confirm that my parents are getting their proper treatment.”

The (marginally) older stag stared flatly, ears flicked, and then he huffed, leaning in to whisper harshly, if not necessarily *quietly*. “You’ll just coddle him.”

Bambi arched an eyebrow and canted his head enough to clack their antlers together, his capped, sturdy prongs a stark comparison to how Ron’s were frailer, sharper. “*I will be as objective as it is in me to be, both in the report and to his director,*” he replied in equal parts stern and audible, and when no response came, punctuated their interaction with a cordial, “*Bye.*” He watched Ron stalk out (with an unnecessary craning of his neck to avoid the doorframe) and not until the door closed did Bambi address the tablet and inspect his parents with a flare of his nostrils. “Let’s see here… Patients: cared for, that much is obvious. Room: clean. Beds: also clean. Air temperature:*” he paused and walked about, “comfortable. Presentation:*” he stood in front of the nurse and studied him up and down, using mainly the peripheral vision of those grand, round eyes so that his antlers stayed as stationary as possible (the courtesy of a civil stag), “Tidy. I’d say you’re doing a bang-up job, Lanny,” he complimented and completed the inspection with a tap of his hoof and a merry chime.

*I think you just saved Ron’s life, Junior.* “Thank you, Mr. Stagmire,” the nurse professionally replied, accepting the tablet and tucking it under his arm, both paws held to his front.

He chuckled and turned on a heel. “*Please,* you don’t need to be so formal, we’re practically family at this point.”

“So… ‘Bambi’, then?” Lanny teased -- the Stagmire heir dropping into a waiting chair -- as he retrieved a vase from the supply cupboard, “It’s a good thing so many well-wishers keep bringing these by.”

The stag grunted and pouted with a hoof to his cheek. “You know I only let my godfather use that name, nowadays…”

*Because that’s what your mother used to call you…* Lanny remembered him saying, as he filled the vase with water and food, cut the stems and displayed it on the table between the two parental deer. While he was over there, the nurse routinely checked the machines using the tablet, ‘*Doana Stagmire*, caught in a drive-by shooting several years ago; alive but hasn’t woken up since. ‘*Buckley Stagmire, Sr.*’, sudden onset full-body nerve paralysis due to contact with faulty wiring.

“It’s poetic, you know,” Bambi considered as he watched, “Dad would stay at Mom’s bedside twice a week ever since she was admitted… and now he hasn’t left her for three years… I remember I would push their beds closer so that they could hold hooves; until I was yelled at by one of the first nurses.”

Lanny smiled over his shoulder, “You also did it so that you could lie in bed with them, as I
The stag chuckled. “That is true. Ron said it was unbecoming of me but he can go knock branches, for all I care,” Bambi muttered, pouting out the window to continue under his breath, “His Mom is still very much active and he has to be bothered to call her each month; some mammals just don’t know what they have until they lose it.” His eyes then flicked to Lanny… whose shoulders slouched some as he returned to his nursing duties. “And… at least I know who and where my parents are…” Bambi added in quiet remorse, followed by the sound of his hooves approaching the lion, and then touching his shoulder, “I’m sorry, Lanny, sometimes I forget to count my blessings.”

Soft, tied-back red mane swished as the head it was attached to shook. “No worries, Junior,” he assured, once more smiling over his shoulder as the stag nodded and retreated a step to lightly clutch his father’s shin through the blanket, as though to appreciate each breath he still took.

“That reminds me, you were going to talk with Ryan Wild, weren’t you?” Bambi asked, looking a bit hopeful, “I remember he and I would play together when we were young as our fathers met for their cribbage or curling games. I admit that we’ve grown apart… went along with different crowds, I guess. Did you learn anything from him?”

*Only more fractured memories, thus more frustration… that must be why you came back, huh?

Lanny wondered of the tiny blue fox lounging on the neatly-kept antlers of the bright-eyed stag, More clues as to what I lost that I can’t figure out.

“J-ust hang i-in there, S-on,” ‘Dawson’ pondered, foot idly bouncing as his tail swayed freely beneath him, clipping between his relaxed position and one crouching forward like television static.

Yeah, a great help you are.

Lanny shrugged. “What Ryan confided in me gave me lots to think about, so I suppose I *did* ‘learn’ something,” the lion said, nodding his head towards the chairs and continuing when they both sat, the tablet set upon the table at the foot of Doana’s bed, “You knew Ryan… did you also know Simon?”

“Of course I did,” the stag chuckled, “Memphis was as much a part of the ‘cribbage group’ as Dad, Sam, Leo, Camelita, and the Felix himself, so all us kids got a chance to hang out every once in a while. This was when Oswald was with his first mate, so we got to see little, baby bunnies, but they were always separated from us, for their own safety. I was usually the tallest (and only prey) amongst that burgeoning pride of lion cubs; Simon, the ‘big cub on the block’, Ryan -- and Nat was there, too, since she’s Memphis’s goddaughter (she had a vixen kit friend, Brandy, who tagged along on occasion) -- and there were Leo’s cubs, Alice and Leddy. Little known fact:” Bambi continued in a marginally brighter tone, “It was something of a running gag with us but Simon was actually small for a lion cub, especially next to his dad; not that you would ever know from the photos,” Bambi then whispered behind his hoof.

Lanny joined in the boyish teasing as ‘Dawson’ mimicked the action in the corner of his eye, “What, did he stand on a box to stay in the frame?”

The light laughter relieved them both. “Yes, exactly. He was small in stature but huge in spirit,” Bambi reminisced, “could be a real brat, too… always ready to prove how brave he was. How magical everything seemed back then, all the adventures we went on,” he sighed, “when the only thing a cub or fawn had to fear was disappointing their parents.” Attention was directed to the reposed deer… namely the stag, “The cubs dared each other like it was a currency, bidding with higher and more ludicrous descriptors for each dare, and it always caused trouble… I never got into much trouble, but then, I didn’t do much of anything,” he gingerly rued.
“Except be a total klutz,” Lanny added, taking ‘Dawson’s exaggerated cue of tripping and falling down the multi-pronged antlers.

Bambi snorted and rolled his eyes with a flick of his hoof, “You show me a young ungulate who doesn’t trip over their own legs and I’ll show you—” he paused, resting a cheek on a fist to study the nurse while tapping at the arm of his chair, “Granted, I _was_ particularly klutzy as a fawn… did you hear that from Ron?”

_Ermm…_ Lanny pondered, awaiting his cue.

“Guy can’t take a joke,” ‘Dawson’ vocally teased, crossing his arms and leaning on the upright antler.

“I’m just joking, Junior,” he assured, paws spread placatively, _He still seems put-off, though… I guess I could reveal one thing about my cubhood, to even things out, _Listen, if someone isn’t bashful about their childhood, then they haven’t told you everything about it. One thing I do recall about my time as a cub, about my dad,”_ Lanny began, earning the deer’s perked ears and brighter gaze, “was that every chance I got, I _always_ bit his ear. And what a fit he’d throw.”

It worked. Bambi laughed and covered his eyes with a shake of his head, lifting one leg to cross it over the other as he wiped away a tear.

“I didn’t think it _that_ funny,” Lanny insinuated with a quirked brow and smirk.

Another chuckle and the stag was able to dismiss the concern. “It’s _not_ , just… I know this will tweak you but tit-for-tat, Lanny Wild: it must be a lion thing because Simon did the _exact_ same to Memphis.”

‘Dawson’ snapped his fingers for attention and brought it on himself to state the obvious, “Except you’re _not_ Simon King. _How_ can you be?”

Lanny’s brow furrowed at the stag as he grimaced good-naturedly. “I suppose I deserve that for the ‘klutz’ comment. But yeah, it was just a sign of affection, nothing _aggressive_ or anything like that.”

“Oh, yes, most assuredly,” Bambi affirmed, “but Lanny, now that we’ve had a good _jab_ at each other, there is something I’m deathly curious about… When you spoke with him, Ryan, I mean…” he stammered some and glanced at his wringing hoofs, as though to find some script upon them, “did he… say anything about _that_ day?” The lion stared hard and so the stag continued. “We caught up somewhat recently and… I can’t say for sure, but something about his demeanor reminds me of how he was back then, before the dance class; he seemed… lighter? Maybe that’s not the right word…”

The lion sunk into his chair somewhat, elbows on the arms with his paws tucked in, legs spread and heels planted to the floor. “It might be. Ryan told me about why he and Simon ran,” Lanny lamented, gazing out the window, _And it just burns me up inside..._ The carefully steadied antlers jostled some as the deer attached to them scooted to the edge of his seat, head bobbing to urge the conversation on. “They were playing hide-&-seek and while Simon was counting, Ryan recognized… a voice…” he glanced about and leaned in to whisper as carefully as he could, _I don’t think Ryan would mind you knowing this since you might be one of the few mammals in this city to truly appreciate its severity, “It was William Kazar.”_

Bambi’s pupils contracted with what could only be the full knowledge of who that was and what he meant to Ryan. “ _Kazar?_ At the King’s ranch in Horseshire…?”
“It was over the phone,” Lanny clarified, “and he was talking to Tycho. Ryan wouldn’t say what about... I don’t think he meant to say even *that* much.” He then sat back again with a nod of his head and relaxed.

“Wow...” he gasped, running a hoof behind his antlers, “Is that when they...?”

“Not until Ryan caught too much of a conversation that he knew he shouldn’t have heard, even if _he_ didn’t understand all the details,” Lanny explained, “but... I think Simon *did*.”

Bambi then exemplified the derogatory stereotype of ‘a deer in the headlights’... until he lowered his eyes and rubbed his mouth. “No wonder Ryan felt so *guilty* for Simon’s disappearance...” and stopped again, a finger gently wagging in thought, “Tycho was *very* protective of Ryan after that, even though he couldn’t stand cubs (I think he tolerated his own as a matter of paternal courtesy); he was so *weird*, you have no idea... but we never thought he actually *hurt* anyone.”

“Unfortunately, Ryan only ever told Simon and I didn’t want to press him on it; he would only push away. Whatever Tycho was or wasn’t up to, the only ones who knew won’t ever talk.” A solemn nod agreed with the lion, prompting him to change the subject. “So, I heard that Mr. Stagmire was *restrained* when they first brought him in, not that any of the nurses would tell me why and his clipboard is only for daily requirements.”

A weary sigh answered first as the round eyes gazed over a shoulder once more. “Dad suffered violent seizures, initially, and *drastic* drops in body temperature. They were worried he’d break his neck and so they also kept his antlers trimmed back, and then he went full-on nerve-paralysis; he’s been dormant ever since. Have you been keeping up with his exercises?” Bambi then asked the nurse.

The nurse nodded to invoke a sigh of relief and gratitude. “For both of them. I know it’s not part of my job description but I wouldn’t want their muscles to atrophy, just in case they wake up.” Lanny earned another expression of heartfelt gratitude in the form of a smile as warm as afternoon sun. “So, question:” the lion then smirked, reclining in his chair with one leg out as he leaned on his arm, “why _are_ you here so early? Not that I’ve minded the company or you saving my pelt back there with Ron.”

“My godfather’s parole officer finally gave him a day off, so he -- well, they _both_ are visiting Dad,” Bambi revealed after a light chuckle, “And I haven’t seen him in _months_, as I’m sure you can imagine, so this will be a good chance to catch up,” and then quirked a brow, “What?”

*Oh no...* Lanny dreaded while chomping back a throat-wrenching snicker, *Should I tell him...?*

“*Nah~*” ‘Dawson’ mused, “Let’s see his reaction when he finds out.”

The lion waved his paw dismissively and choked back his laughter, “It’s nothing, nothing at all.”

“Hold the door!” someone requested, and so a tawny paw clapped the closing elevator to push the opening wide once more as a *second* tawny paw clapped the other side to do the same and shoulder its owner through. “Thank yo’s *muchos,*” the lion stepping inside enunciated, so warm and cordial a greeting only possible when mixing two distinct accents with such clearly incorrect grammar of either language; amiability immediately drained as he recognized the other lion already inside and made to retreat (perhaps with the pretense of ‘getting the next one’) until he saw the included fox.

“Hello Officer-” the other lion already inside said, glancing to the shiny ZPD badge and keeping up his best introductory smile (and it was, indeed, his best considering how important a smile was
to his profession), “Delgato. All aboard?” he offered.

“Mr. Lionheart,” Officer Manuel Delgato said as politely (but dispassionately) as possible, nodded, and then addressed, “Nick, good to see you again,” with a subtly warmer disposition. He stepped in fully and turned on a heel, shoulders squared and back straight, soon reaching for the button of his destination… only to find that it was already selected.

“How’s it hanging, Manny, I see you’ve already met my friend Leo,” Nick said in all the casual smugness available to him while clicking the button to close the elevator doors, “Whom are you visiting in such a hurry?”

Delgato arched a severe brow at his fellow officer (even if he was a parole officer, at the moment), allowed a smirk, glanced at Leodore, and then spoke in his native language, “Is Mayor Kidnapper okay to talk in front of?” he asked as discreetly as he could.

Nick’s ear flicked at the sighing, gaze-averting former mayor of Zootopia before answering, “I’m sure he knows what you’re saying. Isn’t that right?” he then asked of Leo, in a language more common for Zootopia.

“I know what ‘mayor’ and ‘kidnapper’ means,” Lionheart answered forlornly and then continued, pivoting to talk directly to Officer Delgato and his momentary, jaw-clenched wilting, “and honestly, yours is amongst the fairer outrages. This last year has been hard on us all, Officer Delgato, and I know I’ve dragged lions through the mud through the mud with what I did during the Pred-Scare. I have no excuses and no apology that could ever truly pay back the pain and terror that I was responsible for. All that I can see ahead of me is opportunity after opportunity to make right what I did wrong… as best I can and all that I am able, and pray that the mammals of this city can, in time, come to forgive an old, blind fool.”

The elevator’s cables were not its only, or even greatest, tension.

Manuel braced his folder-holding paw to a cocked hip. “You know, Mr. Lionheart, I had all year to practice what I would say to you if I ever got the chance, and practiced it all the more when I found out that Nick was your parole officer,” he said, and then smirked as he punched a shoulder, “but no hay más cáscaras , if you didn’t have far more opportunity to practice what you would say to someone like me.” A short, perhaps obligatory laugh was shared between the three of them before he said, “Just like my sister, Rosa said, ‘Manny, you’ve got to let go of all that hatred’, and I guess she was right; again. I’ve got better things to do than be mad at you, Mr. Lionheart, and it’s not like I can do any worse to you than the rest of the city -- or even yourself -- already has.”

“I’m glad we could resolve that,” the older lion said with his photogenic smile, and then eyed what the officer carried with him as the door opened onto their floor, “So, what are you here for, if I may ask? Or are we looking at official police business?”

“I think,” Nick chimed in after getting a good look of the folder, sliding out of the elevator and around a gurney in transit, “that we are headed to the same room but for very different reasons.”

“Oh, what a charming coincidence,” Leodore mused as he straightened his casual-wear button-down shirt, a simple piece of brushed silver and slate that really did nothing to accentuate his more earthen fur-tones, a wardrobe choice that so conflicted with his more iconic business formal whenever he made a public appearance. He sauntered out quite easily as Delgato studied him still.

A mixture of a growl and a snicker slipped out of the officer lion’s mouth as he followed at an easy pace. “So we just happen to be meeting the same breath-of-life nurse? It sounds like the ‘lucky fox’ strikes again.”
“On the contrary, Manny, we’re meeting up with Leo’s godson, who just so happens to be the normal son of that particular nurse’s patient,” Nick said as he reached up and pat the civilian lion’s forearm, “My parolee here earned enough brownie points with his alpha at the docks for a little free time.”

“¡Ostia tío!” Manuel halted as Leodore bashfully rubbed the back of his neck, not turning to address the officer as Nick had, who exchanged a grin of surmounting smugness, “are you telling me that Lanny Wild is your alpha?”

“Courtesy of yours truly,” Nick boasted, “Lanny was the guy I knew down at Pridelands Shipping who got Leo into a work-placement program as part of his parole; temporarily, of course. It is excellent PR if I do say so myself, sweating and swearing with blue-collar mammals.”

Leodore laughed and his shoulders shook, and then they sagged with his head so that it could shake, too. “Talk about humbling, my alpha is half my age!” he joked and scratched his cheek, finally pivoting with an awkward smile, “But then, Lanny has a few betas who are older than him and yet he still treats us old fogeys with respect; he doesn’t seem to discriminate in that regard. Every time I see him juggling crates, I’m always reminded of Memphis in his prime,” Leodore pondered, stroking his maned chin, “That cub’s got a bright future ahead of him.”

“Well, if I may toot my own horn, this bit of cleverness on my part should help him along, too,” Manuel agreed, holding up the folder, “not that he would need it, mind you, reliable guy like him.”

“All right, if we’re all done grooming each other, let’s continue,” Nick berated as he kept on, throwing his paws up in a shrug to mumble, “Lions gushing over each other… you know, ‘pride’ is only supposed to be a turn-of-phrase.” The fox ignored those lions’ exchanged smugness (which somehow managed to outclass his own) as he pushed open the hospital door with a posthumously polite, “Knock knock~?” Nick hid his instantaneous stun upon considering, I really should learn to not open the door while knocking or else I’ll keep finding this guy in compromised situations… He was then bumped by either lion behind him gawking at what they saw concerning their fellow within.

Buckley Stagmire, Jr. was reclined as much as one could be in a hospital waiting chair with his head leaned back and leg raised, carefully cradled in the velvety paws of one Nurse Lanny Wild, whose claws gently scraped across a cloven hoof with a cleaning pick clutched between his knuckles. “By His spanning antlers, that feels amazing,” the stag moaned.

“I never get a reaction when I clean your parent’s hooves, for obvious reasons,” Lanny explained, “unless Ron finds something to complain about their hoofcare after scouring with a magnifying glass.” He then lifted his head to the visitors and… it seemed as though a distinct incredulity passed between the three big cats regarding the Lions Gate alpha kneeling on the ground as someone’s hoof-polisher. “Oh, hi guys,” he casually greeted and held the pick’s handle in his teeth to retrieve a nearby brush from a rolled out kit to continue his task unabashed, “Come in, take a load off. Just let me finish up here, then I can grab some chairs from the lobby desk on this floor.”

Manuel and Leodore exchanged bewilderment. “You know, Rosa said he was easy-going off the docks but I have to admit, this is somewhat surprising,” the former said to the agreeing latter, who was striding into the room, “Unless there was a certain lioness foremammal around…” he then wryly added under his breath.

The older lion stopped only when he was standing over the reposed deer, paws folded behind his back and grinning wide, eyes hooded and bent forward at the waist. “Is this a bad time, Bambi, because I can come back if you’re preoccupied?”
“Oh, Uncle Leo!” the stag moaned again but with a far more urgent inflection to match how he vaulted from his own hide (and Leodore reflexively stood upright at the springing prongs, experienced as he was in keeping the company of deer), “Lanny was just…’ he cleared his throat, scrambling for the antler-caps sitting on the nearby table (which Lanny nonchalantly presented for his convenience), “I mean, Nurse Wild was demonstrating his hoof-cleaning techniques because Ron -- Mr. Ghannam -- was unduly demeaning his fastidiousness for my parents’ care.”

“And his skill at antler-polishing, I wouldn’t wonder,” the paternal lion endeared, assisting his godson in reapplying the caps which blended in so well with his natural colorations.

“Yes, that too,” Bambi huffed, sitting as still as possible as the lions on either end of him continued their unnecessary doting. His eyes scanned the two officers also in the room and tried to obscure the flaring beacons that were his ears by pinning them behind his skull.

Nick flicked his paw dismissively as he hopped up into the vacant chair, “Don’t mind us.”

“Won’t be here long,” Manuel agreed.

“Although I think our sharply-dressed lions with rhyming names have some business to attend to, and if I know Manny’s partner like I think I do (and I usually do), he doesn’t have all the time in the world like some of us lucky schlubs.”

“Thank you, Nick,” the police lion said before addressing the then standing nurse as he set down his tools and straightened his back; Manny was quieted for a solitary instant as his eyes glanced upward at the fiery-maned alpha of Pridelands Shipping as he worked any kinks from his spine with so whispered a growl. “I don’t know if this is anything of a breakthrough, Lanny, but it’s definitely something we can work with… it might be a bit sensitive, though,” he implied, glancing at Leodore and Junior as politely as he could.

Lanny followed the gaze and then took a seat on the coffee table provided for the waiting chairs after rolling up his hoof-&-antler care kit, smiling with a soft chuckle. “They’re okay; practically family.” Junior shared in a somewhat bashful chuckle, perhaps still recovering from his unprofessional demeanor not a few minutes prior.

Manuel nodded. “To catch either of them up, I’ve been scouring police records for any lion parents who were killed in car crashes, train wrecks, house fires, anything that could explain the traumatic event around Lanny’s amnesia and unknown parents,” he explained and Leodore grunted curiously since he, quite obviously, was the only one in the room that didn’t already know about Lanny’s lost memories.

“You have my sincerest condolences, Landon,” Leodore said in his sincerest fatherly tone. “It’s actually ‘Leonardo’, but please, just ‘Lanny’, ” he politely and succinctly corrected before smiling up at the older lion’s blinking surprise, “Most don’t know my full name, so don’t worry about it,” and then nodded to Manuel to continue.

“Sí. So, I started in Lions Gate, turned up empty-pawed, and expanded my search to anywhere nearby,” he said, counting off on his fingers, “Gnu York, Acorn Heights, Big Dune, and even as far north as Glacier Falls but nothing matched up with a family of ‘Wild’ lions missing a son or dead parents around that time frame. I was about at the end of my rope until I was inspired by the precinct’s ‘lucky fox’ over there.” Nick feigned and dramatized a blush. “‘Wilde’ with-an-’e’ sounds exactly the same but is differently spelled.”

Lanny arched a severe brow. “You think I forgot my own name?”
“No no no no,” Manuel insisted in casual but rapid succession, opening the folder and pulling out a profile, “I think you knew your name but whomever you told it to -- perhaps this mysterious ‘green-eyed uncle’ of yours (who could have been anyone, honestly) -- heard it as the most common surname in the city.” The officer’s face lit up so cleverly, “That in mind, I expanded my search for any ‘Wild’ lion families who spelled their names differently, perhaps with a ‘y’. It was a shot in the dark, don’t get me wrong, but …” he showed an older-looking lion with a dark-reddish mane but light pelt, “I present to you the family Wyld (with-a-‘y’) of lower Gnu York; their apartment was near some train tracks, a few blocks down the line from the Prairie Road stop.”

Nick shot up in his seat. “I think I remember hearing about this,” he then said, “it was a cataclysm of errors that led to the train jumping those tracks and clipping the apartments, causing a terrible fire (among other things).”

“Sí …” Manuel soberly repeated, closing the folder, “There were some recorded fatalities but more notably, several children were reported missing afterward, specifically, one of the Wyld sons; an assumed statistic of the missing children epidemic from that era. The Wylds have since left the city and moved out of Zootopia to the middle of the country, as best I could find out. With your permission, Lanny, I might be able to follow this trail, in fact… I might even be able to call in a favor to get your DNA tested since you’re already in the system and we have someone to test it against.”

Hardly a few seconds passed before Lanny rocketed to his feet and approached with so bright a smile. “Manny, that’s amazing!” he declared, tears only just staying in his eyes with paws spread out towards the officer, “If it’s at all possible, then yes, please, you have my permission to look into this! Aslan’s mane, I’ve been searching and waiting for this news my whole life,” he continued.

The lion in a blue uniform beamed and reached out to clap a shoulder of the one in a white uniform. “Consider it done, hermano,” he assured and then looked about, “Nick’s right, though, my partner only has so much patience so I should be going, what with my good news delivered. Ciao,” Officer Manuel Delgato bid as he exited the room, properly closing the door behind him.

“Well,” Nick chuckled, holding a paw to his mouth as though speaking through a walkie-talkie with a purposeful crackling-cough, “Ground control to Lanny, how are you doing up there?”

“Hopeful,” he answered and dabbed the tip of his thumb at the corner of each eye.

“‘Lenny Wild’…” Leodore pondered aloud, claws sifting through the mane under his chin.

“Not since I was a teenager,” Lanny said and turned before the conversation could, shooting a smirk at the older lion, “You sound a bit familiar with the name, Mr. Lionheart.”

“That big cat’s slier by the day,” Nick admired, also catching the former mayor’s speculation, he beat me to the punch by half-a-second.

The master politician smiled and waved his paw with keen dismissal and a cordial groan, sauntering over to where Nick sat to (quite easily) pick him up and set him on the arm of the chair so that he might have a seat, instead. “Don’t mind me; it’s the most common first name for a lion and the most common last name for a mammal, yet not often combined. Pray tell… what is your middle name?” he asked, crossing one leg over the other as he leaned on an elbow, paws gesticulating to some minor degree, and to the younger lion’s quirking brow, “Merely a professional curiosity, is all; you needn’t answer.”

Rude, Nick huffed, doing his best not to let his annoyance show as he reclined with superb balance
on his narrower if still cushioned resting spot, arms folded behind his head. Green, hooded eyes then lifted to the towering, uniformed lion… *Is his jaw clenching? His whiskers perked… wait… no…* the fox disbelieved, certain though he was that his outward nonchalance was impenetrable, *I know that face, that’s Lanny’s listening-to-Dawson face, I’d bet my tail on it… he’s not using Pollen to deal with the stress, is he…?* No, there would’ve been obvious signs. *I’ll need to convene with him afterward as to the why and how but currently… it looks like he is, in fact, listening to his ‘Dawson’ which means he’s about to say something clever… and I do want to hear him say something clever.*

“Uncle Leo,” Junior groaned in exasperation and looked ready to continue berating until a quick, polite ‘hup’-ping from Lanny interjected. He watched instead as Lanny strode to the chair and gestured for the other to lion remove his elbow from where he might sit, and then slung his arm across the back to speak in a conversationally clandestine manner.

“Perhaps a trade?” Lanny played, “I’ve been trying to figure out something that no one else at the hospital will tell me but *I think, you might know the answer to,*” he casually said, tapping the older lion’s chest with a finger. “For my middle name, I will hear straight from your mouth about the day that Buckley Stagmire, Sr. went full-body nerve-paralysis. *As a… professional curiosity.*”

Jiminy Cricket, Freight, Nick adulated, *talk about punching above your weight class!* *I learned just about everything I needed to know about double talk from watching snake-charmers like Leo here. Still, he would have to stick to whatever story Junior is so familiar with while knowing about my little knack for sniffing out lies, even if he does think of it as little more than a parlor trick. I’m curious as to what you hope to gain from this, Freight.*

Leodore studied the younger lion, paws folded calmly in his lap, glimpsing momentarily (if superiorly) over his shoulder at Nick, and then up to Lanny once again. “An interesting proposal… have you a cure in mind that a breath-of-life nurse -- such as yourself -- might figure out better than the top doctors in the country could for the past three years? Granted,” he jovially admitted, “your profession hails back into antiquity as some of the top resuscitators in the medical field. Oh yes, I know all about breath-of-life nurses (the Lionhearts have their share); said to have originated with the idea that lion fathers breathe life into their newborn cubs and how the restorative properties of the smaller cats’ purring sped up the mending process of bones, muscle, and nerves; how lions’ roars can reliably maintain a Herdtz range that is too high for tigers yet with the power behind them to cover the entire body of larger mammals, something a bit beyond the scope of smaller cats. Well,” he chuckled with a shake of his shoulders.

He’s going for it, Nick anticipated.

“I simply *cannot* wager such information about my dearest friend on a ‘professional curiosity’.”

Not right now, certainly, but he will, the fox considered, *Even though Chess managed to refine my self-taught intrigue over this past week, Leo’s been a tough nut to crack; I caught him ‘lying’ with grade school math and ‘telling the truth’ about his polka-dot wings, so one thing I can say for certain is that this guy’s glibness is in a league of its own, maybe even better than Dad’s. Plus, I’ve yet to secure any leverage to convince him to stick his neck out and help with such a politically volatile thing as the Reino del Sol mission.*

“Really, you two, is this the time or place for posturing?” Junior critiqued, “I understand that the roles here are reversed than at the docks and I enjoy knocking antlers as much as the next buck, but if you keep this up, I’ll tattle on the both of you to Dad,” he warned, tossing a thumb over his shoulder, “in a heartbeat. Besides,” he continued and sat up, adjusting his jacket *very* professionally, “I shall answer both your questions to duly settle this here and now. Uncle Leo, his
name is Leonardo Baxter Wild; yes, the same as Simon’s but it’s really no more than a coincidence. Lanny, I appreciate your concern but the honest truth of it is that Dad and Uncle Leo were working with Doctors Without Species to construct houses to be transported internationally when a faulty generator electrocuted him.”

*You old, clever cat,* Nick could not help but congratulate, *Junior believes every word of that story and, honestly, it’s what was released to the public anyway... but I want to know why Lanny thinks it might be something different, perhaps something his medical training is telling him.* Nick noticed Lanny’s inquisitive gaze and gave as subtle a shrug with his eyebrows as was possible in him to give, *Yeah, he was expecting me to catch something... sorry, Lan, but unless I get it directly from the source...*

“Isn’t that right?” Junior asked of his godfather.

“Absolutely,” his godfather promptly assured.

_Hup! Gotcha~ Don’t let your guard down around a fox, Leo,_ Nick mused, his lie detector ringing like a bell from all the minor tells that he saw on Leo... like how he was doing something with his fingers that also caught his attention, _Hmm..._ Before he was too distracted, however, he winked to Lanny to confirm the nurse’s suspicions, who then stood from the chair (with a noticeable shift of weight).

“It’s a miracle that Bucky is still with us at all,” Leodore continued, eyes closed with a paw to his chest to emphasize how heartfelt his concern was, “I remember it like it was yesterday... Bucky seized, went glassy-eyed, thrashed, and then collapsed... I still remember the smell of the smoke from his fur.”

_That... was all true, as best I can figure,_ Nick thought, also sitting upright on the arm of the chair as his eyes flicked up to Lanny, _yet it seems off somehow... Talk to me, bud, what are you looking for?_

“He was also thrown several yards and horribly bruised,” Junior added.

“Yes, of course,” Leodore agreed.

_Another lie...?_ Nick wondered.

“It was the same day I got this scar on my nose,” the older lion pointed out.

_Okay, that’s true, I guess._

“Also from a power tool malfunction, as I recall,” Junior conversed and his godfather vocally agreed.

_The scar wasn’t from power tools either, huh?_ the fox reasoned, looking again at Leodore’s paw, namely his knuckles. He then looked up at the nurse, _What did you figure out, Freight?_

“Hey... Nickster,” Lanny prompted, earning an immediate reaction from the fox for using one of his dad’s nicknames for him, “could you entertain our guests for a bit? I need to go fetch something from the nurse’s desk. I won’t be gone too long,” he assured to the room at large, earning curious but reluctantly permissive glances from his “guests” as he departed.

_Holy mackerel... it can’t be..._ “No problemo, Freight, you go do what you need, I’ll be sure these upstanding gentlemammals are well looked after.” _But how do I... Oh... but how else, ‘eh Dad?_ Nick slid fluidly off the chair and leaned on the coffee table with an amused expression from either
of the larger mammals in the room.

“It’s quite alright, I don’t need to be entertained,” Junior kindly assured.

“I think you’ll like this, Bambi, if Nick here is going to do what I think he’s going to do,” Leodore pondered, to which the fox casually dismissed, “A parlor trick of his, a real-life Basil of Baker Street .”

The stag was quite clearly contemplative as he scratched his chin. “I am a sucker for displays of deduction,” Junior admitted, “Being a manager as I am, I readily support any outside-the-box thinking and creative problem-solving… which, you likely deduced already, Detective Wilde.”

“‘Eh , that’s something anyone could read off the website for Deerbrooke’s branch of Hexward Pharmaceuticals, considering Bucky, Sr. re-invested in the company after Bellwether replaced him as Leo’s assistant mayor for his re-election campaign. No, I won’t bore you with menial observations about whom you keep company with or favorite hobbies (all things I could read about on your FuzzBook page), rather… how about I show you both another ‘parlor trick’ of mine?” Nick suggested, strutting around the coffee table to sit on it.

“Oh?” the stag wondered.

Nick nodded and hoisted one of Leodore’s mitts (with some effort, heavy as it was) and was avidly watched by the lion. “I’m something of a fortune teller, you see, in that reading paws or hoofs are an exceptiona l way to find out lots about the mammal attached to it; for example, while Leo’s involvement in Doctors Without Species is well known, I would say that he’s a bit more than the frequent donator that this elastic band on his wrist would imply,” the fox said, slipping his thumb beneath the simple rubber ring to test its elasticity, “I can tell by the callouses on his fingers that he regularly handles carpentry tools (which you’ve already confirmed for me, by the way), is something of a scholar because of all the years spent holding a pen (no big surprise there), and… most interestingly, I can say with some certainty that Leo is no stranger to fisticuffs (you’ll notice these scuff marks on his knuckles here). Really, though,” the fox continued as he beamed sidelong at the paler lion looming overhead, and then released the plastic band to sharply snap on his wrist, “That’s just the surface stuff of what I found out.”

Muted and painless though the snap surely was against his fur, the tawny cat flinched violently all the same as his eyes stared fiercely into the fox still very much within arm’s reach… practically dancing in the palm of his paw. Those eyes spoke more than his speechless lips ever could to the observant Nick Wilde, though… and as Junior bit back a snicker, his phone rang.

“Oh, drat ,” the stag muttered, earning only an ear flick from either predator as he stood, “I suppose I have stayed a bit long… if you’ll both excuse me I need to buy myself some more time.”

“Of course,” Leodore allowed, barely blinking as he registered his godson leaving the room. His lips pursed and fangs audibly ground inside his mouth. “So…” he finally said.

Nick turned on a heel and propped an elbow on the lion’s knee, inflecting a solitary grunt to express how amused he was at the situation, Do you want to say it or shall I?

“You really are John Wilde’s son, aren’t you?” he threatened in a low voice.

“The one and only,” Nick quietly boasted, “Dad told me all about that pool party where you got him that job as a tailor’s apprentice… Vincenzo Corlione.” The muffled noises out in the hospital's walls and the Stagmires’ life-monitoring equipment was almost deafening.
“It’s funny,” Leodore picked up after air, light, and heat returned to the room, at last, “all of my sources told me that the ‘John Wilde’ who came to me that day was a pseudonym… that he was really named ‘Jacky Savage’…”

*He must have found out about Dad’s bachelor name from Kristofur Pounceski… Nick realized, who only confirmed what ‘Vinny’ likely suspected at the time if Dad really did single Kris out as he exited stage left.*

“And that he was securing a position for his cousin or friend named ‘John Wilde’. I checked up on the fox apprenticing under DeCoyote, of course; how could I not? But he was so different, so ingratiating and awkward, nothing at all like that suave, debonair tod who snuck in under my canopy.” The lion softly growled. “I couldn’t even catch his scent, not with all the perfumes, sauces, chlorine, and hard spirits in the air. But you… for you to know everything that he said, there really is no doubt… and I could hardly miss those bright, green eyes of yours,” he said, the lion leaning closer, “I thought I caught him once… but he was only a trick of the light and mind… and cider. Even now, whatever experience and rationale I have denies it, but ‘Jacky Savage’ and ‘John Wilde’ were always the same fox, weren’t they?”

“Just like Leodore Lionheart and Vinny Corlione,” Nick confessed, *He was lying somewhere in there, I think, but I can’t pinpoint exactly where,* “Do you want to know what’s also funny? The ‘unknown son of the dead Corlione family’ was a *legend* amongst Zootopia’s hustlers… still is, so far as I know… so might I just say that it is an *honor* to finally meet you, ‘Vinny’… or it would be if that were still my life.”

Leodore grunted again, arching his brow regally. “And what happens now, Mr. Wilde? If you wanted to oust me you wouldn’t have waited until Bambi left the room. Will you finally ask me that thing you’ve been *dying* to ever since I became your *parolee’? I know what anticipatory pleading looks like, ‘Nickster’, but I rather thought you above that, considering *whom* you were partnered with,” he endeared with a smile to match,”You should know better than anyone that the well’s tapped dry; my assets are still frozen on the assumption that I’m a ‘flight risk’, even after serving my time and repaying every cent in damages to every family I hurt from the Pred-Scare kidnappings. Conner Shere, the DA ‘Whom Buzzards Follow’, still had a paw to play in my punishment, you see, and he twisted the screws as *tight* as he could so it will be sometime more before they are loosened.”

*Hmm*… “The long and short of it, Leo, is that I need your help rescuing someone from Reino del Sol.”

The lion flinched again, eyebrows and ears askew as his jaw slackened. “Reino del Sol is a powder keg, any intervention from any major nation could spark a world war. You know that.”

“I figured,” Nick dismissed.

“And yet you just came out and said it…”

“I did.”

“Not very fox-like.”

“On the contrary,” he argued, “my mate was stolen away by an evil dictator and I aim to exploit every advantage at my claw tips with *extreme* prejudice to get her back, even if it means turning any and all crowned heads of the world against each other in the process. There’s nothing more fox-like than that.”
Leodore’s head did, indeed, turn to answer with a mute, sidelong grimace.

“IT won’t be overt ,” Nick scoffed, “I plan to sneak her and every large fox out of Reino del Sol… and I think your DWS can help me do that.”

The lion softly growled. “I suppose it’s a credit to your cleverness that you even know about the plight of the large foxes… Be that as it may, Doctors Without Species is not a black-ops team, Mr. Wilde… and I am hardly any use in that regard. I might as well be made of lead for how far I could drag you down.”

“Or gold, I hear it’s also a heavy metal but far more valuable,” the fox pondered, “Cards on the table, Leo, I know you and Mr. Brains-of-the-Campaign over there gathered an amazing team in your heyday to save the city. It was because of you two that Maximillion Waters was finally removed after his eight-term winning-streak in the mayor’s seat, wasn’t it?” Nick commended with a flick of his finger, earning another flinch but was perhaps more… bashful, “Zootopia floundered for years without an official mayor, so afraid of another Waters family corrupting the office… until you and Bucky grabbed the reins and wrenched it from the brink.”

“Nick, flattery aside,” Leo harrumphed, “I am of no use to you against Reino del Sol.”

“But you agree,” Nick countered, “Reino del Sol is not the ‘just-trying-to-get-by nation’ that its media wants the world to believe, right?” Leodore certainly didn’t voice an opposition. “It’s an empire and while I can’t save all of its citizens… I can at least save Esther Grey and her species from slavery.”

Leodore sighed as the regret of that name weighed him blatantly. “I’m sorry, Nick, but I cannot help you. Vinny Corlione is long gone and so is any of his power, influence, or connections… or his mentality. In our ‘heyday’, Bucky and I stretched out our necks and did things we weren’t proud of… but that was in a time when corruption ran rampant and all we needed to do was play the game against those who designed it; I’m kept awake at night still. Those times are not now and my soul will surely shatter if I play fast-and-loose with my morals any further, as I try to repair the damage I’ve done in the past… again. Besides,” he said with a grumble, and for once broke eye-contact with the fox to lament his friend’s unresponsive state for a few long seconds, “without Bucky… I’m just another pretty face.

“We worked so well together because we wished on the same star… that predator and prey could have cooperated all throughout history if they just saw each other as fellow mammals… he never feared my jaws and I never feared his antlers,” the lion reminisced, “Ours was such a well-oiled machine that what offices required an entire morning to figure out in meetings, we smoothed out by walking from the elevator to my desk. I spent the day handling the crowds, getting a feel for what they needed; he and his team spent it boiling down the paperwork to a few ‘big decisions’,” Leodore sighed. “I tried that with Dawn and it just wasn’t the same, she couldn’t handle it…” he softly growled again, “Why did I ever agree to switch him out for her… yes, the sheep vote was critical at the time but it’s not like we exactly risked losing it and even if we did, Bucky would have figured something out…”

Crud, I’m losing him. “As I recall,” Nick attempted, whipping around to the lion’s front, “it was your idea to simplify your first campaign, against Swinton. She was winning because she pandered to the lowest common denominator and made promises she could never keep, all while cozying up to lobbyists and special interests… just like Waters before her. But you spoke to the mammals,” he continued, “you reached into their hearts and presented yourself and Bucky as protectors, guardians… It was your idea to have Bucky grow out his antlers so that they were bigger than you and your mane.”
A single, sad chuckle was all that was permitted. “It appealed to the predators that I was larger than Bucky, but it let the prey know that he could ‘still keep me in check’, if the need arose; a truly tragic irony,” he distantly mused and then cleared his throat, “Even though it was my idea, Bucky implemented it to fruition.” That shaggy head shook again, “Please, Nick, press me no further… I cannot help you. It’s not that I won’t… I can’t.”

Dang… he was going to be my linchpin… Nick huffed and sat back on the coffee table once more. “Don’t worry, I limit myself to asking only four or five times,” he assured and reached out to pat the boxer-scuffed knuckles of Leodore’s paws.

“Tell you what…” the former mayor considered, even daring a smile, “I would like to meet John again, knowing now who he is. I have one of his suits, actually; it was a gift from Memphis after Bucky and I won our first election. Bucky was never too impressed with your father’s tailoring, he’s something of a DeCoyote loyalist… but if you could arrange lunch with him, maybe a double-date with our mates… I might have one more string to pull that could prove helpful to you. It’s not much, I’ll admit,” Leodore apologized, “but I receive the occasional phone call from the mayor pro-temp, Wahlvin Foliage.”

Wow, bottom of the barrel there, Leo, Nick thought, hoping that his opinion of the red panda pseudo-mayor didn’t show through too much on his face, “‘Cool Wahly’? What, is he a fanboy of yours or something?”

Leodore chuckled. “Goodness, no, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him get excited about anything. He sought advice on current city programs and what we did -- Bucky and I -- to govern Zootopia, generally speaking. Still, he’s got a good head on his shoulders and… not to presume, but I know that the surest avenue available to you is the World Heraldry Society. Empire though Reino Del Sol may be, they still adhere to the international rules of conduct between royal bodies.”

Nick had his turn to chuckle. “Is it weird that I’m thankful to have reached the same conclusion as one of the greatest hustlers in Zootopian history?” Leodore laughed regretfully at the observation. “Seriously, though, how is ‘Cool Wahly’ connected to the WHS? The only reason Ms. Cotton-Candy-Head chose him as her assistant mayor is that he’s, technically, classified as a ‘predator’ but also shorter than her pompadour; it was an obvious and desperate grab at what you and Bucky did with your campaign. Heck, his big claim-to-fame is that he’s completely paws-off.”

“Thing is, Nick, Wahlvin is closing the WHS office in Zootopia.”

“What? But I… I already scheduled an appointment! I just needed to talk to the guy in charge, see if there was a case at all…” the fox growled as he held his head, “Now I have to find some way to get ahold of some one in Liondon, at which point it’d be too late to rescue the future Mrs. Wilde!”

The lion’s paws shrugged and placated once more. “You truly have my deepest regrets, Nick, but I understand why he’s doing it. City Hall is still undergoing a full audit after Bellwether was arrested and her ‘overhead’ investigated, from salaries to welfare programs to the paperclips and staples. That particular office was brought in to investigate the dynastic claims about the Waters family -- and was instrumental in that regard -- but since then… they’ve been little more than an obligatory tick on the city’s payroll. The original representative already retired back to Liondon and the only reason why the current one is still here is that in a form of… soft exile, I suppose,” and then leaned in to share that, “I hear he was ‘bursting with holiday spirit’ at a party and tried to court his manager’s fiancé; repeatedly and… nakedly.”

That’s just ducky, Nick grumbled, biting back a snicker though he was at such a juicy nugget of gossip, here I was riding high on my own confidence but I should have known it wouldn’t be that
“But… I could talk with Wahlvin for a temporary stay on his trimming, in case the office proves useful (for the first time in a decade),” Leodore offered, “It’s the least I could… probably the best I could do to help Esther in any kind of a timely fashion.”

Nick sighed but nodded and gesticulated his explanation. “Well… the race isn’t over yet, I suppose, still plenty left to run.”

“The race isn’t over yet, I suppose, still plenty left to run.”

‘Dawson’ succinctly instructed, “casually.”

But not too casual, Lanny heeded, his whiskers, ears, and nostrils on high alert as he traversed the hospital hallways back to Mr. Stagmire’s room, I hope they don’t suspect anything since I’ve been gone so long.

“They won’t,” the glowing blue fox assured, “Nicky can keep them busy for hours if need be-wait!” he alerted, stopping the lion immediately, “Hug the wall, deep breath, hold it, and look away.”

Yep. Lanny observed a fellow nurse, an especially nosy porcupine with a slight overbite, reviewed her chart, curiously sniffed the air, shrugged, and then continued along. He’d smelled her and heard her, but only by ‘Dawson’s instruction did it click as to her intentions. He was not… necessarily hiding from anyone, but he knew the schedules and routines of every patient and regular visitor on the floor, and an ill-timed inquiry to his activities could prove his downfall, especially since…

“We’ve not a second to lose, Slugger,” ‘Dawson’ affirmed, “Hurry but not rushed, quiet but not sneaking.”

It’s lucky that Madge was available to talk, Lanny thought, but really... you knew that, huh?

“She always carves out sometime in the week for videogames, otherwise she’d go even crazier,” ‘Dawson’ said.

I’d think all of this even more luck except I can’t help but consider that it’s all just... slyness, for lack of a better term. Observation of facts and recognizing patterns, utilizing them to one’s own advantage-

“Wait!” he instructed as a door opened nearby, “Okay, you know who this is, Sport, so just lean on the wall and wave.”

Lanny did so, raising his arm to brace his frame on the adjacent wall and present a paw in jostled greeting. An older, surly-looking armadillo doctor paused upon exiting a patient’s room, adjusted his glasses at the unusual forward-shrugging of the lion’s shoulders, and then waved back before continuing his rounds further along the hall. Completely stand-offish but worries more about getting work done than tattling on nurses, the lion recalled, and with silent, padded feet was off again.

“Oh, deer…” ‘Dawson’ mused, bobbing in the air on the edge of Lanny’s vision (and notably larger...) as they both noticed Bambi standing just outside the room and chatting on his phone. “Nope, can’t duck out, Champ, he’s spotted you. I must say, his peripheral vision is nothing to sneeze at…”

“That’s good for now, I’ll call you back later,” Bambi said into his phone before pocketing it on
approach, “Lanny, there you are! I was beginning to worry. If you needed to run down to the cafeteria, you need only say so,” he then teased.

*He wasn’t supposed to be out here... What’s the plan?* Lanny asked of his imaginary fox.

“...Get him inside and tell him the truth,” ‘Dawson’ advised, his ethereal figure taller than the stag as he leaned over and studied him, “Bambi here has done nothing but earn your trust and vice versa. No,” he decided with a crossing of his arms and a bob of his head, “keep it quiet as long as you can but bring him in on it... Nicky and Lionheart, too. You’ll need all of them for this to work.”

Lanny nodded and strode past the bewildered buck with a gathering gesture of his paw... and then tap his lips. He reached into the front of his shirt, into the great tuft of fiery mane upon his chest to pull out the item he secreted away, gripped between his pectorals: a syringe. “Inside,” he directed. In the threshold of the hallway and the room he revealed to the son what he suspected of the father; what he was instructed to do from Dr. Madge Honey-Badger, a foremost expert of treating the condition, after confirming with her the symptoms as detailed by Leodore that he recalled in Judy Hopps on that fateful night of the TBR. “Bucky was intoxicated with an early strain of Night Howler serum... this is the antidote.”

Chapter End Notes

Ron Ghannam references the character Ronno from the movie “Bambi” and his voice actor, Anthony Ghannam, from “Bambi 2”.

Long-time reader and fellow author, HawkTooth, has brought it to my attention that horns and antlers are, in fact, very different things and should be classified as such; I'd known this but read that the terms were used interchangeably in some circumstances (the surprise for me was that this interchangeability was, in fact, incorrect and should have researched it a bit further). To that point, in a world like Zootopia where horns and antlers are an iconic attribute for many species for not only their identity but their bodily health, it's no wonder that someone would get upset about mistaking their classification. In this circumstance, however, it's a testament to the amount stress a medical professional like Lanny is under by Ron to perform and, like many of us do when our noses are constantly pressed to the grindstone, make the occasional mistake (and subsequent rationalization) at crucial points in an otherwise adequate performance of their duty. That said, "any ungulate in a ten-mile radius" probably wouldn't raise as big a stink as Ron did and definitely wouldn't have followed up with the "Savannah coat" barb considering Mr. Stagmire would have adapted after how long he lived in that part of the city. Thanks for the correction, Hawktooth.

[complete with his weird fur-markings, powder-and-sky-blue colorations, and a beard hanging from the tip of his chin.] I'm borrowing the likeness of Zuso from "Elena of Avalor" for Lanny's 'Dawson'.

[he can go knock branches] is a deer expression of utter disregard and contempt for the actions of a stag, ram, or other ungulates, referring to the intentional knocking of his antlers against branches (as characterized by fauns practicing their posturing).

Camelita Maracci, based on the famous dancer and singer, Carmelita Maracci, was
first introduced (along with the "cribbage group") in Loyal, chapter 4.

I'm basing Leodore Lionheart on American president Theodore Roosevelt (I think the comparison is apt), and the names Alice and Leddy are his oldest daughter and son respectively ("Leddy" being short for "Leodore" as "Teddy" is for "Theodore"). This comparison is in tandem with how he's depicted in NieveLion's "To Mend a Broken Hart".

Brandy is a quick reference to a character cut from the original script of “The Lion King”, Bhati is a bat-eared fox and a close friend of Nala's.

[I was particularly klutzy as a faun] references how some of the iconic scenes from Bambi's youth is him stumbling along or sliding on the ice.

[he was so weird, you have no idea...] Since Tycho is the analog for Scar in this story, this phrase feels appropriate in describing him.

[no hay más cásacaras] is an idiom meaning "There's no other way out" or "Well, I'm blown!". In this context, I'm using it as "There's no other way around it" or "Well, shucks". [¡Ostia tío!] Some Spanish slang which, if my sources are accurate, is akin to a not unkind exclamation of disbelief.

[His spanning antlers] Bambi refers to the ungulate deity of this world, the Great Stag, as represented by the stag in the last musical number of “Fantasia 2000”.

[the missing children epidemic] Refer to John and Jackie's backstory from Loyal for more on this.

Medical studies have shown that bone mends faster when treated with sound vibrations between 20-50Hz, and lions' roars can get to 40Hz but tigers' can only get to about 83hz. Additionally, [Herdtz] is a pun on "Hertz".

[Basil of Baker Street] The Great Mouse Detective is this world's Sherlock Holmes.

Refer to Loyal, chapter 15, for Vinny Corlione and the pool scene, events that this chapter refers to.

[It was your idea to have Bucky grow out his antlers so that they were bigger than you and your mane] This is an idea I shared with NieveLion, my fellow writer, who used it in his story, “To Mend a Broken Hart”.

Swinton was part of the original draft for Zootopia and a less-than-friendly sow mayor. As far as I know (and wholly support) she or a sister of hers is now the prison guard seen at the end of the movie.

[we wished on the same star...] A Zootopian phrase meaning "uphold the same ideals", a reference to “Pinocchio”.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

'Til we find our place
On the path unwinding

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t wait, see you next week, Leo!” John Wilde said over the phone but before his son ended the call with a casual flick of his thumb, could be heard muttering, “‘Leo- y ? No, that sounds terrible , far too many vowel sounds… Leodorey… maybe ‘Leddy’…”

“Couldn’t be easier,” Nick said, ignoring his father’s quirk of adding the “-ee” sound at the end of every name he could get his mouth around, “he’ll probably boast about it to his next customer.”

Leodore grimaced and smirked, “I can’t imagine I’m too much of a celebrity these days. Even so, it will be great to hear some of the stories of the infamous ‘Jacky Savage’, if our meeting on that fateful day were any indication of how a more casual encounter would play out.”

“You don’t know the half of it. So… he actually snapped your speedo at the pool party? I found that a bit hard to swallow.”

“He did , just reached over and plucked it right off my hip,” the lion sighed, though chuckling, “Your Dad has nerves of steel, if nothing else because in any other situation I would have slung him into orbit by his tail. Truth be told, though, I always hated wearing that blasted thing because no matter what I did or how I sat, it always rode up under my-”

“Imagine that , Lanny’s returned and not a moment too soon,” Nick interrupted (to the older lion’s amusement) and would have gone on if not for the unmistakably furtive discretion both Lanny and Junior broadcast on their entry into the hospital room, “Watch out, Leo, those young folk over there are up to some manner of shenanigans.”

“Odd … that’s usually the purview of smaller mammals,” Leodore joked (to rolling green eyes) and then asked in a more audible, if paternal tone, “What are you two conspiring about?”

Junior’s ears perked as he stood at the foot of his father’s bed, almost acting like a barrier between the two lions. “Well… Lanny thinks he knows how to resuscitate Dad.”

The former mayor groaned as his smile faltered ever-so-slightly in its transition to a bewildered furthering of his amused grimace, thusly exaggerated by Nick’s cunningly triumphant eureka. “Dang! I wish Judy were here, I could’ve wagered something on that…” the fox gleefully lamented, eyebrows cocked as he hopped from his chair to pursue the premise of some medical miracle or other.

“Now hold on just a minute…” Leodore tried, also rising up in attempts to keep pace (if only with the conversation, which every other mammal in the room already seemed a part of, somehow), “Bambi, run that by me again, please?”

“I know it sounds crazy,” he admitted, hooves presented placatively, “but remember when we
brought in that medium just in case Dad was trying to communicate with us? Granted, I was in something a low place then—"

“Mr. Stagmire was intoxicated with an early strain of the *midnicampum holicithias* serum,” Nurse Lanny Wild explained, whipping the linen sheets off with a practiced flick of his wrist and folding them impeccably on the attached table at the foot of the bed. Quickly, promptly he utilized the restraints kept nearby in the event that the deer thrashed or flailed again and proceeded to bind the limp figure, limbs and torso, “at which point he went primal and attacked you. Right, Mr. Lionheart?”

Nick sharpened his elated features in yet another eureka moment but by far more electric. Leodore, on the other paw, lost all the tawniness in his face with the several beats his heart skipped—especially when Junior -- likewise paled -- pleaded either lion without a single coherent word. “That’s why you never considered the predators’ biology as a factor during the Pred-Scare!” the fox then announced, “But would you have known about…” he considered, “You might have but I wonder if… no, of course!”

“Nick, we can’t hear what you’re thinking,” Lanny reported, using the distraction to inject the antidote into Mr. Stagmire via the IV drip’s cannula, and then reaching around the statuesque Junior to wheel over a crash cart with the vitals-monitoring tablet, “Also, this thing will start alerting someone pretty soon, so I need you to run interference on the door; just wag that silver tongue at anyone who tries to get in.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n! Curiously speaking, how soundproof in this room?”

“Rabbit-tested.”

“Excellent.”

“Yes,” Leodore then recovered, speaking almost exclusively to his dumbstruck ungulate godson, “Bucky went savage. We were sitting on the terrace of my villa in the Rainforest District and… he looked pained, at first, and then lunged at me.” He pointed to the scar on his nose, the one he said came from a defective power tool, “I received one of these from defending your father against bullies when he was a fawn… and another from his antlers when he lost his senses; I’m reminded of those days every time I look in a mirror and it tears me up inside. I only managed to keep him from skewering me by ordering my wolves to tame him… which… it took several to bring him down. I’m sorry I never told you, but…”

Junior shook his head, eyes never leaving the older lion except to blink. “…I’m not sure how to handle this right now…” the young stag numbly admitted, strained though his voice was with a slew of caustic emotions -- accusation and desperation chief amongst them.

“Bambi,” Lanny said in his most empathetic tone, grasping his shoulder from behind, “your Dad could start freaking out at any second, I’ll need you near his head to calm him down. Mr. Lionheart, you stay nearby and hold down his torso because he will—” The machines struck up a passionate tempo as the long-since dormant stag flinched within his bindings, every muscle contracting and relaxing in a single, livid wave.

“Batten down the hatches!” Nick yelled from the door, “Brace for impact!”

“Nick!” Lanny berated. He and Leodore threw their weight upon Bucky’s shoulders and hips; atrophied though his muscles were -- with only the barest exercises provided to keep them baseline healthy -- he still rattled the bed and tested the tawny predators' strength in violent thrashing. Eyes shot open to reveal dark savagery, nostrils flaring and mouth panting as Junior tried with all his
heart to reach the civil stag inside; it was obvious to anyone watching that if Bucky’s antlers were not trimmed back, the three bedside mammals would have been skewered through. Breath built within the deer until the strap across his chest strained…

“Thar he blows!”

In various countries and communities around the world (what some designate as “uncivilized” and “underdeveloped”), mammals whose voices carry great distances regularly announce their territory as in days of yore. Zootopia is no city of the sort wherein such traditions are widely adhered to (without the proper permittance and notification) and as it stood, Buckley Stagmire’s rutting call was never particularly sonorous; in most circumstances. When his jaw and gullet opened, however, the windows rattled and the others in the room did, indeed, brace themselves against it. The resulting silence was punctuated only by harried gasps and the life-supporting machinery… and…

“…Remember: life or death. Now, go, quickly!” Nick urged while leaning out the door, promptly closing it and scampering over to hop onto the bed.

“What did you tell them?” Lanny wondered, pushing back his bangs.

“That we need a proctologist.”

“Nick…” the nurse disapproved by pinching his nose bridge.

“Dad…?” Junior implored, hooves cupping and caressing Bucky’s cheeks, the steel cabling that locked his body into rigidity released to wet noodles as all the vim and vigor drained with a ghastly pallor. The esophageal vocalizations continued but quieter as his wide, peeled eyes looped around, nostrils gaping in flickering attempts to register all of what was happening. “Dad… Dad! It’s me, it’s Bambi; you’re safe!” the young buck continued to implore and… gradually, color seeped back into the older deer.

“Ba-?”

The three predators held their collective breath, even retreating a step as Bucky’s eyes regained both focus and color (and so, he was unbound), thus giving him and his son some space.

“Am…”

By the sharpening contortions of his face, Bucky’s mind struggled to not speak in a grotesquely saturated accent, the monosyllabic rambling an amalgamation more akin to using the wrong end of a rubber mallet to honk a bike horn.

“Bi?”

“It’s bleatspeak, deer dialect,” Nick aloud pondered what everyone else in the room already knew, “which I can see I needn’t tell anyone here. But that’s what I do,” he continued to conversationally exposit since Bucky didn’t look ready to gab any time soon, “I explain the obvious for the benefit of those of us that don’t fully understand. First and foremost. Mr. Lionheart, I am willing to bet folding money that you concluded that Bucky here was Dawn Bellwether’s Patient Zero, specifically, the first distinguishable target of Doug Ramses.” He smirked as the combined six eyes of the larger (cognizant) mammals in the room all stared at him (Lanny’s dawned much faster). “Let’s go through this, step-by-step:

“Dr. Honey initially suspected that the Night Howler flower was involved in the Pred-Scare when she saw the symptoms but nixed the idea after pumping the victims’ stomachs turned up empty,”
the fox began, sitting himself on the attached table of the hospital bed rather professionally, “she told me so herself while I visited her out in the country. This, of course, crossed your mind when she mentioned it the first time, Leo, but since there were likely no NH snacks served on this villa terrace of yours, you immediately nixed that theory, as well. More to the point, you didn’t bring Madge in on Bucky’s condition because she is a pred iatrician.”

The older lion harrumphed, both at Nick and the memory. “In a shortsighted fit of pettiness, I was set to show her Bucky when she ‘considered the biology’ of those from the Pred-Scare… until I realized that she and I were not the only ones in that hallway,” and then leered at the fox, if only for an instant, “You’re right, though; after I heard about Doug Ramses and his serum dart gun, I wanted to find out if it were at all possible that whatever diabolical concoction Dawn used in her scheme was viable on prey species; biology is quite different between predator and prey, as you know. Sadly, I was locked up at the time and only the in the past few days did I even figure to have a chance to consult with Madge; we’ve been on… no-speaking terms since the Scare, something I hoped you could’ve fixed for me, Nick, given time.”

“Huh, I’m usually quite keen on spotting when others want a favor from me,” Nick teased.

“I’ve been at this game far longer, kit,” Leodore teased right back.

Nick leered.

“I figured out that the Night Howler got into his system some how,” Lanny explained (to which the fox concurred in quiet boasting) as he checked Bucky’s eyes, pulse, and ears, even sealing his mouth around the stag’s throat to “roar” ever-so-quietly and at a specific frequency. A breath-of-life nurse’s training implemented techniques to better mend the muscles and nerves leading up to the brain and Junior instructed him to do so in secret during his assignment (Ron insisted that the Stagmires weren’t “paying for quackery” and would have raised too much a fuss if he knew, especially after the attempted séance), “but not that he was shot . Why was he targeted, though?”

“An excellent question, Freight,” Nick said, “I was going to ask him that myself when he came to (since I’m sure Leo isn’t going to tell us without quite a lot of cajoling, even at this crucial juncture).”

“Now see here-”

“It can only be because Dad fought back against them ; you both did,” Junior came out and said, looking down into the gawking, distant gaze of his father… who only seemed to squeeze his son’s hoof with some half-baked confirmation. He then frowned at the combined indignation and guilt of his godfather, “You lied about what happened to him… to the city, to me … and it must have killed you inside to do so. But that’s not important right now… what’s important is what if Ramses did shoot Dad while he was aiming for you ?”

Leodore did, indeed, look like he’d been shot. “For me ?”

“Dad confided in me about his work to bring Underland into the light of day and came to suspect Dawn… the first thing she did was drive a soft wedge between you two and maybe he caught wind of her scheme,” Junior continued to speculate, “and if she wanted to kick off the Pred-Scare in the process, then two-birds with one stone, right? The Pack in Black would have done what every other secret service does: cover it up until an answer could be found.”

“Dawn’s machinations would have kicked into gear thus putting her in office without micromanaging all the dirty work,” Nick joined in, “‘Former assistant mayor killed by savage lion’ would have been a headline to set the city ablaze but when the first shot missed, she resorted to a
subtler ‘plan B’, wherein Leo here would be framed instead of caged.” He then smirked in commendation of the young stag, “Good to know that your prongs aren’t the sharpest parts of your head, Junior.”

Fingers traced along the older lion’s neck. “You’re right... those seconds before Bucky attacked me are burned into my memory. He went on about yet another reason why Dawn should have been let go... I didn’t listen to him, I thought he was being unreasonable or jealous so I threw my head back and laughed... and then it felt like a giant mosquito zipped right through my mane; I mean, they are prevalent in the Rainforest District…”

“Ramses’s shot must have missed you by millimeters ...” Lanny considered, sifting through his own mane.

“I honestly thought he was overreacting, at first,” Leodore bashfully admitted, “until he attacked me as a mammal possessed.”

“Li...” Bucky muttered, immediately commanding the conversation with every degree that his eyes regained their focus and face its color, “on...” the stag continued, the wet noodles of his muscles regaining some of their previous strength as he then blurted out, “fart.”

Snickering and snorting surrounded him (more so from Nick than the others) but Leodore looked almost moved to tears until the fox finished up his laughter with a question, “So wait... ‘Lionfart’ is his nickname for you?”

“Always has been, ever since boarding school,” Leodore explained, reaching to grasp the offered hoof to just... hold it, “Hey there, Stankmire, glad to have you back.”

“Is that why you about bit off ‘Smellwether’s head when she used it?”

The former mayor cringed some at the memory. “I didn’t...” and sighed, “maybe I overreacted but she must have thought since I gave her a juvenile nickname, she might as well reciprocate. Honestly, I would’ve handled it better if it wasn’t the day after Bucky was hospitalized.”

“Leo...” Bucky heaved, “I’m so sorry, I completely lost control of myself...”

“All is forgiven, old friend.”

“You should rest now, Mr. Stagmire,” Nurse Wild instructed.

“I’ve rested plenty...” the older deer argued, hoof fumbling with the bed, “Where’s the blasted up-button on this thing?” Junior erected his father’s torso with a quiet whirr of the motor. “Ah, thank you, son. Now, I’ve been out for too long -- far too long -- and there isn’t much time. Leo, I know you still think the world of Dawn but she’s been playing the entire Hall since day one. Those ‘urgent’ boxes in front of her ‘office’, they’re-”

“Half-filled with blank files, yes, I know,” Leo tried, “Listen-”

“The remodeling of my old office to fit her size and species, she’s been postponing it-”

“Yes, to connect to the jury-rigged VPN in the temporary, boiler room office, I know.”

“It’s all been a ploy, Leo, to gain sympathy for-”

“Bucky,” he interrupted, “you’ve been out for three-”
“If it’s only three,” he counter-interrupted, “then there might still be time enough—”

“Years.”

Bucky looked as though he might faint again, and then addressed the three younger mammals at his bedside. “Years?”

“Yes, Dad, you’ve been in a paralytic state for three years,” Junior explained and then stepped aside to gesture towards his reposed mother.

“Doana…” he grieved, weakly reaching out to her (and finding that he could, indeed, grasp her hoof when the nurse slid his bed a bit closer and his son repositioned the cabinet between them to support their hooves). “Three years…” he repeated, and asked the mammals at large, “What have I missed…?”

“We have a lot to catch up on,” Junior said.

Bucky gazed at the serene face of his mate a moment longer, and then took a quick breath to sit up and ask his son, “Am I a grandfather, yet?”

The younger stag flinched and sucked his teeth, nostrils flaring and shoulders squaring to prepare his answer, “No but—”

“Then I haven’t missed too much,” he teased.

“Actually,” Nick finally voiced, courteously waiting for someone else to insert levity into an obviously emotional situation, “the long and short of it is we foiled Bellwether’s plot.”

A rapid blink from the still bedridden stag studied the fox.

“You’re welcome.”

Bucky leaned over and beckoned in a whisper, “Nurse, is there a fox at the foot of my bed?”

Lanny bit back a snicker. “Yes sir, Mr. Stagmire.”

He concurred with a nod, gesturing the other lion over to discreetly and significantly ask, “Do we… know him?”

Leodore also bit back a snicker, but much more gracefully, “We know his father.”

“Is that so?”

“Officer Nick Wilde,” the patient fox amiably and casually introduced.

“’Officer’?” Bucky blurted out despite himself, but luckily, under his breath, “I might’ve missed a bit more than I realized…”

“I’m partnered with a bunny.”

“… Quite a bit more…” the paternal stag admitted and scratched his cheek, eyes distancing with each second, “Three years… that entire time I dreamt I grazed in a field or ran through a forest, as naked as our massage sessions at the Mystic Oasis,” he then reminisced with his old friend, “Except Doana was there and life was… beautiful, yet ever on the brink of disruption. There were others, I thought, but I could never recognize them… not that it mattered too greatly… and there was some green-eyed fox skulking about, grinning, and disappearing… And here is such a fox,
present as I wake, just like what happened to you, Leo, except you were—"

Leodore cleared his throat violently. "Bucky, I think you do need some rest because you’re spouting nonsense."

Bucky’s eyes seemed to refocus as he studied the older lion a moment, cleared his own throat, and then rubbed his forehead. "You’re right, quite right… whatever befell me must surely still have some horrible grip on my wherewithal and impulse control. Forgive me, I’m not quite myself right now, nattering on about this or that,” he apologized, "Nurse… Wild? No relation, I’m sure,” he attempted at a tease, the fox and the younger lion politely chuckling as the former reached for the folded sheets, “I think I shall like that rest.”

Suddenly, a nurse and a doctor burst through the door, both seemingly in something of a panic. “I have the proctologist!”

Nick bounded to the floor. “I’d say that’s our cue to butt out, Leo; let’s give the stag his privacy. Thanks for having us, Bucky, be sure to tip your nurse!”

The door closed behind them and -- from what Nick could ascertain of Bucky’s skill at impromptu thinking -- might’ve heard something along the lines of “Well, get in there and be quick about it!” He would thusly chuckle in contrast to the sober lion trudging alongside him. “Hey, buck up, Leo, your best friend in the world came back to the land of the conscious! I’d say that’s cause for celebration.”

It wasn’t some many paces before Leodore collapsed into a waiting chair, paw sifting through his wavy mane as his lungs refilled. “He really is back, isn’t he…?” he dumbly asked when his parole officer propped a patient elbow onto his knee, “Lanny cured him, he truly cured him. It… it’s a miracle,” Leodore quietly revered, gawking at the door of his friend’s hospital room.

“I like to think of it as ‘supreme cleverness’,” Nick mildly boasted, “Though I cannot doubt the miraculousness that he came back so thoroughly… nothing I haven’t seen before, though.” The gawking directed at Nick, instead, and so he extrapolated, “You’ll remember I spoke to you in some small part about my adventures with Judy Hopps during the TBR? Well, it’s how we found out what the toxic whipped cream was supposed to do,” he discreetly mentioned, “and Lanny came by with the NH antidote… with pretty much the same reaction -- more or less, Judy was significantly quieter but then, we were out in the open air.”

Leodore continued to think on it, to calculate on it. “This changes everything…”

“I’ll say, not even I, a metropolitan guru can predict how this will affect the populace—”

“No, Nick,” he corrected, “He’s back … we’re back. The brains of the operation… and now I realize, my moral lodestone.” He then shook his head and looked about. “Not here.”

The Lions Gate General Hospital boasted some of the most exquisite architecture, most of it designed to provide a soothing atmosphere for the patients with neutral, earthen colors and plentiful leafy trees, along with (what some might describe as) a creek that ran in three directions from a central fountain. The fountain itself resembled a watering hole with fresh water and designated depths for patients to walk into and splash about (design choices came from the Mystic Oasis to allow for some mammals a stress-free experience in their mending, whether it be physical, mental, or emotional). Nick and Leodore sat near a particularly loud fountain with some sandwiches and sodas they purchased from the cafeteria.
“We need to talk.”

“Yes, we do ,” Nick casually concurred, “Namely, who exactly you and he ‘fought back’ against.”

Leodore quietly munched around his words. “I’ll go ahead and assume that you -- a worldly fox -- already know about the very pit of Underland: Pleasure Island.”

Nick glanced up as he, too, munched. “I neither confirm nor deny such an allegation.”

The lion chuckled. “It would be easy to say that it’s the only shadow out there… even in Zootopia but it is only one of, if not the worst. Bucky and I fought it for years , tried to infiltrate it using the Corlione name and got pretty far… but then he said we had to pull back, ‘getting too deep’. I don’t know how he managed it, Nick, and never truly appreciated him until he was gone.”

“Well,” the fox said, “he’s to you like Finnick is to me. I’ve got the nerves of steel and the silver tongue but he was the brains of all our hustles, never could have made a single cent without him. Coincidentally enough, not too dissimilar from what you and Bucky did as Corlione.”

“We needed capital and connections to heal the city,” Leodore mentioned matter-of-factly with a defeated shrug, “I try not to think of what we did as ‘hustling’, though.”

“Was Bucky only the shadowy puppetmaster in that whole thing?”

Leodore about choked on his sandwich. “You’ve certainly got a way with words, Nick…” he coughed and beat his chest to dislodge anything else stuck in there, “He wasn’t a ‘puppetmaster’, I had plenty of say in everything we did and more than once changed his mind.” The lion sighed and chugged some carbonated pomegranate-raspberry juice before continuing. “And then one day -- out of the blue -- he said that Corlione ‘wasn’t enough’; that we could ‘be doing more ’. He said that the city itself was fighting back against Pleasure Island…”

Nick blinked. “The Borough Watches?”

He nodded. “Good… you do know about those, too. Every day families, average citizens… standing against the fear of a powerful, unelected governing body that controls what’s ‘okay’ or ‘normal’ to satisfy their own ends. It was a great risk even speaking out against what they did because the backlash could be horrendous… it was a catch-22 of terror and tribalism pitting neighbors against neighbors. And he heard about a group that worked between the Watches, aiding them and protecting them… something from out of a storybook…”

“The Rescuers.”

Leodore smiled and nodded. “Just like King Richard did during his Crusades to save the enslaved mammals of the world. Before I knew it, Bucky was elbows-deep in it all… I remained Corlione for a while and he used his connections and resources at Hexward to aid and protect those who saved children from Pleasure Island. However, I should have known there was more to you than you let on, Nick,” he said with a rueful smirk, “Ever since I saw you at Cliffside, I should have known that you were connected to Jacky Savage…”

Nick’s chewing slowed. “I suppose this is where I reveal how Bucky has been working with my Dad this entire time but neither of them knew it.”

“Possibly.”

“Hypothetically.”
“Purely academic speculation,” Leodore chuckled, “When Bucky said that a green-eyed fox ran in and out of his dream, I knew that had to be Jacky -- as though Mr. Foxglove himself jumped out of the comic books. He was secretive about his work with the Rescuers, even to me… he told Bambi about it, though, I knew that much, long after everything seemed to die down.”

“And when did everything ‘die down’?”

“Right after Maximillion Waters was impeached for corruption… when Charles Hemion went down with him. City Hall and Precinct 1 were finally freed from their hold and we felt safe in getting to normal business. Pleasure Island was crippled… PredaTherp had just crashed in flames… Bucky and I, we weren’t perfect (plenty flawed, actually) but we stepped up, ran for office, and decided to tell our closest and most trusted about what happened. What use is a victory if no one learns from what we fought against, right?” Leodore posited.

Thoughtful chewing continued after Nick tossed a grape into his mouth, letting its juiciness explode across his tongue. “No arguments,” he casually said and waited for Leodore to come out with what was on his mind.

Leodore picked up the chunk of watermelon that came with his lunch and bit into it. “It will take some time, Nick, but now that Bucky’s awake, we can help you get Esther out of Reino del Sol. Do you have a time frame?”

“Sometime within the next seven or eight months… after that, there will be nothing we can do to save her or her species,” Nick explained.

“I see… Bucky’s always been a healthy sort, especially since it looks like Lanny’s been keeping up with his exercises,” he then chuckled, “So perhaps his recovery will happen sooner rather than later.”

“The sooner the better,” Nick said, and nearly melted on the stone planter which they sat, “And thank you. I about flipped my lid in there when you said you weren’t available for our rescue mission. Now I have another thing to worry about.”

“Oh?”

“What’s to happen with Lanny, I wonder?”

A paternal brow arched. “How do you mean?”

Nick held the emptied stems of grapes in his fangs like a toothpick. “Last I heard, his Director appointed him to Bucky’s room as a form of punishment because of his poor behavior over the past month, but now that Bucky’s awake, well…”

Leodore smiled. “I didn’t even see that favor coming…” he chuckled and the fox grinned with a shrug, “I suppose at this point, he can go wherever he wants. Back to the docks, to any hospital in the city, the nation … Bucky would be more than happy to refer him, I’m sure, and Junior, too, but they’d no doubt want to keep him where he’s at. Why, do you happen to know of any big dreams of Lenny’s? I’ll let Bucky know of them, maybe he can give a nudge in that direction.”

“Lanny’s,” Nick corrected.

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“No, you said ‘Lenny’.”
“Oh… slip of the tongue, then,” the lion chuckled again.

Nick blinked and his eyes sparked like a flashbang. “Actually, I just so happen to know of one… a dream of his, I mean.”

“Let’s hear it, then,” Leodore said as he opened up his chocolate pudding cup.

“You see, Lanny was supposed to be the hospice nurse for Memphis King but he missed the boat on that, afraid that he’d lose both his jobs and be left with nothing.”

Leodore groaned in realization. “Yes, poor Memphis has been teetering over the deep end, I heard… probably for the best that he didn’t accept the position… except?”

Nick smirked once more. “Madge is out in Preds’ Corner -- as you know -- and she really took a liking to him while he filled in for otherwise absent nurses.”

“Did she?” the older lion wondered, sincerely unable to hide his shock, “Enough to offer him a position?”

“Let’s just say he made a few friends and has a few options if city-life doesn’t work for him.”

“I see …” Leodore mused and stroked his mane, “Leave the docks, be fired by Memphis, and go out to the country for a quiet, comfortable nursing gig. A little underhanded, I won’t deny, but one might say it’s an exceptionally clever way to get what he wants.”

The fox laughed. “So, think you can get Lanny to meet his destiny at Pride Rock?”

The lion also laughed. “No need to be dramatic, Nick, but that’s certainly doable, and whether or not it’s his ‘destiny’ is yet to be determined.”

Nick nodded and grunted his wholehearted agreement. “I let him know about it, give him a proper send-off. I made a promise to him, after all, and I aim to keep it.”

After two weeks’ notice…

“My brother and I first met Lanny when he was only this high,” Terry McManee, the previous alpha of the Lions Gate docks, reminisced. The setting sun outlined the braided mane on his chest as he held a plastic red cup in honor of his adopted nephew, and tapped his hip to indicate just how small the towering, brownish-gold lion once was, “What a troublemaker but hey, who wasn’t when they first get here?” The crowd of dockworkers cheered (Leodore Lionheart amongst them). “All who’ve walked these planks and hoisted these crates know what it means to be given a first or second chance…”

“Or fourth!” someone called out and sparked laughter.

“And we’ve lost count with you !” the older lion chuckled and shook his head, “Lanny Wild… our brother, our son… and to some, our father,” Terry continued, smirking at the cubs who joined in the festivities, their cups full of juice, “has accomplished more than any of us could dream and with less than most of us had to start with. It’s a rare thing for any beast-of-burden,” he said, his face contorting in a dry smirk at the term of endearment, “to come back here after moving onto bigger and better things… but then, Lanny is a rare one,” and the crowd nodded quite audibly, “he brought some of the bigger, better things back for us. And now, he’s showing us poor sods what we can be when we try… he’s going all the way to the top !” he cheered and was raucously joined,
and so turned to Lanny, “When you get to the bedside of that Memphis King, you let him know that the docks are always open to him, should he ever need another chance to get back on his paws!”

Lanny rose from the crate he sat on to embrace his uncle amidst the applause, they licked each other’s cheeks and then did the same with his Uncle Keith (who’d already given his speech). The younger lion then stood in front of his fellow dockworkers, not upon a stage, and raised his cup in a toast, “I’ll be honest, I was afraid to take this step; afraid that if I failed then I could never come back here… But that’s not why we wind up in Lions Gate, is it, because we failed? We get here because we pulled ourselves up and this is the first ledge of that long climb to something better; we stay because there are others who can’t even get this far without help.” The crowd rigorously grunted its agreement. “Memphis always said that ‘These docks are not a trash heap, where the discarded scrape together a life… rather, they are the foundation of Pridelands, built up with hard work and hope’.

“Not that you need me to tell you that,” he then laughed, “some upstart alpha-cub, leaving to go put on a nurse’s uniform… I wish I could say that I’ll miss you guys, being here on the docks... but though I am leaving, you will never leave me. Now… I’ve still got a day or so before I get that King out of his bed and back to work, so tonight, we’re letting him and his whole family know what they’re missing!” The dockworkers raised their cups and roars to their alpha.

Afterward... Lanny found a quiet, secluded spot amongst the labyrinthian crates and looked out over the night-painted Zootopian Sound, feet dangling off the pier. Salty air filled his lungs with each breath as the waves batted against wooden pillars keeping everything above the tide. His ears perked and nostrils flared to someone’s approach. “Hey Nat,” he greeted, looking up at his former foremammal, Natalia Boone, tail whisking as she presumed to pull up some dock and sit beside him.

“Hi Lan,” she accepted, smirking over her shoulder at the boisterous band of crate-juggling dockworkers, “Boy, you could really feel the love tonight. So…” the lioness paused, straightening out her cotton button-up with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, hip-hugging denim well-faded from days in the sun, “I heard an interesting rumor that the miraculous recovery of Bucky Stagmire might have something to do with you, Lanny Wild.”

He scoffed, flopping back with his head in the fold of his paws, smirking up at the millions of overhead lights millions of miles away. “Did you get that off some gossip rag?”

“The docks are my domain but I still live at Pride Rock,” she rebutted, “That caregiver Uncle Tycho flew in from the other side of the country finally had enough, I guess, even said some pretty awful things about Uncle Mimsy and his ‘paranoia’,” the lioness conversed.

“‘Mimsy’?!” Lanny chuckled but softly whooping as he calmed down before laughing too loudly.

“They didn’t last long but you’ll break the sound barrier with how fast he’ll kick you out, if you call him that,” Natalia playfully warned, twisting her torso to address the lounging lion and his unabashedly displayed frontside, “But yes, despite the papers not disclosing the details as to Mr. Stagmire’s return, I happen to have it on good authority that, since you were his nurse, he referred you to take care of my godfather. Your Director was against it but unless you were responsible for reversing his paralysis…”

His smile flattened but did not diminish, and so he lifted one denim-clad leg to fold it over the other, foot-paw lightly bouncing. “It was a little bit of luck, a little bit of faith,” Lanny coolly dismissed, “You know, Nat… I also happen to have it on good authority that you didn’t come out here just to bat around.”
She hummed and groaned. “That would be Rosa, I suppose, she has been trying to fix us up, hasn’t she; even sent me over here to check on you,” the lioness sighed good-naturedly, “Too bad the first rule of the docks is ‘don’t court the-’”

“Except,” he cut in, glancing over at how the waning light outlined her figure, an excellent vantage point from where he lay, “you’re not my foremammal anymore; officially, as of tonight.”

Natalia arched her eyebrow at him and wryly smirked before rolled her eyes and leaning back on her arms to study the horizon. “You’ll have to do a bit better than that, Lanny… assuming I was even interested.”

“According to Rosa, you’re not interested in any one.”

“Rosa does not know everything.”

“Alright then… I dare you to kiss me.”

An inflecting grunt detailed how thoroughly unimpressed she was. “That’s adorable, but we’re a bit more than awkward cubs… I am, at least, you’ve been stealing glances at me all night.”

“How about… I double dare you to kiss me,” he proceeded, still lying back.

“Yawn. Perhaps I should head back, there might still be some cider left…”

“I double-doppler dare you to kiss me.”

Her ear flicked and head canted. His body erected as his paws swung forward to brace his knees, tail whisking about as he, too, studied the horizon. “I double-doppler, mega-nova-super-whopper dare you to kiss me,” he recited, and when she gasped, turned his crimson eyes to her as she then sprung to her feet and retreated a single step.

“Who are you…?” she demanded… quietly.

The lion also rose to his feet, smiled, and approached a single step. “It’s me,” he said… quietly.

By seeing his face, truly seeing his face… she knew who he’d always been. Many things were said, questions asked and answers given… tears shared… but what mattered most was that he reached out to touch her cheek and when she did not pull back but rather leaned forward, he pulled her closer still to together remember their first kiss from when they were cubs… when they yet understood what fear and love meant in a big, scary world.

**Many years ago**

“Hey Dad,” the cub asked, refusing to go to sleep for the umpteenth time, and so his father turned back around with a patiently paternal smile and sat on the bed’s edge once more with an inquisitive grunt, “who’s ‘Lenny’?”

“‘Lenny’?” the lion wondered aloud, his sonorous voice inflecting with genuine confusion.

Seizing the opportunity to stay awake, if only for a bit longer, the cub sprung up where he sat and almost kicked the covers away (had not his father calmly tucked him back in), “I heard Nanny talk about him like he was a hero.”
The older lion chuckled in that quiet yet rich way he did. “A ‘hero’, you say? Perhaps ‘Lenny’ is his secret identity, then.”

“Nuh-uh,” the cub playfully denied, “she said his name was just ‘Lenny’ and that he helps kids who get snatched up find their way back home. She even prayed to him.” A sad smile responded and so drooped the cub’s ears… he knew that look on his father’s broad face as it was canted to one shoulder.

“Ahh…” Dad realized, sitting further onto the bed, “Lenny, the patron saint of lost children. He is from the Chronicler faith and a lion cub -- much like yourself,” he lightly teased, tapping under his son’s chin with the knuckle of his finger, “Said to be Aslan himself, come to walk amongst us as a guide to the wayward, both predator and prey.”

“But Dad… won’t prey kids be scared of him if he’s a lion?”

The older lion chuckled again. “Yes, son, but let me explain. Lenny is said to befriend predator children, yes, but also said to chase prey children to safety. You see, fear is as much a part of us as joy or sadness, and Lenny is a very clever and quick lion, so even if we do not recognize that what He’s doing is for our benefit -- if we trust in Him and have faith -- we will find ourselves on the right path.”

“Oh…” the cub said in equal parts confusion and enlightenment, “So he’s… good?”

The shaggy-maned head nodded. “He is.”

“But he also sounds naughty,” the cub leered, “I know I was yelled at for pouncing.”

“Aslan is both terrible and good, son, much like the truth, which only hurts when we turn back to Him after turning our back on Him,” the lion further explained, “Fear, sadness, anger, disgust… each of these can cripple us or they can motivate us to overcome any and all obstacles. By loving each other, as Aslan loves us all, we remain strong and grow stronger every day.”

The cub counted off on his fingers. “And what about joy? That’s always good, right?”

Smiling sadness canted the older lion’s head to the other shoulder, and it seemed it was joined by disgust, anger… and also fear. He faced his cub once more. “Son… do you remember what I told you about…” and then leaned in, a great paw raised for secrecy, “Pleasure Island?” The cub ducked into the palm, nearly engulfed by its hollow, and then nodded fervently. “It is an awful place filled with ‘joy’… at the expense of others. Mammals gorge upon ‘joy’ and so transform into dumb animals, filled only with carnal desire… and when they are lost, they are in turn gorged upon like a fattened duck.”

The young lion gripped his sheets, remembering that story only too well.

Dad smiled warmly again and cupped his son’s wilted face. “Joy, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust are all delicately balanced in the circle of life so if we let any one overtake it, then we could succumb to the dark days before our ancestors built Zootopia. There are some who would do this to their fellow mammals on purpose, and not merely let them fall but push them into the Abyss. One might say… that Lenny saves children from that dreadful fate… so I would deem him a hero, indeed.” They shared a thankful smile as the cub pressed his face into and gripped as much of his father’s massive paw as she could. “Now then, it’s time for sleep. You brushed your fangs?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Said your prayers?”
“Yes, sir.”

“Alright, good night,” Dad said and leaned in as his son sat up for a good-night kiss, first touching his nose and then his tongue and then his lips upon the cub’s face. And as a cub should, he touched his nose and then his tongue and then his lips upon the lion’s face… and then sprung up to bite his ear. “Argh!” the lion exclaimed, reeling back at a sting that was so minuscule he hardly felt it all, clapping a paw to his ear to check for blood (as he always did), and then giving his mischievous cub a fierce grin to wilt him (but not stop giggling), “Just wait until you get bigger and let an old pro show you how it’s done.”

The cub curled up in his bed as the lion left the room. “Good night, Dad, I love you.” “I love you, too, Simon.”

Chapter End Notes

First, I need to acknowledge my fellow author, NieveLion, for his ideas on the characters of Leo and Bucky; I came up with Bucky way back in Trustworthy but never developed him beyond a name (which was originally “Stagley Buckmire”), that he was the assistant mayor before Dawn Bellwether, and his association with Felix Oswald Lapis and Hexward Pharmaceuticals. Beyond that, he was effectively a cardboard cutout. NieveLion did a great job developing his character and I took several pages from his notes, namely, that one of the scars on Leo’s nose is from when he defended Bucky from bullies as children. The “Pack in Black” is also NieveLion’s idea which I absolutely love as a name for a covert wolf pack.

Also from NieveLion’s story is “Chief Jack Hemion” (named because “jack” is a male donkey and “hemion” is a specific breed). I needed a name for him but I didn’t want “Jack” (for obvious reasons) so I looked up the voice actor for the puppeteer in the movie “Pinocchio”, Charles Judels; the parallel seemed appropriate, considering his affiliation with Pleasure Island.

Madge first explained her ideas of NH involvement to Nick, Judy, & Co. back in Loyal, chapter 6. Long story short, she recognized the symptoms but not the cause and so pursued other possibilities. In this circumstance, I use the analogy that “everything is cancer to an oncologist”, a sort of “have hammer, see nails” viewpoint of the world. Dr. Honey is an accomplished pediatrician, the top of her field, and so when dealing with predators and all she has to go on are predators ailing, she’ll develop a theory based on her background and experience.

Though Lanny wasn’t wholly aware of it at the time, what Leo described as “a giant mosquito” going through his mane actually happened to him (and by the same sniper) back in Brave, chapter 19. Nick and Doug were in a tussle, Lanny pounced Doug, Doug shot wide at Lanny and the dart sailed harmlessly through his mane, just missing his neck. It’s for these circumstances that Doug hates shooting mammals with thick, shaggy pelts, namely around the neck area.

“Pride Rock” references the home of Mufasa and his pride in “The Lion King”, an apropos name for the King family estate in this story.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

We must all take our place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nowadays...

The gardens, topiary, and manor of Pride Rock, the King family estate, were meticulously maintained and guarded by the Gévaudans -- a family of hyenas preceded by their reputation some several decades prior as brigands and malcontents. Their favor amongst the hyena and predator community at large (thus, any protections afforded to them by proxy) was decimated during the killing sprees of Prima Gévaudan -- a troubled youth whose carnal methods of zooicide cast a blight upon hyenas across the city and neighboring territories for generations yet to come. Prima remains institutionalized, her insanity deemed nigh incurable while the Gévaudans remain sullied by her sins against nature but have since benefitted from a long-standing association with the reputable King family (namely, in the direct employ of the younger King patriarch, Tycho, and namely as his legal counsel and bodyguards). Not all Gévaudans reside at Pride Rock, as it so happens, only those who still adhere to the ties of trust initially established.

“…And if Uncle Memphis deems you worthy,” Vanessa, the only daughter of Tycho and Zoë King and something akin to a (begrudging) upper management position of the King household, explained during her tour for the new hospice nurse, “then you can keep the keycard and WiFi permissions. If you want, you can live on the estate; there’s a room up on the second floor-”

“ Not the third floor,” “Nuke”, the oldest from Tycho’s side, interjected as he swung around on an ornate pole of the banister leading up (an artistic style based on a late Deco-Sylvan Period, characterized by intricate, nature-inspired designs smoothed into a continuous and often spiraling pattern; most of the estate shared the style), “that’s where we of the family live… and the godcubs too , I guess, whenever they’re over.”

Vanessa addressed her brother critically (seemingly her default for most things, especially him), arms crossed over what would certainly be considered a rebellious, gothic ensemble if it didn’t cost more than the average teenager’s entire wardrobe. “Finally out of your den, Nuke? I was about to call search-and-rescue.”

“Only for my required two hours; thought I’d go check out that bouncy house the hyenas put up in the backyard,” he grumbled and then hopped onto the banister’s generous curl at the very end to sit up and lean in towards Lanny with a curt sniff, “But then I smelled fresh meat . Kinda big , aren’t you?” Nuke wondered.

“He’s Lanny Wild, one of the dockworkers,” Vanessa explained with a dismissive flick of her paw in a gesture to the tawny titan, “Orphaned, amnesia, got his nursing degree, and now here he is. Mom says it’s ‘setting a good example’ for the others, I guess.”

The scraggly-furred lion with his scarce black mane (more the signs of long-lasting fire damage than any lack of genetics) seemed to look on with some haughty contempt and amusement, legs kicking some in their tight, zipper-riddled pants as he observed Lanny, “Not sure what Aunt Sarah
expects to get out of you that the top-of-their-field professional Dad flew in couldn’t, but you don’t smell like a dockworker, at least,” he snickered, “Think you being a lion will help? Good luck with that. Where is Mother, anyway? I wanted to tell her about that fieldmouse tech startup I got for her,” he said with an almost neurotic glee, “Took me a few days but I’m nothing if not persistent-

Vanessa advanced on him, “You were supposed to look for orphaned cubs up for adoption, Nuke, and since you didn’t answer your phone she went out to choose one herself.” The sullen lioness tightened the arms crossed on her chest, “She took one look at Little Orphan Lanny’s bio and nearly gushed, ‘Ohh, I want one!’.”

“What!” Nuke about choked, sparing a glare at the still adjacent, still quiet Nurse Wild, “She wanted that for herself? But she already has two perfectly accomplished cubs right here!”

“Adopting an orphaned lion cub would be ‘excellent publicity’,” she guessed with a shrug, “Daddy okayed it so we’ll have a new brother, pretty soon.”

The mention of a brother nearly set Nuke’s facial tick into overdrive, launching volleys of accusatory daggers at the larger lion all the while. He then wiped at the nurse’s headwear to spitefully point out, “Don’t you know it’s rude to wear a hat inside?”

Lanny clutched the cap protectively, leaning back with a pursing of his lips as he peered from beneath the bill. “Thing is,” he then beseeched with a plaintive cringe, “a giraffe dropped gum on my head yesterday and now I’ve got this huge bald spot…”

Nuke snickered, spurted, and then laughed, sliding down and adjusting his black shirt with a bright, neon orange nuclear symbol-skull combination logo as though he wore a jacket. “Well, sounds like your luck is starting off on the wrong paw, Lanny, but don’t worry… it can’t possibly get worse from here,” he leered and strutted on past, “By the way, where’s Dad at?”

“You know exactly where Daddy is,” Vanessa answered with a roll of her eyes, “He and Aunt Sarah are in the teleconference room, running the company non-stop as they have been for the past month.”

“Oh, yeah…” he nodded and then continued on his way, pointing to the new nurse as he did, “Two-hundred says he doesn’t last the week, Vansy!”

“You’re on!” she called back, paws at her skirted hips. When her brother was out of sight and earshot, she leaned up towards the larger lion, “You better make it to the weekend, got it?”

He grunted and nodded, even swallowing a bit as he made every effort to avoid her sharp gaze. Lanny adjusted the hat again as he dutifully followed the lioness upstairs, knowing better than anyone how betas should act in the presence of an alpha and how well its proper use deflected suspicion. Exquisite portraits of King family members (as well as Sarah’s side of the family), both past and present, decorated the walls leading up into the spacious living area of the second floor, mixed amongst pieces of artists ranging from Rambrandt to Andy Warthog. Memphis and Sarah King stood in majesty, he cut from solid amber, it seemed, and she molded from clay formed in the planet’s very heart; their depictions cowed the humble dockworker-turned-nurse as he dared tilt back the obscuring bill of his cap to look upon them, if only for an instant, before hurrying on his way.

“That’s Grandpa Ahab and Grandma Ursula,” Vanessa soon pointed out, noticing how Lanny lingered on one portrait in particular, “You can see where Daddy got his rich, raven-black mane,” she then explained, almost revered. Though the color certainly matched Tycho’s without a doubt,
it was the wave, the thickness, and the abundance which resembled Memphis to a tee. “They’re retired to some foreign beach.”

“He’s… pretty big,” Lanny simply stated.

“No kidding,” she dismissed, “Mom says he has a bit of Barbary in him, from the prehistoric gene pool, same as mammoths, dire wolves, and ground sloths; Daddy says it skips a generation and that’s why he likes to tease Uncle Memphis about being someone else’s cub. Anyway, the stairs are mainly here for looks so you’ll be better off using the elevator.”

They walked past the common area and there, sitting around a table and chatting with some of the house staff, were Ryan and Natalia… Lanny noticed Ryan, first, whose faux-mane coat was slung over the back of the couch… he looked happy as he smiled and laughed, reclining back where he longed… Lanny then saw Natalia’s face and felt his ears grow warm and chest swell… but he was glad that they had not spotted him. He was not ready to be seen, just yet.

“C’mon, nurse, I still need to show you to your patient,” Vanessa reprimanded, tapping her foot impatiently on the next flight of stairs, “And don’t even think about chasing tail while you’re here. Remember, you promised you’d make it to the weekend, at least.”

“Right, of course,” Lanny agreed, shouldering his duffel bag and lowering the bill of his cap… especially as he dodged a portrait of the “Missing Prince” himself, Simon King. It wasn’t the first one he’d seen on the estate, and those he saw would often have vases of flowers set up on tables near it… as though to remember him by. The city had long since gotten over his disappearance but it was clear to Lanny that the Kings had not… at least, Memphis and Sarah hadn’t. Twenty years was a long time for a broken heart to live without closure…

Twenty years ago…

The noonday neon and cacophonous merrymaking of the Palm’s casino took their toll upon the well-to-do lion and retreating to his private suite was all he could manage. Time was that he brought the party along with him but currently, he was just exhausted, yearning for the unlit solitude of his luxury bed to rest up for the huge day ahead; it didn’t help that his danger sense constantly ticked like some faulty smoke alarm. It certainly didn’t help that some buffoon slipped a playing card into the lock of his door, causing him further delay and frustration. Time was he would tear up the card or flick it away… but he looked at it… and at long last, it was the danger he sensed all night prior. It was the Jack of Hearts.

No medicine or rest sobered him faster or surer than the realization that he was to be visited by some “guest” he could neither invite nor dismiss. A phantom that plagued him and his partner with good fortune, amazing fortune beyond anything either of them could have ever imagined… ever since one such “guest” flickered into existence all those years ago. Payment had come due, no doubt. The well-to-do lion thrust out his chest, squared his shoulders, corrected his attire, and smoothed his immaculately buoyant mane; lions were made for war and he was no exception. The hotel suite door opened to allow the towering frame and austere light to creep in, his ringed paw immediately clapping for the light switch but…

“I’d advise against that,” the darkness said, some pointy-eared silhouette outlined by the moonless night of the singly opened curtains. The lion, indeed, paused as his physique eclipsed the distant glare and noise. So, he calmly slid in and shut the door to stand amidst the sepulchral isolation, broken only by a flash of eyes, glowing with an unnatural green that churned like pools of some witch’s brew. They were joined by a suave, pointy grin, and soon enough, the lion’s own nocturnal
orbs. “Please, sit, chat,” he offered, a shadowy paw gesturing to the chair opposite a table on which sat the suite’s ice bucket, two glasses, and a decanter.

A fox. Of course, a fox. What else would mask their scent so thoroughly that even a fellow predator could not distinguish who they were except for a general inclination of their species? It was not even the scent of a fox but the lion knew that the Jack of Hearts dealt with the shiftier end of the predator spectrum, and by his size and shape, could be little else than a tod. A sharply-suited tod, no less, but given the circumstances, it was no great surprise.

“Suffice to say,” the tod conversed, sauntering to the ice bucket, utilizing the tongs to add “rocks” to his drink, pour hard spirits for himself (the stopper set upon a napkin as he used both paws to hoist the massive thing; it was to some amusement that he fumbled the glass stopper), and then punctuated his act by plugging up the decanter again. It was a challenge to the lion… a ballsy one, at that. He then turned fully, back facing the lion so that he might sit and continue, “Mr. Corlione will be quite cross that we are using his room without permission, so let’s be brief.”

A parley… and a chance to allow the lion his maintained anonymity. “Indeed,” he agreed, and mimicked the action by pouring himself some of the same hard spirits and sitting down, not drinking until a quiet, terse toast was made to their impending negotiation, and as was custom, his “host” drank first, “and… to whom am I addressing?”

The tod arched his brows for but an instant. “No one, except myself,” he assured with grinning nonchalance, crossing one leg over the other as he remained upright in the lion-sized chair. He amiably continued to the reflexive quirk of an eyebrow that he was not representing anyone (perhaps more surprising than actually sneaking into the suite in the first place), “but you may call me ‘Foxglove’.”

Quaint. So quaint, in fact, that the lion could not help but boisterously (and mutely) laugh at such a notion. “Foxglove”, indeed. “Very well,” the larger of the two chuckled, willing enough to play the charade, even honoring the vulpine visitor with a double bluff of his own, “then you may call me… ‘Lionheart’.”

Foxglove shared in the laugh and once more they toasted but to each other’s clever subversion. “So, to business.”

“Quite,” Lionheart said, the buzz reigniting in his skull but he managed it, flicking his wrist to slide the Jack of Hearts across the table and earning a wry smirk as the green eyes caught it, “What message shall I forward onto Vincenzo Corlione?”

Those green eyes studied the further imbuing lion (for the vintage was quite good) while the fox in which they rested leaned forward to set the half-finished drink upon the card with a soft sound. “It’s to do with a matter most dire, Lionheart.”

“You must be more specific, Foxglove.”

“True enough… this is a great burden that I know you -- of all mammals -- would vehemently shoulder, as I had this past month. And believe you me, keeping him hidden was no small feat.”

Lionheart’s keen mind and eyes narrowed upon the fox, sitting up to loom as he set down his own emptied glass with a sound considerably less soft. A single, solitary “burden” came to mind that had plagued him and all closest to him since a month ago, only one that warranted such gravity. “Tread carefully, Foxglove, for I am not in a mindset to take mockery on the chin, especially about what you imply…”
Foxglove’s grin softened but diminished not a wit. “No mockery… but it is about Simon King-”
The lion, perhaps in the pit of annoyance from his drained civility, dug claws into the chair’s arms while his dark lips curled to threaten with glistening jaws, thus revealing the gaping aperture of his thunderous maw. Foxglove swiftly shushed and then pointed his raised finger to the grand bed, “He’s sleeping.”

The air cleared as the maned head whipped around to address the bed… there was someone in it, someone small. Lionheart was no naïve cub, though, he was a worldly lion (perhaps even jaded) and so he pushed the wave of his mane back again to doubt the fox square in the eye, fighting back the day’s weariness with every ounce of strength he could muster and taking stock of every possibility. “And I am just supposed to infer your word on this?” he demanded… if quietly.

“No, of course not,” the fox assured, relaxing and gesturing for the lion to do the same… he did, if reluctantly, and glared over his steepled, padded fingertips, “I expect you to check him after I leave and to heed my warning: Simon King was hunted, Lionheart, and I hid him as well as I could but he will be a target once more when they do not find a body.”

Tension strained the hotel’s walls in the silence between them both. “Let’s say I believe you,” Lionheart finally permitted, paws relaxed in a gesture of his parting fingers, “Who are ‘they’ and what’s it to do with Simon?”

“Who else?” Foxglove posited, “They take children. They destroy families. They control City Hall and Precinct 1. They run rampant but invisible, for as long as Zootopia stood… probably longer. Nowadays, it’s known by the select as ‘Pleasure Island’.” The name hung in the air like a guillotine from a fraying rope. “You can neglect their influence skulking around the Palm as of late if it helps you sleep tonight, but they seek to kill or corrupt Simon; if they want to make another Prima Gévaudan, I can only dread as to why. The fact of the matter is, fate dealt him a cruel hand one month ago… too much for a cub to handle but it is information he has all the same, information that could destroy them. That’s why he and Ryan Wild fled and it is now your duty to keep him hidden.”

The lion remained quiet during it all, the day’s weariness aiding him to not fly off the handle. “So… you scoured Horseshire and Bunnyburrow, finding the one mammal that the rest of the city could not… Assuming that’s the case, why not bring him back to Memphis and Sarah? Surely he could not be safer than with them,” he said, “Not to mention a handsome reward (that never crossed your mind).”

The fox scoffed. “He would only be in danger yet again; it is a miracle that he got a second chance at all. Not that it would matter, reward or not… because he’s not Simon King,” Foxglove riddled, gesturing to the cub, “The trauma claimed his memories: parents, life, friends… gone. Who you see there is an orphaned cub from South Savannah, convinced his family died in a car accident. Simon will return, he must… but Lenny shall protect him until then; if you doubt me, ask him yourself and he will be more than happy to tell you his name.”

Tremendous though the tension in the air was, it trembled all the same to the lion’s low growl. “That’s an awful lot to take at face-value, Foxglove, I would be remiss to simply let any of it slide… perhaps foremost is that you said ‘after I leave’. What makes you think I would allow such a thing?” he coldly warned, casting a shadow within the dark room after standing at full height.

Bright green eyes smiled as Foxglove hopped from his chair and approached the decanter, removing the stopper and sniffing it, “You don’t even know how I got here… just like you-” he then chuckled as Lionheart’s eyelids and shoulders drooped, his head snapping upright since he could no longer hide its leaden weight, as he had throughout their conversation. Foxglove
carefully picked up the napkin on which the stopper was once rolled about on, folded it, and tucked it into a coat pocket, “I must say, Lionheart, you certainly put up a fight but what you ingested would have dropped an elephant by now.”

The room spun and the lion gripped his head, stumbling into his chair as he tried to stay awake but even an iron constitution wasn’t enough to weather whatever tranquilizer iced his weariness of the day.

Dawn broke, at last, and Vincenzo Corlione was shaken awake by one of his consorts, who found him collapsed in a chair. “Vinny!” the lioness alerted.

Sunlight hit him almost as hard as the freight train from the night before, blinking dumbly at the new morning. “Wha—. What time…? Aslan’s mane!” he roared, checking his watch and springing to his feet, any drowsiness dispersing like smoke in a gale, “I need to get washed up… oh, my head’s going on the wall for this,” he worried, shrugging off his coat before the lioness grabbed his elbow, “What?” Her throat cleared loudly and she nodded to the stirring lump on the bed.

“Who is he?” she discreetly demanded, eyebrows flicking critically.

A flat, calculating stare observed the still stirring cub. “He’s my nephew,” Vinny casually assured, snapping the tie from his shirt before unbuttoning it.

“He says his name is ‘Lenny’—”

“Yes, short for ‘Leonardo’—”

“‘Wild’.”

“From an estranged half-sister,” Vinny swiftly explained as he then wrapped a paw around her shoulders, shirt unabashedly open to compassionately explain, “I just found out about him… that his parents were recently taken in a car crash…” The lioness gasped and melted for the cub’s plight. “I need to shower and redo this disguise before my rendezvous so see that Lenny is bathed, fed, and gets a fresh set of clothes.”

“The poor thing…” she whispered and he nodded, “Don’t worry, Mr. Corlione, he’ll be safe in my care.”

“He’s also very skittish and has amnesia, so I don’t imagine he’ll take to me too well,” the lion continued to explain as he turned towards the shower while the lioness whisked over to the bed. Vincenzo Corlione and his bronzed fur were washed down the shower drain to leave the tawny Leodore Lionheart alone with his thoughts, trying to decide just how much of the prior night actually happened… whether there really was some “Foxglove” or other that came by or just another phantom, like “Jacky Savage” from years ago… Maybe the cub had sweet-talked the housekeeping to letting him into the room. Maybe Leodore was still so distraught over the loss of Simon King that he, in an inebriated stupor, dreamt it all up. After a thorough cleaning, Leodore reapplied his disguise so that Vincenzo Corlione could be seen leaving the Palm Hotel & Casino, fresh and unsuspecting.

There was no sign of the fox. No sign of the Jack of Hearts playing card. No sign even of whatever it was he drank that knocked him out so thoroughly. All who remained was some oddly smelling new cub that the consort grew attached to, some “Lenny Wild” who remembered only his own name and was zealous in its certitude (also denying any mention of a fox caretaker but was not as averse to that possibility). Most peculiarly, he was otherwise withdrawn and anxious, whereas
Simon King was bold and charismatic. Lenny grew spiteful at any notion that he resembled Simon… and retaliated if someone insisted on it; a worsening circumstance as he grew larger with each month. Any claims of “Foxglove’s” were insubstantial at best and Leodore knew that even an attempt to confirm the identity of a “Missing Prince” would draw far too much attention… especially with so many frauds already caught in so short a period. In a best-case scenario, Lenny unknowingly played in one of the most insidious hustles yet.

Regardless, that mysterious cub escaped from the consort’s care for the umpteenth time, disappearing with hardly a trace that he ever was; she eventually left “Corlione’s” employ for bigger, better things. Vinny, or as he was really known, Leodore could not find it in his heart to chase after the chronic runaway yet again, not with his own cubs to look after. Worst of all, he lamented that he hadn’t come to love and be loved by Lenny as his own cub… it was just far too heartbreaking to see those bright, crimson eyes and the sprouting, fiery mane and not think of his lost godson, Simon King…

Nowadays...

Lanny followed along the grand, open hallway with the manor’s central skylight illuminating every corridor, every surface… it reminded him more of a museum than a home. Apparently, Pride Rock was equipped as a disaster shelter (and the storm shutters were artfully-hidden), since according to Memphis, “a true King serves”. The words resonated in Lanny, deep in his core… and every time he heard about Pridelands in the news, about how it seemed to direct its business towards profit at the expense of its customers… it just burned him up inside… as if it were some direct affront to him.

Vanessa approached a gaudy set of solid oak double doors framed in marble bas-reliefs of deific lions standing guard. “That’s Mom and Daddy’s room; do not ever go in there,” she warned and strode right past to another set of solid oak doors, and while marble did also frame them they boasted no stone-chiseled warders but rather a simpler metal-cast lion down the very center, whose offering paws were held before him to replace the door handles… and as Vanessa pulled the doors open, it looked as though his arms spread wide. “Uncle Memphis, I have the new nurse,” she tersely called, nudged Lanny in and whispered, “Good luck. Just last the weekend, then do whatever,” and closed the doors behind him.

As it was throughout the manor, Memphis’s room was naturally illuminated (or mimicked it, barring any open windows) and meticulously cleaned. Unlike the rest of the manor… Lanny immediately felt unwelcomed, hiding the tremble of his knees by gripping the floor with his toes and wringing the strap of his duffel bag (eyes darting about to the cameras in the ceiling’s corners that kept an eternal vigil of the ailing lion, just in case any mishap should befall him, as was explained to the nurse during one of his first stops in the tour).

Memphis lay in his bed… so unlike how he was remembered. His once golden fur faded to an ashen pallor; the blazing red of his mane… a dense, rusty cobweb that not so much reflected the light above him but spat it back like gravel from under a semi truck’s tire. The sleeping shirt which would have been filled… hung off his thin frame. The machines around him beeped and hummed and pumped as he removed his reading glasses to set them upon the book soon closed beside him; he peered over the oxygen mask wrapped around his face. His eyes, though… like lances they pierced into the nurse from clear across the room and yet he hardly seemed trying at all. “Lanny… Wild, was it?” he critically asked.

“Yes, sir,” he answered and swiftly approached at the permitting gesture of a wilted paw… a paw
that once was probably strong enough to bat Lanny out the window if it were so inclined. Hearing about Mr. King’s condition was one thing… but seeing him was another… Yes, the loss of his son hit his spirit like a runaway train but it was the internal organ damage that nearly killed him… The Pridelands Charity Marathon held on Stampede Street that he always ran in, one year boasted its highest attendance from a sudden influx of wildebeests. He tripped and was nearly trampled to death by a hundred different sets of hooves… no charges were filed for the “terrible accident” but Memphis never truly recovered. Lanny smiled his most professionally and set down his duffel bag to sit on the side of the bed, something he learned from more experienced nurses that helped to build a rapport with the patient. “It’s great to meet you, Mr. King.”

He huffed and breathed harshly through his mask. “I find that hard to believe, considering you were offered this position several times in the past,” he stated, “but then, all of your predecessors were a bit too eager to get in here…” and scowled, sweeping with disdain at the nightstand pharmacy prescribed to him, “Even that stuffed-shirt was determined to poison me, just like everyone else,” he grumbled and sank back into his pillow, paws folded on his stomach.

Lanny chose his words carefully… figuring anything off the top of his head was already mentioned (and thus, rejected). So, he stood and addressed a sample of the plethora of pill bottles, mouthing out the names as best he could. “Some of these are for conditions you don’t… or can’t have; best case scenario, your body would be completely unaffected by them.”

“Finally, some sense, maybe you will last the week,” the old lion wheezed, “not that it matters.”

“With all due respect, Mr. King, why wouldn’t it matter?” the young lion asked, perusing the prescriptions until he recognized the one that might actually prove beneficial, “If I have anything to say about it, I’m getting you well enough to lift crates down on the docks again,” and then leaned in to smirk, “I already promised the other lions I would.”

Memphis seemed to laugh despite himself and then gave a crotchety harrumph. He sat and thought a moment, entering the new nurse into his calculations but sighing as the medicine and water were presented… he simply pushed it away. “Because I’m tired, Lanny. My heart broke twenty years ago after I did everything, every thing a father could possibly do to keep his own child safe, but it wasn’t enough… it will never be enough. And now my body has accepted it… I prayed that quack was the last nurse my brother would sick on me but then the love of my life insisted on one more… I shall abide by her wishes but I cannot live like this,” he growled, gesturing at the whole of his circumstances, “Thank Aslan they haven’t put a catheter in me. I was going to turn you away at the door but I couldn’t do that to Vanessa,” he groaned and chuckled, “She might be the only hope for whatever poor cub my brother and his mate plan to adopt. So… you’ll stick around for the rest of the week, maybe receive a glowing letter of recommendation, and then you can be the hospice nurse for anyone in the world… someone who can be far more grateful than I for all the hard work of yours that I read about.”

“Mr. King…”

“Please, just Memphis… ‘Mimsy’, if you like,” he continued and then pulled off his oxygen mask to toss it aside with disgust, “All I want is to spend my last days in the company of someone who won’t look on in pity for the lion that once was. Can you do that for me?”

Lanny’s chin trembled. He refused to nod or shake his head, however, looking down instead at the colorful capsules, gently nudging them with his thumb… and then at the motley assortment for the old lion’s consumption. He quietly pondered for some several moments and clenched his jaw, crouching to get a better look at them all.
Memphis sighed and drummed a single finger to his own knuckle. “No, I suppose I wouldn’t have an answer, either, if begged for some merciful end to it all, as though back on the battlefield,” he grumbled and picked up the oxygen mask again but flicked his eyes towards the nurse’s flank, studying the uniform fitted to it and grinned. “If I might be so bold as to point out, Lanny,” he said, a finger shaking with the effort it took to point it, “but unless I am very much mistaken… did your uniform come from John Wilde? His work is very distinct.” Memphis then laughed at such a notion, “He used to be my tailor, you know, but he was more than that, at times, always a delight to have around… except for Tycho, of course, he could leave anyone ‘in stitches’!”

The young lion’s train of thought derailed as he addressed the invalid and then his own uniform, snickering first at the joke and then laughing heartily. “It needed some mending and John -- or rather, Mr. Wilde -- fixed it for me. His suits really are that prolific, though, aren’t they?”

“It’s uncanny…” he said ambiguously and to the inquisitive stare, continued, “I can’t help but feel that we’ve met before… perhaps down at the docks? No, you’re far too young.” Memphis shook his head. “Never mind. Tell me instead, Lanny, what has so piqued your interest?”

“Well…” he muttered, making some room on the nightstand to spread out a pawful of pills, “I don’t think you were poisoned.” All of the comradery from the previous few minutes evaporated as Memphis slumped back into his pillow. “I guess I am just a crazy, old, paranoid lion, then,” he bitterly stated, snatching up his book and glasses again.

Lanny didn’t seem to notice (and likewise, Memphis didn’t pay him any attention, either) as he used his claw to dissect a capsule, carefully opening it and pouring out the contents. With a careful sniff and a moistened dab of his pinky finger, he dared a single taste… and his whiskers perked as he looked about the room. However, before Memphis could properly address him, he stood and pulled the medical tablet from his duffel bag to check it. “It looks like it’s about time for your bath, sir,” the nurse professionally informed.

The old lion’s face sagged as he begrudgingly closed the book. “Hurrah.”

“But,” the nurse continued and even leaned in to whisper with a wry grin, “instead of a sponge bath, as it says here, would you like a bath bath? You know, get out of bed, soak for a bit… make a big, hot bowl of you-soup?”

Resigned though Memphis might have been to follow along with whatever routine his nurse was hired to inflict upon him, and whatever vehement reluctance he expressed from the mention of a “bath bath”, his curiosity piqued at the fanciful phrasing. Lanny was already turning away to retrieve the nearby wheelchair and unfold it with a smooth click of its fasteners. “I’ve not heard such a thing in years,” the older lion laughed, despite himself, and was politely joined in the frivolity as the covers were carefully removed from his legs, “My cub, wherever did you hear it?”

A meager but amiable shrug was all the nurse answered as he carefully and quickly detached his patient from the various monitors, “And we’ll just unplug these for a bit… so long as you promise not to tell,” he said and winked.

Minor glowering remained on the gaunt face but a good-natured, grateful confirmation was chuffed all the same. “I remember Sarah used that all the time with Simon,” he quietly reminisced, looping his arm about the nurse’s neck and propping up his knees so that he might be transported from bed to wheelchair.

“Did she?” Lanny grunted, surprised that the weakened lion could still be as heavy as he was and
secured him thusly.

“Oh yes… Simon hated baths, said they ‘messed up his mane’,” the old lion mused, nostrils flaring for a moment, “But then one day his mother -- clever lioness that she is -- started peeling the soap like it was a potato, sprinkled in scents as if they were spices, and even used a big spoon to stir and pretend to taste it; she said it ‘needed something more’. Always the curious cub, he wondered what she was doing… that’s when she grabbed Simon and tossed him in. After that, baths were always ‘you-soups’.” Memphis chuckled as he was wheeled to the bathroom.

The walls were a dark earthen tone with the barest rocky patterns, the sinks smooth porcelain with brass spigots for faucets, large mirrors, gorgeously plush towels (and private blow-drying room adjacent); various toiletries for her and for him on their respective sides, decor of faux-masonry ceramics (but looked sturdy enough to survive an impact). The tub itself was an ornate basin with silicon cushions and holes for jets, two overhead rain showerheads… big enough to house two lions, from the looks of it. Memphis chuckled again as the nurse leaned over to turn the water on, the surrounding aesthetics similar to artistically curling shoreline plant life. “Feels like it’s been ages since I’ve been in here, most all of my hygiene was maintained at the bed… but then, most all of my other nurses couldn’t lift me… aside from the rhino. Sarah would leave the door open so that I could see her, though; brush her fangs, I mean. She’s always been a lioness of taste and had a keen eye for value… picked out most everything on the estate, back when we were newly mated.”

“And you didn’t get a say?” Lanny teased, pouring in herbal concoctions that he’d brought in his duffel bag, simply letting them churn with the running water.

“I only wanted whatever I could lie down flat in,” the old lion rumbled quite jovially and stroked his waning mane, getting just a bit of color back in his cheeks as he muttered under his breath, “It was in this very tub that…” and then cooed, “but you don’t need to hear that.”

“I really don’t,” the young lion politely and succinctly agreed, daring one last glance at the ceiling to confirm that there were no cameras.

Memphis patiently sat as the water ran. “And they call me paranoid,” he remarked, coughing for no specific reason than to clear whatever was in his lungs as he attempted to stand from his wheelchair, “Do you plan to keep that hat on the entire time you’re here?” he asked… and seemed to notice that the tub was not filling with suds as he assumed it would, regardless of whatever was poured in.

Lanny rushed over and guided him back into his seat, earning more patience in the form of a direct glance. “No… I just didn’t want to take it off, yet,” he said under his breath.

“So why wear it? It certainly doesn’t look like your favorite cap… it actually looks brand new. Come to think of it…” he added with a furtive leaning of his elbow on the wheelchair’s arm, “I can’t help but wonder if it’s not because of some… bad trip to the groomer?”

“Well… it’s a secret,” he whispered, grinning and tipping the cap back so that it could no longer shade his eyes.

The piercing lances which struck from Memphis’s gaze softened as he studied the younger lion’s face, nostrils flaring again; even so, doubt riddled his features like rust. “Really…?” he aloud wondered, glancing about as he lifted a paw (not very high) to beckon him closer with a single finger, canting his head some and perking an ear, “Maybe it’s something you shouldn’t discuss too loudly, something about all those medicines?”

The younger lion’s brow flattened. His eyes wavered and jaw clenched. He blinked the haze from
his eyes.

“What’s wrong, son? You can tell me.”

“You see…” he continued, daring an impish smirk to tug at the corner of his lips as he raised his paw to cup it around Memphis’s ear so that no wayward words could escape, thus urging his eager listener closer and -- as sharply and softly as he could -- bit his ear.

Chapter End Notes

Zoë, Nuke, and Vanessa are based on the characters Zira, Nuka, and Vitani from “The Lion King 2: Simba’s Pride”; similarly, the adopted cub Vanessa and Nuke spoke of references Kovu. Grandpa Ahab and Grandma Ursula (not the sea-witch from “The Little Mermaid”) are derived from the names of Ahadi and Uru, the parents of Mufasa and Scar/Taka.

“Little Orphan Lanny” is a pun on “Little Orphan Annie” even though she is not a Disney character; forgive me this minor transgression.

Rambrandt and Andy Warthog are Zootopian analogs to Rembrandt and Andy Warhol, respectively. To my knowledge, “Deco-Sylvan” does not reference anything.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

"Oh. I guess even Kings get scared, huh?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Recently…

When asked about the zoning regulations across the city of Zootopia, one of the most hotly contested political issues is what species need how much and where; in contrast, the issue of size differences have simmered to a much more manageable broil with the technological advancement of construction, structural integrity, and sound-proofing. In centuries and decades past, entire societies of rodents relegated to living within the walls of larger mammals and to some extent, the tradition perpetuates into modern days but much more closely regulated (as an exemplary exception, see Little Rodentia and its dedicated infrastructure to the smallest mammal species).

Over in Conifer District, streets and blocks are set aside to help distinguish mammals in their respective size brackets; notable examples are the Wildes on the southern end and the Pounceskis on the eastern. More often than not, species in the medium size bracket remain the most versatile but it is not unheard of (and it’s actually more common than some might think) for a small mammal to greet their larger neighbors from -- what to them would be -- their second story window. Like in the case of John Wilde, a tailor from Conifer District whose shop caters to all sizes, Suitopia, it is a sensible practice to rent a studio or make “house calls” for the wardrobe maladies that might befall his plus- plus-size clients.

“I don’t know,” Lanny doubted as he breathed in the rich pine scent, “Conifer has always been kind of… off-putting for me.” Simple gratitude was kept close to his chest that the evergreen locale accommodated species larger than the average lion (even if he himself was a bit larger than) and that even on the smaller end of the spectrum, the walkways and buildings were by no means confining.

“Could it possibly be the threat of meteoric pinecones?” Nick presumed between licks of his ice cream, “Don’t worry about them, the nets have held strong for years … especially when the Great Pinecone Avalanche showed everyone just how badly they needed to be brought up to code… we shall never forget…”

He sniffed the air again. “It’s more the smell, as if… I wonder if I ever came here as a cub before I lost my memories,” the lion said and then shot a glance at the fox, “You’ve got that look again.”

“‘Look’? What ‘look’, I don’t have a ‘look’?” he feigned, immediately wiping the contemplative expression off his face for one of confusion, and then snapping to a debonair self-satisfaction, “Unless you’re talking about my devilishly good look… s, which I have in spades.”

“Yeah, no. More like the ‘I know something but I’m not telling Lanny’ look,” Lanny implied, “Your ‘there’s something else going on’ look.”

Nick groaned. “Fine, yes, I have ulterior motives for bringing you to see Dad, jeez,” he grumbled, “What kind of world are we living in when a fox can’t even keep things from a lion?”
Ever on the lookout to one-up his dismal score against the fox (having only found out about it when they met at the TBR), Lanny loosed a braggadocious scoff, “But I thought foxes didn’t keep secrets from other foxes?”

A high, hearty laugh relaxed Nick’s nerves. “You got me there,” he readily ceded, “and probably the first ten-foot fox in history, no doubt a remnant of some prehistoric species.”

Lanny joined in laughing and secured the package under his arm. “So, other than John fixing the seam on my uniform at such short notice, what else are you scheming today?”

“Had we more sidewalk, I would tell you,” Nick mused and hopped up to the rented studio on the 33rd Street side of the city block wherein Suitopia resided. He ascended the stairs that were more frequent (for the ease of smaller species) to guide the lion alongside the sparser flight, and as he stepped into the cut-away door, Lanny walked through the larger one. “I was just thinking that this was the first time you’ve met Dad since the TBR, right?”

“Yep,” the lion confirmed.

“How did you get that bloody nose, again?”

He shyly shrugged. “Gid wanged me in the schnozz with the door of my truck; it tends to stick sometimes and I might’ve been a bit too eager to help get it open… didn’t even see it coming until all I saw was stars. And I know I shouldn’t paint with such a broad brush, but I feel like I put a damper on that whole time everyone was there; Gid looked so guilty every time I snorted… he tried to make it up to me but I couldn’t even smell his pancakes, I was so blocked up…”

Green eyes studied the lion… if not directly, and then finished sending a text message on his phone. “You’re clenching your jaw again.”

Lanny cleared his throat and scratched his cheek as he took a seat in one of the larger waiting chairs (Nick was adjacent) and placed his packaged uniform in his lap. He looked at the temporary measuring station (which did actually have some rudimentary scaffolding set up) and gave his mighty shoulders another shrug with much more muchness, “‘Dawson’s been going bananas ever since we got to Conifer and I have no idea why. Normally I can figure out what he’s trying to tell me -- what he doesn’t just outright tell me, that is -- but he’s all over the place and… it’s frustrating. I thought listening to him was supposed to help but it’s as bad as when I tried to get rid of him.”

Nick tossed the remainder of his ice cream cone into his mouth and crunched it.

“You’re not telling me something.”

Ears pricked as John Wilde entered through a back door and strode across the otherwise empty room, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt to roll them up to the elbow. “Lanny!” he greeted, “absolutely a mazing to see you again. Sorry for the delay, boys, some customers just can’t seem to understand that a fox has places to be, mammals to see; never mind that they couldn’t bring it upon themselves to be punctual but that’s neither here nor there.” He rubbed his paws anticipatorily and gandered the seated lion up-and-down before stating, “Let’s see what you brought me.”

“Heya, Dad.”

“Hi, Mr. Wilde,” Lanny agreed, turning his head forward in greeting, remaining seated as he extended the article of clothing in question. His nostrils flicked, breathing in the new scent that he
couldn’t while at the Grey household, the last time he’d met John.

The tailor took great care as he thumbed through the handiwork and then grunted in revulsion. “Is this what passes for ‘top-of-the-line’?” he griped, “Look at this seam… it’s a wonder it’s not in shreds by now or that you can even breathe in it. A mortician wouldn’t be so stiff in the attire they choose. It’s a lucky thing you came to me, Lanny, I’ll get this atrocity fixed up for you in a jiffy, just a soon as we get you measured. I need to know what this uniform has to put up with all day, after all.”

“Yeah, and we’ll be right with you,” Nick said, “I need to first prepare myself for… well, there really isn’t a way to explain it…”

John groaned and smirked, tapping his chin. “I thought as much, the way you two distanced yourselves from each other like that… I don’t imagine you’d come here to get me involved if it needed a one-on-one, so perhaps you can both work it out while I work on Lanny?”

Lanny patiently quirked a brow at Nick as he propped up an elbow to his knee quite expectantly. “One would certainly hope so.”

“It actually needs to happen before that,” Nick suavely gesticulated and stepped nearer to the inclining lion… and swiftly clapped his cheeks to kiss him full on the lips. Neither dared speak as that very lion’s jaw slackened and eyes blinked, nostrils flared, and face slowly turned towards the older fox… who’d collapsed to the floor in a fit of laughter.

“You bet him a Square-on-the-Mouth!” John guffawed, struggling for breath as he gripped his sides and clapped the ground for mercy, “Nicky, there’s a special ice cream cone at the Frozen Fox named ‘Square on the Mouth’ -- you needn’t actually kiss him!” Whether distracted by his own merriment or boisterous vocalizations, John was caught unaware of the fact that Lanny had closed the gap between them. Great tawny mitts grappled the older tod, he yelping and flailing against the iron hold but before he could protest any further, a large nose was shoved into his neck and simply inhaled his scent, rich with the pine needles of Conifer District… and his eyes sparked with terrible revelation.

Nick was stoic.

John, at an absolute loss for words.

Lanny… collapsed to his knees and sobbed, massive frame shaking. At last, he raised his sopping, crimson eyes and trembling chin to look at John… into those hauntingly familiar green eyes…

“You always waxed poetic about how the sense of smell was closely tied to memories.” The younger fox sighed and rubbed his nape, stepping down from the chair to approach. “Back during the TBR, I made a wager with a lion friend of mine that I’d kiss Simon King square on the mouth if I ever met him… not that I thought I ever would, of course; even so, I’m glad the message was received loud and clear, one fox to another. Later that week, I heard about some… ‘green-eyed uncle’ of his and a mysterious blue fox popping up in his memories… I recently remembered that you wore a powder blue suit the day you left for a whole month, Dad, right after Simon disappeared,” Nick explained, crossing his arms and glancing up, away, “I heard from that lion friend of mine about hot, dry, roaring, dark winds… and realized that it could describe the fires of a car crash… or a stretch of desert in Sahara Square during a sandstorm.

“You explained how you could help abducted children forget their trauma by encouraging them to repress it all but only long enough to get them the professional help they needed…” he continued, thinking about a conversation he had with Leodore in the past week, “But what if you didn’t have
that luxury? What if Simon’s life was in immediate danger? What could you, would you convince a young cub of, one that was on the verge of death from extreme exposure… Would you convince him that he wasn’t who he thought he was? That, maybe, you guided him to think that he was anyone except Simon King? Someone familiar with ‘Lenny, the patron saint of lost children’; someone who knew your name, ‘Wilde’… except you heard it as ‘Wild- without -an-e’ when they said it themselves.” Nick stroked his chin. “Luckily… I know a certain badger out in Pred’s Corner who already had a totally legal DNA test of Lanny’s at the ready, and I just got the very conclusive results today. So now, my only question is—”

“Why?” the lion asked of the older fox, a maelstrom of every negative emotion his heart could manage.

John was also crying as he gripped the wrists before him. “They wanted to kill you, or worse…” he choked, “I knew they would never stop and I didn’t know what else to do so I hid you… I hid you where they could never find you… not until you were strong enough to fight back on your own,” he confessed and hung his head, tears cascading down his snout, “You wandered the sands for three days before I found you and then I saw the buzzards… I was afraid you weren’t alive… I covered you in my jacket just before the sandstorm kicked up and marched through it, praying to feel your breath… But then you started sucking the sweat out of my pelt and I knew you were still with me, that I could still save you…” and then looked up with a guilty whine, “For a month, I hid with you under the Palm until I could convince you that you weren’t Simon King… and to forget me… that’s when I could entrust you to the only mammal who could protect you but then… he was gone … and you really were lost… I had no way of tracking you again and I… I lost hope, Simon…”

Lanny’s fingers clenched around the thief that stole his past, grip as though a cage but the control of his strength became all the more evident when -- despite the raw power surging through his arms -- they did not rend John asunder. “You ‘lost hope’…?” Instead, the lion’s fangs dug into his bottom lip as he forced his own paws open, dropping the fox like a wet sack of flour… and so his fists curled until the pelt stretched tight around his knuckles and eyes sealed the tears in.

John prostrated where he fell -- glasses clattering away -- heaving as he wept with his face buried into the lion’s leg, “I tried to save you… I tried to save Prima… but what good did it do…? I failed and the city suffered because of it; thousands suffered because of me…” He then threw himself aside with whatever strength remained in him and flattened his face to the floor, covering his head with wringing paws, “I’m a plague…”

What words there were to say, twenty years worth of what Lanny wanted to be known to whoever took his past from him. If ever there was anyone he could blame for his isolation; for instilling such terror in him that he could trust no one, not even his own kind; for having nothing but a name and a memory of death to call upon in his blackest hours; for being the only other voice he heard in his head but with no face to attach it to… no answer or comfort as he tried to piece together who he was ; for his abandonment. And there was someone at fault: a wretched fox who surely welcomed the retribution. Surely none would blame him if the anger roiling inside came out to pay back the twenty years that he could never get back… surely, it would have… until he felt something on his arm.

Nick held it; with all the weight of a single flower petal, he held those dark, lonely years at bay… those years growing up when Lanny could only rage against his empty past in confusion and echoing silence. Brilliant, crimson eyes stared into those calm greens, watching as the son picked up his father’s tear-stained glasses and cleaned them on a handkerchief… and simply nodded at who was, without a doubt, the “green-eyed uncle” that risked life and limb to pull a scared cub from the brink of death; who took not only his body upon his back but his name, as well, a name
which surely spelled doom for not only him, but anyone even loosely associated with him, should it had ever gotten out; who must have suffered every day, month, and year that Simon King remained missing, convinced that he was the instigator of so much anguish…

Lanny… Simon shakily reached for John. The time it took for his paw to span the distance between them stretched for ages until, ever-so-carefully, he scooped him up by his torso… and John grew more confused until he was embraced against the lion’s chest. “Thank you for saving me, Mr. Wilde.” The fox held onto the hug as best he could when he finally understood.

“You know,” he eventually said, remembering all the secrecy he and his mate, Jackie, adhered to as the Foxgloves and all that their stories entailed, about the thousands of families whose eternal gratitude gushed for “a hero” who proved so instrumental in the rescuing of their children, proved only to express such gratitude by keeping the secret, “this is the first time anyone’s said that to me.”

Now

Memphis flung back with a harsh grunt caught in his throat, sparing a glance to his paw to check for blood from a bite that hardly stung at all. His knuckles curled white around the arm of the wheelchair as he gawked; the discarded cap and hair-tie allowed the mane, grown unimpeded for the past month, to fill out around the younger lion’s head… the mane so alike his father Ahab’s and mirroring his own. “…Simon?”

Simon nodded, pursed lips smiling and head canting as he gripped his father’s paw, weakness melting away for a strong, desperate hold. It was his sincere belief that he cried all the tears he was going to cry with Mr. Wilde, that his days as an alpha gave him the steel to return to his father as a stalwart lion rather than a bawling cub. He was wrong -- very, very wrong. Luckily, he wasn’t the only one. “Dad,” Simon only just managed to say.

“Don’t be a dream,” Memphis begged, tears streamed down his cheeks as he felt the sting in his ear, grunting as he tried to sit up but didn’t need to as his son collapsed at his knee. His paws scrambled over the broad frame for purchase, trembling fingers digging into the uniform. “I’ve dreamt of you so many times -- please, Aslan, be here.”

“I’m here, Dad, I’m here.”

Running water helped to fill the silence of so grateful a reuniting as theirs. “What happened? Where were you? Why did you never come home?” he choked, retreating from the hug just enough to hold and see his son’s face, his heart beating its strongest in years.

“I’d forgotten who I was… and so I’d forgotten you…” Simon confessed, and leaned in to touch his nose, and then his tongue, and then his lips to his father’s cheek… as a cub should.

Memphis repaid the love. “Does your mother know?” he asked when he dared to speak again.

“Not yet, but she will the next time I see her,” Simon explained, overcome by the simple thought of seeing his mom again, the rapturous swell bringing his heart to burst.

Concluding their embrace, he carefully hoisted his ailing father from the wheelchair to sit him in the tub, without getting the sleeping shirt wet as he removed it. “Can you handle a bath while I’m away?” he lightly teased, folding the garment to lay it in the vacated seat before turning off the water, “Wouldn’t want you drowning on my first day on the job.”
The old lion looked on in utter bewilderment, leaning on the edge of the tub. “Well, yes, but what are you…?”

“I’ve been in the company of foxes for a while, now, rabbits too,” the younger lion said, smiling as he stood and stretched an arm over his chest and then up over his head, hoping to clear his sinuses as quickly as possible, “Tricky characters, the lot of them, but after the strong fall, they’re the ones we look to to get us back up again. A little rabbit apothecarial science to help with your condition, and just a bit of foxy slyness to get him in here.” Simon then referenced his phone with a nod, “He’s coming,” and slipped out the bathroom door.

“*There are three big questions every successful hustler asks before anything else:” Nick professed, “one, ‘what’s the hustle?’; two, ‘how much money does it make?’; and three, ‘who’s the mark?’.* If you can’t answer these, you’re dead in the water and the biggest, bestest hustles have a ‘guy’ for each question: someone with the ideas, someone who runs logistics (i.e., Finnick), and then there’s yours truly, the guy who works the mark. No one’s assigned a role, of course, a hustle needs to be flexible, but believe you me when I say that Magnus was the front-guy for this whole Pleasure Island scheme; he and his bunnies did the dirty work, he had the connections and the resources, he cleaned up afterward to make sure they could do it all over again. How ever, the problem with these long-running hustles is that someone eventually gets wise to them; always. Sure, he had his fingers into all manner of legislative pies, changing the rules to run things smoothly but he fell into the same pitfall every scam-artist does when they get too big: they forget that a hustle was never meant to be real in the first place. Now, I think we can agree that Magnus wasn’t working alone, so here’s the million-dollar question: who is the logistics guy?”

Simon visualized meeting his Uncle Tycho as coolly and non-threateningly as possible, just like Nick instructed him. He was the alpha, after all, and couldn’t let his emotions get the better of him or else the entire plan to bag “the logistics guy” went up in smoke… Nick (somehow) had sown the exact kind of rumors in the stock market to get Pridelands Enterprises buzzing so that Tycho would be on the estate but preoccupied with important matters; check. Finnick got inside the Pride Rock firewall through the Wifi access on Simon’s phone; check. Simon tripped the silent medical alerts by detaching the machines from Memphis; check. All he had to do was appear as cool and non-threatening as possible to catch the conniving lion blabbing about something he doesn’t want the rest of the city to know…

…Less so.

As soon as he stepped from the bathroom in his pristinely white nurse’s uniform -- a posh piece the hospital had him wear with the buttoned flap across the chest (like an admiral’s ensemble) -- the two lions locked eyes as they let click their respective doors behind them. Had steam wafted from Simon’s boiling blood it likely would have surprised no one, his tail slicing the air while that pristine uniform with its pristine buttons strained against the flexing muscle within. His dark lips curled and nose wrinkled as every memory that John helped recover of what he heard on that fateful day in Horseshire -- what caused him and Ryan to flee for their very lives and the decades which resulted from it -- eclipsed whatever pointers the masterfully composed Nick could give him.

Surely, there was someone to blame.

“*Simon,*” Tycho endeared, the faint sound of the bedroom door locking behind his back as he then swung that paw around to the front and gave what could be interpreted as a courteous bow, “I’m a little surprised to see you… alive,” he then added, if under his breath. He was a slender lion, fur a good shade darker than his brother’s with features of a certain slink and point that some might even
call... “shifty”. He likely wore his full business attire not too long prior, the khaki pants, brown belt, and pressed white shirt without any neckwear remained whereas any jacket was since discarded. His entire face seemed to smile quite demurely, from the coil of his cooing lips to the arch of his scarred eye. He dared a step closer.

“Tycho,” Simon threatened through his teeth, every long breath failing to cool the furnace stoked within his core, “give me one good reason why I shouldn’t rip you apart.”

The darker lion wilted. “My darling cub, is that any way to talk to your dear, old uncle? Especially after you’ve been away for... so many years,” he continued and gradually neared, “This is a cause for celebration, is it not? I know I was... a tad standoffish but surely we could put all that behind us... hmm?” His visible paw waved in a gathering sort of motion, he standing upright with his chest out. Tycho immediately choked on his words as a great mitt closed the distance in that room while the two lions paced ever closer; the padded paws making no sound until they were the only ones on the floor, the other set just brushing its clawed tiptoes along the carpet for some semblance of purchase. “Simon!” he gasped, both paws wringing the wrist to keep himself up... perhaps only then comprehending his situation, “What are you going to do? You wouldn’t kill...?”

Simon’s fingers ignored the thick shag of the dark lion’s mane to hold his neck with absolution, careful to keep him at arm’s length... Nick warned him not to lose his cool, after all. “No, Tycho. I’m not like you,” he resolved and then pulled him only close enough to ensure that his eyes were all his uncle could see, causing him to go limp, “A century ago, I would be within my right, for everything you’ve done... but that’s not justice. I’m not the only one you’ve wronged.” Pain incarnate brilliantly consumed Simon’s gut and seized his jaw.

Tycho’s paw had wilted off the wrist to instead grab at what was clipped to the back of his belt, a taser whose purpose the darker lion had not hesitated an iota in implementing. His face was calm after its feigned panic but twisted into leering self-importance as saliva pooled at the corners of his nephew’s mouth and smoke emanated from the burns in the center of the once pristine nurse’s uniform. Though Tycho found that his heels were planted on the firm floor, the paw around his neck clinched with Simon’s gurgling growl, surging to slam the raven-black mane into a wall, clattering the pictures and hanging art pieces. True fear filled the uncle’s eyes but also hatred as he wedged the taser into his nephew’s chest and jammed his thumb onto the maximum setting, terrible light bursting in ribbons between them but the paw around his neck stayed true.

A great roar deafened the taser when another paw grabbed it, wrenched it away, and cracked its chassis with a single squeeze; it clattered onto a dresser, not a fox-taser or a bull-taser, not even a bear-taser... but an elephant-taser. Simon still stood, shaken and panting, but he held his uncle some feet off the floor and seethed through bared fangs, the taste of blood fresh on his gums. “You... don’t...” he strained and gulped, “deserve...” Once more he was halted as his uncle seized the opportunity to disfigure his voice into a high and agonized noise with a swift kick, and so both lions dropped to their knees (if for wholly different reasons).

The uncle cleared and rubbed his throat as he stood before clutching his brow, either in pain or annoyance. “If I had to suffer through another righteously idiotic tirade...” Tycho whined, swinging the back of his paw into Simon’s slacking jaw before grabbing up the taser and testing it as he watched his nephew brace the floor after the cheap blows, “I try not to resort to such vulgar tactics, a sophisticated gentlemammal like myself, but you really left me no choice.” The broken taser sparked however weakly, earning a pained yowl from Simon as it was shoved into whatever tender place possible until the thing petered out... and was then tossed over a shoulder. Tycho crouched and studied the twitching, salivating mess of a lion that threatened him so brazenly not a few minutes before. “Your daddy got the lion’s share of brute strength, you know, leaving me at the shallow end of the gene pool... but when it comes to brains,” he cooed in a boast, tenderly
caressing the young lion’s cheek, “But… only a very clever, very ambitious cub could have evaded the Prince’s Guard all these years… a true son of the King family. There might be hope for you yet, but we’ll need to fix that attitude of yours, first… don’t worry, we’ve long since perfected the process,” he assured to the writhing snarl, tapping his finger on the cringing nose.

Water drained from the tub and so Tycho glanced up with eager, patient eyes. They both waited for the wet footfall on tiles to stop… a door to open, close, and then for the blow-drying room to steadily hum at his highest, loudest setting. Tycho looked down to his nephew… and leered. “I thought the herd in the marathon would finally do him in but it wasn’t until you got that paranoid father of yours into the bathroom… you really are such a clever cub,” he whispered after leaning in, “Did you know that the bathroom is the most dangerous in the house? It’s true, more than the kitchen or garage. It’s all the water and slippery surfaces, you see, especially treacherous for the elderly and enfeebled. Well…” he continued and stood up, prim and proper as he corrected his mane and shirt while stepping over the heaving mass, “I thank you, Simon, for giving me such a unique opportunity… my dear brother is taking his sweet time dying, you see… just like he does with everything, forcing me to get what I want by my own means.”

The blow-drying room whirred and the electrocuted cub protested as Tycho reached the door, back erect, grinning over his shoulder… and it was kept open so that his nephew could see everything. His keen eyes glanced first at the empty tub, peering over its raised edge before spotting the trail of water on the floor and the light beneath the drying closet’s door. “Finally…” he mused oh-so-quietly, “I’m the strong one now, Memphis.” The scar over his eye itched, just as it always had when he remembered how he got it… and who gave it to him.

Tycho grabbed a ceramic, ornate soap dispenser from the sink -- knowing well its sturdiness -- focusing on the next door he crept towards, padded paws absolutely silent even against the water. A nimble paw braced the handle with the tips of his fingers and dislodged its clasp as only a master sneak could. He envisioned it all… surprise his older brother, inflict such a concussion that he could drag him to the sink and break his skull open on it… watch as Memphis finally understood who was the real King and in his final thoughts… appreciate how much it took to get him there. The door flung open as Tycho pounced and roared with the bludgeon poised to strike…!

Memphis was nowhere to be found. And amidst the room’s steady buzz, only the faucet’s drip dared make itself known. The darker lion gazed about, nostrils flaring and whiskers twitching as his weapon lowered in furious attempts to comprehend what he was seeing… or not seeing. No conclusion was reached because (or until) a thick arm strung with steel-cabling locked around his neck and another pinned both arms to his torso at the elbow (the soap dispenser clattering to the floor). Tycho panicked in both voice and limbs as he was backed into the bathroom again.

“That was dirty, Uncle Tycho, and it hurt,” Simon growled in a voice only just recovering, strength persistent against the flailing as his veined bicep wedged under his chin, the younger lion grinning, “my pride, that is, and luckily for you, nothing broke -- except for my heart.”

“That’s impossible,” Tycho heaved as he was dragged back to the bedroom kicking and screaming, “Memphis, he…?” He then gagged on his words not only due to the physical restriction of his windpipe but because he saw his older brother pop up from the tub… the tub he wanted because he could lie down flat in it. “Not… possible!”

“Don’t be such a poor sport, Tycho,” Memphis wheezed, gripping the side of the tub as he sat himself up again, “I’m not all brawn.”

“I’ll help you out in a minute, Dad,” Simon called on his way out the door.

“No rush, son,” the old lion assured, finding for the first time in too many years that could finally
breathe freely, “I’ll be right here.”

“Simon, Simon!” Tycho beseeched, recognizing that their path around the bed led them towards the balcony, “Please. Please, have mercy, I beg you! I’ll make it up to you, I promise. Tell me; I mean, any thing!” he continued, envigored when they stopped and his toes could touch ground again, “Oh, Simon, thank you. You are truly noble. How can I, ah, prove myself to you?”

Thoughtful rumbling filled the air around them. “Tell me what I want to know.”

Shallow breath eventually steadied with a leaden gulp, allowed to breathe as the lock loosened the slightest bit. “Yes, of course…” he surrendered, careful of the vice grip around him, his own claws still unable to reach anywhere on his captor, “What do you want to…?”

“You’ve got the brains,” Simon dared him, tightening his grip for only an instant, “So tell me.”

Tycho whined. “I never wanted to kill you -- you and Ryan -- you know that, right? I loved you both as though you were my own cubs and would never let harm befall you. I just wanted… just wanted to talk and perhaps I let my emotions get the better of me -- you must cede that eavesdropping on the conversations of adults was awfully naughty of you, Simon. I was scared for you both, that you told Ryan whatever you heard, it simply wouldn’t do if... well...” he cleared his throat at the impatient growl, “It was them, they said ‘No exceptions’ even though I vouched for your credibility but it was... it was the hyenas, they were... eager, you know how they are; I told them not to—”

“No,” Simon warned, tightening his grip again and taking another step toward the open balcony doors, “Who are they?”

“‘They’?” Tycho rationalized, “‘They’ could be almost any one—” he choked again, “Hemion! Hemion and Waters controlled every thing back then, every one and if it weren’t for me, then Ryan would have certainly been—”

“You and Kazar,” he demanded, “Talk.”

Sunlight hit Tycho’s face as they stepped outside and he whined louder. “Kazar was a terrible bigot and we had a falling out because of it but he came crawling back, begging forgiveness,” he rambled only to choke again, the soft breeze from the third story balcony displacing his bangs, “He was threatening me; I was the victim! Hemion pressured on him to pressure me, wanting more out of Pridelands but I wouldn’t budge,” and then choked, struggling to open his windpipe despite the hold.

“Tell the truth.”

“Truth? But ‘truth’ is in the eye of the beholder—” he bargained, only to find that his air supply was completely blocked for a few deathly seconds, the inside walls no longer visible as he recognized the panoramic view from his brother’s bedroom balcony, forcing himself to say, “All right. All right. Kazar was negotiating with Hemion and if we were going to keep the ZPD and Pleasure Island on board, I had to deliver him another Gévaudan… another Prima, except not as bloodthirsty after she was broken in.” Tycho rolled his eyes, sighing with his breath replenished. “There’s just no pleasing some mammals… some mammals who will be none-too-happy that I turned over a new leaf; so, I’m sure you -- who’ve always been my favorite nephew -- can appreciate that I might need some manner of… protection after baring these dark, terrible secrets of my soul. After all, Simon, I a- am family…”

Gravity suspended and the world flipped topsy-turvy as Tycho was flung over the tawny titan’s
shoulder… and the balcony, as well. His three-story scream ended, muffled by the stunt airbag awaiting him in the gardens below; engulfed by the inflatable mound, the dark lion scrambled back to solid ground, livid in his perception that he’d been played for a fool. Livid, up until he was yanked by his shirt onto the lawn and stared up into the cracking grins of the entire Gévaudan family of the Pride Rock estate. They had never looked at him like that before…

“Ahh, my friends,” Tycho endeared… pleaded.

“ ‘Friends’?” came the mirthless laugh of Shannon, the matriarch of the Gévaudan hyenas and leader of the King legal team, “After what you did to Prima? How you ‘broke’ her and then her crimes got pred-therapy started up again? Isn’t that right?” she then asked over her shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard,” came the chuckling confirmation of Benzo, her right-paw and head of King security, “and we just got a King’s ransom of documentation that you never showed us.”

They both then looked over to the bulk of their group, whose paw was still very much clinched around Tycho’s shirt collar and asked in unison, “Ed?” Ed, along with every other Gévaudan, was absolutely ecstatic to get a piece of Tycho.

Simon unleashed such a sigh of relief as he strode into the bedroom, “Don’t worry, Uncle Tycho’s not dead,” he announced to his Dad, plucking the minuscule mic hidden in his mane (which thankfully survived the taser assault; he whispered the “all-clear” code into it first, of course), “I just really wanted to toss him over the balcony… Oh,” he stopped, for his father was already out of the tub, dried, robed, and sitting on the end of the master bed with “Mom.” His paws shuffled, standing before them in his battle-burned uniform, paws behind him to resist the urge to start crying again. “The medicines,” Simon explained, “were ninety-percent placebo, I figure, only enough to promote a steady decline in your health but no doubt designed to kill you by attrition. Mom, I’m sorry I was so distant with you earlier and at the Luau; I would’ve said something… any thing sooner but… there were extenuating circumstances and… I needed to… umm…”

Sarah stood in her casual business attire of a turquoise skirt and cream blouse, and though Simon believed he had no more tears to cry, he spared her whatever he had left as she reached up to grasp his head, bringing it closer to touch her nose, and then her tongue, and then her lips to his face so that he could mirror the affection. “It doesn’t matter; you’re home.”

Chapter End Notes

The “Square-on-the-Mouth” wager that Nick mentioned is back in Brave, chapter 16. Reference Loyal, chapter 5 for the mention of Lanny’s “green-eyed uncle”, wherein there is also his description of how he remembers the Sahara Square sandstorm (note the “sticky red” could either describe a pool of blood or John’s sweaty fur). Reference Loyal, chapter 8, for the mention of the blue fox and how Nick explains it association to a fox clothed in blue that Lanny’s young mind tried to interpret, and then Loyal, chapter 25, for when John mentions that he wore a powder blue jacket.

As Tycho is based on Scar from “The Lion King” (whose original name is “Taka”), quite a bit of his dialog in this chapter comes from the showdown between him and Simba. Also referenced is how Scar is defeated by being thrown off a cliff to the awaiting hyenas -- Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed -- who in this story are named Shannon, Benzo, and Ed.
Thanks for reading and reviewing!
“Damn…”

“What do we do now?”

“‘Do’? Whatever do you mean, ‘do’?”

“Well, without Pridelands, how do we-?”

“Pridelands isn’t lost, merely… limited; there are other venues. No, the only real issue we face is putting Magnus back in Hopps Manor.”

“…So I’ll ask again, how do we-?”

“There is no question of ‘do’ in this circumstance, Foxy. Magnus will be attacked by an inmate as a ‘snitch’, his safety pending the trial brought into question, and then he will be made useful again while under house arrest. I suppose if we are to question anything, it is how long a leash we risk with him.”

“It’s Magnus.”

“Yes… her ladyship will certainly be kept busy, won’t she?”

“And we trust her with this?”

“None of this would be possible without her, so there isn’t much choice. You will come to learn that we are nothing if not patient, especially when the true ‘Zootopia’ is nearly within reach.”

It was awkward.

It was nerve-wracking.

It was necessary.

Esther was yet undecided on how the “local tod’s” good looks factored into the nerve-wracking awkwardness of it all. It was still the first month during her stay that Emperor Zevon Supai (as he apparently was known anywhere within the empire) flew a large fox tod in from the Valle del Rio - Valley of the River, the namesake of her family. He was the only one of eight sons who had not yet mated and wore a rugged demeanor that spoke of hard labor and integrity, something she always admired in her own father, Goliath. Esther had heard that daughters marry their fathers, in that they seek out mates who emulate their characteristics; while her mate, Nick Wilde, was not rugged, brawny, or much in the way of a hard-worker, he (like Pa) had a serenity to the fire burning just behind his eyes that melted her from the inside-out whenever she saw it (the irrefutable fact
that he was easy on the eyes helped in that regard). Wayna -- of simply “Wayne”, as she learned he preferred -- was polite to Esther, energetic in his speech, and as far as she could tell, was even less enthusiastic about the whole situation than she was (a definite plus in her book).

“So…” Esther tested in the language common to Reino del Sol, idly kicking her legs off the side of her bed near where Wayne rest his back, sitting on the floor with a knee propped up (and clearly didn’t care for the “spruced up” ensemble the llamas dressed him in; he’d already undone the top half of the shirt and Zevon deemed such initiative promising, considering how he gloated over a shoulder before being wheeled out of the room), “I suppose we should get to know each other, first…?”

“I don’t know what Zevon is expecting here,” Wayne griped, returning the language word-for-word, if thick with an unmistakable rural accent so unlike anyone’s in the palace, “but the sooner I can be sent back to the village, the better.”

“Well…”

“I know what he’s ‘expecting’,” he aptly responded, bringing both knees up to sprawl his arms across them, and then swatted the air in dismissal of the woolly tyrant, “it was all explained on the way over. But does he just expect two mammals to fall in love like it’s some divine edict etched into the stars?”

The vixen hummed. “I sincerely doubt it’s ‘love’ he’s expecting,” she idly dreaded, “but he seems ‘generous’ enough to ‘allow’ us to try it ‘willingly’,” and vocally spat as much sarcasm as was in her to produce (she had plenty to go around), “Although, if I may so say, Wayne, you can be quite poetic.”

The tod harrumphed. “Thanks, I suppose. By the alebrijes, I would defy that long-necked tarado to my dying breath; let him and his alchemists break my mind a thousand ways and a thousand ways again, but he cannot break my spirit.” He then sighed with the weight of his whole heart. “But if I did, it would only doom you to a horrible fate… knowing what must happen to put a kit in your belly…” Wayne looked up abashedly. “Apologies, I do not mean to be so crude in front of such a refined lady, as yourself.”

“No need for apologies, I’m only a ‘lady’ on paper,” she assured in good humor and then spoke a bit numbly, “Besides, Zevon’s already detailed as much… in front of the guards, his siblings, at dinner… every week since I’ve been here… twice this week, actually.”

“Pepita ten piedad…” Wayne reviled, “What could you have done to earn such ire?”

Esther smirked and daintily propped her chin on the back of her paw. “I broke his knee and dared him to take me to court,” she coolly boasted, “of course, doing so would have kept me in Zootopia, which was the original plan… never would have figured his ambition to win out over his ego… ‘No exceptions’, as he is also fond of saying.”

The local tod barked a vindictive laugh. “Novia, you have done more against our oppressors in a moon’s cycle than generations before you have in their entire enslavement. We can hold up that triumph against our crushing defeat when we cross over to join our ancestors.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Only a little,” he said, elbows on the bed, “We aguará guazú have accepted our lot in life as the cattle of llamas; too many have died trying to rise against them and ‘die free or live in chains’ is a fire long since doused. These Supais… they’ve always controlled the lands and species of Reino
del Sol, bringing only those they deem worthy into the modern age, ‘worthy’ enough to be of use to them. And then there is the loberia plant that the Riveras alone can grow but is so, so very precious to the Supais. Tell me, what has your Papa told you about us down here?” Wayne asked, pivoting in his seat.

Esther sighed and pushed her bangs back while flopping onto the bed, paws cradling her contemplation. “In complete honesty and totality did my beloved Pa answer every question I asked…”

Dawning realization groaned shortly until a smug chuckle followed suit. “Then he did not tell you every thing… we foxes dig our own holes far too often.”

“…All questions… except one.” The Zootopian defense attorney had watched prosecutors speak to a witness and knew how to get what she wanted out of them… and Wayne was someone she needed on her side. It was time for a calculated risk.

“Oh? Be I so bold to ask, what was it that he dared keep from his own kit?”

“In his defense, he was lied to, as well, and the truth was too harsh a reality for him to accept,” Esther admitted, “but I found out recently what became of my birth mother…” The vixen rolled onto her stomach and folded both arms beneath a morose chin to speak in a whisper that would not have been heard anyway, but the severity demanded a solemnity which Wayne seemed in concurrence of. “The Supais had slain her to break my father’s spirit… to make him believe that he had killed her while under the influence of the loberia flower; in this way, they sought to control him and me… but as to why I can only speculate.”

Wayne was dumbstruck by the news (or perhaps his indignation caught in his throat), “There is a special place in the Abyss for these llamas,” he determined, claws digging into his own palms until the faint smell of blood could be detected upon them. He then pivoted where he sat to better face her, practically kneeling at the bedside but he might as well had been conspiring through a fence. “Mayhaps I can shed some light,” he offered and prompted her nearer, to which she abided, “I was still nursing when the Supais took Nina and her beloved, Inti, for what they called ‘tribute’, but my older brothers told me what they knew,” he said and then smirked at her shock, “Sí, Nina’s tale is well whispered amongst the villages and Inti’s infamy as ‘El Chupacabra’ is quieter still. Her body was returned to the valley over thirty years ago, her neck torn open by -- what they claimed -- a murderer; Inti. We knew Inti was not a killer… a fighter, yes, but he could never harm Nina, not in a hundred years. They thought it was a set of jaws that did it but even we knew what the slash of a knife looked like, and figured that they so closely held onto that fear of a monster still…”

“Legend goes that the aguará guazú were like all predators, hunters of prey with teeth and claws and as it goes, the prey fashioned their spears and slings to fight with their numbers and strength until the predator learned those weapons, too, beginning the cycle anew in endless turning of either side winning over the other. One day, the aguará guazú begged the alebrijes to save them, to allow them to live in peace with prey and so Pepita -- the Rivera guardian -- gifted them a fruit to calm their bloodlust.”

“The wolf apple.”

“Sí, as you know to call it,” he said with a smirk, “but it came with a price, as all things must: the fruit’s flower could return them to their savage ways, as a reminder of what they left behind. The alebrijes were not without pity, and taught us how to bring back one who was fool enough to swallow a whole blossom.”
“Pa did tell me this story, part of it, at least,” Esther said, “but I thought ‘El Chupacabra’ was made up by the Supais after Pa escaped?”

“Half true; it is their name but it existed before. Eating the lobeira flower is taboo but there are kits who do taste a petal on a dare,” he shrugged and snickered, “Not only does a fox lose their senses but it also means one less fruit at harvest, you see, but a single petal will not ruin the plant nor its effects last too long.” He sighed another heavy sigh. “The Valley of the River, it is some of the most fertile soil in the empire and we were kept on it to farm crops, with tribute expected… it was a peaceful existence; still slaves but… peaceful. The llamas of old chanced a glimpse of an aguará guazú after they ate of the lobeira, you see, and so dreamed up the myth of ‘El Chupacabra’. We used to revile the story, once upon a time… until we realized that it protected us, keeping out the Supais for fear of a monster. In time, the myth no longer scared them and they figured out that it was a flower which caused the madness, figured it useful… so long as it was kept secret. It was then that they used the myth to their own advantage.”

“Is that why they took my parents as this… ‘tribute’?” she asked.

Wayne shrugged with the whole of his face as he glanced out the window of the facing wall, and then looked up at her. “We grow the lobeira with the essence of our bodies, you know this, but I figure Inti never told you that it passes through some of us differently.”

Esther blinked. “He… did not.”

“I don’t blame him,” the tod forgave, “Every seventh year, an aguará guazú must eat the essence within the lobeira seeds to strengthen their bond to it. Then, they might affect the leaves or the roots, the stems or the nectar… but there are some who make the flower bloom bluer, darker…” Wayne then lifted a bang to reveal his rich, brown irises… with a single azure wedge. “No one knows where it came from or who gets it but it changes the flower… and worse yet, no one knows if it is for good or evil. Nina had one such eye, completely filled… and Inti had two; like father, like daughter, ‘eh? The Supais always want a darker flower, so I would bet my tail that it’s why they chose me amongst all the single tods in the village… and not simply because I am muay guapo,” he punctuated with a smirk and then flicked his bang.

The vixen stared, her tail whisking behind her. “Of course… it must be some kind of dormant gene, correlated with the blue eyes…” she aloud pondered, “Could it just be a coincidence or is there some biological component linking it to the solanum lycocarpum, maybe to do with our gastral fungi…?”

Wayne grimaced and rolled his eyes, “Call it whatever fancy words you want, novia, all I know is that it’s caused me some small trouble as a kit but all the more as a tod. Nothing terrible, of course, but all I’ve got is this little chip, I can’t imagine how it must have been for Inti. Well,” he then paused and bounced his foot some in anxious anticipation, “since we’re ‘getting to know each other’, there’s a very specific reason why I, at my age, have no kits… or mate,” he snarled.

Esther transitioned from her calculations to smirk and lean in a bit closer. “I’m sure there are actually two reasons in that statement but one likely leads into the other; so tell me, Wayne, who’s afraid to pop the question… you or him?”

“Him,” Wayne immediately barked and groused at no one present, “The huevón finds every excuse to dodge commitment and work. Curse it all, why do I love him so much…” He then swooned a little, “But oh, how he yearned for me when the Supais flew off… it was like falling for him all over again… too little, too late for us, I guess. Don’t get me wrong, you are a beautiful vixen but I am practically spoken for… not that it matters,” he regretted and then stood to shrug off his shirt, tossing it irreverently onto a nearby chair.
“Whoa,” Esther stated, reeling as she looked up at the bare, farm-hardened back, “Wayne…”

He glanced over his shoulder and then hung his head, paws to his waist. “I remain forever defiant in my heart but I must do what I can to spare us both of what would happen if I don’t perform. Tamaya…” he continued, sitting on the bed and grasping his own paws, thumbs twiddling, “Esther, we are not in control of our own fates; the Supais have long since proven themselves stronger than the alebrijes, who can only comfort us after we are tossed away like rinds.” He then turned around and sat upon his ankles, paws braced to his thighs as he blinked away the mist in his eyes, “We will stay true in our hearts as we do what he must amongst the living… and reconcile with one another on the other side of Eternity, as we aguará guazú have always done. So, for now…” he concluded and scooted closer, “I shall do my best to… perform.”

Esther politely cleared her throat with a grimace of her own before speaking very, very low, “Flattered though I am that you would suspend your true feelings for our sakes (and trust me when I say this, your fears are well-founded considering who they brought in to ‘prepare my body’ for this) I was about to say…” she stumbled over her words some and Wayne looked frozen in anticipation, “the thing is, I have a mate back in Zootopia whose kit I am already carrying.” She awkwardly grinned and groaned through his teeth, “Surprise, you’re technically the first mammal I told this to.”

Wayne’s jaw flapped uselessly from his absolute lack of words but when he finally did manage to say anything, it was a lengthy chain of sacred affirmations as he made the sign of the four-leaf clover, and then collapsed backward onto the bed with both paws covering his face to gently tremble.

“Oh… did I? A slip of the tongue, niña,” she slyly pressed, scooting closer until she was nearly hip-to-hip with him, “We foxes don’t lie to each other up north… is that different down here in the south?”

The vixen’s gaze flattened. “As if you gave me much of a chance! You immediately went from ‘Woe is me, I’ll never see my lazy boyfriend again’ to ‘Woe is me, I guess we’re making kits now.’”

Wayne crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “You need to work on your attitude, novia.”

“That makes two of us, novia,” she shot back. A happy wag of the tail was shared between them and in all honesty, the vixen relaxed in knowing that the large foxes down south were exactly like every other fox up north, and was truly happy to have someone to banter with. “A question, if I may,” the vixen continued, speaking low again, “Why did you call me ‘Esther’?”

The tod’s eyes shifted in another grimace, one far more awkward, “Oh… did I? A slip of the tongue, Tamaya, nothing more.”

“Wayne,” she slyly pressed, scooting closer until she was nearly hip-to-hip with him, “We foxes don’t lie to each other up north… is that different down here in the south?”

Wayne chuckled to clear his throat. “No, of course not…” he corrected and then leaned in as covertly as he could, “I am told that you are ‘Tamaya Rivera’ and while a beautiful name, we Riveras know that…” he groaned, “you see… the Supais, they keep all manner of their devices away from us but… sometimes the guards might lose a… a TV or radio… or a VCR, I think it was called.” He drummed his fingertips together. “I was not one who could do such a thing, but some
of our cleverest foxes found paperwork and tools to get these things working… picking up errant signals… I only know the words, you see, so don’t ask me how they did it.”

Esther leaned in closer, eyes and smile bright as her tail swept behind her.

“It was… a year ago, I think? After Zootopia was beset by savage monsters… and then it all turned out to be a hoax. Well, the lion was on trial and… I think it was Inti’s mother who recognized a vixen that could only be her grandkit… especially when her blue eyes flashed silver, just like her Papa’s. That was when we learned about ‘Esther Gray’.”

Esther beamed, not even faltering as she recalled the misspelling on the newscast. “And, for the record, my last name is spelled with an ‘e’, not an ‘a’. It sounds the same. I can’t help but wonder why you were so hesitant to tell me about this, though.”

He grimaced some more. “There was always a fear amongst the llamas that we would rise up against them, as done in the past, a ‘revolution’ that would do little more than convince the Supais that we are no longer worthwhile to keep enslaved… or alive. There have been some… many who tried to rally the other large foxes into fighting back, nonviolently, that we should instead not perform the ritual to strengthen the lobeira seeds and so let them wither and die… and us along with it; they needed some divine signal to show them it was time to act and that we would still be protected by the alebrijes. Some thought that it was when they returned Nina to us and so we’d already began to weaken the plant… but then you showed up in Zootopia. I…” he regretted to inform, “doubted that there ever was anyone coming to save us. And with all due respect, Esther, that kit in your belly saves your tail but I cannot see how it will help us.”

A coy brow quirked as to entice Wayne closer. “Are you familiar with the name… ‘Loxley’?”

Incredulity answered with a severe arch of both brows and a blink. “Every kit knows that name, one of those supposed ‘saviors’ who promised to come back for us. As I recall, his tail is all that’s left and it’s sitting on an ofrenda in the village. Next, you’ll tell me that some ‘Loxley’ is waiting for the opportune moment back in Zootopia.”

“A ‘Loxley’ is whose kit I’m carrying,” Esther reported and then used a single finger to close Wayne’s swinging jaw, “and I feel awfully sorry for the Supais when my mate is done with them. Now,” she continued, “this won’t be entirely in his paws, you see, I have been reading up on the laws of Reino del Sol to figure out a way to get every one out and up north.”

“Pepita ten piedad…” Wayne marveled and exhaled several times before he replied, “What… what can I do to help?”

Esther sighed and shook her head… but then brightly smiled. “We need to get you back to the villages, everyone needs to prepare for the exodus. I’m afraid I don’t have a timetable… this has to be done legally and my studying the emigration laws is slow… agonizing, even. But… I have faith in my friends, who are trying with all their might to get me back… I know they are. The best I can advise is to keep an eye out for… someone, probably rabbits—”

“Rabbits?”

“Yes… probably. Look, that’s my best explanation right now, flying by the seat of my pants as I am, but I know we can save everyone so long as we remain faithful,” Esther assured, gripping Wayne’s paws. It wasn’t the best set of circumstances she could’ve hoped for… but Wayne’s help was certainly something she could work with.

He smiled and gripped hers back. “I’ve always been something of a cynic… and there’s plenty
here to warrant cynicism… but in all my years I’ve never felt like we aguará guazú had more of a chance for our freedom than now. You get me back to the villages and I shall spread the word.”

Esther nodded valiantly as hope swelled in her bosom, allowing even a hint of slyness to lace her tone. “You are a light in the darkness, Wayne, and though I’ve only been here a month, barring a world-shaking vent, getting everyone out of here is practically a foregone conclusion.”

Hopping ahead…

“Absolutely, it’ll be a piece of cake!” Stu Hopps assured Dr. Madge Honey-Badger as they inspected the greenhouse erected in an especially secluded part of Preds’ Corner, “The solanum lycocarpum isn’t the first piece of produce to come out of Reino del Sol’s cerrado, just the rarest. So rare, in fact, that it’s thought to have never existed.”

“You sound awfully excited about this,” Madge pointed out, gently lifting one of the gray-white fuzzy leaves of the sprouting wolf apple plant, growing alongside a whose-who of precisely chosen flora to aid it. The badger looked about with a pang of disappointment… she wanted to preserve the secreted patch of farmland for after the inevitable collapse of society. It didn’t take much to convince her that saving an entire species from enslavement by providing their exclusive nourishment was a bit more important than her doomsday farm, though, when it was revealed to her that it was meant to feed more than a single large fox.

“I am!” he agreed, giving an okay to one of the horticulturalists he pawpicked to work in the greenhouse. “Always wanted to try my green thumb at something as exotic as this. It’s like finding a rare treasure, and since Goliath’s got a few seeds, I think we can get a crop growing in no time. What a blessing that my cousin decided to stay after the TBR; we wouldn’t even stand a chance without their expertise on tropical vegetation. I’ll admit, what You-Know-Who gave us is certainly one of the strangest fruits I’ve yet seen…”

Dr. Honey nodded and grunted her affirmation. “I hate to give a tyrant any kind of credibility but that llama’s right; I checked Goliath’s pH levels and whatnot several times… at his age, there’s just no way his system would be good for the wolf apple, not with all the pharmaceuticals over the decades that compensated for its crucial nutrients. There’s no denying that Bo was a huge help coming up with a diet for Gideon to get him prepped for the seeds; he’s only half large fox but young enough to make up the difference,” she then smiled as they exited the single row of sprouts, “I would happily give credit to that bunny, he knows his stuff when it comes to the dietary nuances of both predator and prey physiology.”

“Luckily for us, Gid was able to come back before moving into the city, and boy, he sure was embarrassed about eating those seeds… more about them coming out again, I’d say,” Stu joked and then sighed as he removed his cap and rubbed his ears back, “It’s a darn shame about his bakery, though, I’m going to miss those little sweet potato muffins he made… but I’m pleased-as-peaches for him, and I could always order them,” the Hopps patriarch decided, righting his cap, “If anyone deserves a better life, it’s Gid, and by his own paws, too! I’m finding it hard to believe I ever held an ill thought for the fox.”

She exited the greenhouse, its surrounding trees towered but for plenty of hours a day, sunlight streamed onto the plants along with the most up-to-date indoor sun-lamps on the market. Madge paused in the antechamber. “Thanks for the tour, Doc, I’m glad this spit of land is getting some use. Honestly, I am. I should get back to the clinic, though; now that Lanny Wild is Simon King, I don’t think he’ll be heading out here anytime soon,” and sadly chuckled.
“Yeah, I’m happy for him, too. He was always punctual when delivering medicine to the Hopps house for those few days at the TBR and mindful of our crops, even though it meant parking such a distance from the door, so I’m sure he’ll do great things for Pridelands. That said, I hear he would have been a great addition to the Corner.”

“He did say that his uncles are looking for a place to retire and that one of them is a former breath-of-life nurse, so maybe we might still get one,” the badger mused on her way out the door. The greenhouse atmosphere was regulated to the ideal humidity and temperature for the wolf apples, along with the ideal assortment of airborne pollen and insects to keep them growing; all according to design.

“Hey, Mr. Hopps.”

“Oh, Bo! We were just talking about you,” Stu amiably said as he ushered the earthen-brown bunny over to a table beneath a bug-net canopy that doubled to help keep the moisture out, “and what are you doing here? You should be resting after the training Phil puts you through.”

Bo chuckled, “You know me, I can’t stay still very long and Goliath needed an extra paw with the eastern frame of the greenhouse, checking its support and stuff. Turns out this place needs a beehive and he’s looking at ways to expand.”

“Bees, huh?” Stu wondered and rubbed his chin, sitting himself down at a table and referencing some outlandishly detailed notes he kept, “I figured the carpenter ants were all the insect-attention these plants needed but if they also need pollen distributors… I could bring in an apiarist if that’s the case.”

“How about Max?” Bo offered, taking a seat opposite at the table, “He’d be happy to help.”

Doubtful eyes glanced upward, cap tilted back some. “Max Hareton?”

“One of the best apiarists at Honey Hills,” he extrapolated.

Stu grunted in thought. “Well, if you say so then that’s good enough for me. Give him a call, see if he can come down here. There should be room in the budget if he’s willing to work pro bono until the next expense period is submitted; that burst pipe last week was a doozy of a head-scratcher but nothing we can’t deal with.”

“Mr. Hopps,” Bo sighed in good humor.

“‘Stu’,” Stu cordially insisted.

“You know you’re the only one working in the constraints of a ‘budget’, right? Nick already said money wasn’t an issue—”

“It’s a matter of principle, Bo,” the paternal rabbit assured, “we are rabbits and as such, we strive for efficiency. It’s in our DNA.”

“Hey Doc,” the lead horticulturist said, an older bunny graying around the edges but boasting a coat still sleek with burnt orange, smiling as she grabbed another cup of coffee, “the turfgrass you put down is doing wonders for subjects four and five, but three and one look like they’re struggling a bit.”

Stu groaned and drummed his paws on the table, soon jutting out his lower jaw and jotting something down. “Which means number two…” and rubbed the eraser of his pencil behind his ear, “I’ll bet it’s the worms. Cut down on the turfgrass a bit,” he told the graying orange bunny,
“add just a pinch more calcium to their feed, maybe a little lime, not too much, though. With any luck, we won’t need to add any gypsum.” She nodded as she sipped her coffee and exited the tent. “Who’d’ve thought number two was the problem child, ‘eh?” he laughed to the younger rabbit, “Sneaky little guy, using the worms for deeper root-paths… I’ll need to keep a closer eye on that one.”

“So…” Bo wondered aloud, “why have I never noticed that ‘Doc’ is your nickname?”

He rolled his pencil between his fingers a bit. “Be cause … no one at the house calls me ‘Doc’, it’s strictly a… professional nickname.”

“Even Dr. Honey called you ‘Doc’… and she’s actually a doctor.”

“It’s because he’s a doctor of agriculture!” the graying orange bunny leaned in to say before disappearing again.

“Oh, it’s something of a silly name-” Bo began to say.

“It’s an honorary doctorate-” Stu immediately rationalized. Their simultaneous utterances twitched the paternal rabbit’s nose, so he set his pencil down and gestured in wholehearted agreement, “A silly name, yes, that’s it exactly, correct.”

Bo’s face contorted in abject curiosity as he leaned forward on the table, ears pointed where his eyes focused. His own nose twitched and lips pursed as he studied a shrinking Stu. “An honorary doctorate…?” Bo repeated in awe, “So… you are a doctor of agriculture?”

Stu groaned and wheeled his paws. “No, not really, I mean, I wasn’t even going for a doctorate-”

“But… even honorary doctorates are recorded at BU and I never saw your name there… granted, the agricultural doctorate program requires a transfer to ZU since BU isn’t actually a university, technically speaking, but even so, if you studied at BU-”

“Not BU,” Stu admitted under his breath, bringing his clasped paws a bit closer to his chest, “What I mean to say, is that sometimes when someone is going for a degree and their thesis gets recognized by a fellow at a certain college or two-”

“Wait, what degree is this? And which colleges? And what thesis? Are you talking about a bachelor’s degree?”

Stu pursed his lips and wrung his paws. “Master’s,” he muttered out the side of his mouth and then cleared his throat at the younger buck’s aghast expression, “I was working on my masters’ theses and apparently the idea that interconnectivity of vegetation from around the world could be used to accomplish hitherto undreamt of crop abundance without the reliance on certain destructive genetic engineering practices was… pretty darn smart, I guess.”

Bo’s jaw swung for a bit. “But… Judy would’ve said something if you had a masters from ZU.”

“They’re not from ZU,” Stu belched out and then clapped both paws over his mouth, ears pinned back as they would go, before spreading his palms out to placate the still aghast Bo, “They… might be from the Agricultural College at the Academy of Science in Liondon…” Bo’s jaw hit the table. “One for plant husbandry and another for theoretical botanical chemistry… My Dad sent a lot of my siblings and me to a boarding school in Liondon, we studied there until adulthood, and I earned my masters… es, but only the two of them. As I said, I wasn’t even going for a doctorate; I could struggle through calculus well enough but linear algebra? I just missed the top ten for the class, ergo, there was no way I would qualify for advancement so they sent me back to Knotash
“But Knotash wasn’t for me; everything there was so artificial (just like the wolf apple I got from You-Know-Who, poor thing needs lots of TLC) and I got in trouble all the time for working in the garden, just covered in dirt, constantly, so when I actually had the schooling for it, I wanted to be a carrot farmer, to make the world a better place one carrot at the time. And I did!” he declared, “The Hopps farm has never been more prosperous (you should see how big I can grow vegetables!), we sell what we need to keep the place going, and all of our extra produce is given away to struggling families. Bunnies are fed; bunnies learn important life skills. What could be better than that?”

The broad-shouldered bunny needed some time to gather his thoughts on the subject as said shoulders slumped to either side. “But… why haven’t you told anyone?”

“Because it leads to these awkward conversations!” Stu pleaded, paws wringing as he held them to his chest. He huffed and rubbed under his cap, “I know the world sees us as dumb bunnies… even city-bunnies say it about farm-bunnies… but the truth is that doesn’t affect me. I’ve raised hundreds of good, honest rabbits, I keep the Tenets, and I love my mate more than life itself. That’s all that matters to me. My degrees… they’re some where in the attic. What’s important is what’s here,” Stu said, patting his heart and then tapping his noggin, “and here. Bonnie and I settled on our dreams of becoming carrot farmers and we couldn’t be happier.”

Bo’s reverence shifted to incredulity as his face reflected the cognitive gears turning in his head. “With all due respect, Stu… what do you mean ‘settled’? With, an honorary doctorate and two masters degrees from the Academy of Science in Liondon (which I’m still wrapping my brain around, by the way) then you could’ve gone anywhere in the world!” he then paused as his brain wrapped around another concept, “And what do you mean Bonnie settled, exactly?”

Stu shrugged and drummed his paws on the table again. “Bonnie… she didn’t look up in fear whenever a bird flew over,” he explained, almost in awe, “she wanted to be flying right up there with them. Her mother, rest her soul, would allow nothing of the sort so Bon ran away from home to be a pilot but the only ‘ace’ she got was on the tests; got motion sick too easily, you see, and crashed her glider after passing out from the G’s. So… Bonnie returned to the soil whence she sprung and stayed ever since.”

 “…And what was the dream you had to… ‘settle’ about?” Bo dared to ask.

The question seemed to war with Stu, “You know, I don’t think…” he retorted, looked the young buck directly in the eyes, and shook his head, “Actually, you might be the one to tell this to. My dream was that my Dad would accept me for who I was… my other siblings went on to work in Liondon’s Parliament as advisors and consuls, stuff like that…” He then rubbed his chin and grunted, “Well… me and Magnus came back, and Dad really hoped I would be the one to follow in his pawprints but no, that was Magnus.” Stu idly flipped through his notebook, propping his cheek up in a pout. “He never really… Dad was proud of me at the end but he didn’t say it, exactly, he just kind of meant it. I guess he never will, now.” He sniffed and rubbed his nose on the back of his sleeve. “But that’s life, isn’t it? It’s great to have dreams, so long as you don’t believe in them too much; gives you a little elbow room, just in case they don’t pan out. Judy’s a special case, of course,” he then exulted, “has her mother’s spirit in droves.”

Bo found he could agree with the Hopps patriarch. “No doubt about that.”

“And…” Stu continued, “I know Judy can stand on her own two paws, so she doesn’t really need the encouragement that knowing about this would give. My life in Knotash… that was another Stu Hopps. I went back for Dad’s funeral which was… that was hard. Besides, Graham’s the big bun
over there and I wouldn’t want to throw dirt in his warren by digging my own, you know?”

“Right, of course,” Bo assured to an amiable nod, his cognitive gears clicking into place, “Speaking of, I’ll be receiving them at the train station tonight.”

“Another late night arrival,” the paternal rabbit noticed, “Will they want the full welcome, or…?”

A shaking head and grunt politely declined such an offer. “Graham’s still a little… standoffish, not to mention he’s also recovering, so I think he needs to be eased into the full bunny experience.”

Few would argue the logic behind why a train ride into Bunnyburrow would be quiet, especially at night. After all, Zootopia’s rural outskirts are not frequented save for grand festivals (like the TBR) and by those who commute between the city and the farmlands on a semi-regular basis. As far as Judy Hopps and her butterscotch-furred traveling companion were concerned, the train ride was plenty quiet (and even the engine sounds were muted inside the passenger car as they sat in the glass-dome headroom compartment at the top of the train, what with the privacy it afforded). Judy read the latest issue of Mammals magazine (granted, the information therein wasn’t up-to-the-minute accurate but its pages didn’t require a steady Internet connection and the ads were less intrusive), particularly the article about the pending wedding of Simon King and Natalia Boone.

A single month had passed since Simon King returned to the Pride Rock estate… and already the world had shifted. A grand ceremony joining Simon and Nat in holy matrimony… a book deal about his life as Lanny Wild, “Waiting To Be King”… a disbanding of “The Prince’s Guard”… and that’s nothing to say of Prideland Enterprises’ stock value… Simon’s return and Tycho’s incarceration sent tremors throughout not only the business world but every aspect thereof. Perhaps what affected Judy most was how long it’d been since she got to hang out with one of her newest friends… she was, of course, over-to-moon happy that he discovered his true self and reunited with his family but… she hoped to have known him a bit longer, considering all they’d been through in so short a time.

Graham glanced at the magazine’s cover as Judy flipped another page and then back to the train’s ceiling, his feet idly kicking. “All good things…” he consoled.

“It’s not the end,” she kindly corrected, “I’m sure once all of these life-changes happen, he’ll make time for his friends. Simon’s just that kind of lion.”

“You knew Lanny,” he teased, smirking at her from over the edge of her reading material, “This ‘Simon’ fellow could very well be just like his uncle.”

“Or he could be like his father, Memphis.”

“Who you don’t know, either.”

“I’ll have you know he sent me a text just the other day,” Judy boasted, setting her magazine aside to converse with the inverted rabbit sprawled adjacent. The cushioned benches they occupied were of a size larger than they and so there was ample space to stretch out. As for Graham, he lay with his feet up on the seat back with ears dangling.

“Oh, what, ‘New phone, who’s this?’.”

“He and Nat attached a video message, for your information,” she revealed, “Simon regrets not being available but apparently (and understandably) he’s been dealing with a lot of trouble… and admirers from the past twenty years. It’s actually one of the reasons why he and Nat are hitching up so quickly,” Judy explained, “Not that I blame him… I wouldn’t wish fame on my worst
enemy. A handsome, young, kind, and now rich lion like Simon? Shot him to spot number one of Zootopia’s Most Eligible.”

“Speaking from experience,” Graham continued to tease, “You do have a type, don’t you?”

Judy harrumphed and pinned back her warm ears. “Yes and that type is ‘good-hearted’, whatever their physique might be,” she scholastically extrapolated with a raised finger, which then pointed, “And what’s with the mood, all of a sudden? You are just oozing indignation.”

Dark purple eyes rolled. “And your emotional perception never ceases to amaze.”

“C’mon, sit up,” she invited.

Graham sighed but abided, righting himself along with his teal-and-maroon striped t-shirt; a fashion choice he argued against but Judy insisted on (the casual attire better fit the season, as did her red v-neck with white flower patterns, and aided their discretion in traveling). “It is a sequence of things, my dear Candleflame, first and foremost this whole exodus predicament. Pridelands was only just progressing business relations into Reino del Sol with Tycho King at the helm, and well, let’s just say that getting my aeronauts down there has become… trickier.”

Judy grinned condescendingly. “And here I thought you liked a challenge.”

“I do not ‘like’ challenges, I ‘love’ them,” he sharply corrected, “I thrive in adversity but one must know one’s limits, and I would never shoulder so tremendous a burden this far afield of my expertise…” he grumbled and sunk back into his seat, “I planned to exploit the closing window of connections established with the Supais when Tycho and Magnus were still bedfellows but their dual incarcerations has forced me to pull back my paw lest it be lopped off. Ecstatic though I most surely am for those villains brought to justice… I cannot deny a certain bitterness that it happened before any good could be made of their villainy. As it stands, I must rely on my own over-abundant charisma and empathy to convince the aeronauts that ours is a just cause worthy enough to validate this threat of life, limb, and sacred honor… with out completely revealing that which we conspire,” he dramatized, “Return to me the days of mercenaries too easily sated with money…”

She cradled his head to rest on her shoulder, gently rubbing an ear. “There there, Little Moth, you’ve already made great strides in learning empathy. I’m fairly certain you screamed louder than all those young bunnies did when they rushed love upon you.”

He grumbled anew. “Their zealous elation was a bit too much to handle all that once, so accustomed to solitude and apathy as I am,” Graham rationalized, “ergo, the other issue in my sequence of buggery: my body is recovered enough to ambulate without too much assistance… but I was fooling myself to think I could be more than the boogie-rabbit lurking around the corner,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Now now,” she shushed and hugged closer, “you’re not the only one who ‘loves a challenge’.”

“…Thank you.”

Judy gave him another squeeze and rubbed her forehead to his.

“You have no idea what it’s like.”

“Actually… I, too, have been alone in a room full of rabbits.”

“No, not that…” Graham rued, laying on the bench to rest his head in her lap, once more studying the ceiling, “I do not think I am dead to the emotions around me, per se… it’s just that… I feel
emptiness, more oft than not, and it always reminds me of Magnus. We leave impressions on those around us, you know, we bunnies.”

“Especially on other bunnies,” Judy agreed, gently caressing one of his coffee-spotted ears as he folded his paws on his stomach, fingers tapping in idle thought, “primarily, one might say.”

“I could almost see it -- hear it -- the influence that he had on others… perhaps because I once invested the totality of my soul into emulating it. The way their speech faltered, their pulse quickened… like a terminal fear conjured by his mere memory. He did not simply convince, my dear Candleflame, he controlled, condemned… the vitriol that eroded until there was nothing left but his likeness.” The dark purple of his eyes snapped to the bright violet of hers. “I daresay… I can almost feel it in you now… a prickling on your nape? A chill in your bones? A pit in your stomach?”

Judy huffed and pinched Graham’s arm, causing him to flinch and glare. “Yes, and that will be quite enough of that,” she rebuked, “You’ve spent far too long harboring that nasty mindset and if we’re to make a proper bunny out of you, then you’ll feel a good deal more than Abyssal dread. Fear is a healthy motivator,” Judy instructed, “and sadness a cleansing of the bad which happens to us, however, we mustn’t ruminate on that which does such terrible harm to us.”

Thorough rubbing and eye-narrowing spoke volumes about Graham’s current mindset. “Tell that to the rest of Hopps Manor. I’m not sure which I’m happier to take a holiday from, the mind-numbing boredom of the processing plant or the hollow shells of rabbits wandering the halls back home. It feels like they’re just waiting for him to come back.” He then mused and smiled up at Judy, “Perhaps I should bring you in, as a proper guest this time, to revitalize the lot of them? If fear is the motivator and sadness the cleanser, then surely joy must be the healer.”

The gray bunny endeared such a compliment, sweetly moaning as she braced her bosom. “I’d be happy to,” she then chuckled but then flatly continued, “Will Clea be there?”

Graham grunted as he sat up. “I should be able to schedule you around her well enough.”

“Why, what else does she do?”

“It’s not supposed to be public, but…” he considered, “Clea is one of the therapists for Bucky Stagmire’s recovery. Now,” he promptly continued, “I needn’t be empathic to know what that face means so let me cut you off at the pass: Uncle Ozzy insisted on the position and she wouldn’t dare any funny business with him watching her every move. Remember, Mother was top of her field as a psychiatrist… it’s a shame that he cannot see past her victimhood veneer but here we are. To her credit, I can directly attest to her best behavior at home; it seems that without Magnus, any authority she might’ve clung to is long since evaporated.”

Judy crossed her arms and grumped out the window. “I still don’t trust her.”

Graham folded both paws behind his head. “As well you shouldn’t but she has no power, and the other therapists attending Stagmire were already vetted; all above board, so fret not of any repeat of her secret pred-therapy atrocities.”

“Well… I do trust you and the Felix, and it’s not like she’ll be able to get away with anything. I really need to learn to stop worrying so much, I guess, but maybe… maybe she has learned her lesson enough to not start up anymore ‘experiments’… and will finally give up the ship when Magnus is locked away for good. By-the-by,” Judy then conversed, “I’m no lie detector, like Nick, but I can’t help but feel that you have one other ‘issue’.”
The butterscotch rabbit looked aghast. “What ever are you talking about?”

“A ‘sequence’ usually implies more than two, Graham.”

He huffed and rolled his eyes again, but harder. “Your emotional perception does more than amaze, at times…” Graham rebuffed but then turned about to face out the window, instead, on his knees with his elbows propped up to rest his face into crossed arms, puff-tail gently wiggling, “None can deny that you are a wonderment for the spirit, Judy, and I am grateful to you for many a thing. You convinced me to get rid of Gideon’s muzzle… I can’t help but feel as though what I had in mind wasn’t the right thing to do, though…”

“Guilt, have we?” Judy implied and gently nudged his shoulder, to which he glowered a bit, “Listen, we told him about it beforehand and he agreed to it. You sat down with him, one-on-one, while Lory and I went to do other stuff; we came back and everything seemed to be okay,” she brightly said and then leaned in to tenderly infer, “Unless… not every thing was okay?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, watching the moonlit scenery change outside, harshly contrasted trees whisking by behind his reflection, “I’d heard about the Greys and their eyes changing color… I saw it on Esther once or twice but seeing it on Gideon…” he shrugged with the whole of his face and shoulders, “I haven’t the foggiest idea what to make of it.”

Judy tried her best not to let anything about her full knowledge of Gideon’s shift in eye color come out. “He got pretty angry, huh?” she feigned since it was the more common reason as to why Esther’s eyes turned from blue to gray.

“No,” Graham wondered, “he barely raised his voice or scowled or anything of the sort…”

So far as she knew, Gideon harbored a fractured identity, a coping mechanism for when he was tortured within an inch of his life in pred-therapy… according to Nick, the “other-Gideon” was a lion named “Lenny” and -- as was expected of the Grey family but unexpected of him -- his eyes changed color to reflect heightened emotions… in Gideon’s case, it meant that he reverted back to that coping mechanism. Judy had never met “Lenny” before but apparently, Nick met him twice (and he didn’t even know it the first time) so to hear that Graham might’ve met him… “Considering he saw the muzzle whose scars he bears…” Judy waxed poetic.

“Perhaps…” he allowed and then rubbed his head, eyes gazing at the space between the train and the parting landscape, “In my idiotic days of youth, I taunted and teased Gideon into being the monster that I wanted him to be, maybe so that I would not be alone… and yet now, as adults… I felt like I actually… connected with Gideon, in that moment he saw the muzzle…”

A soft, high gasp of delight preceded deep concern, “You’re not happy about that? Connecting with another mammal -- a fox -- should be an amazing feeling.”

He looked to her with those deep, purple eyes. “Except… I cannot fathom as to how it happened. Could it be because we both suffered through pred-therapy… if on different sides of the cage? Or… were we both reviled as a monster while yearning for acceptance? I cannot say for certain but…” and shook his head to sink back into his seat, facing forward, “It’s ri dic ulous, never mind.” He glanced at her imploring gaze and huffed. She leaned in to gaze harder and so he crossed his arms, looking away. He sighed. “But… it felt like it wasn’t Gideon I spoke to,” Graham muttered and swatted the air in disgust, “Fanciful nonsense, so clearly a fault of my fledgling empathy playing such preposterous tricks ‘pon so rational a mind as I. In any case,” Graham continued, only just missing Judy’s silent shock and awe, “the muzzle is his now to destroy as he sees fit.”
“I’m honestly surprised you didn’t.”

“Judy,” he endeared, “destruction is its own catharsis and while I did wear the cursed contraption in fits of insanity, it is not my blood rusting its metal. No, only Gideon can destroy that… thing and all that it represents.”

Her purple eyes narrowed and lips puckered in thought. “You get a certain… glint in your eye when you’re esoteric. Why can only Gideon destroy it?”

He scoffed and smirked… a bit boastfully. “Because it was made for him, my dear,” he answered and soaked in the burning curiosity of her features, “I would stake my reputation as an artisan that that muzzle was a commissioned piece, no simple over-the-counter restraint for a small adult predator (repurposed for a fox kit) was that.”

“Child muzzles have been illegal in Zootopia for decades, reserved solely for violent adult offenders,” Judy fitfully argued, “What happened with Gideon was sixteen years ago.”

“Yes,” Graham airily considered, “it’s hard to say how old that piece is exactly but if I were to set my luck to it…” he said and reached down to rub his right foot, “that muzzle can’t be too much older than I am; and by extension, you as well. Another coincidence, however morbid, for us to gnaw on, ‘eh?”

Judy grumbled, crossing both arms and legs with introspection. “And I don’t like coincidences… Gid’s pred-therapy can’t have been planned that far in advance, right? According to Nick, Magnus wouldn’t even have considered kitnapping someone off the farms until at least six years after, when the new child protection laws went into effect. Maybe it’s nothing…” she said and brought out her notebook and carrot pen to jot something down, “but I’ll bring it up with Nick when I get back to the city.”

The butterscotch rabbit chuckled. “You and he are partners again, are you not?” he supposed.

“We are,” Judy boasted and flipped her notebook shut to store it in her bag once more, recalling how her temporary partner -- Officer Maurice Fitzpouchrick, a rather cheery wallaby -- was even cheerier to find out that he needn’t run on all cylinders with her with every case anymore, “and it will be just the thing we need to prime our pumps. For now, though, I need to focus on finding that white book of Pop-pop’s.”

Graham grinned. “You truly are a wonderment for the spirit, Candleflame.”

“Hello again, Mr. Stagmire.”

“Dr. Hopps, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise, and please, ‘Clea’ will do.”

“If you insist, heh. Is that a new necklace?”

“This old thing? Hardly, it’s simply visible due to my more… comfortable attire. The season is what it is. So, how are you feeling today?”

“I’m still getting used to pants but I can almost stop myself from rubbing my antlers on nearby objects and surfaces.”

“They’re coming in rather nicely, despite the regular trimming over the past three years. Tell me,
do you recall how your antlers were before you went under?”

“Before Ramses shot me by accident, you mean? Well… I don’t think they’ve ever been this sturdy; they almost feel like buffalo’s horns. I’m not entirely sure what that has to do with my mental state, though, unless you’re wondering how I feel about drywall dust on my head.”

“Merely a curiosity is all, I find that physical changes to the body can affect the mind in subtle but definite ways. As an example, you have grown much more mindful of your cranial orientation in the past month, something I recall you’ve always been… gravely serious about.”

“Clea… must we play this game?”

“‘Game’?”

“Yes, where you insist that your intentions are wholly altruistic.”

“Bucky…”

“Mr. Stagmire.”

“…Mr. Stagmire, you know that I’m no longer under the thumb of Magnus…”

“Don’t cry, Clea, it’s beneath you.”

“Truly, I do not know where this is coming from! I thought this would be the chance I needed to redeem myself… for all that I did because of him…”

“As we’ve undergone mutual observation for a month, I am unconvinced that you really are out from under that psychopath. So tell me, Dr. Clea, what exactly are you hoping to learn here?”

“I’m just trying to help …”

“I have two other psychiatrists, and you know what they say about chefs and kitchens.”

“I’m sorry, I was… just… I… oh… ohh…”

“…Clea? Clea! Someone!”

“Dr. Hopps!”

“Dr. Hopps?”

“Patty… up we go…”

“Ozzy…? My dear brother, when did all these mammals… oh, stars above, I’m so embarrassed…”

…

“Bucky, what happened in there?”

“Nothing, Oswald, for which I am grateful.”

“Really, because you sure have an ironic sense of gratitude. Do you have any idea what it took to assemble this team so quickly? Patty knows she did wrong and is trying to make up for it, and yet you exploited her weak constitution… for what? Just what were you expecting my sister to do, exactly?”
“Why is she even on the team? One psychiatrist is excessive.”

“Because no one else in the world has her expertise on the conscious-subconscious relationship, and you know it.”

“My subconscious is absolutely ducky, thank you!”

“You are eating a flower you plucked out of a vase!”

“…What, I’ve always liked lavender… Oh, don’t judge me.”

“I am judging you, you just humiliated my sister. You know how sensitive she is.”

“Hmph.”

“Buck… come on, you were lapping up soup last week and caught your napkin on a prong.”

“…I don’t see why you have to bring that up…”

“Because Leo recorded it and is on pins-and-needles to show it to Memphis.”

“…Cursed lions…”

“She’s your best bet to a full mental recovery, Buck. Go ahead, tell me I’m wrong.”

“By His branching antlers, maybe I should have stayed in that blasted paralysis…”

“So how about it, are you willing to give Patty the benefit of the doubt?”

“I’m not calling her ‘Patty’.”

“Clea, then?”

“Very well… I shall give Dr. Clea the benefit of the doubt.”

“Thank you… maybe you finally regained enough IQ to get you back to genius level.”

“Despite the several IQ points I did drop during my suspended animation, I never actually fell below genius.”

“Pompous stag.”

“Dumb bunny.”

“It’s great to have you back, old friend.”

“Well, I never could deny you anything, now could I?”

Chapter End Notes

Kingpin's plot (from the Netflix series "Daredevil", season 3) to get out of prison and into a penthouse was diabolically brilliant, so I'm borrowing it for Magnus (and I find the character parallels apt).
I'm also borrowing some Spanish slang here: "tarado" is a very unkind thing to call someone; "novia" translates to "girlfriend" but I cannot say with any certainty one way or the other if Spanish slang uses "girlfriend" in the same lighthearted manner as English, but for the sake of argument, it shall be used so here; "huevón" means lazy shmuck; "niña" is perhaps a more formal usage of "little girl" but in this context, it works on a few levels because while Esther is younger than Wayne by only a few months, she is about the size of a kit to him (additionally, with her mother's name of "Nina", this usage could be a pun on being a smaller version of her); "cerrado" isn't a slang term but to the best of my knowledge, it is the name of the Brazilian savannah, wherein the wolf apple or "solanum lycocarpum" is exclusively grown; "alebrijes" is not a slang term, either, but rather references the spirit guides from the movie "Coco" and the television show "Elena of Avalor" (these are effectively the angels and spiritfolk for that part of the Zootopian world); "Pepita ten piedad" roughly means "Pepita have mercy" (Pepita is the jaguar-esque alebrije from "Coco" and similar to a saint in this story, she is the chief protector of the Rivera families); finally, as mentioned first in Loyal, "aguará guazú" means "large fox" in the local, Guarani language, rather than Spanish.

"We will stay true in our hearts as we do what he must amongst the living… and reconcile with one another on the other side of Eternity, as we aguará guazú have always done."] Foxes mate for life. This is something upheld throughout the story but I could not, for the life of me, figure out how it worked with Goliath and Ruth. Mateship, in Zootopia, is cemented with the rearing of children (whether by birth or adoption); that said, partnerships without children are not excluded (they'll just be scrutinized by meddling relatives). Culturally speaking, mateship does not require children but children do require mateship (there are exceptions, of course, but this is an ideal strongly upheld in nearly all fox communities). Anyway, this phrase is what helps me accept Goliath's choice to mate and raise kits with Ruth, even though he was once mated... as a sort of... sad reality of the large foxes' plight under their oppression, that they're not in control of their own fate and so can only do what they can, reconciling in the Great Beyond.

Esther's mentioning of "Loxley" refers to Nick since it was revealed back at the end of Loyal that he is descended from the Loxleys through Jackie's line (it is worth noting that this is not the same as Foxy and Fuchsia Loxley, whose name was chosen rather than born into).

Carpenter ants and large foxes have something of a symbiotic relationship when it comes to the health and growth of the wolf apple. The large fox eats the apple and defecates the seeds near carpenter anthills, who then distribute the seeds. I thought it a wonderful bit of zoology and decided to include it here.

Introduced back in Loyal, Max Hareton is a character based on Max Hare from "The Tortoise and the Hare", voiced by Ed Norton. He raised teenaged Bo in the Honey Hills, taught him how to fight, and to never give up living just because he had a terminal condition, and also introduced him to "Captain Warren".

["you should see how big I can grow vegetables!"] is a reference to how the Hoppses always win the biggest-produce contests at Carrot Days.

["Nick already said money wasn't an issue-"] Remember back in early Trustworthy when Nick found out he suddenly had more money in his bank account than he realized?
"Mammals" is the Zootopian analog of "People" magazine.

["I do not 'like' challenges, I 'love' them"] is a nod to the character Anton Ego, the food critique from "Ratatouille".

"Dr. Clea" is a little shout-out to my fellow author, NieveLion, who gave "Dr. Clea" a cameo appearance in his own Zootopia story, "To Mend a Broken Hart".

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
"There is nothing quite so confusing yet crucial to a civilized society as language. Even amongst homogenous species, means of communication could differ wildly not only in the words or even the inflection thereof but the positioning of ears, lips, eyelids, tails, and head; more to the point, some species cannot replicate certain sounds or gestures due to the variation of physiology, i.e., a fox's snout and tail are much longer but ears and feet shorter than a rabbit's in comparison. As such, and perhaps ironically, a fox's long snout has a wider range of pitch than a rabbit's but a rabbit could differentiate that range better than a fox could due to their keener hearing. This in mind, and keeping to the fox example, sarcasm is as much a factor in their communication as the words are themselves, sometimes determined not only by the inflection in their voice but the angle at which they point their ears or the speed of their swaying tail; oddly enough, despite where a fox might be from or where they visit, they always have a knack for understanding each other with mindboggling immediacy."

-Cheryl Corn, zoology professor of Zootopia University

The radio crackled and died repeatedly, its signal surging with each new attempt until the fox could find proper reception by leaning out a window. “Talk to me, Sonny,” Nick beckoned, cupping his mouth and whispering into the mic wrapped around his snout from the bulky earpiece practically strapped to his head; it was clumsy and outdated but analog devices were not so easily hacked in a vibrant, digital age.

“Gimme a landmark, Pawps,” Finnick answered, his deep voice like a cough on the rough frequency, the soft clack of keys audible from the other side of the call.

“I’m about fifty feet above the mammals that want me dead,” Nick described, “which wouldn’t be too much of a problem if I had both paws to hold onto this pipe, but my big mouth has a habit of drawing notice. Other than that…? I’m at the corner of Truffle Road and… 4th? That doesn’t seem right but part of the sign is blocked.”

“Truffle and 74th, gotcha,” the fennec pinpointed, “There’s one building in Subterraria on a Truffle and ‘4th’ intersection tall enough for you to be that high up.”

“Fantastic, I knew I could count on so sly a fox as you,” Nick endeared (to a dismissive chuckle), eyeing his pursuers in the alleyway below and how more of them came around, “Now, where’s that next waypoint? This building is about to host a block party and you know how socially awkward I am.”

“Triangulating… head south-by-south-east, you should see one of the structural support pillars, dimly lit, fenced in. There’s a post office near there, which overshadows a rinky-dink radio-parts shop; privately-owned and piggy-backs off the city’s geological datastream.”

“I see it,” he confirmed and then grumbled, sliding down a drainage pipe to one of the clotheslines
spanning to an adjacent building, “and if you’ll excuse me for a bit, I need to make a daring escape. I’ll check back in ten minutes.”

“Should I assume death if you don’t?” Finnick asked.

Nick mulled it over as he tested the clothespin-laden cord, “Not with Judy out of town, I don’t feel safe enough for that with her outside of a hundred-mile radius; just let Leo know I’ll be a bit late picking him up if I don’t check in. Going silent,” and then traversed the gap. Between his parolee’s part-time work at the docks (of which he was gradually becoming a sort of… pseudo-alpha, what with Lanny’s ascension to King-hood), spending time with his family, and helping Bucky with his rehabilitation (as an “anchorage point” for his identity), Leo was able to confidently assert that “Nick is… some where around, I’m sure;” and could always call Finnick, who would then patch him over to Nick (when he had the opportunity to find a secluded place in which he could openly talk). It also helped that Chief Bogo was in on the fox’s activities.

Mack was still missing, dropped off the face of the planet. Mr. Never (or the fox formerly known as “Foxy Loxley”) might as well have never existed at all. Nick knew that finding the former meant finding the latter and if they were really lucky, vice versa. The deeper parts of Subterraria, known only as “Underland” (and only by those in the know), might as well have been an entirely different city than Zootopia and it was somewhere that Nick stayed far, far away from… and only under Chess’s tutelage did he feel capable of delving into the murkier cityscape, where it was rumored that alligators freely roamed the sub-sewer. Underland had everyone and thing that both was and wasn’t in Zootopia, so it was his best bet at finding either Mack or Mr. Never… and thus, the Lionheart Heir.

Of course, Simon King wouldn’t be the Lionheart Heir, that’d be too easy… Nick harrumphed, scampering up a fire escape to the rooftop and towards that support pillar and its nearby post office, All the rich lions get themselves tested and the Kings come from the first Lionheart son, so his lineage already gave up any power to honor the Mallupe’s pardon or help us out with Reino del Sol. I’ve buddied up with more lions in the past two months than in my entire life and not one of them is king of the world… To be fair, Nick reconsidered as he ducked beneath a duct, catching the sound of rigorous searching from the building he just left, Lanny did turn out to be the Missing Prince, so he’s done plenty.

He raised the mic from his mouth and hung the headset onto his neck, allowing him to don the hood of his grungy sweater (ears poking out the slits on the sides) and so complete the illusion of a streetwise scamp, no doubt up to mischief in some other part of the city. All that was needed was to get down to street level… rather, stay as far off street level as possible, using the underground “skyways” of adjacent architecture, reaching crossbeams, high fences, and dangling wires to traverse the urban center of Underland.

In the days of old, before fate saw fit to join two foxes together, Jackie Wilde was uncatchable in the city of Zootopia, even her shadow escaped sight of those intently and specifically seeking her out; she was the original “Mr. Foxglove”, after all, and was limited only by wherever she could fit her camera through. Thirty-plus years into the future turned her into a mate and mother, but after thirty-plus days of getting back into shape she proved herself still swift and nimble enough to give her son a chase along the secret passages of Zootopia (Nick remains baffled as to how she seemingly slipped through an intact chain link fence); “An old fox doesn’t need new tricks,” Jackie coyly riddled to remark on her son’s dumbfoundedness. John would have joined but claimed he’d be far too distracted to ever catch her.

“Sonny,” Nick called back in, flat on a roof overlooking the radio-parts shop.
“Pawps,” Finnick responded, the concern in his voice masterfully masked, “you’re late.”

“You’re right, that’s actually early for you.”

“I didn’t even stop for a snack on the way here,” Nick said, “and when you said ‘shack’ I didn’t realize you meant ‘reinforced bunker’.”

“Most of Underland is reinforced, I hear. According to Koslov, one of the first Mayor Waters secretly built a city under Zootopia to withstand fallout and siege in anticipation of war, but none of that happened so it was repurposed into a sort of… ghetto, I guess.”

“Dang… Madge was right… about this one specific thing.”

“Did the transmitter survive the escape?” Finnick asked, getting back on track.

Nick pulled out what looked like a billfold from under his belt to reveal lockpicks, some concealable screwdrivers, and a USB radio transmitter. “It just needs to catch its breath.”

“No time for that. Now, look for wires or whatever could hide wires leading from the post office to that shack, they’ll be plugged into a console. Open it up, connect the transmitter into the CPU, and then hightail it,” he casually warned, “You’re causing a bit too much chatter for your own good.”

The alleyway itself was uninhabited but there were mammals inside the building he hunkered on, some scarcely passing by on the street, and the store itself had at least someone inside. “Tally ho,” Nick muttered as he hopped down to skulk, scanning for suspiciously long mounds in the dirt, odd bulges in cracks or along edges… and then spotted a few rusty pipes running up the side of the shop. One pipe wasn’t leaky. Well, if I wanted to hide illicit cabling… which I never have… he mused, scurrying up the pipe and into a vent, shimmying along until it went down through the ceiling into a sizeable server console. Bingo. “Sonny,” Nick whispered as low as he could into the mic, “I found the thing but need a diversion,” he requested, eyeing an especially awkward-looking aardvark typing away at a keyboard.

“What sounded like the storefront phone rang and eventually pulled the programmer away from his station… after shouting some unanswered inquiry through the door and then retrieving something from underneath the table. Heavy locks and a chain preceded the opening and closing of a sturdy barrier. “Three minutes.”

“I need just the two, thanks.” Nick slipped through a panel and onto a pile of stacked boxes, sliding down with hardly a sound as he freed up his ears and nose to remain vigilant. Though his hearing was nowhere near as acute as Judy’s… she taught him a few tricks to focus on sounds and voices at a distance and he was always up for learning new tricks, New tricks are the purview of young foxes, after all, and I’ll always be a kit at heart. The screwdrivers unlocked the panel which then swung open to reveal the computer’s motherboard, Any port in a storm, Nick determined and plugged the USB radio transmitter into the computer, looking up to the screen to see a window flicker into and then immediately out of existence, Time to follow suit and have-never-ever-been-here.

The computer was closed and the pile of boxes ascended into the ceiling but Nick’s tail and foot lingered in the last second of his departure, a bellowing declaration of surprise and anger preceded some very loud holes puncturing the ceiling near Nick’s torso. This part never gets any easier! he dreaded, scrambling through the crawlspace after he kicked over a few of the boxes.
“You get back here, mangy fox, and give back whatever it was you stole!” the aardvark demanded, the sounds of his own attempts at scaling the pile of boxes only motivated Nick to slip away faster. Irate yelling continued, supposedly running around to the back but by the time the shopkeep got outside, Nick was already on top of another building a safe distance away.

“Mission accomplished,” Nick huffed into his mic, watching the aardvark sniff at the ground and scan the area in frustration before storming back inside.

“Roger that,” Finnick confirmed, “I’ll let Rocky know.”

“Have Leo meet me behind Dock B. Ending call.” The red fox removed his headset and disconnected the mic, and then pulled off his invertible hoodie to flip it inside-out and so provide the disguise for his escape topside. The headset resembled a set of head phones after Nick inserted an AUX-in cable so that he could walk the Underland streets without drawing too much attention to himself. With paws in his pockets and the hood over his head, Nick traversed back to the more recognizable parts of Subterraria and then Zootopia herself, ruminating on what his brother-for-all-intents-and-purposes discovered a few weeks prior…

71:77:7E:B1:RD

It was a MAC address that started showing up in random places around the city. Finnick -- the “bookkeeper” and “tech support” for Tundratown’s “most legit businessmammal”, Mr. Big -- was tasked with keeping an ear to the ground of Zootopia’s economic cycles (as well as ensure that the WiFi kept steady) and caught the scent of an errant, unpingable MAC address scattered to the digital winds like a stack of lost newspapers. Two things stood out to him: the hexadecimal code which all such addresses adhere to shouldn’t have an “R” and all such addresses should number twelve digits, not ten. Its purpose was indecipherable with any manner of certainty except that whoever used it was wasting bandwidth and processing power, negligible amounts though they may be, to present so obviously a bogus bit of data. So, he did the only thing he could think of when something itched deep inside his brain and needed someone to scratch it: he threw it at Nick. Literally, the alphanumeric code was written down and tossed at Nick from across the Bug Burga dining area table. The fennec dipped his fries into barbecue sauce while Nick took obscene bites from his second burger (Finnick offered to buy lunch, after all) until chomping entirely and swallowed what he had… and flicked those shimmering green eyes between it and the smaller fox (who was then washing down his own food with soda).

“Sonny…” Nick then said, biting back laughter, tabling both burger and the index card on which the information was written to cover his eyes and guffaw quite heartily. The large, caramel eyes of the sandy-furred fox across the way stared harder with each chuckle; he knew an answer would eventually come and criticizing would draw it out no sooner. “This is a message for you, ‘Little Bird’,” Nick explained, fluently speaking a language that was as romantic and passionate as those native to those far South of Zootopia’s borders but had a certain flourish and fluidity to distinguish it. It was not an uncommon language but its dialect was specific to the fennec fox’s native culture and made for an easy, discreet conversation between the two of them, “The 7’s are L’s and T’s. What makes this so funny is that this MAC address is how Mack addresses you. I shall need to congratulate that wolf on so amazing a pun the next time I see him… heck, I might need to pull his tail out of the fire if Kela finds out he’s still kicking about.”

Soda jet back through the straw and into the ice-filled cup before Finnick could speculate… and then reached to examine the slip of paper with a groan, “Mack… someone’s definitely got him by the nape,” he pointed out, flapping the code, “There’re a lot of things he’d never do, even
with a gun to his head, and call out for help is one of them.”

Nick’s face then blanched and he removed his jaws from the burger. “Oh dear…” he implied, except the words he actually used were by far more profane, “You’re right, Mack wouldn’t ask for help… unless it was for Lory.”

The foxes exchanged dawning dread.

“But who…?” Finnick asked, ears and face falling.

“Ferris MacGrim is the only mammal I can think of who would and could…” Nick realized, “Mack always kept his sister a secret for this exact reason… Plus, I found out from Chess that they got on the Secret Police’s naughty list a while back, so he might also have the motive to bring out the thumbscrews.”

The fennec let out a long breath as he raked his claws across his scalp. “That means he’s in Underland… Nick, I know we swore to never go down there again, not after…” All noise drained from the otherwise happy fast food chain as the dread broadcast between them was almost a miasma. Nick swallowed the softball caught in his throat. Their gazes broke in dismay to recollect themselves. “We need to get this to Rocky,” Finnick finally said, studying the MAC address, “it’d bet my tail all of its instances are part of a larger code and he’s the only one in the city with the processing power to triangulate something so fragmented.”

Nick sighed and grabbed some heavily salted fries. “Dang, I was hoping not to ask another favor from him; he’s not the most altruistic raccoon in the city and I already owe him for something pretty big…”

“Call it a stab in the dark but he’s stated his price, hasn’t he?” Finnick wondered aloud, a smirk crawling up his cheek.

Green eyes rolled. “He needs paws on the ground in Underland but can’t find anyone stupid or crazy enough… I guess now he’s got just the fox for the job. Fan-flippin’-tastic,” he rued, munching his burger anew.

“And… what exactly did you ask him for?” the fennec dared to ask, rejoining his younger brother-by-bonds in gorging on greasy comfort food, “I thought you already squared your debt with him.”

“I’m trying to help Dad’s side of the family leave the Knottedwood and those contact lenses Rocky’s developing into eyeball cameras would be great to their surviving inside Zootopia’s electrical field,” he casually explained, stumbling a bit when trying to find the right words in a foreign language, fluent though he was, “He’ll need a citywide array, though, and the best way to do that is to hook up to Subterraria’s tremor-sensors… like what Underland does.”

“Uh oh…”

“What?”

“This almost sounds… plausible,” Finnick dismayed.

“I know, I’m scared, too.”
“So… you talk with Rocky ASAP and I’ll see what I can do about getting Mr. Big’s go-ahead.”

“His go-ahead for…?”

“You think I’m letting you dive nose-first into certain peril without me at your back?” he said with a wry grin, “Some one will need to tell your folks that there won’t be a body for your funeral.”

Nick endeared a heartfelt moan. “Sonny, that is so thoughtful of you. But Rocky won’t be my first stop; Lory and Gid need to know to be on the lookout for unfriendly wolves. I should probably let Kela know that MacGrim is up to some manner of thuggery, too; they won’t be able to stop them, what with Pack Law and all that, but it should be enough deterrence from bothering that sweet little fox community on Reynard Road. After that, I’ll let know Rocky what we’re up to.”

“This isn’t going to be easy.”

“It never is, my brother; at least we’ve got allies this time.”

Hopping ahead...

The night train into Bunnyburrow came to a full and complete stop with a muted squeal of mechanical satisfaction for a job well done. Wide doors, small doors, and tiny doors slid open for their respective passengers but of prominence, Judy and Graham disembarked with a single suitcase each; awaiting them was none other than Bo, gleefully waving on the platform, to which Judy repaid the glee in full and then some (to compensate for the lacking enthusiasm from Graham’s return gesture).

First to spring up was Judy, nearly vaulting through the air as Bo charged forward to catch her, kiss her, swing her about, toss her into the air again with a triple-axel spin, and then catch her upon his shoulder. Graham placidly watched the exuberant display and picked up her suitcase to calmly approach.

“Heya, cousin!” Bo announced, one paw keeping Judy steady while the other reached out wide to gather the butterscotch rabbit in with an observation that was nothing if not genuine, “Nice shirt, by the way, very classy.”

“You’re not going to throw me into the air, are you?” Graham aloud wondered with a half-step in retreat, sincerely concerned behind his narrowed eyes.

“Only if you want me to,” the larger bunny offered, quirking both brow and smirk as he advanced a half-step, “I could probably clear the train.”

Graham groaned in uncertainty as he glanced up at Judy for direction.

“A one-armed hug isn’t going to kill you,” she assured the city-bunny, rubbing behind Bo’s ear.

With that, he reluctantly (and warily) set both pieces of luggage down to walk into reach and wrap an arm about his cousin’s back while a much larger one wrapped about the whole of his shoulders. “Well…” Graham admitted after a light bump and squeeze, “I suppose this isn’t too bad…”
“I think he might be ready for a full hug,” Bo suggested and at Judy’s nodding agreement, let her slip down to supervise as Graham braced himself for what was to come and so be engulfed in familial affection.

“Judy,” he whispered, craning his neck to peek outside his cousin’s brown-furred farm-bulk, “I can’t reach around him. What do I do?”

The gray bunny discreetly flicked a wrist in amiable dismissal, “Don’t worry about it; just do your best.”

With pleasantries out of the way and Bo courteously carrying both suitcases, he guided them off the platform to the beat-up truck whose purpose was to transport supplies between vegetable stalls around the Hopps farm and to be lent out. “So, about the You-Know-What…” Bo said out of the side of his mouth.

“The white book is no matter of secrecy, Bo,” Graham cordially corrected, “I doubt its existence is even considered.”

The larger rabbit pursed his lips momentarily. “Anyway, I think it would be a good idea to check the attic.”

“Why the attic?” Judy asked.

Graham considered the prospect. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. Surely, if its sun-bleached cover were the result of being forgotten near an attic window and since Pop-Pops has not yet found the thing, perhaps it isn’t in his study at all but was rather moved back into overhead storage some time ago.”

“Right, it’d be some forgotten relic stored away for safety but not for use.”

Judy playfully punched her boyfriend’s arm. “Sly thinking, Bobo, plus, no one ever goes into the attic so we’ll have plenty of time to scrounge through the boxes. I’ll tell Mom that we’re volunteering to clean the dust and cobwebs (that does need to happen every once in a while).”

“Nothing quite like honest work to cover for underhanded activities,” Graham remarked.

Bo winked, smirked, and clicked his tongue as he flicked a finger-gun at his butterscotch cousin. “We do what needs to be done.” When both passengers were safely seated and their respective suitcases in the truck’s bed, Bo hopped behind the driver’s wheel and gave the engine a good turning and then another good turning, ears flicking in agitation. “Hold on.” Since the third time was not the charm, he excused himself and bid the smaller rabbits remain seated so that he could retrieve the tools from the back of the truck, pop the hood, and use his phone as a light source to determine what might be wrong.

“Judy…” Graham cautioned.

“Hmm?” Judy wondered.

“I do not trust him.”

She reeled. “What? Why? Bo’s honest to a fault; it eats him up inside to keep surprise parties a secret.”

He shook his head. “As it eats me up to feel this but… never mind, it’s surely nothing except exhaustion from the train ride, still recovering, all of that and more,” Graham thoroughly
dismissed.

Bo closed the hood and stowed the tools, reinserting himself behind the wheel again to cross his fingers and rev the engine to life. “Boom! Just needed a little love is all,” he assured, thusly sending them on their way back to the Hopps farmhouse.

Judy remembered what Nick learned after Simon King’s return… what his parents told him about the days when they who kept Pleasure Island afloat operated with impunity and how Zootopia’s atmosphere choked with their ambition. About how those days were settling onto the city again in peripheral ways like a noose gradually cinching or a warming pot of water. About how trust in one another was a currency more valuable than gold…

“Paranoia keeps you alive,” Nick said, “According to Chess, we’re still a long way from those days coming back but he knows the signs. Just keep your ears up, Carrots.”

As it was, Judy returned home to visit with family, yes, but also to look for Graham’s fabled “white book”… and to deliver a message that would eventually reach the foxes of the Knottedwood.

As it was, Judy had prepared for all of her covert activities both logistically and emotionally… but she could not believe that anyone she loved so dearly could be distrusted… especially by whom she opened her heart to so readily. One thing at a time, she resolved, looking between Bo and Graham as she leaned on the former’s arm while he caught up with the latter, Bo’s got a heart of gold but I shan’t dismiss Graham’s intuition. I’ll figure this out, no problem.

Chapter End Notes

Referring to Jackie Wilde as “Mr. Foxglove” harkens back to Loyal, chapter 13, when Dean and Duncan Vandersnatch explain that they need a character to spread the word that children are being saved from Pleasure Island and that Jackie was their inspiration for Mr. Foxglove.

Mack “The Sparrow” Mallupe called Finnick “Little Bird” back in Loyal, chapter 6. The idea behind this references Johnny Depp’s character the Big Bad Wolf from “Into the Woods”, and him calling Red Riding Hood “Little Girl”; this coincides with his nickname for Nick, “Little Red” (which is also his nickname from the Precinct wolf pack, something that he finds to be a hilarious coincidence).

The language alluded to here is French. The fennec fox is native to North West and Central Africa, where in most countries speak French-African; pair this with the French rap music Finnick had in his van in the movie and it makes for a fun bit of logic that he can speak French. As for Nick... he just has a knack for picking up languages.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lory still apprenticed at Rocky’s garage, “earning her keep and learning something new every
day!” she’d say; according to her, and given enough time, she might even be a licensed mechanic
(after she finishes up her night school GED course). As it was, she mainly delivered goods for
Gid’s in-home bakery (which always made the place smell wonderful), but Gid was also out at the
moment, as he usually was around that time. And the phone was ringing, so… he sat and listened --
as he always did -- to the answering machine explain how to order stuff (including an online form,
in case they were interested); it eventually ended. The call was a customer, that time, rather than
Bo asking about the thing Gid was working on for him (“Darn bunny’s gettin’ awful pushy…” Gid
would say) but it wasn’t any business to poke his nose in, so he went back to what he was doing.

The soft chimes of metal-on-metal marked his cool-down bicep curls, utilizing the set of weights
that Gid and Lory got him (bought by someone down the hall for themselves but never used, so it
was instead exchanged for a cheesecake). He got an hour a day for working out, and thanks to the
schedule that Bo wrote up for him, found that he was coming along nicely with his own muscular
development. Quite a bit of flab remained, which was to be expected, but some firmness hid
beneath all that and pretty soon, he might see some of it in the bathroom mirror (rather than
digging for it while flexing an arm); have him looking a bit more like… him.

He stopped and rested after working up a healthy sweat, grabbed a quick drink, and then recorded
his results. “That should do it for today,” he determined, feeling pretty proud of himself at the
gradually climbing numbers in his workbook (which went along with the photographed progress,
documented as Bo instructed him to do, if over the phone). It was then time for a shower. He was
okay with how he looked… generally speaking, maybe not as big as he thought he should be but he
was working on it. He initially wanted to follow Bo’s strict meal-prep plan, as well, but Gid put his
foot down about what he liked to eat, and that was that; it was hard to argue with him when it came
to food (especially since what he made was always so delicious). It’s not that he minded, either,
not after Gid set up his own email account and all that; it really helped him cope with everything…

After the shower and his fur was all dried, he made his neck look a bit fluffier than it usually
would, or his tail a bit thinner; it all kind of evened out after a while but he didn’t mind too much.
With a shirt and some shorts, he wandered into the kitchen to follow the instructions for the stew
on the stove (Nick was coming over that night; he liked Nick) and carefully followed them step-by-
step. Not only was he entrusted with keeping an eye on dinner but also the birds, Horatio, Baron,
and Lory’s raven, Wisper (who usually spent time outside with Baron); he wasn’t as nervous
around them as he was other mammals, for some reason, and they seemed completely okay with
him, even when he cleaned out their cage. It felt good to do things for himself, to move about of
his own volition and without worry… even if he still kept all the windows in the apartment
covered and held his breath if anyone knocked on the door. He checked his email (most of them
were from Gid, of course, but there were also ads, for some reason) and saw that he received a
letter from his penpal, a snow leopard named CountessRosaries (or just “Rosaries”).

It was a new experience, having a “penpal” (for lack of a better term). He dared to venture onto
the Internet one day (by-and-large a meteoric mistake on his part so he refrained from doing it
again so frivolously) and found a website that allowed him to talk with cats of all kinds, both large
and small; one found him and sent an email, and then a chat request… and he dove for cover when
the laptop’s webcam automatically turned on after he accepted it (another meteoric mistake, one he
wasn’t keen on repeating). Apparently, what he did was “cute” and Rosaries really wanted to chat again. He wasn’t having anything of the sort but also felt bad for not responding, so he kept his emails short and to the point. He definitely wasn’t sending any kind of picture, that’s for sure, even if “CountessRosaries” was actually a pine marten named Marv.

The door eventually opened while he was watching TV and so he ducked behind the couch, warily watching as a wolf and a fox entered into the apartment. He breathed a sigh of relief and poked his head into view. “H-Hi!” he said, waving.

“You!” Lory giggled, “Stop bein’ so skittish and come over here to greet us proper-like.”

“Bangs, still so shy even in your own…” Nick began, stopped, and looked a bit harder, eyebrows flinging off his face in abject curiosity as his arms swung wide, “Lenny! My cousin’s very own guardian angel. Good gosh and-or golly, it’s been ages; how’ve you been?”

The dissociative identity of Gideon Grey -- a lion named “Lenny” -- bashfully smiled as he glanced between the two of them with bright, silver eyes while kneading the back of the couch. “Well… you’re both home early and Gid’s still… out, but I could go get him if you like…?”

“No worries, Len, I got ‘im,” Lory promptly responded, setting down a heavy tote bag with an audible heft of something metal, most likely mechanical, a smile inching across her cheeks as the brick-red ‘lion’ shuffled into full view and approached, she meeting him halfway between the couch (Nick following a few paces). Lenny didn’t recoil but did shrink a bit, blazing hot ears pinned back as his silver eyes looked up at the wolf while she stooped to cradle his cheeks, thusly touching a tender kiss upon his lips. The dark ears fluttered as if the attached head might pop off and fly around the room, eyes blue in an instant during their euphoric discombobulation. Giggling quite an awful lot, Lory stood upright and hoisted her boyfriend off his feet, holding him under the arms and hugging with a happy ‘whurf’ sort of sound.

Nick burst into laughter, slapping and bracing his knee. “You made him ‘Giddy’! That was artistry,” he declared with a long trail of chuckles. “Hup, he got the joke!” Gideon excitedly announced, set back onto the floor, “Didn’t even need too much setup, neither.”

The resident avians were excitedly flapping as Nick sauntered over to their birdcage to retrieve his raven from within, only to be assaulted by affectionate beaks. “Okay boys, settle, settle,” he ordered of Baron and Horatio since Wisper was already on her way to greet Lory. “C’mon, you prob’ly smelled your dinner from down the hall... and I’m pretty sure I heard your belly grumbling, even with Lenny at the helm,” the stouter fox said (Horatio hitching a ride from one shoulder to the next, and then to the back of a chair), gesturing his cousin and girlfriend over to the kitchen before groaning and hobbling, “Golly bob howdy, I am jus’ all kinds of sore... that lion is makin’ up new muscles to work out, I swear…”

“Want me to take care of dinner, Moonpie?” Lory offered, looking to the prepared bread-bowls and steaming pot of gumbo, nostrils flaring at the potatoes, garlic, shrimp, oysters, hot sauce, and about seventeen other things all thrown together.

“Thanks but I can handle it. No reason you should need to come home after a long day and fix your own meal,” he rebutted in a stretch of his limbs, back, and chest, and then nodded at the tote bag near the door, “Specially not with all this extra stuff that raccoon has you fiddlin’ with. You go ahead and get washed up.”
Lory dismissed the notion with a snicker and a flick of her paws (which she thoroughly cleaned at the sink), at least setting out beverages while Nick retrieved the utensils, “That one is actually my own little thing. Rocky gave me a carburetor of his own design to dismantle; ‘pparently, it’s an outdated model so he don’t mind if I rend it asunder,” she excitedly relayed, “Should still be better than anything on the market today, though!”

Nick minutely adjusted a spoon and a fork upon the table. “So... how does this whole... other-mammal-in-your-brain thing work, exactly? I am morbidly curious (the best kind, as everyone knows) if only because I get fidgety with Zoogle tracking my search history; I can’t imagine how I’d get with anyone else timesharing my own headspace, constantly watching.”

“Well...” Gideon pondered, hot home cooking poured into a bread bowl each, the steam wafting with the plethora of spices (both mild and pungent yet never repulsive to the sensitive fox nose) mingling with the vegetables and seafood, the mere whiff of which causing the scrawnier fox to wipe his mouth, “It ain’t like he’s... that diff’rent from me, it’s more that... Stretch, you know how you act diff’rent in front of some mammals than you do others? Judy calls it a ‘face’ of yours or some such.”

Green eyes quirked in thought. “Oh... kay, I think I almost see where you’re going with this. I might be able to elaborate the rest of it for you, as is a quirky habit of mine, but the gumbo tanks for my brain have unfortunately run dry,” he said, sitting himself down to secure a napkin with a lick of his chops. His steely composure was tested, as it had been thousands of times before, as the fresh meal was set under his face and the bread-lid removed, stretching out his nostrils to breathe in as much of the sublime aroma as he could in a single breath and wheeling his tail in a rambunctious arc. Perhaps what stopped him from nosediving into the gumbo was the irrefutable fact that it would melt his eyeballs if he did.

“It’s like what Travis said, about mannerisms?” the stouter fox continued, sitting down and gesturing appropriately with his spoon, “I don’t talk to my customers the same way I talk to you or Lory.”

“Giddy,” she reminded, pausing the conversation for a quiet grace before anyone began eating.

Nick took his time responding as he sipped the hot concoction, careful not to scald the various fleshy bits of his mouth. “You’ve described it as ‘looking through a TV screen’, though.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, blowing on his gumbo before ingesting it, “it’s the same feeling I get when I’m really into baking, and I can imagine its taste and texture before it’s even made, right? I think you said it was like how you felt when conversing with someone before you conversed with them.”

Nick paused again from eating (or rather, focusing on eating as he opted to absentmindedly insert it into his gullet while recalling, and then panted at the temperature and spice). “I actually can’t help but wonder if you got the same way when you were talkin’ with Dawson.”

The spoon was set down. “Was... is Lenny your ‘Dawson’?”

Gideon sincerely shrugged.

The spoon was picked up again after some thought. “They’re both to do with Night Howler... Regardless, I’m not entirely keen on gazing so deeply into my own navel that this delicious gumbo will go cold before I finish it. Therefore, please continue with your most interesting narrative while I stuff my gob,” and thus, proceeded.

He chuckled. “As you know, Uncle John gifted me a suit and got my measurements and all that, but all of a sudden he got it in his head to help me with whatever problems I been having with
my… y’know, pred-therapy trauma. Tha’s when I told him about Lenny or… rather, I let slip about Lenny. He got real inters’ed, lemme tell ya’. So the long-and-short of it is, Judy came over one time to help Lory with gettin’ started on her schoolin’ and helped us both with studyin’ techniques and then Uncle John is helpin’ me sift through my nightmares. And tha’s when Lenny comes out.”

Nick gulped his gumbo quite heavily.

Gideon hadn’t yet realized the exact conclusion his cousin reached, so Lory elaborated, “He means that he’ll give Lenny the wheel while he figures out his dark memories.”

The foxes each groaned their understanding, one as to the situation of the other and the other as to how what he said might have been far more negatively interpreted than he intended. Gideon awkwardly chuckled, “Yeah! Umm, sorry, that is what I… anyway-”

“Why do you go back there?” Nick asked. When an answer was not immediate or likely coming any time soon, Nick followed up, “To my admittedly limited understanding, Lenny’s entire spiel was that you never went back there… he told me so himself, that no one was supposed to know about what happened to you, especially not you.”

The stouter fox blinked as he observed from across the table, brow quirking and head canting. “Hey Lory,” he said out the corner of his mouth, “Does Nick seem like he’s… spacin’ out to you?”

“Yeah…” she concurred, “You okay, Nick? Are you goin’ to that Dawson place?”

Nick flinched. “What? No… but I like that, ‘Dawson place’, I might have to use it at another time but no, right now I’m only remembering a discussion I had with Judy and Esther about how pred-therapy used some kind of… ‘mind-muzzle’ to stop anyone from talking about it. Back then, I figured it was the sheer trauma of it all but what if-”

“What if we were actually stopped from talkin’ ‘bout it?” Gideon cut in, earning a curious glance from the other fox, so he smiled a bit and gestured with his spoon, “Lenny said he made a promise to never let anyone find out but didn’t say who he made it to. Now, ever since I started talkin’ ‘bout pred-therapy, I kept hearin’ how ‘no one’s ever got out’ and it got me thinkin’,” he continued, tapping his cheek with the handle of his spoon, “Aslan kept hold on darn near all my marbles, and Ma always said that it’s up to us who escape to go back in to save those who didn’t. So… seems I got me a duty to pull as many outta that Abyss as I can.” He punctuated his declaration with another bite of gumbo.

A spoon speculatively tapped on the edge of the bread bowl. “Not literally, of course,” Nick suggested.

Blue eyes rolled.

Green eyes grinned. “It’s safe to assume that you’re already updated on all the dandy suspicions that despite the whole PredaTherp debacle, there were plenty involved who never paid for their crimes.”

“Aunt Jackie brought me to speed, more-or-less.”

“‘More-or-less’,” Nick considered, “So… what happens while Lenny’s ‘at the helm’, exactly?”

“Well,” Lory inputted, “me and him had a little sit-down as to what sorta things he wants outta life; we figure it only right,” she said and held Gideon’s wrist. “We don’t know how this all works and the Internet isn’t exactly useful, best we can figure, so we’re figurin’ it out as we go.”
“Poor Len about near flipped first time goin’ on there,” Gideon explained, “We keep in touch with emails, y’see, whenever we don’t meet up in the ol’ noodle,” and pointed appropriately, “That don’t happen too often because it means no one’s drivin’.”

“And Lenny said he wants to look more like a lion and, well, all the lions he’s seein’ on TV and stuff are all… well…” she said, shaping a top-heavy silhouette overhead, “Bigger.”

“Like Simon,” Gideon pointed out and then smiled, “I sit back while Lenny pumps iron and he watches the world from over my shoulder. Turns out in all the time he been with me, he never rode shotgun too much, tryin’ to keep back the darkness as he was. And he’s real anxious,” he further explained, “more than I ever was, can hardly handle bein’ looked at and don’t even get him into a conversation… he lasted, like, half-a-second the first time he tried. Len likes you, though,” Gideon then said with a nodding grin to his genuinely surprised cousin, who pointed to himself, “and Lory, too.”

“There was even one time, when—” the wolf began, sharing a bashful giggle with her boyfriend.

“That’s great, really,” Nick interjected, patiently smirking and leaning on the table to more directly address the stouter fox, “but I meant: what do you do while Lenny’s at the helm?”

Blue eyes blinked. “Oh! Right, yes, well, them lessons Judy taught me, about visualizing what all I learned? What I’ve been tryin’ to do is figure out if I can recognize anyone who was at pred-therapy with me, doctors and the like. But I can’t just make ‘em pop outta thin air, now can I? That ain’t how it works, according to Jude, I need to… associate them with something I can organize, like sticky-notes or photographs.”

“Yes,” Nick idly postulated, “Judy’s tried that with me to some (minor) degree of success.”

“Cept that ain’t how I figure things out.”

“We’re more paws-on sorta learners,” Lory added.

“I need to feel a thing, smell it, see what it does, hold it and turn it about, y’know?”

Nick snapped his fingers. “You imagine baking … your memories?” he attempted and chewed on a shrimp, “No, that’d be silly.”

Gideon chuckled. “Almost, Stretch, but like Jude and Uncle John said, I shouldn’t associate something I hate with something I love, otherwise I could never look at my pies the same way again. Instead,” he said, grinning a grin most sly, “I whittle.”

“Of course, because you can also get more detail with woodworking,” Nick realized and then mused, “I can’t imagine you could use a cake-sculpture to identify someone too easily.”

“It also helps that Uncle John lives in and smells like Conifer because pine is one of the best whittlin’ woods out there,” he continued with a merry bite of his gumbo, “It’s a dual effort, me and Lenny; Jude helped us imagine up a forest with all the bad stuff inside, he goes in with his ax and comes out with a big ol’ tree for me to whittle down with my knife. I can’t go into that dark place very far, see, so it’s up to Lenny to pull out what he can and then I do what I can to shape it into something recognizable. But…” he rued, “must’ve done a dozen scenes by now but all’s I ever get is some boogierabbit which I s’pose is Dr. Cleopatra Lapis but they’s all boney and stuff. Well, that and one other’s been poppin’ up but I can’t say for certain if it’s just because he’s been in the news.”

“Alas…” Nick also rued, “this tells us nothing we don’t already know or can’t do anything about.
Magnus will go into protective custody after a fellow inmate shivved his liver (and resulting surgery) and Clea’s turned into something of a morning-show icon for ‘courage despite domestic violence’, he continued with a mixture of disdain and begrudging concern.

“‘Tain’t Magnus I see, not really,” Gideon corrected, earning another curious gaze from across the table, “it’s that Tycho King fella.”

Nick’s spoon dropped into the gumbo.

“Got that scar on his eye and ev’rything.”

“That…” Nick considered, brow furiously furrowed as he seemed to stare at the space around his cousin, cradling his chin, “It makes sense that Tycho dealt with pred-therapy, I guess, considering what happened with Prima but why was he there…?”

Gideon twiddled his spoon a bit, dark lips pursing as Lory braced his shoulder. “There’s… one thought that comes to mind and it’s to do with a major reason we invited you over, Nick,” she explained, “Judy and Graham stopped by before leavin’ for Bunnyburrow, said there was a lot that Giddy needed to know… about what happened… Turns out they found a lost video from their Grandpa Reggie.”

“Really?” His brows arched… and so he picked up his spoon (handle licked clean) and proceeded to finish off his gumbo before starting on the bread bowl, “It’s funny, Judy claims I can’t lie or keep secrets from her and true, I do not ever endeavor to, not only because she holds a special place in my heart but she also sees through my guises a little too easily. Well, that is a two-way street and I couldn’t help but notice that she was keeping something from me… which I gave her the benefit of the doubt on; another two-way street. How ever , I suspect that now is the time that I can be told the secrets that were not hers to tell.”

“And because you should know, too, Stretch,” his cousin explained, if a bit apologetically, “especially since we’ll be needin’ your insight on it all.”

Nick nodded. “Happy to be of service.”

“Judy and I went out while Graham spoke with Giddy… well… more like he spoke with Lenny , though I suspect he didn’t know the diff’rence,” Lory said, “According to them, pred-therapy used to be like some kind of bloodsport or somethin’, and we’re thinkin’ Tycho was in on it with whoever else Magnus got in cozy with… and, well…”

Gideon breathed to steady himself. “He gave me my muzzle, Nick,” he muttered, heaving a bit, Lory bracing both his shoulders, “It was… rusty with blood and vomit and… he said only I could destroy it…”

The taller fox tapped the tabletop with quick, thoughtful clawtips. “He’s waxing poetic but I understand where he’s coming from,” he permitted and then, likewise, waxed poetic, “Not every cage can be escaped by slipping through the bars, sometimes you have to unlock the door. What do you need my insight about, though? Intriguing though this ‘bloodsport’ might be, it is something I’ve already suspected about PredaTherp (courtesy of my favorite conspiracy theorist).”

“It’s jus’ that…” he paused, gently scratching his arm, “should I?”

“Destroy the muzzle?”

“It could be evidence,” Gideon suggested, “I’d ask Essy if I could, but if it’s got me all over it, then it’ll link back to Clea or Magnus, right?”
Nick shook his head. “It came from Graham, yes? He would have figured out how to do so if that were the case, no doubt already ran it through the forensic gauntlet. No… I don’t think that thing has any good in it and is better thrown to the fire or an industrial-strength grinder. Keep whittling those faces, Bangs, if you could pull out Tycho King, then I don’t doubt the rest of Magnus’s shadowy cribbage group is hidden away, too.” He then smirked. “Like Dad would say, ‘All we need is a star to sail by’ and you’ve got a whole bag of them tucked away inside your repressed memories, ready to guide us to whomever else is keeping Pleasure Island afloat. Just don’t open Pandaora’s Box, of course, your well-being far outweighs any justice we could serve these villains.

“Now then, I have a bit of business to attend to, as well,” Nick amiably countered, “There’s no easy way to say this, Lory, but I shall soften the blow as best I can that there are well-founded suspicions that Mack is being held prisoner by the MacGrims,” he plainly stated, to which the wolf promptly bit back a distraught yelp by cupping her own mouth, “He managed to reach out to Finnick and it was very clear that he did so under duress. Mack would be a valuable asset to them, I don’t need to elaborate on that point, and you are the sole means of his leverage. Now, before we get our knickers in a bunch, know that we can use this to our advantage.”

“How?” Lory nearly demanded, “Am I jus’ s’posed to lounge about, knowing that leaving my family’s protection is what got Mack snatched up? This all seems to spiral the drain, to me.”

“On the contrary,” Nick smoothly retorted as Gideon rubbed her wrist, “we now have MacGrim’s number one priority: using you to pressure Mack. No one understands The Sparrow better than you, so I won’t bore you with how difficult it is to keep him in once place, especially against his will, thus, his captors won’t do anything to jeopardize his compliance. In fact… I daresay they wouldn’t let anything happen to you, either. Isn’t that right, Shortcake?”

The wolf grunted in bewilderment… and then touched her bottom lip in recollection. “There have been wolves hanging nearby on the way to the work… and from it, too. They never came up to me or anythin’ but they were always polite; figured ’em friendly city-wolves… I thought I recognized one of ’em but it was jus’ me remembering wrong.”

“Luckily, Captain Kela can spare a few members of the Canine Unit. They won’t stay in the same proximity but they’ll be half-a-howl away. May I see your phone?” he then requested with a beckoning gesture of his paw. Lory tilted to the side to pull the device from her pocket and slide over the table, Nick’s own phone meeting with it. “I’m adding you to the Unit’s chat group,” the fox then explained, tapping the screens simultaneously, “and there you are. You’ve just gained ‘mammal of interest’ status,” he congratulated and slid the phone back, “If you’re in danger, just hit that bright red button to send a digital howl out to every canine cop in a ten-block radius.”

“Oh, wow…” the starstruck wolf muttered.

“I didn’t know this Captain Kela guy was in charge of ev’ry wolf in the city,” Gideon aloud wondered, equally starstruck.

“Technically? Yes,” Nick considered (partially smug), “but I should emphasize that Kela’s pack at Precinct 1 is the foil to MacGrim’s; the other wolves respect him as the alpha’s alpha and the other canine cops respect him as the ‘top dog’,” he mused, comfortable with using a word that would be degrading if uttered outside the canine community. “So, now that business is well squared away, who’s up for dessert?”

A hearty dessert of strawberry parfait with chocolate syrup followed the cream-of-broccoli soup and buttery biscuit dinner, as kept warm for Judy and her associates since they arrived at an hour
deemed late by most other members of a prey species. The Hopps farmhouse no longer accommodated the sheer over-abundance of familial tenancy as it had several weeks prior, so it was by far more spacious with all of the bunnies pre-teen and younger bedded down for the night. It meant that Bo’s usual bunk (one of the guest rooms reserved for young couples of the family, occupied by he and Judy during her regular visits from the city) was instead shared by him and Graham while Judy slept with her sisters. The primary difference to it and other sleeping quarters was the larger bed and shared clothes storage.

They both sat on the floor, Graham with his Knotash standard summer-time sleeping shirt and shorts, a modest set of respectively light and dark cotton that breathed for the warmer season and didn’t cover too much of the limbs, optimized for comfort and to not bunch up; Bo wore shorts cut from a pair of pajama bottoms. The latter’s mitts stretched out the former’s arm, professionally kneading around the muscle from the wrist to the elbow.

“‘It’s the oddest thing,’” Graham remarked, earning a curious grunt from his cousin, “of every time I was dragged to this backwa-” and promptly cleared his throat as his limb was gently extended out to feel under the tricep and then over the bicep, “homely residence, this must be the first I ever felt like I’d… visited.” He continued staring ahead as his limb and paw were curled in to invoke a flex and continued curious grunting.

“Ears forward?” Bo instructed as he felt across the butterscotch, coffee-spotted shoulders (for Graham’s sleeping shirt was folded on the bed pending the examination of his musculature degradation), lightly kneading and prodding up along his nape to the base of his skull. “Judy said you had a long road ahead of you but -- especially after finding out it wasn’t a car ‘accident’ -- I didn’t see a single problem with the adults,” he amiably observed and then snickered, “which technically includes Judy and I… guess I still considered myself sitting at the kits’ table.”

Graham softly huffed, bracing his knee with the already inspected arm while the other was lifted and likewise treated, “Yes, I seem to have earned quite the sympathetic ear at the Hopps House. Whereas you have ‘little’uns’ hanging off you, like playground equipment, according to her,” and was replied with a hearty chuckle, “I learned early on to pay all due respect to my elders… and respect was always due,” he conversed, casting an instantaneous glance over his bare shoulder.

“The same out here,” Bo concurred, likewise flexing the arm but grunting with some concern. Graham sighed with acceptance. “You said you’ve been working out?” the brown bunny implied as politely as he could.

“As prescribed by Uncle Ozzy, the leading authority on muscular hyperatrophy ,” Graham responded, also as politely as he could, “not that I need any help breaking down muscle but it just doesn’t come back as it used to, not without the steroids and poultry.”

“I guess the protein shakes I recommended aren’t helping much, either,” he regretted and was affirmed by a single negative grunt.

Graham remained as dramatic as ever as he leaned forward and put both elbows to his knees, his cousin checking the muscle density along his back (his spinal bumps nearly visible beneath the fur), “At least I shall be of sound mind when counting my breaths.” Leaden air persisted until he hiccuped a jovial laugh to launch their ears skyward and Bo’s paws off the (nearly) outlined ribcage. Butterscotch and chocolate bunnies sat stunned, contorted at the prospect that the former was even capable of such a noise; the latter leaned in.

“Are you ticklish ?” Bo teased in appropriately familial fashion, index fingers alternating pokes at the mid-back.
“No!” Graham denied, spite snapping over his shoulder with those dark, purple eyes… and would likely have further repulsed if its exaggerated contortion (perhaps unintentional) weren’t itself so comical. He huffed and looked forward again (to emphasize how much he was ignoring Bo’s smirk) and braced himself for further errant tickling as the mitts next examined his abdominal muscles. “I’m not often handled so… familiarly. Even Uncle Ozzy was a bit more professional during our check-ups.”

The larger of the two shrugged as he inspected his cousin’s chest. “Farm-rabbits are a bit more touchy-feely,” he explained and then tugged a concerned city-bunny into an embrace when he finished everything above the waist, “‘Healing-hugs’ was the first step to all that ails… even the ‘bunny curse’.”

“If only muscular osmosis was feasible,” Graham grumbled but abided the affectionate hold all the same, patting the thick forearm which locked him in place, “Unfortunately, its true cure is strictly genetic but, at least, we who’ve lived before can edge rabbit society along for the benefit of those who come after.”

Bo grimaced, releasing his cousin to allow him to lean against the bed while he inspected his leg muscles. “Hey… my life goal is still to find its cure through nutrition and exercise, Graham, that’ll never stop. In fact, as soon as Gideon finds a way to make my formula palatable, you’ll be the first one to get it.”

From the bed was the light-cotton sleeping shirt retrieved, a paw reaching up and patting around for it to flap it open and re-dress. Graham grunted doubtfully as his thigh was inspected down to the knee. “And how is that coming along?”

Bo grimaced harder, bending said knee and feeling the tendons, “I recall the phrases ‘brick wall’ and ‘I’ll tell ya’ when I figure it out!’ were used… He’s found all sorts of ways to make variations of the formula just absolutely delicious but… they simply won’t cut it.” A neutral affirmation quietly vocalized. “But I’m not giving up, no sir!” Bo declared.

“Huzzah,” Graham airily cheered, fist bobbing in the air as he flexed whatever muscles he was instructed to, paws idly folded on his trim stomach.

“I will do what needs to be done,” he assured to his cousin’s arching brow, “no exceptions.”

Such words hung in the air over the butterscotch ears. “Well,” he reasoned, “I would hardly imagine there’s much else you need to do, Bo.” Graham folded his leg in as the nutritionist scooted to examine the other one, and then continued when his brown shoulders and head bobbed in a cavalier shrug. “After all, you found the formula and delegated its palatability to an expert in their field. Your task is already complete, is it not?”

A snerk and a smirk answered first, his inspection perhaps a bit less meticulous as he held the leg in one arm and flexed his other. “I just got to make sure he finishes the job, right?” he teased.

“…Bo, Gideon is a fox, so no matter how strong you get he could still launch you over his shoulder by your ears; it’s simple physics,” he punctuated and retrieved his leg to, instead, sit on the bed, limb stretching out some.

His brown mitts were up and placating as he stood. “Hey, c’mon, that was just… just a joke, I’d never strongarm Gid into doing something he wasn’t okay with.”

Dark, purple eyes cast up as the rabbit in which they resided, likewise, stood. “No, I’d imagine not… unless he was made to be okay with it.”
“…And what’s that supposed to mean?” Bo asked, thick arms crossed over a thick chest, short ears erected, “I get the sneaky suspicion that you think me some kind of bully,” and then added, “which is rich coming from you.”

Graham smirked and canted his head. “Perhaps a ‘touché’ is in order. Keen senses, really that of a fighter’s; you’ve been training for the MMA, correct?”

Bo scoffed through his nose. “I have, as it so happens, that’s another life goal of mine: to win the championship belt,” he partially boasted.

“No exceptions?”

“Not a one,” Bo confirmed, smugness lilting some as the coffee-spotted ears flicked, “And there’s nothing wrong with a little… ambition. Judy wouldn’t have gotten where she is today without it.”

Graham inclined to also scoff, if at the very back of his throat.

Bo narrowed his eyes and ground his molars inquiringly. “Y’know,” he plainly stated, “I thought we could’ve put everything behind us, Graham, but nothing’s changed; you’re as much a jerk now as you were then, the only difference is you’ve somehow got Judy to side with you.” Hazel eyes bore into the smaller rabbit’s continued inclining defiance.

“Yet despite it all, all of this,” Graham jabbed, both figuratively and literally at the rock-chucker’s physique, “you’re still that weak little rabbit at Woodlands; desperate for absolution, cowering in the shadow of something stronger for its protection. Just like every other rabbit that’s ever been.” His fingertips braced Bo’s chest, just below his collarbone and ever so slightly nudge him a single degree before the upright stance was corrected. “Bo Branches, bending to the wind… aren’t you?”

“You’re tired from the train ride, Gra… ” Bo responded, one paw bracing his own waist and the other the coffee-spotted shoulder as he proceeded to lean forward, “so I’ll let all that slide for tonight.”

His smile crept up, pointed as though anchored by a single stitch. “In retrospect,” Graham unabashedly pressed, guiding the brown mitt off of him, “you showed a certain… strength when my cohorts and I picked you up from Clarabelle’s soy farm, carrying that newly-cleaned vat of Gideon’s. I couldn’t help but feel Judy’s righteous indignation oozing off you… maybe it’s what riled me to run you over.” His eyes scanned up and down and then glanced to the side when he felt the paw resist its removal. “That’s… not quite there now, is it? As if someone took it from you…” he openly mused.

“I am strong,” Bo argued.

“You’re weak,” Graham reiterated, another stitch pinching his smile on the other cheek, leaning up and into the grip. He was then righted onto his ankles. A finger once more jabbed into the earthen rabbit’s enormity, directly into his sternum. “He got to you.”

A harsh brow arched high, hazel eyes flickering for an instant.

“You know exactly who,” he challenged, more stitches pricking either end of his smile, “I heard the manuscript from the night at the Notary, Branches, and I wonder which plucked heartstring it was that welcomed him in…” A finger raised and nose scrunched in rebuke but Graham was quicker. “Was it discovering Saint Judy’s capacity to sin, that naughty ‘get-out-of-jail-free card’ with Weaselton?” he demanded, stitched smile lessening by no degree, “Or was it your parents’
deaths, your life of abandonment… and to whom it all could ultimately be traced back to?”

The brown shoulders squared and the rebuking finger curled into a fist. He made to speak but said no words, choking on them and his outrage as the veins surged along his neck and arms.

Graham seethed through leering teeth. “It’s what he does, Bo, he reaches into you and wrenches his fist until a cavity forms of fear and hunger… which you will beg him to fill and oh,” he guffawed a high, mockery of laughter, “he will. Did you think I couldn’t see it, cousin? That burgeoning rot inside of you? The ambition to do ‘whatever needs to be done’… ‘no excuses’?” His neck craned as he coughed, “I was born with it.”

Bo growled to mimic the readying machinery of his battle-ready punch, “I’m not weak. I am str-!”

The room… the world quaked as a fist swung, stopped short in the tumult of Judy’s thumping foot. Both bucks gawked, frozen as she eclipsed the hallway light, her violet eyes daring either of them to so much as breathe or blink out of turn. Not that they quite remembered how it happened, but Bo’s knuckles were millimeters from Graham’s face and Graham’s fingers clenched around Bo’s skull, his thumb about to gouge an eye. Additionally, Graham’s neck was cinched in a brown-furred vice while his foot was raised and accompanying claws poised to open up Bo’s femoral artery.

“Would you two cut it out!” Judy chastised, finally kicking time back into gear as she closed the door. They vaulted from each other, Graham bewildered as he clapped his forehead and white-knuckled the sheets with harried breath while Bo stared down at his own trembling paws as if they were vipers and shamefully whimpered in abject guilt to Judy. “On the bed, both of you,” she promptly ordered and they nearly broke the sound barrier to obey before she reached the foot thereof. “You’ve been stink-eyeing each other ever since the train station and quite frankly, it’s a good thing I kept my ears glued to you all night,” she continued to chastise, arms tightly crossed as they wilted under her glare, “I shudder to think what you were poised to do to each other if I arrived a half-second later. I hope you have a good explanation for yourselves!”

Each second felt like hours before either Bo or Graham realized that she, in fact, awaited an explanation and by the metronomic tap of her foot, it had better be good .

“I’m sorry, Judy!” Bo immediately cried out.

“It was my fault!” Graham simultaneously declared.

“I thought I could handle it…”

“I am only a threat to this and every bunny family…”

“The training helped me direct it but it only got worse !”

“What was I thinking, I’m not ready to leave Knotash!”

“It was Magnus !” Bo and Graham at once confessed in respective dread and despair. The amalgam of their braiding incoherence culminated on that name and branched again until the trains of thought halted at Judy’s raised palm. Bo looked on the verge of tears and Graham as though he might faint, but they were quiet to see what she might do… and when she gestured they scoot back a bit, they readily complied to be joined by her upon the covered mattress, tucking the excess of her oversized jersey to, likewise, kneel with them.

Judy’s face no longer blazed with justice, its sword swung and mayhem deterred, rather the mantle of mercy was shouldered as she inched nearer to Bo and cradled his rugged digger’s paws (that
would always have dirt under the claws, no matter how much he washed them) and rubbed the knuckles. They were calmed and set upon his folded knees so that she might brace his shoulders, and then his neck, and then his skull to lean him in closer until their foreheads touched. “It’s okay,” she assured, “Magnus is scary… and he is manipulative. That doesn’t mean he got you, Bo, because you are what he could never be: loved. Everyone here at the Hopps house loves you and you love them. Bunnyburrow loves you, Bo. Magnus can’t ever take that away.”

He trembled and exhaled, his paws nearly engulfing her arms but he held them with such tenderness, looking into her eyes. “But what if… what if I don’t make it…? What if I fail…?”

She smiled, tilting their heads to softly touch their noses and then their lips. “You will do your best, Bobo, better than any rabbit ever has, better than you ever have. And what can anyone say against that? They can only cheer in amazement at what you accomplished.” He smiled in return and thanked her in more than words but with a snuffle before apologizing so profoundly that it, too, was beyond what words could manage; she forgave him once more as she always would, touching their foreheads as he visibly relaxed with another serene exhale.

Graham gawked, lips tightly pursed as his dark purple eyes wavered to what unfolded before him, caught betwixt wide and narrow in long-held but instantaneous flux (ears straining at them). “What was that?” he dared ask, nose wiggling and wary finger not quite thrust across the bed but reenacting how the first mammal was introduced to electricity, and to how they were taken aback by his inquiry, he continued, “That… thing with the holding paws and the… the foreheads touching…?”

“That was… forgiveness?” Bo responded, sitting back on his seat as his cousin persisted his awed incredulity, “For… a transgression?”

“I know what ‘forgiveness’ is ,” Graham shot back as calmly as he was able, scooting closer with wild gesticulations, “Transgression; apology; forgiveness; absolution. What I’m flabbergasted about is what you did.”

“What I did?” Judy repeated, further taken aback by the offering paws, “Maybe Knotash bunnies are a bit stiffer with their interactions, Graham, but that can’t have been the first time you saw rabbits forgive each other; it’s prolific across the world and throughout history.”

“Indeed,” Bo concurred, perhaps hoping the scholastic insight would calm the twitch in Graham’s eye (as it so often calms his own nerves), “no matter a rabbit’s station amongst their own warren or in society at large, the touching of foreheads served as the penultimate righting-of-wrongs, even used by a rabbit peasant to a 5th century auroch regent-“

Graham shook his head and held up both paws to cease their academia. “I know , please, I do know about so sacred a communion as the forehead-touch, what I mean , Candleflame, is that you have purified him.”

It was their turn to be aghast. “What?” Judy aloud doubted, perhaps a bit louder than she intended, “You’ve always been theatrical but I figured that when you said it for yourself -”

“It’s not completely gone but it’s not exactly there , either,” Graham attempted to explain, maybe more so to himself than they and touched his temples to emphasize his mental struggle, “All rabbits are taught that we are stronger together than apart, you both know this integral element of being a bunny,” he continued and they readily agreed, “Magnus… he is apart from other bunnies; isolated, except his absence of empathy is whence his strength flows . It’s widely speculated to be the same sadism which allowed ancient predators to hunt and eat prey, and yet even they did not go after their own…”
“Any sensible mammal would overcome that enmity, seek help but Magnus… he nurtures it, harnesses it, teaches it to others… he shows them that they can rend themselves from their own heart and become… carnal. I’ve seen him do it… but it’s a long, difficult process of delicate manipulation, subterfuge, and peer pressure; it’s been honed to surgical precision over the years. It starts with destroying or corrupting something you cherish only to convince you that you are to blame,” Graham confessed, “He taught me how… and I surely would have become him if Judy hadn’t purified me as well… it’s just too bad I am such an advanced case, but you, Bo, there’s still hope for you… especially after what I’ve just seen…” he tripped a bit, “Maybe not ‘seen’, per se, but certainly witnessed.”

Either bunny hopped across the bed to surround Graham, Bo grabbing about his shoulders and Judy about his neck. “Lo and behold, Little Moth, you have a conscience, therefore, I could have done nothing more than help you realize what you want,” she explained when he looked between their grinning faces in uncertainty, “You want to be a better version of yourself, too, and know that it can only happen by helping others; not too unlike how Bo trains his body, you’re training your heart.”

“And I can even help you train your body, too,” Bo added, “Felix Lapis is the authority on our condition but he doesn’t know what I know about overcoming it. You’re still young, Graham, so given enough time, I can get you as big as me,” he boasted and once more flexed his arm; unlike before, it was not intimidating but by far more lighthearted. “Those of us with hyperatrophy have it the worst because we feel like we’re as cursed as we look.”

Graham considered it… and flexed his own arm. “I’d settle for less bone showing,” he said, “and not that I doubt your sincerity and skill -- either of you -- but as I’ve already explained to Judy, I’m at something of a plateau when it comes to betterment; both physically and emotionally.”

“Challenge accepted,” Judy and Bo simultaneously stated. He then reached over to his side of the bed and grabbed his phone off the nightstand, sparing a smug grin, “And if you’re still unconvinced, I should show you Gid’s progress under my tutelage… and his is over the phone.” Graham’s brows arched their combined cynicism and curiosity. “Oh yes, our favorite fox-baker is not as ‘chunky’ as he once was,” Bo teased and opened up a folder in his gallery to select the first and last image, “Before; after.”

“Wow!” she marveled, looking over Graham’s shoulder as he cradled the phone, her finger swiping between the two, “It’s subtle but it’s there… in only a few short weeks, too. And love him though I do, Gid’s never been the most driven or athletic individual but look at that progress! Imagine what an ambitious rabbit like you could manage; both emotionally and physically.”

A harsh frown and furrowed brow persisted until Graham’s face softened into a permitted bob of the head. “Far be it for me to deny photographic proof at this point in my life…” he admitted, and looked up to Bo, “Logically, if I’m to overcome this ‘bunny curse’… I should seek someone who’s already done so.” The brown rabbit bashfully beamed. “And I’m… sorry for turning on you as I did, Bo, dredging up such horrible things like that and… trying to gouge your eye out. Magnus’s talons are still clutched around my-” but was interrupted when he looked at the phone he fiddled with in his paws as his face was brought back to touch foreheads with Bo. Graham blinked and fiddled with the phone bit more (Judy quietly gushed). “So…”

“I can’t but notice something about Gideon in these,” Graham continued, zooming in on the fox’s face, “Is he… upset?”

All of the stellar feelings Bo felt just a minute before wavered as he rubbed the back of his neck abashedly. “May be I’ve been… bugging him about that formula of mine more than I should;
luckily, he’s sticking to the training regimen so I guess he’s not *that* upset. I mean… he’s got gray-eye in these photos but when I saw it happen with Esther, she was *peeved.*”

“Yet he seems completely relaxed here,” he wondered along with the brown bunny, both studying the oddity of the dissimilarly-eyed fox.

Judy’s mind reeled, caught between the rock and hard place scenario any fox dreads: keeping a secret while also *not* lying to loved ones. “Adrenaline,” she declared with a snap of her fingers, squeezing out of the proverbial tight spot and earning for her slyness dawning acceptance from either buck.

“That would do it,” Bo rationalized, “he *did* just finish working out.”

“And if seeing his muzzle didn’t trigger an adrenaline spike, he’s *far* more hard-boiled than I ever gave him credit for,” Graham likewise rationalized, returning the brown bunny his phone (who shuddered as he replaced it on the nightstand).

“That muzzle…”

“Another ‘gift’ from *daddy-dearest,*” he reviled, “Stars above, that feels like a *lifetime* ago…”

Judy inwardly sighed with relief. “Alrighty, kits, let’s get some sleep, we’ve got a *big* day tomorrow if we’re going to tackle that attic in any appreciable amount of time,” she expostulated while hopping off the bed and straightening her shirt, “I’ve already cleared it with my folks so we shouldn’t be interrupted. Teeth brushed?” Either buck answered in the affirmative, one with mild annoyance and the other with mild satisfaction, and so Judy smirked upon exiting.

“G’night, Graham,” Bo said as he turned off his nightstand lamp, slipping beneath the light sheets and burying his head into a pillow, softly humming before shifting about to his side and tucking an arm under his head, legs brought a bit closer as he settled into slumber.

“Goodnight, Bo,” Graham quietly replied. He looked to his tablet sitting on the nightstand and pondered reading, as he often did before sleep, but then looked to his reposed bedfellow… He reached to pinch the light’s toggle but gazed over his shoulder again, and sat back to study his cousin’s shape… and then rolled back a sleeve to flex a spindly arm… and then lifted his shirt to touch his ribcage (which was *ticklish*, of all things…). Mortality stayed to his bones better than muscle ever could but… what stayed on his *mind* was something Judy told him, that fateful night when they escaped Hopps Manor…

“Logically speaking, there should still be hope for you.”

Hope… he’d long since abandoned so fine a sentiment as “hope”. He adhered himself to logic and reason, statistical likelihoods of anything within his purview… and anything outside of it, he either delegated or left to chance and planned around *that*. But hope… might be something to add into his calculations. Graham turned off the light and reclined fully, likewise facing away… and ever-so-gradually scooted until he felt his back against Bo’s. Graham soon slept quite soundly.

Nick stared in disquiet, searching the night sky for answers and per the norm, it provided none.

“You been up here a long while, Stretch,” Gideon pointed out, batting the tail aside to sit with his cousin on the rooftop of the apartment building on Reynard Road. It was a quaint little fox community and with the fog rolled in as it had, all the young kits were tucked into bed while the tods and vixens finished up their business of the day or started up their business of the next.
With the gangly city-fox sprawled on the concrete rim, head cradled in his paws, he’d lift his feet and extend his legs to rest his crossed ankles on the unwittingly provided thigh of his cousin. “Just… thinking.”

“You don’t seem half-so-distressed as I figured you’d be after seein’ that muzzle,” he pointed out, leaning back on his arms as his own feet kicked over the street several stories below.

“Oh, I am,” Nick revealed, “I’m just holding it back.”

“Savin’ face?”

“And I need a clear head. That’s why I came up here, let my mind wander amongst the cosmos,” he waxed poetic while lifting his shirt to scratch low on his stomach.

“And what’d you learn so far?” Gideon asked, neck craning to direct his blue peepers skyward, as if expecting for such answers to be literally, conveniently written out. He spotted the black shape of Baron circling overhead.

Nick grunted and lifted his feet after they were shooed off their resting place, to instead stretch out and rest on Gideon’s shoulder (with appropriate scooting to accomplish such a feat). “Nothing I didn’t already figure out on my way up here.”

“Uh huh …” Gideon shrugged and the feet were then on his belly, so he grumbled and let it be as the silence drew along, broken only by the ambient sound of night life in the streets below and far off.

“That muzzle…” Nick finally said, the steadiness in his voice wavering however the slightest bit. Blue eyes glanced first before the whole of his face addressed the erecting tod, the brow under which they rest furrowing as he saw those vacant green eyes focusing. Nick dropped a leaden sigh right off the building as he braced the edge and then clapped it, feet swinging. “It was mine, Bangs.”

“… Yours? You mean the one from… y’know, the Junior Ranger Scouts?” he doubted, “Naw, this one is mine, Stretch, pretty darn sure of it…” The green eyes implored him to reconsider and so he did, rubbing his chin and cradling his elbow. “But if they is the same muzzle… then that bunny which grabbed it after you left… I mean, we already figured they worked for Magnus, ‘specially after ev’rything Uncle John told us about, but now there ain’t a doubt.”

A cheek was plopped onto a fist as Nick looked down to the alleyway. “I was targeted by Pleasure Island, even back then… but I slipped out of their grasp, somehow. The Rescuers knew or… figured I was next on their list and kept an eye on me, and sure, Dad found the guy who took that video but couldn’t get any answers out of him,” he then scoffed, “‘Johnson, the Uncatchable Fox’, I guess.”

“But why use the same muzzle?”

“Because child-muzzles have been illegal for decades, and if what Graham told you is accurate (I’m inclined to believe him when it comes to the creeptacular), then it was designed for a fox kit; I always figured it was meant for an otter, repurposed for me,” he casually explained, stretching out his arms and back, “Getting that one must have been a huge risk which just brings even more of this into question.”

“Someone really wanted to catch a fox… but… why go after us?” Gideon asked, “There must be thousands -- tens of thousands -- of foxes in Zootopia, so what makes us so special?”
Nick’s feet idly kicked. “Good question. What’d we do as kits that set us apart, I wonder…?”

Gideon furrowed his brow again, but harsher. “We… tried to get along with prey, didn’t we…?”

“Someone must have deemed that very interesting; worthy of further study, perhaps.”

“It’s gotta be her, huh?” Gideon ascertained.

“And like I said earlier, she’s nigh untouchable,” Nick bitterly lamented, “I doubt we can even track the manufacturer or else Graham would have done so already. How ever,,” he then grinned, “I’ll be back in the good graces of Precinct 1 tomorrow, and with my friend at the DMV, I might be able to pay a few visits to those prey kids from way back when.”

“Maybe find out where they got it!” Gideon excitedly said, “But… don’t you have enough on your plate already? What about Essy? And Rocky? And Mack?”

Nick sighed and rest his face into his palms. “I didn’t say it’d be easy,” he admitted, “Graham needs feet on the ground in Reino de Sol before we can go any further; my appointment with the WHS in City Hall is coming up soon and from there, maybe get a foot into Liondon’s door (honestly, I can’t imagine who else could possibly be filing up their schedule). Judy will get a message to the Knottedwood foxes, and from there, we can start setting up a way to get them into Zootopia using Rocky’s magnetic-array-doohickey. As for Mack… Lory’s safe, and so long as she’s safe, he won’t do anything stupid; the real problem is I need to find Mr. Never…”

“He’ll know how to find a Lionheart Heir; with all the secret history he’s built up in his vaults, there must be a clue. Unfortunately…” Nick grumbled and threw out his paws in a shrug, “his last known location is empty.”

“Wait… you mean where Essy and Finnick met him, it’s been cleaned out?”

“Finnick swept the coordinates for power usage, data transmission, and it’s dead,” he fumed, “Tycho’s arrest sent them running to lick their wounds, ergo, tightening their protective coils around Mr. Never, ergo, the identity of a Lionheart Heir, ergo, anyone who can validate King Richard’s pardon of the Mallupe ancestor, ergo, any kind of leverage I might have to persuade the Liondon Parliament to rescue a private citizen of Zootopia and her enslaved species from an evil drug empire, ergo,” he duly emphasized with all proper exasperation and gesticulation, “ever getting Esther back. Jeez, Dad sure made this spycraft stuff look easy.”

Gideon rubbed his cousin’s huffing back. “Keep faith, Stretch,” he assured and Nick nodded, “Speaking of her, I couldn’t help but notice you got a… matching tattoo,” the stouter fox insinuated, grinning as he did.

Nick also grinned and lifted his shirt with one paw, the other tugging the waistband of his pants low enough to reveal the black-winged, white-crowned, red heart ensorcelled by a script with the words, “‘Hail the King Robin’, baby,” he said, “I know a guy who knew her guy and got the same one in almost the same location. I can’t wait to show her.” He then put his shirt down and reclined on his arms, “All that said, I’m not… too worried.”

“And why’s that?”

“I’m glad you asked,” he boasted, “While living with Mom and seeing her still as nimble as a vixen half her age, I found out that she hasn’t just been playing Susie Homemaker these thirty years,”

Nick began, awaiting Gideon’s awestruck gasp, “Indeed, she and her ‘quilting circle’ have continued her work as Mrs. Foxglove, to a certain extent, staying vigilant of suspicious activity and
keeping the local Precinct up-to-date (aside from, you know, ‘retiring’ Mrs. Foxglove, old habits and all that); one of her circle actually did work for the Federal Government, training animals for special operations but is since retired.”

Gideon gasped higher.

“I was hoping to avoid MacGrim’s pack by reaching Mr. Never directly but that does not seem to be the case, and will need to get to him through them, namely, Mack,” Nick continued, “So, I’m going to visit this specialist vixen friend of Mom’s and see what she can do about training an especially clever raven like Baron.”

Blue eyes quirked as he thought on it, yet almost instantly snapping his fingers. “Mack’s got a raven, too! Except it ain’t been seen in years, according to Lory, straight up disappeared around the same time he did.”

“Bingo,” Nick concurred, “Baron could no doubt find me anywhere in Zootopia, likewise, Wisper can find Lory; finding Mr. Gibbs is the first step in this chain of impossibilities and I’d bet my tail that he’s hovering over Mack, even now.”

“And Baron can find him?”

“That’s what I’m banking on. Birds have a keen sense of one another, according to her; it’s practically a different world to them than anything we mammals can understand. So… assuming that Old Eddy Mallupe’s birds can track as well as he says, finding Mack’s raven with my raven should be a no-brainer. I just need this specialist friend of Mom’s to make sure he’s up to snuff,” Nick explained.

Gideon gradually transitioned into a skeptical humming, arms crossed and eyes scrunched.

“Don’t think too hard, now.”

He repaid the jab with a raspberry. “How’s Dr. Clea fit into all this, exactly? Unless you really are adding more to your plate by going after them prey kids that muzzled you to get to her and I can understand why but… why?”

Nick sighed yet again and brought up a leg to prop his arm on its knee. “Do I want to see her brought to justice? Without a doubt. Do I understand that doing so could jeopardize everything?” he then hypothesized, “Yes. That said… this isn’t only about justice, Bangs, whether you want to believe that she’ll face a higher court or whatever, it’s about stopping her and Magnus. Nothing in what I’ve heard about them from Mom and Dad says that they’re finished, ‘retire to the old folks home for evil geniuses’. Plus, finding out that they might very well have yet more secrets locked away in the Knotash servers, according to Judy, only further rustles my jimmies. I’m not sure what or how, ” Nick doubted, “but Magnus won’t let what happened to him pass without some serious retribution.

“As for Clea, my best guess is that she’s looking for something… something she hasn’t yet found that’s more important than whoever she goes through to get it. It must be why she risked so much to snatch up two fox kits, from two distinct times and places. I just can’t begin to wonder what it could be… and that’s why she needs to be stopped, to answer for her crimes before she breaks open another mammal’s psyche just to futz about. That in of itself is disturbing but there are rumors going around that both Doug and Dent disappeared off the face of the planet after the Feds nabbed them out of Precinct 1,” Nick blandly recounted, “Not even Madge has any theories about it except that they both were part of Cyrus Bellwether’s flock when he was alive; to my understanding, his sister Dawn worked with Clea in the past. I can only assume the worst at this
point.”

Gideon was quiet as he thought. “Magnus is stopped, though… right? We just need to keep an eye out for his revenge. Right?”

“…”

“…”?

Nick hopped down from the edge and onto the roof, paw raised to receive Baron on his way back inside.

“Stretch?”

“Magnus should be off the board until he recovers from a fatal wound to the liver, Bangs, so let’s get some sleep while we still can.”

Chapter End Notes

[“Golly bob howdy”] is borrowed from Slinky, in “Toy Story”.

The “conversing with someone before you conversed with them” idea was mentioned back in Trustworthy, chapter 14. It’s an idea that Nick had such an understanding of whomever he was talking with that he could predict what they would say and come up with the appropriate counter-measures; not a peer-into-the-future sort of sense but merely “I can apply precedence to my current situation and appear to have had it planned all along”. Similarly, Gideon understands his own baking skills and ingredients, granting him insight into the end-result with an impressive degree of clarity. This was right before the scene when Grav “and his cohorts” dropped Bo off at Gideon’s bakery after picking him up from Clarabelle’s soy farm.

The “mind-muzzle” was speculated by Nick, Judy, and Esther in Brave, chapter 7, as a simple solution to why the victims of pred-therapy never spoke about it, keying into the mental trauma they went through. Likewise, the scene in the sheriff’s office with Doug from Loyal, chapter 21, Nick learned about Lenny and that he would “was never meant to be known about”.

The “car accident” Bo mentioned was back in the beginning of Loyal, when Magnus called Judy to let her know (in a roundabout way) that so long as she kept quiet about what he did, Graham would survive the night (Magnus claimed it to be car accident but in truth, beat him within an inch of his life).

The “Logically speaking…” line came near the very end of Brave when Grav/Graham suffered a crisis of identity as to whom or what he really was. “A monster that could not kill/a bunny that could not love” but by Judy’s reckoning, because he could not kill her even with a knife at her throat, there was still some good in him worth saving and hope that he could become a better bunny.

As for Nick’s muzzle, the long-and-short of it was that he went to grab it after the Junior Ranger Scouts meeting as proof of what happened to him but discovered that it was missing (from a video he and Gideon saw in Loyal, chapter 11, before Nick
confronted his parents about their secret lives; John suspects that the video was from another member of the Borough Watch, keeping an eye on Nicky, as later mentioned in Loyal, chapter 19).

The connection between Dawn and Clea was alluded to first at the beginning of Loyal (when Felix Lapis picked up Esther to conduct business) and then again near the end of Loyal (when Nick was chatting with Doug in the jail cell).

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We, sheep, are raised for slaughter,

We follow through the fire and water.

Our wool is soft to hide what we need,

Our horns are hard to do what we must.

Let us join hooves to, at last, be freed;

Let us reunite in the dust.

What worried Esther most about the activities of Doug Ramses inside the Supai Palace was that she could never determine if he knew she was watching him or not; the vixen was adept at sneaking and rather insightful (most everyone said so and with their begrudging tone, she opted to believe them) yet the ram did exactly what it looked like he was doing. He got up at dawn, maintained his wool and hooves, brushed his teeth, ate a simple breakfast (at a table that the kitchen staff set up for him since the Supais were neither early risers nor simple eaters, generally speaking), and then went about with his apothecarial duties (including but not limited to preparing her wolf apple concoction). There were times when Esther’s keen hearing caught him muttering under his breath but never could get close enough to distinguish any words. Perhaps there was something to his supposed black-ops background after all.

“Señora Rivera,” he’d say in his monotone lack of accent, providing for her what he ground into a mortar and pestle to be dutifully consumed. In addition to the so-called “chemist”, Emperor Supai also brought in a world-leading obstetrician/gynecologist with a pediatriac background -- they themselves were not a predator, rather a muskox from a distant country who was unable to speak the local language -- to check up on Esther when it was quite obvious that she was with kit. According to the doctor, the kit was coming along quite healthily and will see her again in a month, except according to Emperor Supai, they would “leave nothing to chance” and be seeing her again in a week.

The days dragged as the awe-striking beauty of the palace and rolling landscapes outside every window did little to comfort Esther’s realization that Doug Ramses -- perhaps the only mammal in Zootopian history to occupy two of the top spots on the ZPD’s Most Wanted as the Pred Scare Sniper and the Gravedigger -- was likely the closest thing she had to a “friend”. Wayne was shipped back to the large fox villages the day after his “task was complete” on account of a “leave of absence for an indeterminable amount of time”… part of her wished they could’ve kept the charade alive a bit longer since they really began to click… Only llamas and goats remained in the palace along with the anteater guards… and the “Hounds” (coyotes who were by no means friendly… or stable). And then there was the legal team, something of a grab-bag of species but really, there was no one else for Esther to connect with… and so she took to exploring the grounds when there was no possibility of secrelty studying Reino del Sol law until the dead of night.

The muskox OB/GYN exposited in agonizing length how crucial it was to a vixen’s health that she not be monitored around the clock (since “no matter where she might wander, she’ll never endanger her unborn kit and will always return to her den”); Zevon begrudgingly complied since it
appeared that not every one in the entire world was in on whatever his evil plot was (to do with the large foxes and the wolf apples). It gave Esther a little elbow room so long as she practiced the greatest caution and inched open the windows of her liberty. The schedules of the other Supai royalty were easy enough to learn considering they had a habit of tipping their hands at any given moment; some had taken a “liking” to her (for lack of a better term) and even dared chastise Zevon for “twisting your neck to keep an eye on her” (they were his siblings, after all, and not exactly bound to the same degree of fear-inspired reverence, especially with him still in the wheelchair, healing as he was).

Esther’s meanderings helped in many regards but chief amongst them was the processing of the empire’s laws and the sating of a few curiosities. First, it felt like she was being watched but not by the llamas or anteater guards (as it came in the witching hours); second, there was a smokey smell that she couldn’t quite put her finger on (different from the palace’s habitual smokers); third, and perhaps the most pressing, a sound tickled her ears, teasing to inch those windows open a bit wider. One day, Esther indulged a burgeoning craving with a swiped pastry from the kitchen when she finally tracked down that sound adrift in the halls… one she heard echoing across the gardens and promenades… new yet somehow… familiar…

It was the west wing of the palace, the sleeping quarters she wasn’t allowed into but found a delightful gap in the patrols and Supai schedules that lined up with her allotted “wandering time”. Long, dark ears led the way for curious, blue eyes to peek in through an unlocked door and find a luxurious bedroom done to the nines in all manner of Reino del Sol heritage… along with treasures from the outside world. Being small of frame (for her species) and still nimble of foot, Esther sought out what swelled her heart as she recognized the beat and rhythm of a song she’d never heard before… and nearly invisible though she was, a chance turn of the head caught sight of her.

Yzla’s room; complete with the fifteen-year-old modern princess and her guards. They were not anteaters, as it turned out, rather a set of jaguar twins with the customary shimmer of black-on-black spots that seemed to trick the eyes with a golden glint, depending on how they stood. Esther had seen them before and what an overwhelming shock it was, at first meeting, they whose eyes pierced and faces set into their obsidian features, and always kept closer to Yzla than any of her family members and their guards. Woe to any who dared too close, for theirs was a life forfeit.

Tez -- the older twin -- had just peered over his shoulder to lock eyes with Esther, his dark lips curling and fangs gleaming as the fur spiked from his ears and down his spine. Poc -- the younger twin -- was a half-second behind his brother (per the norm) in vaulting his height straight into the air. Momentary stereo yowling from the guards ended as soon as they both landed and scrambled, Tez grabbing a robe to wrap up a yet aware Yzla while Poc clapped the laptop shut to cease its video (and then nearly sat on it to look as casual as possible, a demeanor which Tez mirrored).

“Tamaya!” Yzla nearly shrieked, thrusting her arms through the robe to cinch it tight and fix her hair from hanging on one side of her snout. And then hid behind Tez.

Esther slipped in after a cursory glance down the hall and closed the door, cupping her mouth with wide eyes. “Is that Gazelle’s newest album…?" she then breathlessly asked, long since accepted that her pre-ordered copy is waiting back at the apartment with Nick.

“N-No!” she lied, Tez and Poc exchanging nervous glances.

“It’s one my favorites!” she gleed and then looked to either jaguar in their accompanying Tigrito ensemble,
paws folded behind her back to lean forward at the waist, “And might I say, you both look amazing.” They suavely shied at such flattery (and seemed to chitter in response to one another, what Esther recognized as “twin speak” from the Tweed fox twins back at Preds’ Corner).

Quite shyly, reluctantly, the youngest royal Supai of age removed the robe to meekly stand in an outfit that looked better fit on a female more developed than she and a color that did not compliment her natural wool, but by comparing it to Esther’s memory, it was fitted to Yzla’s physique and her wool dyed to better match. It was in a fashion of light and flowing aquamarine fabric with a design that did more to cover the legs than the torso (though her chest and arms were sufficiently modest, if shoulders exposed) that was cinched at her ankles; in contrast, the jaguar’s were only covered below the waist in a similar, whiter fabric with a puffed-out shape that hinted at the definition of their legs when the light hit it at a certain angle. “I got it at the Luau as an anonymous bidder,” she awkwardly admitted (and while talking, it was clear that her front teeth stuck out a bit more than they probably should) and rubbed a gangly arm, “Papi said I’m not supposed to wear it… you won’t tell him… will you…?”

The vixen’s bangs swished as her head shook, scurrying a bit closer with a gesture to show that she was sharing a secret. “I’m not even supposed to be in this part of the palace,” Esther said with a wink and then touched her grinning lips.

“That’s right!” Yzla gasped, “You can’t be near electronics; they’ll hurt you, won’t they? I remember Dr. Gouse was adamant about that.”

Esther maintained her smile, tempered though it was as she sighed through her nose at the mention of Doug Ramses’s alias. “Well… I’ve lived in Zootopia for years, you know,” she explained, glancing at the still closed laptop beneath Poc, and spotting no obvious physical connection to the Internet, continued, “and the Wifi reaches everywhere in the palace yet I don’t have so much as an ache.”

Yzla’s hoof flicked as she snorted. “It doesn’t reach every where… but I see your point,” she considered and took a seat in her desk chair, “Excuse me, Poc,” and then opened up her laptop to immediately pause Gazelle’s music video, “So… this doesn’t bother you?” the llama then asked, neck craning in a way only possible by mammals with the length to accomplish it.

Blue eyes gleamed at the key to her victory practically within arm’s reach: a means to contact Zootopia… to see Nick, Judy, and Giddy again… The vixen hummed with great care, stepping closer under the watchful gaze of the towering jaguar guards, and as the screen reflected off her irises, she shook her head again. “Nope,” she merrily reported.

“That’s weird…” Princess Yzla admitted, thoughtfully closing her laptop and then addressing the vixen directly as the ebony cats casually closed in, “I mean, it’s good!” she assured, “I would hate to think that you being in the palace was painful but it makes sense that living in a city, even Zootopia, let you adapt. Does that mean your kit will, too?” and looked down at the hinting kit-and-kaboodle.

“They should,” Esther mused and caressed her stomach. “So… I take it your family doesn’t approve of you dancing to Gazelle?”

She groaned dramatically and collapsed in her chair, arms tightly crossed. “They just don’t understand that Gazelle’s a genius; they say that if I should sing or dance then it should be to Reino del Sol’s ‘rich musical heritage,’” she pouted, “But Gazelle, she… I feel like she knows me… that she speaks to me…” I was so surprised when Papi agreed to hold my fiesta de quinceañera at her Luau, much less let me dance on stage with her,” she swooned, giggled, and spun in her chair, “She even signed our selfie!” The llama grabbed her bedazzled cellphone to
show her wallpaper of the aforementioned photograph.

“Oh, wow!” Esther awed, holding out her paws to accept the device, eyes sparkling not only with the reflection of its screen but with how insultingly easy it would be snatch the phone, dodge the jaguars, and vault out the window before Yzla even realized what happened; but there was business still to do and legal loopholes to find (and then exploit). “I’m so jealous…” she feigned, to which the princess gleefully shifted in her seat before the phone was returned.

“I heard you were at the Luau, too,” the llama happily relayed and then clapped her hooves to lean in to share another secret, “Want to know who else was there?” she teased and began swiping through her gallery to reveal a lengthwise photograph of the stage during the final number. Almost instantly did Esther’s heart melt and ache with longing as she saw Judy Hopps and Lanny Wild, two of her dearest friends, dancing alongside Officer Clawhauser (one of her dearest, fellow Gazelle fans) and the profile of Chief Bogo in grass hula skirts, just visible from around the turn of the stage. “See that lion there?” Yzla directed.

Esther groaned in recognition, her eyes brightening and tail flicking as she poised to respond. “That’s Simon King!”

The vixen was genuinely shocked to idiocy, able only to blink and slack her jaw at such a claim. “What?” she eventually asked, head canted and ears akimbo.

“It is ,” Yzla assured and swooned at the picture, “I like to keep up with whatever news I can find about Zootopia, being Gazelle’s home city and… oh!” she apologetically realized, “You’ve been away for so long, of course you wouldn’t know…” The laptop was opened again to retrieve a saved article about the triumphant (if mysterious) return of Simon King, complete with a fiery-maned smoldering lion that Esther thought she recognized. “As it turns out, he went by the name ‘Lanny Wild’ this whole time,” she excitedly exposited (if a bit nasally, due to said excitement), “Now, some would have you believe that he had amnesia ,” and derisively snorted, “but I found some fascinating evidence debunking it…”

Yzla’s words were little more than a distant buzz for Esther as she thought back to her friend Lanny and his definite diagnosis of amnesia… and was mixed with wonder and relief that he finally found his past… and what a find it was, indeed. Foremost, however, she thought about how Nick had apparently -- without even trying -- found the Missing Prince. Her heart swelled at the hope that he might pull another world-shaking miracle from the air as if it were nothing at all, and prove the salvation of her and the rest of the large foxes. Any doubt she harbored as to the importance of her studying Reino del Sol law for loopholes in its emigration policy whisked away like chaff.

“…So you see, it only makes sense that Simon used ‘Lanny Wild’ (as in famed lion singer, Sam Wild? Obviously an alias) as a disguise to sneak back into Pridelands Enterprises as a dockworker while also being a nurse, which got him up to his bedridden father, and then let him confront his snake of an uncle-”

“Wait,” Esther, requested, snapping back to reality, “Tycho King’s a snake?”

“Oh, yes!” Yzla affirmed and pulled up another article, “He poisoned his brother for his shares in the company. And to think, he was Zootopia’s liaison for Reino del Sol,” she snorted derisively again.

“…He was ?”
“Well, not any more! The Supais have lots to thank Simon for if you ask me; it’s a good thing we haven’t dropped our business with Pridelands… maybe I’ll still get a chance to meet him…” she swooned again, clicking over to his especially debonair (perhaps even flirtatious) depiction on the cover of *Fancy Cat* magazine. The twins chuckled teasingly to each other, to which she whipped her neck around to purse her lips menacingly at their innocent façade.

Tez politely cleared his throat, “Yzla, His Majesty will—”

“-come before too long,” Poc followed up, not missing a beat.

“I guess…” Yzla lamented and then smiled at Esther, “Tamaya, I know it’s asking a lot but… I don’t have anyone else in the palace to share Gazelle with… except you two, of course,” she then beamed at the twins, to which they bashfully nodded, “But… if you ever want to stop by again and listen to her new album, then we’ll look out for each other. Okay?”

Esther had spotted a FuzzBook notification pop-up on Yzla’s screen before it was closed, her mind still reeling with all the new information, recalling how the household and royal family often stopped talking whenever she was nearby…and perhaps finally figured out what they were discussing… Her mind raced with bright possibilities. “I would love nothing more.”

“Da-!” Nick initiated when blindsided by a particularly upsetting headline that popped up on his phone, paused mid-profanity to lock eyes with a rust-brown fox kit peering over the trolley’s backseat, and then swiftly corrected himself, “-gnabbit. Hiya,” he quietly greeted whilst leaning forward, “what’s up?”

“You were gonna say a bad word, huh?” the kit dared to hush, tiny claws secured in their grip with scanning bright eyes, face still half-obstructed but there was no doubt that they grinned and wagged their tail.

A furtive glance was spared at the kit’s mother, who remained thoroughly engaged in a phone call as they traveled deeper into Conifer District, where the streets were less defined and pine needles more abundant. Nick further inclined, “What makes you think that?” he asked behind his paw.

“’Cause that’s the face adults make when they say bad words,” the kit said, even rising up onto their little toes to poke their nose into view, also talking behind their paw.

“Well, I only say a bad word like ‘dagnabbit’ when I need to describe something bad.”

“That’s not a bad word,” he kit chastised.

Nick arched his eyebrows and canted his head. “Oh, and *you* would know?” he challenged.

“Yeah- huh!?” they defied and looked about ready to climb onto the back of the seat, “I know the *P*-word.”

Nick gasped and looked about, ears pinned while scooting in closer with a paw still raised. “Where did you learn the *P*-word?”

“From my big sister, she teaches me all sorts of things,” they said, quickly checked that their mother was still talking on the phone, and then whispered as low as they could, “Poop!”

Nick gasped again and covered his mouth before giving his least-threatening glower. “That is a very bad word,” he warned amidst the kit’s giggling, “and should only be used for the *baddest* things. Okay?”
Okay!

They both promptly sat when the kit’s mother got off the phone as the trolley gradually came to a full and complete halt, its bell clanging for the current stop before continuing along. Nick wistfully sighed and smiled despite the “dagnabbit” news he’d just read:

PROF. WILLIAM KAZAR IMPLICATED IN MAGNUS HOPPS CASE
Tycho King points fingers and names names in ongoing investigation

His green eyes cast out the open window as he slipped his phone back into his pocket. Oh yes, Professor K just so happened to be caught on your everyday white-collar embezzling, nothing too serious that he can’t get a plea bargain for. Sheesh, I’ll run out of ‘stars to sail by’ if they keep eating their own like this, Nick griped, I hope this thing with Baron works before all my leads are thrown to the buzzards of Conner Shere… The justice system will prevail in the end -- I would turn in my badge if it didn’t -- but Esther doesn’t have that kind of time and bless his heart, Gid’s digging up shadows from an unstable subconscious mineshaft just to try and help. He sighed and rubbed under his bowler hat, sifting through the fur there before reaching up to tug on the trolley stop cord as his destination approached.

A jolly smile and salute was paid to the trolley conductor as Nick alighted onto the sparse cobblestone, ears flicking to the boughs high overhead (the pinecone nets rattling with their quarry and the pinecone teams buzzing with their chatter) to deliver a soft if terse whistle through his teeth as aided by clicking his tongue off the roof of his mouth. His paw rose and from the high-noon dim that could reach through the pine-needle canopy did a feathery specter swoop to, likewise, alight upon his ‘gloved’ perch before hopping to the custom-made shoulder harness. Nick, Baron cawed.

“Good lad,” Nick commended, raking fine claws through the inky plumage and continuing down a lane well-lit for those whose vision relied less on bright sunlight; there was the occasional glade, of course, into which soft sun merrily streamed, usually in such places which residents were best found. “Lessee… number 3… that would be 4… and number 5,” he counted and came upon a quaint cottage nestled in behind a flourishing if modest flower garden and picket fence. “Howland” read the mailbox Nick walked past as he peered in at the maternal vixen of strawberry-red fur specked with the wisdom of her years tending to a bed of tulips. “Hi Auntie Mae,” Nick greeted in his typically casual warmth, immediately exciting the dark-green iguana keeping close tabs on the vixen.

It sprang up and amiably… “croaked” (as best Nick could describe the noises of an iguana) while skittering along the path to greet the tod, its tail whipping behind it. “Alright, alright!” Majie Mae chastised in nonchalant authority, “Roxie, down.” The iguana snapped shut but wiggled in anticipation to properly welcome the guest in, further shooed aside as “Auntie Mae” stood and clapped dirt off her legs. “She’s why I don’t bother with a doorbell,” the vixen joked, and then observed, “Aslan’s mane, the last time I saw you, you could have ridden on her back and now you’re longer than she is, tail included. Come on in, the gate’s not locked.” The iguana immediately followed her up the garden path and Nick wasn’t far behind as she guided them into the cottage.

Meticulously kept ivy covered the walls outside and was printed on the wallpaper inside (along with a florist’s dream of climbing plants scattered around the rooms). The space was largely open and breathed wonderfully, artwork and photos joined humble Chronicler imagery across every wall nearly as high as the ceiling. Auntie Mae gestured toward a set of thoroughly worn and comfortable couches in a corner surrounding a solid oak coffee table; despite the abundance of natural chaos
outside the home, inside things were organized be they on the bookshelf, in an immaculate kitchen, or a set of coasters and placemats seemingly designated for visitors. “Sorry I couldn’t get things cleaned up before you got here, sometimes I just lose track of time, you know?” she apologized while setting down a tray with a towering, frosty pitcher and glasses, “Iced tea?”

_She likely couldn’t schedule the steam cleaners last minute_ , he mused and tossed his hat onto a provided rack near the door on his way to the couch. With a nod and smile, he accepted a drink as well as the sandwich cookies and another, healthier snack. Nick minutely sighed at the choice of fruit.

“Not a fan of cherries?” Auntie Mae wondered as she sat with him on one of the couches (Roxie wiggling herself beneath their feet and nosing Nick’s leg).

“It’s nothing,” he assured before popping one into his mouth and then spitting out the seed into an adjacent empty bowl, soon engaging in the customary niceties while petting the underfoot lizard, “So, how’s the family?”

“Well, my daughter’s in the Royal Navy as a ‘shipfox’ but is more of an engineer; deployed only a few months ago,” she boasted and gestured toward a photo with a wine-red vixen proudly posed in a sailor’s outfit, “She took after her grandfather -- rest his soul -- and one of the first foxes in modern history to be _officially_ recognized as ‘uniformed’; that makes her the second one I know,” Auntie Mae mused, smirking at Nick’s feigned bashfulness, “My son is expecting another kit and his next book should be on the shelves later this year. But enough about _me_ ,” the vixen coolly said, folding her legs up onto the couch, “let’s talk about your friend.” Her paw lifted and fingers flicked as she made a bewildering clicking-whistle.

Nick blinked and arched his brow as Baron smoothly fluttered from his shoulder to her wrist, and then puffed at her cooing as she caressed a claw under his beak. “Mom said you had a way with birds,” he recounted, grinning, “Auntie Mae, I’d like you to meet ‘Baron’.”

“What a handsome name. Jackie also said very little as to your intentions, Nicky,” the vixen kindly countered, setting Baron into her lap such that he nestled at her gentle stroking, “except that I’d best hear it from _you_ . So… what can ‘Auntie Mae’ do for you?”

Another sandwich cookie was peeled open, the cream inside licked away, and then the rest tossed into Nick’s mouth to be crunched. “I have it on _excellent_ authority that your ‘way with birds’ is a bit more than an affinity; that you train them.”

“Past tense,” she corrected, claws idly sifting through ebony plumage, “I am since retired… and only then, I trained messengers.”

“In this modern day and age,” Nick pondered.

“Messengers not easily intercepted,” she elaborated and then grinned, “Ravens are very smart birds and are some of the best, you know.”

Green eyes studied her. “But that’s not _all_ you did.”

“Nicky, you’ve been slying me ever since you came to my gate,” Auntie Mae cooed and then examined Baron, “I used to live in Gnu York where Daddy integrated into civilian life after meeting Mom and having me and my siblings. He was a shipfox but he worked with radar and the like -- an engineer -- but his _real_ talent was parsing the truth,” she reminisced, “There was still a stigma to admitting small predators into law school back when he was a young tod so he became an insurance adjuster…”
Nick quirked a curious brow.

“A Carnivore Insurance Adjuster.”

“Well... now that is interesting. It’s no wonder you and Mom get along so well.”

She tittered a giggle. “He was one of the best... almost too good, in some cases. Whether it was why he packed up our family and moved to Conifer went with him and Mom into Aslan’s paws but I digress,” Auntie Mae continued, softly sighing as she examined her floral life upon the walls, “Mom... she had a way with plants and birds and the like that I could never hold a candle to -- ‘treat your plants like pets, your pets like children, and your children like adults’ she’d say -- but I picked up some of her tricks all the same. Daddy introduced me to one of his old naval buddies and I was trained in the training of birds... for missions,” Auntie Mae explained and leaned in, “We foxes... have a keen sense for what’s not there, Nicky, same as birds, lizards, and fish. It’s in all mammals,” she’d assure, “but we foxes pay closer attention to it. My son says it’s the reason why we’re called ‘crazy’ -- or in another time -- ‘witches’.”

“He’s always been... creative, hasn’t he?” Nick pointed out, drinking more iced tea.

“You don’t know the half of it,” the vixen coyly responded, “But I’m retired from bird-training, as I said.”

The tod hummed speculatively. “Something I’m sure Mom didn’t mention is that I’m quite adept at parsing out the truth myself,” he humbly boasted and examined his claws, “And with all due respect, Auntie Mae... you’re not telling me everything.”

The vixen hummed retrospectively. “As I also said... you’ve been slying me. Why do you want a raven trained by me?”

“Because I’m looking for someone,” he resolved.

“That’s sweet but what’s it to do with me?”

He quirked his brow. “...Please?”

“Points for manners, Nicky, and happy though I am to help the kit of a dear friend whom I love as a sister... Well, let’s just say I picked up a few tricks from Daddy, too.”

Nick politely grumbled. “And I’ll likely hear it from Mom if I’m not wholly honest with you.”

“You’ll likely hear it from me if you’re not wholly honest with me.”

“...Touché,” he abided to her smirk, “I need Baron to find another raven that I can say with... enough certainty is in the city of Zootopia. This raven belongs to a wolf and, long story short...” he sighed and folded his paws, “I call my mate ‘Cherries’... and finding this wolf is the key to rescuing her.” A maternal paw held his arm and he felt a gradual onset of... what he could only describe as “okayness”.

“That is an excellent reason ‘why’. We can begin today if you’d like? I’m pretty much free.”

“Thanks, that’d be great,” he airily replied, his brow furrowed while looking at her directly. “You’re... empathic?”

She shrugged with a smile and a tilt of her ears, “We’re all empathic, some mammals.”
“Like, really empathic,” Nick determined and squinted one eye at the vixen before blinking them both wide as his mouth seemed to work of its own accord, “That must be why you work so well with birds and lizards, you understand them on a deeper level than other mammals. I thought only bunnies could be that… you know, feely. One specific bunny comes to mind…” he then added under his breath.

Auntie Mae bashfully scratched at her neck. “It’s not all pet tricks, Nicky, sometimes I feel emotions that aren’t mine and it… gets a little out of control.”

He studied her a moment longer. “Can you… make others feel what you feel?”

Auntie Mae gesticulated her point a bit. “No, but it’s more like… I help them find what they’re looking for or… they feel more of what they’re already feeling. Kind of like someone who’s very charismatic brightening up a room just by entering it but what I do is far less overwhelming; I’ve dealt with those types, by the way, and they are not always fun to be around…”

*That almost sounds like alpha stuff… but that’s ridiculous, there are no alpha-bunnies or -foxes,* he decided and then groaned in realization, “Okay, that makes sense. So, let’s get started on this super-secret raven training. How long do you think it will take? No rush but a rough estimate would be appreciated.”

“Depends on the bird; if Baron is as smart as you lead me to believe, it shouldn’t be very long at all,” the vixen considered, spreading one of the raven’s wings to examine it.

“Out standing,” Nick delighted, *Because I’m worried I might be a bit behind the 8-ball since Judy’s already moved ahead with her side of things. It simply would not do to let that supremely sly bunny one-up me at international espionage.*

“And just what are you two conspiring about?” Judy demanded, ears erect and swiftly advancing on Bo and Graham hunched over the latter’s sepia-cased phone. She was, of course, pleased-as-peaches to see them getting along as they had all throughout breakfast and the cousins’ dichotomous reactions were all the more satisfying.

Bo was petrified, pinning his ears back to appear as casual as possible.

Graham grinned nonchalantly and lazily waved his phone about. “Don’t mind us boys, we’re just perusing the buttocks mappings on the Knotash servers; they’re kept on file to better shape the seats in the automatic cars to the passenger, you know,” he explained and then knocked a knuckle to Bo’s chest, to which he grinned a bit too wide and cast a quick glance at the butterscotch rabbit, “I merely suggested that I could have yours made into a pillow, should Bo desire.”

She eyed them both, one’s pursed lips and the other’s smirk… and then doubled over in a fit of laughter (which Graham joined before Bo and with varying degrees of believability). Judy’s finger waggled while bracing a knee to then stand and heel-turn with a gathering gesture, “You almost got me with that one. C’mon, we’ve got lots to do today and the sun’s just about to crest the horizon,” the gray bunny instructed and then chuckled to muse under her breath with a shake of her head, “‘Butt mappings’, of all the things…”

Vigorous and silent nodding communicated Bo’s intent prior to following and Graham wasn’t far behind after he pressed a button on his phone. It was still early, even for rabbits, as the three traversed the upstairs hallway with care not to wake anyone else.

“Allrighty,” Judy then said when the chocolate rabbit reached up to yank the folding staircase from
the ceiling, “according to my parents, no one goes up there except to retrieve the holiday decorations, so after we get past the first two or three walls of boxes we should breach long-term storage. Then the real work begins.”

“You say ‘breach’,” Graham critiqued, “and this is me speaking, but isn’t that a tad melodramatic?”

“Nope,” she resolved and held up three sets of “Goggles, face-masks, ear-sleeves, and gloves. We’ll be spelunking through years of caked-on dust, gents, so it will be vital to not work for too long or too rigorously for any span, lest we risk lung damage.”

The butterscotch bunny doubted his eyewear. “This isn’t a prank, I gather.”

The chocolate bunny fitted his ear-sleeves, talking from behind his mask. “‘Fraid not, Graham. In about an hour or so we’ll have a ventilator hooked up to the door to suck out the dust in the air but if you’re not feeling up to it—”

“Who said anything about that?” Graham interjected, comfortably securing his goggles with the faintest lilt of farm-bunny accent, “I didn’t get dragged out into the country to not engage in good ol’ fashioned manual labor.”

“That’s the spirit,” Judy affirmed, “I’ve drafted a rigid schedule that should account for our respective limits including snacks, breathers, and bathroom breaks; if all goes well, we should have roughly seventy-eight percent of the attic cleared by dinnertime,” she triumphantly reported, “if we don’t find the book by then, we’ll see how we feel after dessert and take it from there. Think you’re up to the task, Graham?”

“Candleflame, please, I’m a city-rabbit,” he jovially dismissed and snapped the glove around his paw, “you had me at ‘rigid schedule’.” Graham’s coffee-spotted ears sprung mere milliseconds after Judy’s dark tips did and before Bo’s solid browns, and as he craned his neck over a shoulder towards the long hallway that eventually led downstairs, poised to inquire, “Is that Pop-Pop?”

Both Judy and Bo groaned in exasperated affirmation as she mounted the stair-ladder to say as kindly as possible, “Don’t… just don’t worry about him, we’ll deal with him later. He isn’t supposed to be up this early and our ‘rigid schedule’ has no time allocated for ‘forgetful grandparents’.”

“He calls you ‘Trudy’?” Graham still wondered, fully facing down the hallway with twitching ears to catch any senile rambling, “Sounds like he’s shambling upstairs at a breakneck pace.”

“Yes,” Bo agreed and hoisted his cousin beneath the shoulders (to which he grunted his surprise), “he’ll then come over here and berate us for forgetting what we wanted to ask him,” the larger bunny extrapolated, tossing the smaller bunny just enough to grab him by the waist and then lift him by his seat into the attic and Judy’s awaiting grasp, “Hup sie-daisy.” Swiftly and silently did Bo then close the attic door behind them.

The three were alone in the stuffy and barely-lit attic, a faint airflow still felt from the trapdoor; considering an operation inside the overhead archeological dig, they each opted for some manner of short-sleeved work-out attire. Judy and Bo’s respective tank tops fitted to their respective athletic physiques, she bottoming her ensemble with spandex and he with gym shorts; Graham’s attire was designed to draw sweat away from the fur while also maintaining airflow and -- in contrast to his country-bred cohorts -- modesty.

Bo reached to ignite the dangling bulb with a creaky click of its chain to illuminate the ramparts of plainly labeled boxes. “That way,” Judy reported behind her mask, finger thrust toward what could
only be the length of the house itself, “it’s also where a sun-facing window is and our only point of origin for a lost, sun-bleached item.”

“By-the-by,” Graham initiated to ask as they cleared a path through the holiday decorations with some clever rearrangement, and so continued at Judy’s vocalized affirmation, “is ‘Trudy’ merely a centenarian slip-of-the-mind?”

“Yes but there’s more to it,” Judy answered, handing off a box of brightly colored lights, “I suspect that ‘Trudy’ was a housevixen at the Hopps Manor in Forestdwell with my colorations, which, as you know, Pop-Pop lived and worked as a kitchen boy when he was young.”

Dark purple eyes glared cynically through the dust-glazed goggles as he repositioned his cargo. “That is a remarkable coincidence… so she -- this vixen -- was identical in color to Laverne Hopps?”

“I know, right?” Bo added, alternating between standing and squatting as Judy stood on his shoulders to pluck boxes off the top of a stack, “Pop-Pop also identified her as ‘Savage’ -- her last name, not her mental state,” he then reported, letting Judy hop off so that he could reach up and provide a box for each of the shorter bunnies, “I couldn’t dig up anything about a ‘Gertrude Savage’, though, fox or otherwise.”

“No, I imagine not too many records exist after Forestdwell was razed to the ground nearly a century ago,” Graham considered, “not even the cornerstones survived its cascading ill fortunes.”

“On the contrary,” Bo swiftly countered, “the Iron Bridge -- or Heavens Arc -- remained mostly intact and is the sole remnant of that once-great kingdom. In fact, it was even refurbished to its original design of a lightning catcher and is maintained as a historical artifact to this day… but has since been insulated to be safely used as a very popular bridge between the two cities which sprang up after the kingdom’s destruction.”

Graham gently coughed as they opened up the pathway to the dustier storage beyond. “Stars above, this place has gotten out of paw…”

“To be fair,” Judy defended, “we had over a thousand bunnies living here for the TBR, which is a lot of dead skin cells and fur to get sucked up the vents. All of the lower filters have already been cleaned but it’s just this… build-up of twenty years since the last TBR paired with the propensity to, well, ‘fix not what isn’t broken’. Anyway, let’s get cracking!” she determined and got varying degrees of cheer from the bucks, “Remember: we’re looking for a book so gently shake a box for anything heavy or else set it aside.”

It wasn’t long afterward that cleaning equipment and a giant hose were inserted into the attic’s trapdoor (as well as early-morning snacks and water, and extra boxes with packing tape, just in case any repairs were needed); gentle suction sounded to stir the air and consume all dislodged dust drifting about their ears and around their feet. It was nearly noon when Bo handed off one such box, warning of a weak bottom.

“Ah, biscuits,” Judy declared with only a few steps, “that was weaker than I thought… Graham, grab me another box, please?” She grumbled, very careful not to let everything simply spill out but rather control the mayhem as best she could, even spreading it across the floor to check for anything damaged. “What…?”

“Something amiss?” Graham asked, a spare box and tape in paw as he wondered about her stunned demeanor (Bo peering casually yet expectantly around his cousin’s ears).
“N—nothing, nothing is wrong it’s just…” she attempted to say, picking up a manila folder named “Stuart Hopps” in faded ink… along with “The ‘Royal Academy of Science’…” Judy awed, paw daring to caress the grand, lion-crested seal, “Dad… went to school in Liondon…?” She sat the goggles upon her head and pulled down her mask to better examine the paperwork inside. “A… a masters degree… two masters degrees!” she continued and moaned exuberantly as if a rocket trembling before launch, “Sweet cheese and crackers, Dad’s a doctor of agriculture!”

“An ‘honorary’ doctor,” Graham courteously and curiously noticed over her shoulder.

“It counts!” she joyously rebutted, holding the folder with such reverence while pulling out a graduation photograph of him in some of the finest robes she was ever privileged to witness. “Wow…!” Judy gleed.

“I knew Magnus went to Liondon but he never said anything about Uncle Stu…” the butterscotch rabbit wondered, examining the rough tear in the tape on the box’s bottom, “which, of course, leads one to speculate as to why he didn’t say anything about such a noble accomplishment.”

She took care to slip everything back into the folder and looked through the remainder of the dispersed contents; various paperwork kept from her father’s school days… and then found a manila folder of a different sort with “Bonnie Hopps” in a much more utilitarian type. “A flight school…?” Judy excitedly noticed, “Just outside of Zootopia…” From inside was another picture drawn, one of a younger Bonnie in an aviator uniform and jacket amongst other students (she being one of the smallest). “Mom…” she marveled.

As Judy looked through the folder, however, she began to tremble anew but not with the exultation of just a few moments prior. The high her gasps reached upon seeing the unanimous passing… acing grades on the pilot-in-training scorecard plummeted into the practical tests… each and every one a fail; extra lines were drawn and manually entered for each additional attempt, each resulting defeat until a final medical report: “unfit to fly”. “Mom…” she choked but recovered herself immediately.

“Juju?” Bo inquired, crouching beside her and touching her back.

“I never knew… I don’t think any of us knew…” Judy speculated as she carefully put everything in the folder, “This is amazing! I always figured my parents… well… assumed my parents just wanted to be carrot farmers. They had dreams, yes, but I never… never really knew what they were, they… never spoke of them…”

“I suppose you always wondered where you got your spirit from, though,” Graham suggested, crouching on the other side of her and touching a shoulder.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes before donning both mask and goggles again, “Mystery solved,” Judy determined with a giggle, “Let’s get this boxed up. I’ll ask my parents about it after we find the White Book; that holds priority.”

“Yes…” the butterscotch rabbit pondered as he touched his cousin’s paw -- namely the middle finger -- and lifted it inside its glove, “Bo, did you know about Uncle Stu and Aunt Bonnie?” he then asked. A curious glance was spared by both farm-bunnies as the larger one retrieved his paw, “Follow-up question: might we possibly find any torn tape fabrics hanging onto the claw of your index finger should we remove your glove?”

Judy quirked a severe eyebrow and addressed her boyfriend. “Well?” she then pressed.

He cleared his throat and shrugged with both shoulders and eyebrows. “I was hoping to get away
with it a bit longer than that, but… yes,” he unabashedly admitted and removed the glove to inspect and find the clinging evidence (which he then flicked away), “Your Dad was working with the other horticulturists over at the greenhouse and it just… kind of slipped while we were talking but he made me promise not to tell you, Juju. I think it’s a chapter of his life he kept closed for a reason but… I can’t imagine what it could be.”

Purple eyes (both light and dark) brightened. “And that’s why you sabotaged the box, for Judy to find it,” Graham deduced, rubbing his chin, “I thought it awful suspect that you were looking for a book between sheets of paper while we were up here.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” Bo explained and rubbed the back of his neck, “but all the same… you needed to know and it was up to me to figure out how to tell you without… telling you.”

“That is so sweet,” she swooned, “and pretty sneaky. But did you actually think the White Book was up here or was it only a cover to look for these files?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I went from one end of the house to the other searching for that book after you told me how important it could be. But yes, those files were my primary objective because I knew where those would be and then I heard Pop-Pop mention… something about hiding ‘it’ somewhere ‘dusty’ and ‘up top’. The attic seemed like an obvious place to hide just about anything,” he reported with a general gesture at the multitudinous identical, if labeled boxes, “So… I figured even if we couldn’t find the book, we’d have found these, at least—”

“Hey, guys!” a voice called from the trapdoor, launching the three conspirators from their pelts, “You get your cottontails downstairs for lunch, on the double.”

“Ah, biscuits,” Judy cursed under her breath before removing her mask again and hiding the files behind her back while pointing at the torn box and its contents, “Thanks, Monica, we just need to clean up a few things, first.”

Monica cynically grunted, hoisting her bodily self to sit on the attic floor from the ladder. “Like I haven’t heard that before. I’ve already eaten so I’ll clean it up; you all get fed,” she instructed, standing and thumping her foot, “Chop-chop.” Bo led the way as the files were discreetly passed off to him since the vigilant older sister kept an eye on the ever-wily Judy. “And get yourselves cleaned first; you all look like papier-mâché,” she then called down to them after they descended the ladder.

When they were sufficiently out of earshot and placed their cleaning gear near the turned-off, retracted ventilator, Graham asked aloud, “What would the point be if there’s another half-day of attic-trawling awaiting us after lunch?”

“Oh, we’re just getting a quick spritz with the hose to rinse off the caked layer of sweat and dust,” Bo explained, keeping the folders up high from the prying eyes of curious, smaller rabbits. “Not the full bath experience,” Judy added for clarification’s sake, “We’ll likely eat outside as our fur dries. Plus, the wash will refresh our spirits for the work ahead. It’s too bad we couldn’t stash those files somewhere, I don’t want to just… you know, throw these parts of my parents’ lives out into the open…”

While washing in the backyard was just another day for Judy and Bo, Graham found himself at a bit of a loss at how to adapt to willing being sprayed in his clothes, when to scrub or simply let the bunny at the hose shoot off the dust-formed crust. He also discovered that while his Knotash-designed clothing was exquisite for working in the attic, it did not help in the same capacity when doused. Quite casually, both Judy and Bo removed their respective tank tops, wrung them, flapped
them, and slipped them back on, (repeated the process with their shorts), and then departed the hosing area; Graham followed suit before bringing up the rear and sitting upon some dry, sun-warmed grass well within sight of the house.

Soon enough, lunches of carrot wedges, mustard-beet-and-spinach sandwiches on rye, and cool cucumber juice were brought out for all their nourishment needs (with cinnamon oatmeal raisin cookies to top everything off). The younger siblings who brought the meals grew more and more curious as to what the mysterious folders were, however, especially since they were kept close by but dry during the washing. Bo attempted to dissuade their investigation, grunting as tiny bunnies tried to climb him to reach what he was keeping from them. “What’re they?” a younger brother asked, actually hanging from the outstretched arm.

“You gotta tell us!” a younger sister implored Judy, whose placations did not work on those who knew her best.

“They’re mine ,” Graham lied, casually plucking the documents from the swiping grasp of an especially nimble little sister.

The toddling fluffle directed every eye and ear to the butterscotch rabbit as he retreated a step to draw the encroaching swarm off Judy and Bo, alert but not advancing. “ Yours ?” pressed an audacious brother at the forefront.

“Why, yes ,” the city-bunny assured, haughtily fanning the folders just under an easy grin (and if a fang poked out at the corner of his mouth, it would surprise no one), “ Very secret, you understand; reserved only for those who can… handle it. Do you… want to see what’s inside?” he airily challenged, careful to obscure the identifying names.

Diminutive gulps answered initially as they momentarily convened. “Y-… yeah! ” the one in front said.

Graham’s dark purple eyes lit up. “Do you really ?” he excitedly yet quietly inquired, fingers teasing the opening fold with the faintest hint of a cackle.

More audible gulps. “N- no, not… not really …” he meekly explained, a sentiment shared with the small bunnies behind him as they, in turn, retreated half-a-pace.

“Are you sure ?” Graham pressed, leaning forward with the lifted flap, paw sliding in to tug at the papers inside, “I think you’re ready. I think you’re all ready…”

The fluffle scampered behind Judy and Bo, peeking around their legs or paws and each other. Judy calmly seized the opportunity. “Now now, Graham,” she kindly admonished, holding tiny paws in hers, “perhaps not… quite yet.”

Graham sighed dramatically and closed the folders, snapped them together with a flick of his wrist to then secure them under his arm. “Very well ,” he abided and subtly leered at the small bunnies, “another time, perhaps.”

“In due time,” Bo casually asserted, tiny paws individually gripping his fingers, “we’ll let Mom and Dad decide when.” The young bunnies nodded and grunted their overwhelming agreement.

“Speaking of ,” Judy then orated, garnering the rapt attention of her younger siblings (nieces and nephews, really) as she leaned over to beseech their aid (thusly diverting any and all notice from Graham), “who here knows where Mom and Dad are?” A dozen voices all sounded at once in an adorable cacophony that Judy, somehow, discerned all she needed from. “Great, thank you!” she
commended, beaming brightly and getting a crowd of beaming faces in turn, and with a gentle shooing of her paws, guided them back towards the house (the lunch dishes and glasses likewise gathered up).

Bo clapped his cousin’s back. “That was some clever thinking.”

“Well,” he grunted in response and corrected his stance, “I am a scary bunny and a little fear is healthy in the right doses, and those spawn,” he coughed, “little’uns felt it but not… dread or terror, I daresay. ‘Twas a fun kind of fear, if you will; instructive, even.”

The chocolate rabbit chuckled his concurrence. “So, Juju,” he continued, “you want to keep these folders with your folks, huh?”

“It’d be for the best, now that I think about it,” she considered and rubbed her chin, “show what we ‘stumbled’ upon and… give them time to come out when they’re ready. There’s a nasty pit in my stomach that Dad didn’t say anything about Magnus because he feels guilty…” she speculated and began to pace.

“What could he feel guilty about, though?” Bo asked.

“There are signs for sociopaths and sadists; the torturing of small creatures like insects, birds, and lizards, for example.”

“I’d bet my lucky foot that Stu saw something in Magnus back then,” he speculated after a gasp, “but didn’t want to say anything, especially if he kept gardening while at Liondon. Stu said that Reggie didn’t want him doing that and he was in trouble all the time for disobeying him.”

“Grandpa Reggie had a… a firm paw, let’s say.” Graham added, “I doubt that Uncle Stu wanted to earn his father’s ire more than he absolutely needed to; double that doubt for daddy-dearest exploiting Uncle Stu’s integrity. Surely, he needed somebunny to confide in from time-to-time and blackmail would do wonders to keep that secret.”

Judy kept a paw to her chin and an elbow to her wrist, thinking as she looked toward the farmhouse. “Now I can’t help but wonder if Dad left Knotash to get away from Magnus…” she thought aloud, and then patted her arm, “We should head back inside. I didn’t allocate any time for additional mysteries in our attic-cleaning schedule, either.”

Graham cooed over her shoulder. “Candleflame, there’s always time for a good mystery but a valid point all the same, especially if Uncle Stu might come forward with the conclusion if provided with this evidence. How is our schedule looking?”

Purple eyes gazed up in calculation, finger tapping a cheek. “We definitely took a hit to our coverage, even with the prospect that we don’t need to be so clandestine, and that’s the good news.”

“What’s the bad news?” Bo asked.

“I operated on the idea that Pop-Pop misplaced the White Book, not intentionally hid it. That’ll definitely impact the percentage.”

“What are we thinking, mid-to-high fifties?” Graham asked.

“Gosh, no; low sixties at the worst.”

“You optimists are so cute.”
“Still, not the best odds of finding it…” Bo considered, arms crossed and ears askew, “especially with how little we actually have to go on. Maybe we should ply Pop-Pop for more clues, you know, get him talking; it could get us a corner of the attic, at least?”

Judy gave it some thought. “Perhaps… it might behoove us to divide and conquer to find it in any appreciable amount of time; according to Nick, they have their feelers out for anyone digging up info on Pleasure Island and the S/CARE only allows me so much rabbit-family-time. I was shaving it close as it is and I still need to meet with the Knottedwood foxes.”

“Good idea,” Bo commended, “Pop-Pop should have gone back to his den by now so I’ll-”

“You’ll tell my parents about what we’ve found,” she interjected.

“Why me?”

“Because Dad already confided in you. If you approach him saying you stumbled on it (which you did)…”

“Then he would get the chance to come out,” Bo concluded, sharing her smile.

Judy tapped her nose. “I’ll speak with Pop-Pop since I’ve already asked him about his past, he won’t remember it was me but it might be easier to sift through his… backwards thinking. Graham,” she then pivoted to ask, “are you comfortable assembling a workforce of rabbits to do thankless, tedious tasks for no other reason than an assumed obligation, while also omitting the real reason you’re putting them through it all?”

He snorted. “And here I thought I came out to Bunnyburrow to get away from the office,” he mused and then smirked while stroking his chin, “at least there isn’t the bother of payroll.”

“Great, we still need that attic cleaned not only to chance upon the book, but because we should follow through on our promise and the attic does need to be cleaned,” Judy said and with a clap of her paws, bolstered herself and the two bucks (Graham even displayed a sincere enthusiasm, however minimal), “Alright, we’ve got lots to do and not all day to do it; time to get back on schedule!”

What worried Doug most about the activities of Esther Grey inside the Supai Palace was that he could never determine where, exactly, she was at any given time. He was astute and calculating, yes, but she was still a fox and perhaps the only certainty with her was the strict adherence to their routine.

Morning dosage of wolf apple.

Mid-afternoon dosage of wolf apple.

And then Zevon brought in some bleeding-heart muskox to ensure the health of her kit. As if Doug (or as he was widely known, “Dr. Sam Gouse”) didn’t know the strength of his own concoctions. It ground his teeth that the llama could be so stupid, so arrogant as to allow such a chaotic variable as a fox to simply wander about on the blind faith that she’ll “return to her den”.

To her credit, Esther never deviated from where she was supposed to be and when. Not that a fox would draw such suspicion.

“Doug, amigo,” Zevon said, leaning over the arm of his wheelchair as comfortably as he may, “what troubles you?”
Doug did not answer immediately, pausing as he jotted in his notebook while awaiting a reaction in the nearby beaker. “It’s Esther-”

“Tamaya.”

“…Tamaya.”

“What of her?” he coldly inquired, also awaiting a reaction.

“She’s completely unsuspecting.”

“I know,” the llama stated, “The zorra is above reproach as far as my siblings are concerned… those weak-willed fools believe her spirit broken but you do not.”

“Foxes have a look about them when they’re desperate, all shifties do,” Doug stoically recalled, “but there’s a spark in her eye.”

“She is scheming,” Zevon concurred.

“You’re not worried?” the ram asked, glancing momentarily away from his experiment.

The Emperor of Reino del Sol cracked a grin. “Doug, Doug…” he said and reached out to grasp around the ram’s shoulders, “I would only be worried if she were watched by any other mammal that you, the finest fox hunter in the world.”

Doug remained stoic, ovaline eyes returning to the chemicals inside their glass containers. “I caught Nick and… Tamaya once, that hardly makes me the-”

Zevon tsk’d. “So modest. I followed the exploits of you and your flock while you were on deployment long before I knew it was you, amigo, and I am no stranger to the teachings of Cyrus, you know. Why, if you kept to tradition and carried the tail of every bone-gnawer you caught, you could make a coat of them,” he then darkly chuckled, “In fact, you did make a coat of one of them, did you not?”

The ram huffed. “I did what I had to.” He then shimmied out of the half-embrace to lean toward the bubbling inside the beaker. “Look…”

The llama stroked his chin and leered. “You continue to amaze. I hope I am not too brazen to offer you a long-term position in my laboratory? Such a breakthrough in chemistry as this, ” he said, gesturing to the reaction, “would have companies trampling each other to get you.”

“It’s… nothing.”

“It’s everything,” Zevon assured and grasped the ram’s nearest shoulder, “I have resources to turn whole governments green with envy and despite what others would have you believe, I am not so petty as to scoff at genius on the same level as my own.”

Doug’s lips pursed… but his ovaline eyes did raise to Zevon’s cool gaze. “I would have access to your entire lab?”

“Sí,” he affirmed, “second only to me. Provided Tamaya delivers a healthy kit, of course,” Zevon continued, the strength in his hooves no lessened by the fracturing of his kneecap as he gripped Doug’s shoulder, “Consider it your… interview.”

“I’m already under contract-”
“I will deal with that trifle.”

“…All right. Effective immediately?”

Zevon grinned. “Effective when we can start the next generation of the lobeira but feel free to use whatever you want in the laboratory. If something is lacking, let me know and I shall acquire it for you.”

“Deal.”

“And one more thing,” the llama tacked on, hooves folded under his chin and eyes reflecting the glass-bound chemical maelstrom, “Find out what Tamaya is up to. I do not trust foxes as a matter of principle and compliance is one of their most devious tricks.”

The glass containers erupted, toxic smoke ventilating harmlessly overhead as the two chemists watched from the other side of the bulletproof, vacuum-sealed tank wherein the experiment took place. Doug softly grunted as he jotted something down in his notebook. “I’ll let you know what I find out.”

Mary was a little lamb
   Her fleece once white as snow
   Everywhere that Mary went
   Bad luck was sure to go
   It followed her to school one day
   With all its broken rules
   No more did children laugh and play
   As Mary blackened her wool

Chapter End Notes

The "Shining, Shimmering, Splendid" world tour name, along with Yzla’s outfit, comes from the lyrics of “Aladdin”s “A Whole New World” song and Jasmine’s clothes in the movie.

Esther’s mentioning of the “Tweed twins” refers to one of the other farm-fox families, a reference to Tod and Vixey from “The Fox & The Hound”; in this story, they are “The Tweeds” (referencing the old lady in the film) and their middle kits are twins.

Tez & Poc's names are derived from Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec jaguar god of discord and sorcery.

"Kit-and-kaboodle" is the fox term for a "baby bump" (also used by other species who refer to their young as "kits", i.e., rabbits and beavers).

"Fancy Cat" is a Zootopian pun on the "Cat Fancy" magazine and seen held by
Leodore Lionheart at the end of the movie.

"Dr. Sam Gouse" is an anagram alias of Doug Ramses, as Nick found out in Loyal, chapter 22.

When Doug refers to Esther as “Señora Rivera”, it is implied that she is not mated under the laws of Reino del Sol.

"Carnivore Insurance Adjusters" are just as they sound, in that they handle insurance claims involving violent activities (perceived or otherwise) of predator species, namely who was at fault, extenuating circumstances, provocation, etc. It is common practice for whole agencies to dedicate resources to handling carnivore insurance claims, as opposed to the other prominent branch of Large Mammal Collateral Damage insurance. This is an idea I’ve been brainstorming with my friend and fellow author, NieveLion.

Pop-Pop’s connection to the Hopps Manor back in Forestdwell is detailed in Loyal, chapter 2.

Monica, Judy’s older sister, made her appearance in Loyal, chapter 3.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

The term “fluffle”, as used to describe a group of rabbits, is believed to stem from the notable fluffiness of their tails and while not an incorrect observation (plentiful other species are quite fluffy, as well), there is its other origin that must be considered. Large groups of rabbits, particularly of the country-bred variety, have been known to cause what has been described as an emotional detachment or “fluffiness” in adjacent mammals, i.e., in public transport. In one example, a "Ricky M." was the only non-rabbit on a cross-town bus through Bunnyburrow when other seats were filled with two to three rabbits each, having ridden the entirety of the route before realizing that he'd missed his stop. "Ricky M." had later reported that he "wasn't in any real rush to get anywhere, apparently, and just enjoyed all the nice company".

-Oddities of Zootopia”, season 2/episode 12, "Bountiful Bunnies"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You got this , Judy consoled herself, standing on the front porch not five feet from Pop-Pop, yet he did not seem to register her presence as he stared out over the midday fields, various Hoppses tending the crops therein, just don't assume he'll revert to soft bigotry and this will be a piece of cake. “Hi, Pop-Pop.”

Pop-Pop was unresponsive as he reached for his iced tea, sipped, and then returned it to the nearby table at an agonizingly slow speed. Despite his slacks, tailored shirt, and suspenders, he appeared quite comfortable where he lounged.

Okay… Judy leaned over and smiled brightly with a wave of her paw. “Pop-Pop?”

His bespectacled eyes shifted, blinked, reached to what sat beside him to carefully tap at the screen of a tablet, and then removed the wireless earbud which was practically invisible within the engulfing, adjacent tufts. “Oh, Tru-…” Pop-Pop gently groaned in thought, adjusting and squinting through his bottle-frame glasses, “Ju dy. What can I do for you?”

Huh, he remembered my name; that’s a good start, it means his mind might still be sharp, she hoped and took a seat on the porch chair across from him, “There’s something I really need your help on. It’s a book, a really old one, part of a set. I could be wrong but I think the other one was burnt -”

“I don’t know about any ‘books’,,” he immediately dismissed, averting his gaze to add under his breath, “and what’s this about burning them? Even the thought of it…”

Oh… I think you do, Pop-Pop, you might even know about a black book, too, but why deny it? Judy wondered, sitting forward in her seat, “You don’t?” she politely pressed, “Even if it was a… white book?”

“Bah ,” he harrumphed, sinking into his cushioned chair, “don’t know what you’re talking about…”
“Because you wanted to talk with me about a ‘white book’ after the TBR,” Judy reminded, “it was the same day as Grandpa Reggie’s memorial—"

Pop-Pop’s ears snapped, almost violently as he studied his granddaughter with comically magnified eyes that managed to detail his abject surprise. “Reggie… died?” he asked, face dawning with comprehension, chin cradled and rubbed with quiet mutterings.

Violet eyes blinked and paws spread in gradual explanation. “Y-… yes, he died a few—”

“And…” he interjected, as though not hearing her, “Petunia… she died, too, didn’t she?”

‘Petunia’…? Who could that be?

“And… and Üther… he also died… and the Felix, what happened to her…”

Wait, ‘Felix’, ‘her’? He must be talking about Felix Lapis’s predecessor’s predecessor… And Grandpa Reggie… she mentally counted, remembering what she researched after the TBR, He was on the Tri-Burrow Reunion Board with Petunia Lawng and Üther Wahrheitbegraber. The same rabbits that sent Gideon to pred-therapy, Judy recalled, inwardly seething at the recollection of who the ‘doe with the glass eye’ and the ‘buck with the voicebox’ were… “Did they also know about the white book?”

Pop-Pop wriggled about some and then said, “I… I’ll go get it, then…” with what could almost be mistaken for enthusiasm (or anxiety), removing his other wireless earbud to stagger to his feet with a death-grip around his cane and hobble to the front door.

It must have kickstarted a memory! Judy delighted, springing up and keeping a close pace, getting plenty of time to mull things over as she followed the aged rabbit and even opened the door for him (with a distantly muttered word of thanks). I could be wrong here but Pop-Pop might have possibly been sworn to some kind of secret by the Grandpa Reggie and the rest of the Board but… what could it be? And why Pop-Pop? she wondered, giddier by the second, Hector Howard must be involved, even to keep the books secret… his journal was saved from the fire, after all… it might even have been Pop-Pop that saved it! How exciting!

“Let’s see now,” Pop-Pop considered as they closed the door of the family den behind them, his eyes scanning the floor, “where did I put it…?”

Judy patiently sighed and looked low, as well, Bo heard you say ‘up top’ so that must be the attic since this room is regularly kept tidy. She drummed fingers on her wrist, bouncing on the balls of her feet as her grandfather used his cane to check behind chairs and under tables, grunting as he leaned things over with the greatest care (and minimal effect), and checking things nearly three times.

“It should be over here, I think…”

Judy sighed with less patience, arms crossed. There’s no pattern to his movements, no head turn or ear tilt or glance that would tell that he hid it in here. Except for that one bookshelf without any obvious white books. But why hasn’t he gone anywhere near it? She sauntered over to examine the shelves, No hidden switches or panels… No noise inside these books when I shake them… I could spend the next month reading through every page for whatever clue he left for himself and not turn up with anything. Something here isn’t making sense… Judy then scampered over to the door to intercept her grandfather. “Well?” she courteously asked.

“Well what?” he grumped on his way out.
“Find what?” he demanded, also gradually pivoting, “I don’t know why you’re asking me for whatever it is you’re looking for. Oh, it’s you, Tru—…” he started, grunted, squinted, and corrected himself, “Ju dy. Forgive me, my back’s been acting up again and my mind isn’t what it used to be. What can I do for you?”

What I would give to switch places with Bo or Graham right now… or even Esther, Judy sighed, “The white book,” she explained but before he could follow-through with his brewing denial, immediately cut him off, “Grandpa Reggie, Petunia, and Úther are all dead.”

“Oh…” he groaned and for a second, looked both forlorn and relieved, “I guess it’s time then… come along, there’s something I should show you… if I could just remember where… it was right around here, I’m sure of it…” he said and went back to search the floor of his den.

Judy mildly bristled… but then thought, What if…? She crept up behind him as he focused on searching, knowing how to sneak up on a rabbit and how to palm an item off a mammal’s face (courtesy of watching Nick do it a hundred times). When the opportune moment presented itself that he was blinking, standing up from bending over, and muttering under his breath, Judy reached around and slipped the bottle-frame glasses off his eyes. As swift as could be, she crouched and guided the glasses to land on the floor nearby before swiping them again and scurrying off.

“Dagnabbit…” he cursed and fretted, eyes pitifully slotted as he felt about his weathered face to confirm that his eyewear had, indeed, disappeared, and in futile aspirations that he might spot his glasses better without them, Pop-Pop scanned the floor with both sight and foot, “Where are they, stupid things…”

I hope this works… Judy wished, fingers crossed with a nod of her head before speaking in her most normal voice possible, “Otto?”

The graying ears whipped around and so did the bunny attached to them, eventually, his eyes growing wide as he searched but his ears locked onto Judy. “Trudy…?” he pleaded of the air, a trembling grip on the cane all the worse as desperate hope consumed his features. He reached out and dared a tremulous step, softly grunting with effort.

She kept her distance, though, Forgive me, Pop-Pop, but I need to know… and you didn’t have your glasses when you saw me that night… Judy whisked around, careful not to let him focus on her as she braced his shoulder and elbow from behind to guide the weak-kneed, half-blind elder to his chair.

“Oh, thank you… I’ve gotten so old, I can hardly believe it…” he apologized, grunting yet his voice seemed surer than Judy had ever heard it… except for that night when he -- she then realized -- mistook her for someone else. “But you … if you’re here… then am I…?”

“No,” Judy quickly assured, “you’re not dead, yet, Otto; I’d bet you still have a few good years in you, in fact.”

“But… how…?”

Time for my greatest bluff yet… here goes nothing, Nick. “Fox secret,” she teased and winked, letting the lilt in her voice raise the slightest bit as she touched her lips with a single finger.

The ragged face drooped some… but then he smiled and braced his knobbly knees. “You
shifties…” he endeared in a mutter, eyes a bit mistier, “I should have known better than to think even death could catch you…”

“But… Petunia is dead,” she explained, “along with Üther and… and Reginald.”

Though his eyes had degenerated, he gazed with clearer sight. “They’re gone… they’re all gone, then I… then I can…” he determined, “One journal was stolen but I hid the other, safe and sound, I just need to find… wherever I put that blasted thing…” The aged rabbit made to get up, eyes squinting about at the floor but was sat back down again.

“What ‘blasted thing’?” she kindly asked, If I can keep his mind focused, he should remember where he left whatever will lead him to the book.

“My stepstool.”

“Your stepstool…?” Judy stared at her grandfather… and then studied the gaps above the bookshelves, one, in particular, was just wide enough to gather dust and high enough to go largely unnoticed by the younger rabbit cleaning crews. ‘Up top’ wasn’t the attic at all!

“I left it over here, I thought… maybe it was borrowed…?” he considered and rubbed his eyes with a grumble, “I just keep forgetting and losing everything these days-” and blinked as he rubbed his forehead to find his glasses seated on his brow, and then adjusted them back onto his face quite bashfully, “How long have those been up there, I was sure I dropped them…” Pop-Pop’s vision adjusted on his granddaughter, “Oh, Judy. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were here…” he said and seemed to awkwardly recalculate, crotchetsness soon resurging, “Word of advice: don’t get old, it stinks.”

“Duly noted,” she promptly responded, only just containing her excitement as she propped his feet up onto the ottoman, “You know what, Pop-Pop, you stay comfy here and I’ll… go get your tablet, alright?”

He admonished himself again and checked the adjacent table. “I must’ve left it on the porch again, typical… thank you,” Pop-Pop then sighed and settled into his favorite chair, “Stars above, what’d I do to get so tired…”?

“I’ll be right back,” Judy sing-sang, already halfway out the door (the knob of which she hung the “Closed for Cleaning” sign on) and then bolted for the porch, swiped up the tablet and paired wireless earbuds, ran back inside (before the front door closed) and smack dab into “Bobo!”

“Juju!” Bo answered as she bounced off him. He was by far the less startled of the two, though, even when he reached to steady her but found that the girl-bunny hardly needed it.

“I know where the book is! It’s in the den, hidden high up on a shelf!”

He gasped and clapped his forehead. “Of course!”

“We were overthinking it!” she eagerly expounded.

Bo then turned skeptical. “And we’re certain this won’t be a repeat of when he claimed to have Lovey’s so-called ‘49th song’? That was thirty-six hours of research we’re never getting back.”

“Of course not,” Judy assured and then grabbed his wrist to sprint off… but stopped to quickly ask, “Status on my parents?”

“Gave Bonnie the folders,” he promptly, succinctly reported, “Said ‘I found it’ and ‘it looked
“Good, Mom can handle things from there.”

“I also implied it best that she come forward, in case someone else finds them by accident.”

“Sly thinking,” Judy commended and then they hurried back to the den only to stop at the foot of the stairs, both of them exclaiming, “Graham!”

“Judy. Bo,” Graham responded in turn, vaulting back a few steps to not be run over, “We are in a rush, aren’t we?”

“How’s the attic?” Judy quickly asked.

“I set up a system and then delegated the delegation of tasks and management to someone that the household is a bit warmer to,” he mildly boasted, examining his fingers, “They’ll report back to me at the end of day but really, they hardly need my input at all. Especially not when…” he then leaned in to whisper, “I hear you found the white book, or… where it might be?”

Judy blinked. “You heard me from all the way upstairs, through the ambient house noise?” she wondered, he nodded, and then muttered in amusement, “So that’s what it’s like…” before grabbing his wrist, the thrill of adventure infecting the three of them, “C’mon!”

Pop-Pop was halfway to the door when they arrived, grunting as they burst in but hardly registering their exact identities. “Have any of you seen my tablet? I seem to have misplaced it—”

“Right here, Pop-Pop,” Judy brightly announced (to soft-spoken gratitude) as Bo genteelly ushered the centenarian rabbit back to his chair. As her grandfather inserted his earbuds and resumed his audiobook, Judy rallied her conspirators over to the bookshelf in question, well behind the elderly bunny. “Alright,” she lowly spoke, pointing up at their destination, “let’s crack open a mystery.”

Graham crossed his arms and watched as Bo stooped for Judy to vault onto his shoulders with the greatest of ease; he grabbed her ankles as she stood to brace the very top of the shelf. “How’s it going up there?” the butterscotch rabbit inquired, paws over his mouth as though yelling a great distance, even mimicking an echo.

“Har har,” Judy abided with a bob of her head, reaching down all the same, “hand me a flashlight.” When his phone was turned on and its light source provided, she aimed it between the gap and its years of dust, “It’s hard to see…” she worried, rising up onto her toes to get that extra height to properly see over the edge, or at the very least, reach her arm in. “No good…”

“Should we get a ladder?” Bo inquired as she sat on his shoulders, legs gently hugging his neck and handing the phone back to Graham.

“No,” she decided, “I don’t want to draw any more attention than we already…” and then looked at her farm-cousin, a smile spreading her face as she held out both paws in a gathering gesture. “Hop up!”

“Not happening,” he stated.

“It’ll be fine,” she assured with a dismissive wave, “Bo and I do this all the time.”

“And with plenty of practice to not break your necks, no doubt,” Graham endeared with a smile to match.
“C’mon, Graham, you said last night that you trusted us with your life,” Bo countered.

Dark purple eyes narrowed, glancing between the two of them in severe calculation. “I didn’t expect that to be tested so soon or so haphazardly…” he grumped, grumbled, and groused but ultimately agreed, for their beaming expectation was hardly deniable, “Fine. I should consider myself lucky this farmhouse isn’t surveilled around the clock or else I’d never live this down. So… how does this ha- ah!”

The chocolate bunny already grabbed his cousin around the torso in a carefree hoist (“Hup!”), turned him about, tossed him a bit higher to grab his thighs (“Hup!”), tossed him again so that his feet were planted on his palms (“And hup!”) while maintaining his altitude overhead for Judy to duck hers between Graham’s spread legs and sit him down on her shoulders.

“All good?” she asked, holding his ankles as his arms wheeled to brace the bookshelf.

“Shouldn’t you be on my shoulders? I can’t weigh less, I have a solid two inches on you, at least!” Graham argued, a bit dizzy from the sudden feat of acrobatics he was clearly unprepared for.

“No about the weight, cous’,” Bo amiably corrected.

“It’s more that I have the muscle mass to support you,” Judy said matter-of-factly.

Graham didn’t respond, only stared flatly forward.

“And your arms are longer than mine.”

“Right, of course,” he muttered under his breath and retrieved his phone once more to peer into the solid cloud of dust, coughing as he plunged his paw in and pushed as much as he could out in search of something solid, “I’ll probably get a spider bite or something…” he griped, shaking off cobwebs.

“Well?” Bo asked.

“Got it!” Graham quietly jubilated, pulling out a dust-covered object and shaking some of its years off.

“Yes!” Judy raptured, toes and thighs clenching (Bo didn’t seem to notice the pressure around his neck as he gasped with shared excitement). Graham’s feet were braced and he made to stand on Bo’s raised paws as she bent over and slipped out from under her farm-cousin and off her boyfriend, nimbly landing as the city-bunny was gently set on the floor. Violet eyes radiantly locked onto the white book as a thorough puff discarded more dust. “Open it!” she squeaked.

Graham smirked. “I think you should,” he offered, chuckled to her bashful gasp and nodded alongside his chocolate cousin when she confirmed their tandem concurrence, and then gestured to some reading bean bag chairs over in a corner, “Let’s have ourselves a seat.”

The gray bunny received what might as well have been a holy relic, smiling to either buck before hurrying over, each step nearly launching her to the moon before planting her cottontail down, if upright with the utmost anticipation. Truly, the sun had bleached that old cover bone-white, its original color lost to the ages and the edges of his pages showing the same treatment. Judy took a breath, addressing Bo (who sprawled spread-legged with his paws behind his head) and Graham (who crossed his arms and legs comfortably while reclined) and their relaxed ears with the utmost professionalism, “We must remember that this is evidence -”

“Just read the blasted thing,” Graham kindly reprimanded as Bo stifled a snicker.
“‘Kay~” she agreed and cracked it open with all the care and exuberance as was in her to give; her eyes could not have shone brighter if pure light streamed from within its bindings. “It’s Lovey’s!” she immediately declared, earning curiosity in varying degrees of morbid and eager from Graham and Bo, respectively. *I hoped it would be! Oh goodness, this is going to be amazing!* On the inside cover, much like she would annotate her own diary as a kit, was some of the most beautiful, ink-caressed script Judy ever had the privilege to read:

**Property of Laverne Hopps**

If found, please return to:

Hopps Manor

#3 Primrose Ct.

Forestdwell

For a moment, Judy felt like she’d intimately known her great-great-aunt all her life, as if she were sitting in her chair, at her writing desk, in her room… and simply reveled in the serendipity that such a legend of not only her family but of the musical world was a doe just like her. Judy wistfully sighed, *I’ve always been more of an audial learner -- nearly all bunnies are -- but I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve seen this book before... maybe I have?* Violet eyes still held that girlish glee as they shifted to the facing page, only then recognizing that the charcoal scratches were not some elaborate design… but writing. It was not so beautiful as what she’d just lingered over for several seconds but distraught, pained words from a pencil barely sharp enough to mark the paper, rather than an elegant lady’s quill. She could not help but read it aloud:

*Dear reader,*

*Whoever you are, know that I love you. Know that in a Fortunate life as mine, I wished only for the sake of others for I knew I could somehow manage, no matter what befell me… but that hope is gone… so if it is in the will of the Stars Above, I beg a selfish wish. A petty wish. I wish not forgiveness for my sins. I wish not to escape my punishment. I would commit them and suffer the retribution a thousand times again because it is just and good to do so; fear shall never again seize me.*

*I wish only to hear the song of a true heart for mine has none left in it… and that is death worse than my fate. Please, my love, sing with all your heart and know that wherever I am, I will hear you and rejoice. Grant me this one, selfish wish, that someone might find this message and sing to me on the other side of Eternity.*

*Yours truly and forever,*

*Lovey*

Judy sat trembling, peeking over the edge of the diary at the two bucks, both upright and leaning forward aghast, ears stiff as boards. So… she turned to the next page…

**Chapter End Notes**

Judy and Pop-Pop had a conversation back in Loyal, chapter 2, wherein he mistook her
for “Trudy” (that she and her fox-friends later figured out must have been a vixen of her coloration back in Forestdwell) due to waking up from a dead sleep and not yet wearing his glasses.

“Waheheitbegrabene” is a German diminutive meaning “buried truth” and “Üther” means “terrible”. “Lawng” is simply a portmanteau of “lawn” and “long”, i.e., rabbit ears and rabbit habitat and “Petunia” is a flower (which interestingly enough to derived from the French word for “tobacco”, so feel free to draw conclusions). Their role in the story was identified back at the end of Brave (by Nick, more or less).

When Judy mutters “That’s what it feels like”, she’s referring to her knack of identifying loved ones amidst the noise and bustle of any one building and from a distance away via hearing their voices and associating emotions to them. This was first touched upon in Trustworthy and expanded on in Brave. That’s not to say that Graham’s hearing or emotional range is as intricate as Judy’s, only that he’s managed to “tag” her in the same way as she’s “tagged” him.

Lovey’s involvement in the story has been brewing ever since Brave and I realize now that I cannot do her such an injustice as to cram everything that happened in her, the plot twists and reveals, into a single chapter (not when I’ve previously extrapolated on Judy, Nick, and John & Jackie in such length). I won’t go so far as I did with them, not this close to the end of Neverwere Moments, but I will take a chapter or two to explore what happened and why it applies to the characters.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter Notes

[Mature Advisory: this chapter includes themes and content intended for mature audiences.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Laverne Hopps was a lady of such distinguished character and high standing in the rabbit community, that her eccentricities endeared her to rather than ostracized her from fellow bunnies. Few in the Burrow knew not of “The Silver Belle”; so named for the soft gray of her fur and the clear, heavenly voice which filled an already packed concert hall twice a week. Fewer in the Burrow knew of “The Steel Horn”, however; a righteous clarion call which many in polite society would consider wholly improper and unbefitting someone of her station.

“Good morning, Lovey,” her father greeted. Diocles Hopps was seated at the head of the table, as always, complete with the early edition newspaper and freshly-brewed coffee. He was one of the finest merchants in the Burrow, the little corner of Forestdwell where the bunnies contentedly resided; Primrose Court, to be exact, a hill which overlooked a great swath of farmland (“great” by the standards of rabbits, in any case, since it might qualify as “running space” for horses).

“Good morn, Daddy,” Lovey answered, leaning over to kiss his plush, slate cheek, and as he always did when being kissed, grinned so that his whiskers tickled her nose. The silver maiden giggled and he laughed, and then around the table, she went to allow a younger brother his turn to kiss good morning (and be tickled by paternal whiskers). “Good morn, Mum,” Lovey then greeted. Ima Hopps presented a sleeker, maternal cheek over her shoulder before any breakfast porridge could be received from an aunt (and she even got an extra raspberry though no one but Lovey noticed, so she quickly ate it and savored the little bit of Fortune to start off the day).

Silverware clinked on dishes as the multitude of siblings and many cousins ate, promptly enveloping all present in the exquisite bedlam of positivity. Except for two younger siblings, who sat next to Lovey with such forlorn faces… and it was clear that their days were not as Fortunate as hers, for they plucked from their porridge a withered raspberry each. She chewed the handle of her spoon, remembering the crispness and juiciness of what her breakfast came with and decided it best to cut her largest berry in half and -- before either of them could notice (as Lovey was quite sneaky, for a rabbit) -- reach around them to place the bright, plump berry-halves into either of their bowls. They gasped and thanked their older sister with a kiss on the cheek to each earn a kiss at the ear. Without another word, she scooped up their withered berries and ate them (it was bad luck to waste food, after all) and gobbled up her porridge (even though it was unladylike) to be excused for the day’s tasks.

Unlike other rabbits of the Hopps Estate -- both family and help -- who were tasked with cleaning, education, handicraft, or agriculture (Lovey was certainly taught in those practices), her days were scheduled with preparation for twice-weekly concerts. Not that Lovey would ever brag (an unladylike activity) but as an overt matter of fact, the opera hall sold out each performance, small though it might be, and its profits provided a modest income. The thought always occurred to Lovey that perhaps she could push to perform at greater and grander venues, like the more prestigious opera singers in the kingdom, but a humble rabbit would rather sing for those who
could not afford such luxury. Luckily, her sponsors bought dresses to wear on stage to be auctioned for charity (another sponsor was often eager to have their dress upon her). As Mum always said, “Those who are Blessed must give to those who are not; it is only proper”.

The music room was one of the few on the Estate that she knew privacy; there was a small, standing piano (with concern to space, not expense) to practice Hymns of the Tenets or write songs, and a collection of some of the finest composers to have ever lived: Schubat, Meowzart, Beecloven, among others. Inspiration was drawn from them all so she, their humble conduit, might better share the beauty of music. There was something off about the room, though…

What was it…

Lovey sighed when she spotted it, lifting a drooping flower in its vase. They hardly lasted a few days anymore… So, in a lukewarm lament, she pushed open the window to the gardens and leaned out to find the old, graying Mr. Fox tending to a new bed of flowers. He was a gift a Fortunate uncle of the patriarch’s so it seemed a shame to retire him when he’d been with the Hoppses for so long. One of his eyes lost its color and one of his paws was nearly crippled but he kept with his routine day-in, day-out; very reliable, that old Mr. Fox, except his groundskeeping was not the best it could be. Still, he was very fun to talk to… for those bunnies who ventured a conversation, that is.

He wasn’t the only predator the Hopps Estate knew, either; there was the kindly grocer, an enormous, shaggy wolverine who no one could understand due to his indecipherable accent and stutter. Still, he was a very honest mammal, according to the rabbit who hired him, and stalwart in his loyalty. Lovey offered voice lessons, even to ride along in his cart so to not lose a day of deliveries but that, as her father would say, was a kit’s kindness; she determined it best that he learn to speak from his fellow wolverines rather than a bunny (and according to her mother, such familiar company would be unbecoming and Unfortunate for them both).

Judy breathed and relaxed in her bean bag chair.

“That’s certainly very interesting …” Graham abided.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, though,” Bo agreed, “even her terminology feels very … time appropriate.”

“She really does sound like a normal bunny-girl,” Judy observed, “her… terminology notwithstanding, she actually comes across as rather forward-thinking.”

Graham tapped his thumbs together. “Candleflame, while you are certainly anticipatory of reading through these diary entries,” he speculated, “you don’t sound all together… surprised.”

Judy pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows in a shrug, closing the book around her finger. “It’s… weird; like I’m reliving a dream.”

“Like the hallucination from when you ate the whipped cream?” Bo asked, “Because Lovey’s wolverine grocer is awfully reminiscent of that ‘Big Gid’ character you dreamt about. She even said his name was ‘Big Gus’.”

“Except the gardener is nothing like Nicolas, aside from species. I would understand the cataract and the paw as analogs for the ‘an eye for reading; a paw for writing’ punishment back then but the fox in my dream had both of his intact,” she recalled and then further recalled, “It’s a little bit like Nick and Gid’s grandpa, come to think of it. What a shame that Lovey never mentioned his eye
“Pop-Pop likely shared some excerpts with you as a kit,” Graham suggested, “He no doubt interacted with most if not all of the same mammals that Lovey did, provided they were at the Manor, and his perspective mingled with the facts.”

“She did mention Otto, if only briefly, which also lines up with him fancying himself one of her suitors,” Judy mused, flipping back to a particular journal entry, “despite only being single-digits when hired in the kitchen. He never spoke about his life before then… Let’s press on…”

The curtain settled. Lovey stood amidst a pile of flowers, mostly roses, the applause from the audience still echoing in her ears and my heart. As was the routine, tall stagehands carefully lifted her from the audience’s floral favors to be set aside, and then return backstage for the removal of her gown. As was their custom, the stagehands picked out the finest flowers, washed them, and presented them as bouquets to the starlet’s dressing room. It usually took until the makeupper, Mrs. Mink, cleaned off her latest masterpiece from Lovey’s face for the flowers to arrive.

“Knock knock~?” Diocles said from her dressing room door, leaning in and holding his hat behind him, beaming with those soft cheeks and pert whiskers of his. Mrs. Mink immediately shied away, lowered her eyes, and wrapped her tail around her legs when he approached; she knew she didn’t need to since the paternal rabbit was always very accommodating but she ascertained it was polite to do so. “Another outstanding performance tonight, Lovebird, not a dry eye in the house nor a bottom in the chair, when all was said and done.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Lovey answered, robe already tied but speaking in a lower voice than usual so as to not strain her vocal cords. He waddled over to exchange a kiss (without the tickle of his whiskers; it was a great fortune for a kit to be tickled by their father’s fur when they kissed him but not the other way around, after all, and he was very careful). “Where is Mum?”

Chuckling made his belly bounce. “Oh, you know how she gets with your sponsors; a keener tongue than I! Nevertheless, I was also curious about something,” he said and walked over to one of the bouquets, sniffing at a blossom before plucking a petal and eating it (common for any prey to do, when in private company), soon humming in approval. “These flowers are of excellent quality!” he declared and slid one from its fixture to don it as a boutonniere, “It’s only a shame the night’s nearly over, I wouldn’t mind boasting this about. Hendrick is really out-doing himself if these are his end-of-day flowers.”

“Yes, I couldn’t help but notice how wonderful they were of late; nothing like his usual fare.” As it was with rabbits, they both heard the subtle, involuntary groan from Mrs. Mink (she was definitely clever but not as sly as older females since she was younger than Lovey) and so inquired her with but a glance.

Mrs. Mink rubbed her arm awkwardly and pinned her ears. “They’re not from Mr. Hendrick,” she quietly reported, her accent more an icing than a tar thanks to Lovey’s voice lessons. The makeupper had grown comfortable around the starlet but retained all due deference to the Hopps patriarch, an upstanding member of the rabbit community as he was. “There’s a new vendor; he set up just outside the opera house to sell patrons favors for your performances, Miss Hopps.”

Diocles harrumphed under his breath. “How downright sly.”

“Go to where the market is’,” her daughter kindly quoted.

“Well, I can hardly argue with my own advice, now can I?” he said quite jovially, “Mrs. Mink, are
She wrung her paws a bit. “We’s both of the shiftier sorts if that’s your meaning,” Mrs. Mink cautiously admitted, perhaps lapsing in her grammar, and then muttered under her breath, “though he’s a fox…”

Diocles mulled that over.

“I would like to meet him,” Lovey suddenly said, earning surprised looks from them both.

“Lovebird…”

“Daddy,” she interjected as politely as possible, “Mr. Hendrick does not kindly take to competition unless they can both sit at a table and you know that will never happen.”

He playfully scoffed. “I think you misinterpret me, my dear,” Diocles said as he touched his daughter’s cheek, “I’m sorely tempted to check how green his thumb is or whosoever’s that these flowers are from. You’ve noticed it as well as I; the ones back home are in a sad state,” he added with a chuckle, no doubt from her surprise, “I’ve sufficed their quality for some time but I can hardly turn a deaf ear to my household and guests merely because ‘that’s how it is’. After all,” he solemnly continued, speaking in that scholarly way that his children quite loved, “would not this Mr. Fox be a gift from the Stars themselves? Fortune brought him to our doorstep and it would be ill tidings indeed to cast him aside.”

Again, Mrs. Mink involuntarily groaned.

“Don’t worry,” he promptly assured her, “our old Mr. Fox will be retired and well provided for. We Hoppses have always treated our foxes with the utmost respect and dignity. I shall speak with Thackery, he’ll want to know about my interviewing any vendors outside his opera house,” he then said, “You finish getting dressed; your mother should be in before too long.”

He left, allowing his daughter to disrobe once again so that the makeupper could finish removing her sparkly fur-powder. “What’s wrong?” she then asked.

“…It’s nothing…”

“Sasha…” Lovey urged and touched her paw, using a nickname of the mink’s that she only shared with her most trusted friends, “You can tell me.”

Sasha didn’t say anything at first, not until she dared what no predator in the kingdom would: she looked directly into the eyes of a prey species. “I heard terrible things happen to ‘retired’ housefoxes…”

Her long-eared head shook as kindly as possible. “I heard those, too, but will not let them happen. Our old Mr. Fox served many long, dutiful years for the Hopps family; he deserves an easy life in his final days and I will pay for it from my own pocket to ensure as such.”

She smiled sadly. “Thank you, Lovey.”

Though she could not discern whether the encouragement truly heartened, Lovey felt as though a weight lifted from her dear friend; if only that was accomplished, then she knew she did everything in her power to help. “I will speak with Daddy about old Mr. Fox’s retirement and the comfort of his living arrangements. For now… there is the new Mr. Fox that I very much hope to be introduced to. With any luck, he’ll be less guarded of a nickname that I can know him by,” she mused, standing to dress in an evening ensemble for the ride home.
“Lovey!” her mother called not long after. The starlet tried not to sigh but instead smiled before opening the dressing room door to find the tall, prim, proper lady of the bunny community. “Ah, there you are,” Ima dozed, ushering her daughter along and bidding a quick farewell to Sasha. “You were absolutely perfect tonight and while I do have some minuscule nitpicking, I think it can wait until we get home.” Lovey counted her lucky Stars… “We simply must meet this new housefox your father found; his flowers are simply divine and such an improvement over what we have now. Come, come, we mustn’t keep him waiting! Punctuality is crucial etiquette for a lady.”

“Yes, Mum,” Lovey abided, “Has Daddy already interviewed him?” she then asked as they scurried toward the back door with all due haste afforded a lady.

Ima tittered, which her children always adored because of how it pinched her custard cheeks and fluttered her ears. “Oh, you know your father, he’s not a rabbit to simply let an opportunity slip by. No, I’m quite certain that fox will be riding with us back to the estate,” the motherly bunny mused, “and what an absolute scandal it’ll seem to be, but won’t he be the talk of Primose when they see his flowers?”

“But… we already have a housefox…? Surely, we must give Mr. Fox notice-”

“Tut tut, Lovey, your father will iron out the details,” she assured, and as they rounded a corner discovered that her husband was, indeed, waiting with a patient click of his pocketwatch alongside a tall, gaunt, scraggly, hare who looked somewhere between a hearty laugh and a nervous breakdown. “Mr. Earwicket, a pleasure as always,” Ima greeted, holding out her paw to his fidgety grasp, it steadying long enough for a gentlerabbit’s gesture.

“Too true, except ev’ry bit of pleasure is mine!” he gleefully argued. Lovey was never sure how stable her producer was at any one time but rarely felt anxious around him as others did. There was foundational sanity beneath all his twitching and flinching; simultaneous hyper-vigilance and serenity that offset others, perhaps because they couldn’t understand how they wove so well together inside a single mammal. “C’mon, then, he’s around this way…”

The dutiful footrabbits of Thackery and Diocles soon joined them -- waiting in the wings as they were -- not as any pompous procession but the normal assortment of bunnies moving about outside in the dark. Lanterns were lit and carried so that it was quite illuminated where they stood, gentle bells tinkling to ward off ill fortune; thus were their sundown activities sanctioned by the Tenets. And as it was with all law-abiding predators (both large and small), Mr. Fox stood dutifully aside his station, paws folded and eyes averted (if obstructed by his cap) with his tail wrapped about his legs. The Blessed Court was never too astride, after all, as heard by their larger bells marching down the streets. The flower vendor then tipped his cap and smiled a simple smile, dark lips never parting too far.

“Diocles, this here’s the fox who’s gotten into the habit of selling flowers outside my opera house,” Thackery playfully introduced, skipping over a syllable here and there, “Mr. Fox, this here’s Diocles Hopps and his mate Ima, parents of Ms. Laverne Hopps.”

“Well met, Mr. Fox,” Diocles said with a bob of his head.

“Charmed,” Ima courteously swooned.

“Chipper eve, y’both!” Mr. Fox replied in a horrendous accent, tipping and then ripping the cap from his head in a boisterous bow, his left arm sweeping wide as the right stayed behind him with such exaggeration that the tips of his ears tapped the dirt and his tail arched over his back. As he stood upright, his dark lips spread only so far as to glint the discolored fangs just behind them (as about as much of a grin that a predator were allowed in the company of prey). He was… younger
than Lovey expected him to be, as well as shaggier and more brutish. “How might I bein’ of
service to such fine and lucky bunnies as yerselves?”

Diocles and Ima exchanged concern not only for his seemingly unhinged manner (even if he did
speak at a low tenor, as was custom when in the company of rabbits) but chiefly, the missing eye
and paw on his right side. The patriarch’s foot gently thumbed to his fellow bunnies and the hare,
so they convened in a sort of huddle while the accompanying footrabbits interposed between them
and Mr. Fox (who took it all in stride). “Thackery,” Diocles rebuked, “you omitted the fact that he
was a trickster.”

“Was,” Thackery rebuked right back, “this Mr. Fox hasn’t read nor written a word since then.”

“And you know this?” Ima pressed, “I’ve heard terrible things about tricksters who continue their
scripting, even beyond the loss of their eye and paw!”

“He has signs and prices for his flowers… elegantly written, too,” Diocles suspected.

“Those aren’t his,” Thackery sighed, “it’s clearly a right-handed stroke and that fox’s right paw is
clearly a pruning knife.”

“Mum, Daddy,” Lovey assuaged, “Mr. Fox has already suffered the consequences of reading and
writing, ergo, he is not a criminal. And surely, Mr. Earwicket would not allow such ill-fortune to
linger around the opera house.”

“Certainly not!” Thackery agreed.

Diocles mulled it over a bit more.

“Do we not all deserve a second chance?” his daughter politely posited, “If Mr. Fox were still so
devilish as to read and write curses, then there is no way he could grow or even handle the
beautiful flowers he is surrounded by.”

The slate rabbit rubbed his pillowy chin, tilting an ear over his shoulder at the fox in question. “If
he were unlucky, then his blossoms would be filled with bees and insects and the like… Was there
anything of the sort?” he asked the hare.

“Not a single complaint and trust you me, Dick, I’d have heard.”

“He is still quite unkempt…” Ima argued.

“With all due respect, are you lookin’ for a gardener or a butler?” Thackery countered, “That fox
could probably grow carrots with the dirt in his claws.”

Diocles nodded in resolution. “Were he a bunny, there’d be no question as to his devotion to the
soil,” he decided, “Still, what a shame to pull him away from his profession for our own needs; it
seems as though he’s doing quite well for himself.”

Lovey politely posited once more, “Would it behoove us to ask his opinion on the matter, then?”

Ima reached up to cup her cheek endearingly. “Ever a true lady,” she swooned, joining the other
three in standing after her husband thumped his foot twice.

“Mr. Fox,” Diocles said and took a step forward when his footrabbits parted, “would you be
interested in coming to work as the housefox for the Hopps Estate?”
The fox gawked. “A housefox… me?” he wondered but then dismayed, tracing the curve of the pruning knife affixed to his wrist, “I dunno how it’d look, a gruff bone-gnawer like me but if you’re willing to give me a shot…” he offered, puffing up his chest and smiling as bright as he dared with his one good eye, “then I’ll be the best housefox that ever there was!”

“Thackery… Earwicket… here we are,” Graham said, perusing Woolipedia on his sepia-cased phone, “Opera-house owner of Forestdwell from nearly a century ago, one of three who’ve claimed to be the springboard for Laverne’s illustrious singing career… his claim was scrutinized on account of the ‘unfavorable company’ he hired… known for throwing ‘mad tea parties’, thus, largely avoided by the wider rabbit community… died during the fall of the Kingdom,” he stoically lamented.

“That sounds familiar,” Bo concurred and then continued at his cousin’s querying glance, “There’s lots of hare history at the Honeyhills and Mr. Earwicket is one of those that I heard about; neither Max nor I stuck around long enough to catch all of it, though, we kept to more athletic activities.”

“Both a nerd and a jock,” Graham teased in a low, amused tone, “This ‘Max’ fellow sounds utterly… unique.”

Bo chuckled. “That’s a kind way of putting it. I should introduce you both to him when he sets up the apiaries in the wolf apple greenhouse; there’s no confirmation on that until Stu meets him, of course, but I doubt he’ll say ‘No’.”

Judy muttered under her breath, skimming the diary entries. “Ivy potpourris,” she then mentioned with interest, “Okay, good, good… she likes the new Mr. Fox, as I figured she would… and soothes any concerns of her siblings about him. Huh…” Judy grunted and then moaned, “Oh no, the old Mr. Fox died little over a week into his retirement…”

She gathered herself. “I… it doesn’t say but I get the impression that Lovey… feared as much. Let’s see…” Judy attempted, skimming a bit more, “Okay… she set up a small trust to pay for a comfortable life for him but when she found out about his death, instead arranged a funeral pyre according to fox custom… and then paid the new Mr. Fox a salary.”

“Oh?” Graham aloud wondered, “How curious…”

“Why’s that?” Bo replied, “Housefoxes received salaries in the past.”

“No, I mean, well… this you can quote me on, but…”

“Not that. I mean, well… this you can quote me on, but…”

She doesn’t mention anything about his head missing from the pyre,” Judy numbly cut in, “so we can safely assume it wasn’t removed to be mounted on someone’s wall.”

The butterscotch bunny was quiet a moment before answering the muted, distraught Bo. “Fox heads were believed to ward off curses, as once were rabbit feet to garner good luck. I am fairly certain the former lingered in the Black Sheep Market up until Forestdwell.”

He rubbed behind his brown ear and stared at the floor. “I’ve studied history all my life… yet I know nothing…” he raged, paw balling into a fist to cause a vein to slither up his arm.
She reached over to brace his shoulder. “Our histories are dark, darker than either of us know,” Judy said, “I thought those evil practices ended centuries ago… I never could have imagined it lasted so close to the modern-day.”

“It was outlawed by Queen Neulana over one-hundred-and-forty-seven years ago, her final act before abdicating her throne, so any merchant routes under her jurisdiction -- including nearly all the ones used by Forestdwell at the time -- could not have traded in mounted fox-heads,” Bo bitterly recalled, studying the den’s carpet while rubbing his mouth, “but I guess the Black Sheep Market is what it is… that and pirates…”

Graham’s eyebrows arched with as impressed a grimace as he could manage. “By the way, Judy,” he then said, “just what are you searching so desperately for?”

Pages flipped back to the beginning and then to the bookmark she grabbed from a shelf (provided for the aid of avid readers), feverishly scanning before she answered. “I can’t find the new Mr. Fox’s eye color anywhere…”

Bo’s hazels glanced up. “Why is his eye color so important…?”

Judy’s ears warmed as she closed the book in her lap. “Because… in my dream, I imagined that Lovey’s housefox had green eyes, like Nick. And then I learn that there was a ‘Piberius Savage’ with a pruning knife false paw, just like this Mr. Fox has,” she went on, earning a dawning curiosity from Graham.

“The false paw I mistook for the ‘Scarlet Hook’?” he asked.

“Exactly. All of these clues point to not only who Lovey’s housefox was but maybe -- just maybe -- finding out who Nick’s great-grandfather was,” she excitedly exposted, “I heard from John that his father was also an orphan; grew up in a fox slum, became a shipfox, perpetuated the legend of ‘Captain Piberius Savage’. His kits have chased that shadow all their lives. If I can get some kind of connection between this fox and Nick…”

“The ‘Savage Greens’, perhaps?” Bo eagerly suggested, no longer ruminating.

“Exactly. And no offense to Pop-Pop, but…” she groaned, peering over at the elderly rabbit still on his audiobook, otherwise deaf to the world, “It was a miracle that he recalled the location of this diary… or what he had for breakfast today. This,” Judy said, raising the white book, “is the closest thing we have to the truth. It’s just like what Mr. Never told Esther: ‘history’s been rewritten’, and maybe we can discover what really happened to Lovey.”

Graham rubbed his butterscotch paws as Judy opened the book anew. “Uncle Ozzy’s ‘darn near’ apoplectic to know the circumstances surrounding her intact carcanet… and I suppose I am, too,” he mused. Both he and Bo exchanged wry grins before they practically vaulted from their pelts at Judy’s delighted shriek.

“I found it!”

Hardly a thing could be said against the new housefox. He was quiet, polite, clean, fastidious, punctual, funny, and lucky… every single rabbit on the Hopps Estate enjoyed his charm, his shanties, his yarns, his jigs… except for a bunny, perhaps the only bunny who spent the whole of her time convincing her siblings and cousins that the new Mr. Fox was to be trusted and respected during his initial days. She even pleaded their patience for the atrocity of his accent.

Lovey was in the garden between concerts, her designated time of rest as prescribed by any rabbit
physician of repute and hers specifically (for stress could kill as fierce as any plague or misfortune); the life of a performer was ever stressful. Though resting, the songstress taught her younger siblings and cousins the refined art of pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling by means of one of a rabbit’s most iconic sciences: plant husbandry.

“What flower could this be?” Lovey asked her familial class of fourteen young kits (it was a very special number since it encouraged the younger bunnies to help the fourteenth learn their lessons, thus staving off bad luck), crouching to eye-level and propping up a blossom of many petals, thin and white.

“A ‘daisy’!” they all called back, the fourteenth echoing behind them.

“Very good,” she adored, reflecting their beaming faces, “and how might we spell ‘daisy’?”

“D-A-…” they began, stumbling only long enough when they thought to spell the word “day” before Lovey quite subtly pointed to her eye (for she was quite the clever rabbit), “…I-S-Y!”

The silver rabbit gleed and clapped her paws in utter delight. “Excellent! And what is the name of this daisy?” she then prompted.

“Bellis perennis!” they promptly answered and proceeded to its spelling with minimal assistance. All fifteen pairs of ears sprung at a calling from inside the house, so the younger bunnies were dismissed with a kiss behind the ear (and a returned kiss on Lovey’s cheek; as a kit should), they held onto one another’s paws, returning through the garden as led by the eldest tyke.

Lovey stood and clapped the dirt from her knees, sighing wistfully… but then felt indignation simmer beneath her pelt as her keen, long, silvery ears detected a noise long playing on the edge of her hearing… perhaps she would finally be able to do something about it with no one else nearby. The front of her dress was lifted to navigate the garden paths and into a rarely-if-ever-utilized storage area of the Hopps Estate. The noises she heard were simply boorish, unbecoming of so upstanding a residence as her family’s… gargling, spitting, guffawing, swearing, purposeful mispronunciation for the sake of some crude humor… The fact that it all seemed to come from and was directed to a single individual made it all the more absurd. She could hardly abide it any longer but found herself stopped, at odds with conflicting etiquettes: someone had posted a “Private” sign to bar her path (that and a curtain) but there was an extraordinary likelihood that the very same someone was just beyond it, mocking grammar and polite company.

The Steel Horn was quite at her wit’s end as her patience and tolerance met their limits of deliberate disobedience to very simple credence, and so set aside the Silver Belle to use the command of her voice for… perhaps-slightly-less-gentle admonition. Gathering all her nerve and gumption, the “Private” sign was removed from its moorings and Lovey marched through the curtain… uninvited, and by the Stars Above, that “someone” was going to hear about what she was forced to do to get to them to tell them what for!

As she suspected, the ivy-covered walls in an overlooked corner of the garden wedged behind an overlooked corner of the manor, where there were no windows to observe whosoever went down the wooden steps and into what could only be described as a lesser-known drainage area (a simple ladder leaned against a wall, thus preventing anybunny from walking beneath it; Lovey was well versed in her Tenets, though, and knew to counter such bad luck, she need only knock on the ladder’s wood three times… if doing show should unbar the passage, then she was quite lucky, indeed). The unbecoming noises were loud and distinguishable, using such words that stood the fur on her nape and -- as best she could figure -- were said to no one in particular except himself. Lovey’s eartips first peeked and then her bright eyes at Mr. Fox, sprawled in a tub beneath a spout (and over a gutter) and having a merry old time.
“Mr. Fox!” she rebuked, ears warm at the recognition of his nakedness (if completely obscured) and hastily averted her gaze (as a lady should), indignantly sparing a glance over the edge of the sign to determine his demeanor and whereabouts.

“’Allo, Lovey!” the fox chimed in an accent and dialect similar to his but grotesquely exaggerated, and then kicked his leg into the air to fling water not at her but at the tall, surrounding hedge that was as thick and impenetrable as a solid wood fence (a solid wood fence having been used in its construction), “Come t’have ourselves a splash?”

Lovey fumed, knuckles white around the sign she clutched. “Now see here, Mr. Fox, I was fooled by you the first night we met and you may very well have fooled my entire family and Mr. Earwicket… but that ends today!” she declared (refusing so un-ladylike an act as shrieking).

“Is that so?” Mr. Fox cooed, twirling in his fingers a long-handled wooden toothbrush with fine and frothy bristles, canting his head to open his maw and rinse out his mouth by swishing, gargling, and then spitting out the side of the tub into the gutter for it to drain past the hedge, “Wha’s a matter, Ms. Hopps? ’Y couldn’t hardly stop singin’ me praises them first few nights; got me blushing like a lil’ school-bun~”

“An error in judgment I shall correct forthwith,” she warned, “I demand to know what you’re scheming!”

“’Schemin’?” the fox wondered aghast, “I’m jus’ brushin’ me teeth, I is. Your pretty lil’ pennies afforded me this fancy scrub-a-dubber and baking ash, y’see. Now that I’m an upstandin’ housefox for the Hoppses, I need t’keep m’self proper prim!”

“Under a drainage pipe?”

“Naw, Miss;” he cordially denied with a bright smile, gesturing with his brush like a baton, “This here’s jus’ the overflow from the boiler on washin’ day; as clean as clean can be! Down there’s all the muckity-muck and yuckity-yuck before it goes into the sewer. Ain’t no manner of dirt here.~”

She huffed. “Must I spell it out for you, you… scallywag?”

“Hurful words aren’t very ladylike,” he tsk ’d, “and best be keepin’ it simple for a dumb fox like me, ‘cause all that cute spellin’ will go right over my head, it will.” He reclined on the tub’s rim once more, smugly grinning.

Seething commenced for but a moment… bristling fur smoothing as she dared a step forward, sign calmly held at her waist. “I disagree that my learned speech would, Mr. Fox,” she argued, approaching to a satisfactory distance for polite conversation, “because the fact of the matter is your drawl is an exceptional farse. I taught grammar and oration prior to dedicating myself to my songs and can distinguish one’s true accent from a mile off. And if I may complement a fellow performer,” Lovey then gestured quite casually with both paw and sign, “’ you are quite the act.”

He grinned. A grin such that one fox could only give another. “Oh?” he coolly poised, the water shifting around him as he sat forward, elbows propped onto the wooden edge, the toothbrush spun like a pencil or held like a long-hafted pipe, his bright white teeth even closing around the handle’s end to gently gnaw. That solitary vocalization confirmed everything Lovey and her perfect pitch deduced, from its momentary change in tenor and tone, it was clear to her that the fox play-acted no further.

“Indeed,” she assured, giving not a single inch to her crimson adversary, “which is itself an oddity considering there is no Tenet to punish a fox for eloquent speech; one supposes it is to appear
dumber than you are. I don’t fault you for that,” Lovey endeared, smugness wavering when she saw his bare haunches buoy in the water behind him, the sopping-wet tail drooping and swaying above, idly flicking droplets far from either of them. His grin persisted, insisted, watching her with that gleaming eye as he bit the wooden handle with parted fangs, the shadow of his tongue barely visible just behind. She knew he was toying with her (as is the predator’s compulsion when alone with a prey) but hers was a noble cause. “What I am curious about, though,” she continued upon collecting herself, “is this sign of yours.”

“It’s not mine,” he relayed, plucking the haft from his mouth so not to obstruct a deep, silken oration that put anything the rabbit could teach to shame, and if Sasha’s accent were an icing then his was the custard filling, “a friend wrote it up for me as a favor, the same who wrote my flower prices; I assumed it said ‘Private’ but perhaps we should find someone to confirm that for us.”

Lovey’s composure stayed true. “On the contrary,” she countered and decided the only course of action was to play his game; dangerous of any small predator, not simply foxes, but so long as she stayed cautious and faithful, a clever rabbit like Lovey had nothing to fear, “I would wager my next performance that this is your handwriting.”

His brow quirked further and further until the severity of its angle distorted his bad eye. “Ms. Hopps,” he dully, if patiently answered, “the Tenets are very specific on that particular heresy, especially if a fox has already lost an offending paw to it.”

“I know.” The following silence was heavy, broken only by the running water.

“Meaning, I have no incentive to accept your wager,” Mr. Fox explained with a lazy spin of his toothbrush, languidly lowering himself back into the water.

“And what… would incent you?” she implied.

He studied her, his features always sharp yet then they seemed… directed. “What did you mean you would ‘wager your next performance’?”

She smiled, idly smoothing her dress. “Exactly how it sounds, Mr. Fox, but I can elaborate the finer details as needed.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “Humor me.”

Her violet eyes met him again. “I would perform what ever song you so deem worthy.”

That single eye blinked slow, brows arching to his ears. “Even ‘This One Doe I Know’?”

There was perhaps only one other time in her adult life that Lovey truly stepped in it and then proceeded to choke on her own foot, for in all her dealings and mannerisms she endeavored to exemplify the rabbit and lady (and that one other time was overlooked due to a sudden onset of brain fever). Never had she endangered that reputation… but to sing “This One Doe I Know” would prove a terminal performance and likely the last time her face or name was ever again acknowledged in polite rabbit society… And by that vorpal grin and blazing green eye of his, it was evident to Lovey that her petrification spoke volumes to the sly Mr. Fox…

“Yes,” she said through locked teeth, “even that.”

His black lips revealed jaws instilling a greater terror gently closed than wide open. “I accept your wager, Lovey; our lives are truly in each other’s paws,” he ascertained, reaching across the tub’s rim to set his toothbrush on the same nearby shelf as his towel. Mr. Fox then sat back and fully submerged himself, re-emerging from the finishing dip to fully stand, wringing the water from his
face as soaked pelt clung to the definition of his physique. Lovey’s ears were already pinned and burning hot as the fox climbed from the tub with ease, that solitary eye locking on her again, as if to challenge the rabbit to blink or scurry or hide. To do so would mean he’d handily won their little game, so her violet orbs never left his face (she did, however, politely step back an appropriate distance while holding the sign at an appropriate height and angle). The towel was then retrieved, tossed over the rabbit (with a surprised squeak) so that the fox might shake the water from his fur. When Lovey opened her eyes again at the drying linen’s removal, she found that Mr. Fox had slung it over his truncated arm and presented his remaining paw. “Shall we shake on it?”

The stalwart gaze never dropped. “Quite,” she agreed and put her dainty paw to his callous pad, the clawed fingers curling around it so gently before a single bob of their joined gestures sealed the deal.

“Superb,” he delighted, sauntering past her to go about the harrowing business of drying one’s fur with a single paw, “So, my fair Lovey, you claim that sign was written by me, do you?” the fox supposed, wrapping one end of the towel around his stump so that he could give his shoulders, back, and posterior a rigorous shimmying, his head a thorough ruffling, and his tail a much-needed fluffing, “Despite not only Mr. Earwicket but your parents agreeing that any signage of mine is indubiously a right-handed stroke,” he then tacked on, waving his absent appendage.

“He shrugged his bare shoulders and covered a nearby, upturned crate with the towel so that he might dry whilst sitting; spread-legged. “Meaning that my friend who wrote it is left-handed writing right-handed but I suspect you intend to correlate such a trifle with my layering of accents,” he proposed, smirking at her flattened gaze and subsequent fuming to casually add, “Even the Blessed Court would find that lacking, especially since what you have there is far and above what even the most skilled fox could blasphemously write. Now then,” he concluded, “‘This One Doe I Know’ was produced as a genius burlesque show several years back; as it so happens, I’m acquainted with someone who could—” and promptly choked on his boast, “That’s not altogether a word that a lady should bandy about, Ms. Hopps.”

Lovey -- as any student of life would -- had her notebook tucked into a pocket of her dress and a pencil sharpened for when inspiration might strike; the latter she licked to darken its tip as the former was flipped to a blank page. “And this is the King’s Script,” she countered, tapping at the foulest, most repugnant word that even the foulest, most repugnant malcontents of the kingdom did not frivolously use… but it was written with such calligraphic artistry of branching curves and coils that it could have been included in the Tenets themselves, “a cursive reserved for the upper echelons of nobility that I consider one of my greatest fortunes to have studied; its technique is reminiscent in your signage. You -- along with the majority of the gentry, Mr. Fox -- could only recognize this as fanciful spirals unless you were not only literate (which I don’t doubt for an instant) but more importantly, practiced and educated.”

Mr. Fox did not respond for some time as Lovey yanked the paper from her notebook to tuck it with its pencil into a pocket, and then held the derogatory term with the sign to await him. “And is education a crime?” he finally asked, inclined with an elbow and a fist to his knees.
“Never,” she airily responded, “certain heretical teachings are, but that’s beside the point as I do believe I have my confirmation that this sign was, indeed, written by you.” Lovey grinned at his tightening glower and narrowing eye… despite the primal fear urging her to kick and run in panic. “Though I cannot ascertain when you wrote it,” the rabbit then mused, tapping the scrap of paper under her chin as his gaze softened, “maybe it was before you lost your right paw… which wasn’t the paw you wrote it with but that’s neither here nor there. Oh, don’t look so shocked, my good tod, you twiddled that toothbrush with more skill in your left than most mammals are capable of in their right; there’s no great deduction there. However…” the rabbit poised and batted her eyelashes, “I believe that concludes our… wits-crossing?”

Pearly white fangs peeked through dark lips but whether as a smirk or a snarl was indiscernable… perhaps both. “Assuredly, Lovey, you are rather sly for a bunny.”

“And you’re rather dumb for a fox but we needn’t trade blows,” she coolly countered, “So… to business. I’ve presented my ante and my claim but I cannot recall what yours were…”

He did grin and stroked his chin. “Then I shall refresh your memory. My claim was that you’ve acted wholly unladylike, barging in on my privacy with such unbecoming behavior; my ante was a secret about myself that you might… relinquish unto the Blessed Court so to haul me off in irons, or some such. What was it that you decided on, again, this secret you burned with curiosity over?”

“Ah, yes,” Lovey answered, as though remembering, “I inquired of your nickname.”

Once more did the fox scoff but with inward entertainment. “Of course… and you shall have had it but from what all I’ve seen, you quite forgot your etiquette as both a rabbit and a lady. No wager is won.”

“On the contrary,” Lovey said, “I’ve demonstrated the utmost respect.”

“You called me a ‘scallywag’.”

“An endearment, nothing more,” she playfully dismissed.

“You brought into my company so terrible a word against us predators,” he deigned, gesturing at the scrap of paper.

“I uttered no such thing,” she promptly rebutted and rent it to shreds before stashing it in her pocket, “I abhor that word and would never let it taint my lips.”

The fox’s ears pinned back. “You… barged in on my privacy, as I said-”

“My dear fox, from the moment I came down here, this sign remained a boundary betwixt us,” Lovey elaborated, inclining (he sitting up in reaction) to very carefully lay that “Private” across a very specific part of his lap. “Be that as it may, I’ve taken up enough of your time and I imagine you need to get ready for the rest of the day’s chores; there is a new orchard coming in that will need your utmost attention, after all,” she then said and curtsied. On a turn of her heel and a twirl of her dress, Lovey folded her paws behind her while exiting, “‘Twas a delight visiting with you, Mr…” she prompted, pausing to recall something over her shoulder.

“Pibbers,” Mr. Pibbers answered, flashing a final grin.

“Mr. Pibbers, yes,” Lovey concurred, soon enough rounding the corner and scaling the wooden steps to return to the Hopps Estate gardens.
“‘Pibbers,’” Bo repeated, “that has to be a diminutive of ‘Piberius’!”

“Or else an extraordinary coincidence,” Graham agreed, “especially with his green eye. By a stroke of luck, there was still some DNA in the cuff of that old false-paw, which I’ve only managed to ascertain as ‘a male fox’ but perhaps with the permission of a family member, I might have access to the genealogical records, thus a match."

Judy was ready to launch to the moon, yet again, feet kicking where she writhed and squealed with abject merriment. “That must mean that this mysterious Trudy vixen must be Nick’s great-grandmother!” she declared, “According to him, his grandfather’s babyfur was gray, which means his mother was a gray vixen. I can’t wait to meet her!”

“Which matches up with his maturation as a red fox, since that’s what his father likely was,” Bo continued, “John said his dad grew up in a red fox slum, right?”

“Right,” she concurred.

“Does she say why she confronted Mr. Pibbers as she did?” he then asked, “I get that his boisterous behavior tweaked her and… maybe she really wanted his nickname (there’s a strength to it, you know), but was it worth betting her reputation like that?”

Judy hummed in thought, scanning the diary entries again. “She sincerely thought he was up to no good and had influenced the rest of her family… everyone except Otto, oddly enough,” she said, glancing at her napping grandfather, “Apparently he pleaded her intervention since no one else would.”

“Otto couldn't have been more than a pre-pubescent at that point,” Graham calculated, also turning an ear to the soft snoring, “considering the time period, it seems a bit early to go through any sort of rebellious stage. It would certainly explain Judy’s defiant streak,” he then teased.

She snorted and waved her paw derisively.

“Lovey got his nickname, in any case,” Bo pointed out, smiling, “and from the sounds of it, it’s a nickname he is, in fact, known by; that definitely bridged trust between them. What did she do after that?”

The gray bunny grimaced just a bit, re-reading the rest of the entry. “She managed to find a brother or two before fainting; I think that whole exchange was about as much stress as she could handle, what with it being her prescribed day of rest,” Judy then sighed with relief, “Good news: she claimed that she fainted from a bit too much sun in the garden, and her brothers bought it.”

Graham gently rumbled as he stroked his jaw. “Lovey lied to protect Mr. Pibbers…” he remarked, “Not to agitate old prejudices but it sounds like that fox did, indeed, influence her.”

A shrug rolled her shoulders and arched her brows. “Let’s not judge her too harshly. If they found out about that conversation—”

“I know,” he interjected, “as the saying went, ‘there’d be nothing left of him to hang’, even though she was the one who ultimately intruded on his privacy, he still… so brazenly paraded about in front of her,” Graham attempted to say without snickering but failed to such a point that he simply allowed himself a laugh, “I will say this, that was an astronomical power-play on his part. I would be convinced of Nick Wilde’s ancestry by that and that alone.”

It was Bo’s turn to laugh, snorting into his palm. “But he hasn’t actually done that, has he Juju?”
Judy groaned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “He has.”

Bo guffawed grander, as did Graham.

“Not that exactly,” Judy corrected, batting the diary with the back of her paw, “but let’s just say that Nick’s modesty is a tool in his belt that he’s willing to holster, depending on the situation.”

“Speaking of brazen,” Bo then awkwardly chuckled, “Pibbers really showed no mercy with his choice of music, did he?” and earned for his observation some mature snickering.

“No one would doubt that ‘This One Doe I Know’ would have barred her from plenty of fancy parties, so traditional as they were back then,” Graham conceded and Judy concurred, but he then addressed the pursed lips of his cousin, “Really, Bo, the song is risqué and plays into every terrible bunny stereotype imaginable but it wasn’t condemnable.”

“Was it?” Judy then asked.

“I’ll go ahead and assume you two haven’t heard the original, unabridged version…” Bo thought aloud and then continued to the blinking stares, “I could hum a few bars if you really want to hear it, but the only reason I know the words is because Max liked to sing it when he thought I wasn’t listening… and then taught it to me when I got older.”

“This ‘Max’ of yours is quite the character…” Graham passively and quietly critiqued.

“You’re just jealous he wasn’t your role model.”

“Maybe.”

Judy took a moment to infer. “That really put her life and livelihood on the line, didn’t it?” she rhetorically asked, “Lovey lived and died by her music… to lose that voice, that bond with her audience? It’ll break her heart… she’ll just… fall to pieces…”

“Candleflame…” Graham inputted, reaching out to touch her arm, “would you like me to read?”

“What? Oh, thank you, Graham, but I’m fine, really-” Judy assured but flinched when a drop of water landed on her wrist. She closed the book immediately to protect its pages and scanned the ceiling… before touching her own cheek to find a tear nestled into the fur there.

“Juju, you just started welling up for no reason,” Bo said, scooting a bit closer to touch her shoulder and it seemed he was choked up by proxy (for the empathy of rabbits was strong, indeed).

Judy studied the tear on the tip of her finger, blinking away whatever mist was in her eye and shaking her head a moment. “It…” she said, clearing her throat of subjectivity, “her letter-to-the-reader must have really gotten to me but it feels like… I want to say ‘grief’ but…” the gray rabbit doubted, wiping her paw on her shirt, “whose grief?” She asked either buck with a look, to which they shrugged, and then they all turned an ear to the still snoring grandfather before returning to each other.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Graham kindly pressed, gripping her arm.

“Yes, yes, I am fine,” Judy insisted, “…Why?”

“You spoke in simple future tense,” he explained and to which Bo confirmed with a nodding grunt, “as though with certitude that Lovey would lose her voice and… fall apart.”
She rubbed a wrist to her eye once more and cordially chuckled. “Well, she did, you know, suffer from depression, I mean, that’s why Diocles invites her on his merchant trips around the world; the sunsets inspire her to write new songs, a foreign prince is enamored by her music and gifts her seven unique opals, and then they’re made into ‘Tears for a Sunset’. I’m sure you both all know this,” Judy continued to chuckle and swatted her paw dismissively, opening the book anew, “It’s all part of her story.”

The bucks exchanged doubt until Graham reminded her, “Judy, everybunny knows she sailed on her father’s ship to bring the world’s music to Forestdwell, but it’s not until they’re beset by pirates is she ever deeply, negatively affected.”

“And like you told me last night,” Bo added (if gravely), “the ‘mysterious mariner’ from her story was none other than Hector Howard, Bag-o’-Bones himself. That might be what you mean, her falling into depression,” he suggested, “Regardless, it doesn’t happen before she sails with her father.”

“But…” Judy attempted after a silent span, “her mange-ridden composer… that was before she went out to sea… right?”

Both chocolate and butterscotch bunnies contemplated. “That was after, I thought?” Bo wondered, “She was invited to perform for the Blessed Court because of those songs but she never got there…”

“Lest we forget that she could not have been mauled by a savage fox since her carcanet was undamaged,” Graham reminded.

Judy thoroughly dried her face to retrieve the book. “We’ll only know by pressing on. And thank you for offering, Graham, but I… I need to read this… I need to be there for Lovey,” she determined, and so continued…

Chapter End Notes

The introduction of the chapter is the same as Brave, chapter 18, when we first peered into Judy’s dream. Also in that chapter is the mention of ivy potpourris.

“Schubat, Meowzart, and Beecloven” are Zootopian puns of “Schubert, Mozart, and Beethoven”, respectively (Schubat was mentioned back in Brave).

You might correlate the wolverine grocer as Big Gid from Judy’s dream of The Burrow. I initially wanted to give him a “G” name (i.e., “Gus”) to reflect Big Gid but realized that it wasn’t necessary and perhaps a contrivance too far. As it so happens, the scientific name for wolverine is "gulo gulo", Latin for "glutton", and since he is a "grocer", I guess his name is “Gus”, now; it occurred to me that he could also be “Big Gil” but that might be a contrivance too far.

The line [“our histories are dark, darker than either of us know”] is a call back to when fox-heads as wards was first suggested, back in Trustworthy, chapter 17.

The false paw that Graham mistook for the Scarlet Hook was from Brave, chapter 24 and Judy’s trip through the Hopps Manor of Knotash.
What Mr. Never told Esther about history being rewritten was said in Loyal, chapter 9.

The ladder used to bar a path is a cute little idea I had a long while back; basically, those who defied the Blessed Court would hold their meetings down alleyways that forced anyone who entered to walk under a ladder, thus, deterring the superstitious. It worked more frequently than most would give credit for.

“Baking ash” is old-timey term for baking soda, which was one of the original toothpastes and is still used in them today.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

[The point of this chapter is to explore some different perspectives from individuals involved in Lovey’s diary entries. It’s assumed that she is an astute observer and journal-keeper, so it should be easy enough to reason out their inclinations from what she wrote and what she personally knows of them.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

 Hey~yo, to sea we go  
 Keep an eye out for sails  
 On the horizon low  
 If black, white, or red  
 Her dress could billow  
 You’d still lose your head  
 O hey-yo, hey-yo

Diocles paced the length of his desk, fretting amongst some of his choice children, including Lovey. “Good morning, everybunny,” he greeted and to him, they appropriately responded, “I’ve brought you all in today because you are each directly affected by this most terrible of news: the Appleblossom was taken by pirates.” The room caught its collective breath, for each rabbit present knew that their individual businesses relied on their father’s merchant ships and awaited on that one in particular to complete her trek; Lovey received word that a sponsor’s newest gown was arriving on the Appleblossom but it was for the crew’s fate that her heart wrenched. He was patient for their muttering and consolidation before he continued, “Steel yourselves, for it’s worse than that. Yes, our beloved ship was violated and left to die on the ocean floor…” he choked, sucking on his bucked teeth yet presented a sturdy demeanor for his children, “but it pains me to inform you she was made victim of…” he gulped, “Bag-o’-Bones …”

No less than two of Lovey’s sisters fainted (barely caught by a blanched brother) before they could make the sign of the Four-Leaf Clover or knock on their wooden chairs, as she, herself burst into quiet sobbing and bowed her head to wish with all her might… For that faceless monster -- who crawled from the Abyss, an immense skeletal beast of hoof, fang, horn, and claw strong enough to rend a ship of its mast -- was never so merciful as to simply kill his victims. The exceptionally lucky were devoured alive by his bloodthirsty crew… otherwise, they were conscripted as soulless fiends…

“How could this happen?” a brother demanded, half enraged and half mortified, “She set sail upon a Seventh Day and never left a port on Friday! Whose bad luck is to blame for this-?”

“None!” Diocles suddenly declared, eyes and cheeks drenched with tears but he held himself tall, “Our fortunes are not to blame for the deeds of the devil,” he rebuked, his son withering beneath
that glare, only looking up when his father grasped his shoulder. “There was a far darker force at work here, worse than any one or a whole fluff of bunnies could possibly turn aside. But we are Hoppses,” the patriarch then reminded, throat cleared and for his certitude received a nod from his son to reflect it, “a blessed family. We set out beyond the kingdom’s protection knowing the risks,” he continued to the rest of his concurring children, “Death is as much a part of us bunnies as life, as is the soil and roots. We shall mourn this tragedy… so that we can heal and carry those we lost in our hearts from here on.”

“What of the shipfox?” a sister then pleaded, “Could they not ward off that demon?”

“We… don’t know what happened-” their father admitted and immediately the room burst into worry and accusations.

“What if the fox jumped ship?”

“Or sided with Unlucky Hect?”

“If the shipfox died…”

“Foxes might no longer deter him!”

“Brothers, sisters, please, remember yourselves!” Lovey beseeched when the patriarch’s thumping foot was drowned out, her voice clear and steady and calming in an instant. As she knew to do, Lovey allowed the following silence to linger just long enough that they might set their once-panicked faces and ears upon her alone, “We are Hoppses, blessed and noble; it simply wouldn’t do for our hearts to give out at a time like this. We’ve always treated our foxes with the utmost respect and dignity, as they’ve always loved and respected us. Surely, new information will come to light about this grave event… right, Daddy?”

He nodded. “Absolutely correct, Lovey,” he said, heart swelling with gratitude but he still held himself with authority, “I should hear word about all that transpired before the end of day and so shall you all be informed. I request that anyone you tell in this family be eased into it; I don’t want the kits to worry.” His adult children obliged as well as they may, some still visibly shaken if bolstered by the paternal voice.

Later on, Lovey sat at the window of her bedroom, and try though she might was unable to read. The concern of the Appleblossom’s crew weighed too heavily and she no longer had the sisters whose bed she once shared in which to confide; they were held dearest to her heart but she was the only one of the seven yet unmarried, and so was abided her privacy whenever she did not invite another inside. Begrudgingly, the book was surrendered when she heard the telltale signs of the gardener nearby; by his reasoning, the eastern side of the house was the best for the growth of flowers, for it was warmer in the morning and cooler in the afternoon but Lovey was yet convinced that he did not plant them for her… for the flowers she saw were always the most beautiful.

“Penny for your thoughts, Miss?” Mr. Pibbers asked in a charming, simple accent with a charming, simple grin that made it truly difficult to direct any manner of indignation thereat; Lovey tried her best, though, hidden behind a lofty smirk as it was. He was up on a ladder and washing windows when she opened hers abruptly if only to see how well he caught the bucket and hooked the top rung with his false-paw, balanced until his tail could shift the teetering ladder back against the house.

“How many pennies have you on paw?” Lovey responded in a sweet, ladylike inflection with a sweet, ladylike smile. She knew it was uncouth to engage in such underhanded, “shifty” games as wits-crossing and she would certainly have refrained from them… if it didn’t seem as though the
fox enjoyed them so much; his working whistle was quite distinct outside her window, after all, along with how loudly he cleaned said window. “Really, though, we simply must stop meeting like this, Mr. Pibbers, or else the neighbors will begin to talk.”

“About your repeated attempts to kill your housefox?” he inquired, boasting his most suave countenance; Lovey quickly suspected only she knew of his true self but found that simpler façade did wonders to ease the rest of the house. So long as she kept vigilant to his trickery, the Hoppses had nothing to fear.

“Not a one would blame me,” she cooed and gently batted his arm with her book.

“You are troubled, Lovey,” he then observed, leaning on the windowsill while polishing his pruning knife with the wet rag, “the Appleblossom, no doubt.”

“Her crew,” Lovey specified, slumped where she sat, “The lost goods and cargo concern me, yes, but it was all insured… lives cannot be, not truly…”

Pibbers hummed as he proceeded to wipe the inside of the window. “If I might provide some… solace?” he offered. Her lofty smirk was a formality to their interactions but to see that it had fallen to a sad, obliging smile was a bridge too far for the fox; he abided nothing to affect Lovey so dreadfully. “I know her shipfox,” he revealed to an intrigued gleam in the eye and thus quelled her brewing suspicion, as he knew best to do, “All I’ve heard about the Hoppses is how well they treat their foxes so I pried as liberally as was necessary; a precaution, you see.

“Ms. Tab is a ferocious vixen, one must be to have replaced their lost paw with an iron poker, and is vigilant despite her lost eye,” he casually explained, “I do not suspect that Bag-o’-Bones himself attacked the Appleblossom, rather one of the many smaller ships who run his colors (a rabbit merchant family would not warrant anything larger). They are still part of his Cursed Crew, however, luckily, Ms. Tab is exceptionally sly, so she surely kept a nose open for their putrid stench, easily mistaken for rotting seaweed that buoyed to the surface.”

Lovey clutched her dress and gasped. “Then… there is hope that they survived…?”

The fox sighed through flared nostrils. “Provided Diocles received word about his ship as a flag message with rudimentary details, then I suspect the ship’s fate is all that’s known. So I see it going one of two ways,” he counted with his left paw, “either Ms. Tab detected the pirates and safely evacuated the ship to be ransacked, or they ambushed her from downwind. If the latter,” he gravely continued, “then they can thank their Lucky Stars that Ms. Tab never goes to sea without her ‘little sister’, Ms. Rod.”

“The lynx?”

“Yes, obviously not a sister by blood,” Pibbers admitted, “She is an oaf; a cubhood brain injury made her simple, endearing, and without inhibitions, thus strong enough to take off a pirate’s head with an iron rod; thus her nickname.”

The silver bunny sighed with such relief. “The blaggards were fought off.”

“I did not say that,” the fox cautioned, “Ms. Tab and Ms. Rod likely gave their lives so that the crew might flee on a lifeboat in either circumstance. But we shall see what news comes at the end of day.”

It was as Mr. Pibbers predicted. The Appleblossom was ambushed and nearly all the crew escaped, the boarding pirates busied by the shipfox and her “little sister” until the cannons sent her
to the depths. Tears were shed for the bunnies who did not survive and a memorial erected for them; in the days that the crew did finally return to the estate and the ceremony performed, Lovey had depictions and wreaths of flowers prepared for Ms. Tab and Ms. Rod to join the rabbits who were lost in the attack, not only in ceremony but tradition. Some of the household said it better that the “shifties” be joined with the foxes and lynxes… but Lovey insisted that they be honored alongside the Hopps family; she sang a eulogy for them, one that left not a single dry eye in the house. Not every Hopps agreed but Diocles did, and his was the voice that mattered; in the end, it seemed there was not a bunny on the Hopps Estate who could deny the Silver Belle.

Otto was a precocious scamp (by bunny standards) but a dedicated kitchen boy. His spoons were always the cleanest, he never dropped dishes, and the other housebunnies got along with him well enough; as it was commonplace for orphaned bunnies to be welcomed into Fortunate households, the Hopps Estate found a bed for him to sleep in, chores to do, and due to his admirable work ethic, earned a spot in the family’s advanced classes. One such class was taught by Miss Laverne Hopps herself, held for but a single hour each week and the envy of the children; Otto only just scraped by as the fourteenth, truly the highlight of his life (by his reckoning thus far). He was concerned that his luck had run out when the old Mr. Fox was replaced by a new one… a younger, slyer tod with only one eye and one paw… Otto knew what that meant… but he got into Miss Lovey’s class (as he, her pupil, was then allowed to call her), ergo, things were looking up.

That new housefox, though… everyone loved him! Even Miss Lovey was falling for his tricks even after Otto confided in her; it definitely had something to do with learning the fox’s nickname. He knew better because tod’s were pranksters (especially the young ones) so the kitchen boy shouldered the solemn duty to keep both eye and ear on the wily groundskeeper since no one else would. Foxes were sly, though… and bunnies less so, which one of the older housebunnies explained after nearly a month of his observation. “He knows you’re watching him,” Otto was dully warned one evening while peeling potatoes, “might’ve lost an eye but he still got the both in back o’ his head.”

Foxes truly were crafty devils…

One day, Otto had finished all his chores early and snuck out of playtime to shadow Mr. Fox as he trimmed a tree in the garden. He’d disappeared into the overhead boughs and try though he might, the bunny couldn’t locate him again… he scanned with his ears and heard the creaking of branches behind him but kept his eyes glued to where he saw the fox vanish, trying to figure out the shifting shadows up there… A snap! A heavy limb plummeted towards Otto but stopped just above his head.

“Oi’!” Mr. Fox worried, dangling from a higher branch while his foot caught the one which dropped, kicking it off to the side and hopping down, “I didn’t see ya’ there before it was near too late. You okay? No bruises or scratches or anything of the sort?”

The young bunny sniffed and trembled in equal parts fear and indignation. “I’m fine!” he hiccuped and then scampered off… returning to peek around a corner to then yell as quietly as he could, “Thank you for saving my life, Mr. Fox!” and was gone.

More days had passed and the Estate still mourned losing their treasured Appleblossom and some of her crew, but Ms. Fox and Ms. Lynx were also mourned… which confused Otto. Maybe Ms. Lynx, yes, but Ms. Fox? She probably survived, somehow… Miss Lovey sang a beautiful song for them, though, so maybe it wasn’t so bad… they did give their lives so that others might live, after all… But that Mr. Fox, he was still a trickster and Otto was determined to expose it. There were even times when he caught a sly glint of the teeth on that fox and knew he was getting close. So
close, in fact, that while Otto had remained undetected in tailing the gardener to his shack in the hedge, he found some suspicious papers that came fluttering by after a particularly strong wind, one caught in a rosebush… surely, his Lucky Stars provided for him, at last.

Otto’s keen hearing found him hiding behind a nearby shrub, paw stifling his own mouth and looking quite guilty.

“A wonderful day to you, young Master Otto…” Mr. Fox pleaded with his nicest, most polite smile; there was no sly gleam in his eye or tooth, not when he knew that he’d been caught. He was struggling to keep a scattered bundle of papers (identical to the one Otto had) clutched to his chest with his bad paw while making slight inching motions with his good paw, “I was just… cleanin’ up this nasty bit of trash; flew in right over the hedge, it did! Thank ya’ so kindly for grabbin’ the last of it for me…” he said, dark lips then pursing and claws flinching when the young rabbit bounded back, paper still held.

“What is it?” the housebunny inquired, examining the beautiful script but finding it a bit too fancy for him to read, despite his clumsy attempts to do so.

Mr. Fox cringed and then laughed, straightening out the papers he held. “Oh, how would I know? I lost me reading eye years and years ago; this is all jus’… squiggles to a devout fox like yours truly, so you needn’t worry yerself over such a trifle as this…”

Otto then narrowed his glare at the fox’s bundle. “That looks like a music binder; I seen Miss Lovey with one. It’s sheet music, isn’t it? You stole it, didn’t you?” he then accused.

From out of nowhere did a most ladylike approach of footsteps petrify Mr. Fox and energize his inquisitor. Otto leered first at the groundskeeper and then skipped to intercept Miss Lovey, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He didn’t hear her coming around either side of the house but her music room window was nearby… no matter, she looked about ready to admonish the fox for his trickery, at long last.

“Good day, Miss Lovey!” Otto chimed, nose soon wiggling as he waited for her stern face to soften when looking at him… it’s not like he did anything wrong… if anything, he did something right… Instead of inclining for a kiss to greet, she held out her paw for the sheet music and he relinquished it dutifully (if abashedly). “Mr. Fox stole one of your binders!” he then declared, pivoting and pointing appropriately at an utterly mortified fox.

“Oh? It is very like the paper I use yet has no bars or notes… ” she observed with absolute serenity. Though Otto couldn’t see it, he definitely heard a choking in her throat as she read through that one sheet of paper… no doubt, she used it to hide how much it affected her that her music was stolen (Miss Lovey was always clever, for a bunny, and knew best how to handle foxes and the like). “Ah, yes, of course,” Miss Lovey then realized, Otto bouncing on the balls of his feet even more until she approached with a slight bob of her head, holding the single sheet behind her back, “Thank you for collecting these documents, I shall be sure they are duly secured.”

“Bless me, is that what these are?” he gasped (sounding relieved), grabbing his cap to wring it at his chest, “A thousand apologies, Miss Hopps, if I’d known as such, I’d’ve been more careful!”

Otto stood aghast… especially when Mr. Fox got a sly gleam in his eye… “N-No!” the rabbit desperately pleaded, hopping and pointing to catch the fox in his lie, “He said it flew in from over the hedge!”

“My goodness…” Miss Lovey started and touched her chin with a… curious flick of her ear, “It was quite blustery today… they must have spilled right out of my delivery…”
Both Otto and Mr. Fox verbally tripped over themselves. “Your delivery, Miss Hopps?” the fox inquired, face contorting in confusion (and some dread).

“Certainly,” she said with a bat of her eyes, “it’s been my pleasure to recently correspond with a genius composure but unfortunately, unnamed; one might say that his linguistic mastery was provided to me entirely by chance. This,” she continued, nodding to the paper behind her, “is the first song he’s written for me … its lyrics just need a spot of music, is all, from what I can discern at a cursory glance. Now then, I must prepare and practice this song for the week’s performances, having spent quite enough time waiting for it,” Miss Lovey said, holding out her palm to retrieve the disheveled music binder.

Otto trembled in combined panic and excitement when he recognized the infamous look that Mr. Fox bore: a fox cornered.

“Why… yes … of course… your delivery…” the gardener surrendered behind grinning teeth, cap snapped open to be replaced atop his head. He made busying noises while tidying up the paper (the eye beneath his bill scanning at whom gathered, visible bunnies watching his every move, knowing twice more than they listened in) and when everything was nicely squared, rested the binder’s spine into her awaiting grasp. The force required to pry the folder from his clawed fingers was only enough to leave faint indentations from those locked tips, which released as would the spikes of a trap before calmly curling in their palm. “Will that be all, Miss Hopps?”

“N-No!” Otto then cried, paws balled into fists as he once more pleaded of Miss Lovey. She used the fox’s nickname… and he daresay that she looked… sly, “That’s not all!”

Those vibrant, violet eyes blinked once to demonstrate her patience. “Whatever do you mean, Otto?”

There was that stern look again… but he couldn’t believe, in his heart-of-hearts, that Miss Lovey -- of all bunnies -- succumbed to a fox’s influence… His nose wiggled as he quietly whined, ears pinned to his back as he tried with all his might to reason out what was happening… “Wh- Who is this composer?” he asked, finger thrust at the music.

She blinked again… and he waited for her to crouch down, eye-to-eye, and explain as she always did with that soft, wonderful voice whenever one of her pupils needed a more thorough explanation. But Otto found himself trembling all the worse. “I reiterate, he is ‘unnamed’,” she calmly affirmed, back straighter, “and I shall honor his privacy.”

That might have been that for Otto could hardly withstand such a harsh retribution… except the fox once more looked… relieved… “But!” the housebunny tried again, and though her ears were as forward as they could go he gathered whatever nerve remained in his young heart to hold back his tears and snap a single glare at the fox, “Why isn’t he named?”

Silver fur did not bristle… but she did furrow her brow. “Because he has mange, if you must pry,” Miss Hopps rebuked, withering the young housebunny (and the multitude of eavesdroppers), and then when it seemed that he was about ready to ask another question, she bent forward and wagged her finger, “And you have been very naughty, Otto, harassing our dear housefox by spying on him; I thought better of you.” The shrunken kit looked about ready to sink into the dirt, gently sniffing but drying his eyes and nose as quickly as he could… and then he snuck another dagger to stare at the fox. Miss Hopps stood upright and brought all her presence to bear, “It’s downright sly.”
All the pluck and life drained from Otto; perhaps it might have been kinder had she tossed from off the top of the Manor or into a pyre… The young bunny trembled from ear-to-toe, chin quivering and knees shaking as he curled into a ball, tears and snot pouring down his face into the soil below. His paws grabbed at the dirt as he hiccups, if hesitant before clutching two great clumps… staring at them… and then only holding his skull to weep.

Miss Hopps never called her pupils “sly”, only kits whom she was profoundly disappointed in or adults who uncouthly teased. What was left for him… Be buried in the dirt? What good would it do… In time, the knees of her dress edged into view and a gentle paw touched under his sopping chin. “Now now,” she comforted, a handkerchief covering and cleaning his face, “no need for such a fuss. We are proper Hoppses, are we not?” Otto gazed up at her softly smiling eyes and though his own were pink and puffy, he hiccuped and nodded… and then when she leaned in to touch her forehead to his, he was enveloped in an absolution he could not comprehend… “Otto, would you please help me organize this sheet music?” Miss Hopps requested, standing and holding out her paw to him, folder tucked under an arm. He sprung to his feet and clung to her, hastily wiping the rest of his face as he followed her inside. “A good day to you, Mr. Fox.”

“And a wonderful day to you both, Miss Hopps, young Master Otto,” Mr. Fox said with a tip of his cap as they and the rest of the listeners-in departed.

Both Miss Hopps and Otto sat on the floor of her music room, she spread out the sheets quite casually as he remained as still and polite as possible. Though an exemplar of the lady-rabbit, Miss Hopps soon sat in a very comfortable way, her legs still tucked beneath her but off to the side. She also muttered, “Perhaps like this…” or “Like that, maybe?” without any attempt at proper enunciation. “Otto,” she then said, causing his ears to spring only to droop as he sniffed, fiddling with his own thumbs, “whatever is the matter?”

He whimpered and shook his head. “Nuthin’, Miss Hopps…” he mumbled. His ears were warm yet face pale as she leaned further over with an arm about his quivering shoulders to embrace. “‘Nuthin’?” she playfully inquired.

“Nothing is wrong, Miss Hopps,” Otto abashedly corrected.

She kindly huffed and cradled his head. “You can tell me, this music room is a sanctuary,” Miss Hopps assured as he turned into her, and so continued, “I heard from the head chef that you are Mr. Fox’s shadow-”

“N- No!” he squeaked, paws to his face and knees brought up, nearly pushing his body into her side to plead, “I’m not! I hate him! I hate that fox! He’s sly, not me!”

“Oh…” she softly moaned, caressing his ear, “Sweet Otto… I did not mean to imply anything of the sort… I called you ‘sly’ because you were sneaking about, hounding Mr. Fox at every turn and opportunity. Such behavior is unbecoming of a rabbit… of a Hopps, especially.” When the young housebunny trembled fiercer, she took great care to hoist him by his waist and into her lap, new tears alighting on her dress as he attempted to hide in her bosom. “Mr. Fox has demonstrated exceptional trust for and by the whole Estate, time and again. I will admit that he has a… a lingering sly ness about him but I am already wise to any trickery of his. You cannot fault a fox for such a thing as that.”

Still, Otto whined.

“Why do you hate him so?”
Piteous attempts were made to push the words out of his mouth but Miss Lovey was patient, so he finally managed to say, “It’s my fault he’s here…” Otto’s head lifted enough to stare off in tear-welled horror, paw gripping at her dress. “The old Mr. Fox left… and then a new Mr. Fox came… there were almost two housefoxes and it’s all my fault…”

“Whatsoever do you mean-?” Miss Hopps asked -- perhaps rhetorically -- but her continued comfort was cut off by a stuttering sob.

“I’m a Scarlet!” Otto hoarsely confessed, unable to look her in the eye as he wept anew, wailing muffled by her dress. A cursed, ancient bloodline… “rabbit-traitors”… “fox-lovers”… everybunny knew of their unholy luck to cheat a death that consumed all else… just like their vulpine masters. Doomed was any warren that welcomed in a Scarlet, so named for the blood of other rabbits found dead around them…

“‘I was a Scarlet’,” Miss Hopps kindly corrected, “in the past tense.” It made sense, why he dropped the dirt he grabbed, attempting a rabbit’s ultimate penance by burying oneself and so fulfill their only lot left in life… but Scarlet blood would desecrate the land. Otto gradually looked up, eyes shining not only with tears but reverence as what she said dawned on him. A handkerchief once more dried his cheeks and nose, “Such a fuss~” she gently teased.

His chin trembled and he sniffed but blew into the offered hanky all the same. “But…?”

“You are a Hopps, part of a blessed and noble family,” Miss Hopps explained and though awestruck, the young kit could not find it in himself to shed another tear. “Now then, I’ve kept you for quite long enough,” she said, “wouldn’t you agree?” He quietly grunted and bobbed his head. “Supper is nearly upon us, after all, and there is not a housebunny in the kitchen that cleans a spoon quite like you, is there?” He grunted his affirmation and shook his head, ears flopping above. “Very good. Will you be alright from here on, Otto?”

“Yes, Miss Hopps,” he answered, standing and drying off his face as best he could.

“Yes, Miss Lovey,” she said, sitting up to kiss behind his ear.

“Yes, Miss Lovey,” Otto responded, leaning in to kiss her in turn (as a kit should), before departing, taking great care not to step on the precious song from an “unknown” and Unfortunate composer, cursed with mange as he was; perhaps his luck will change for the better by knowing Miss Lovey, as Otto’s had.

“I demand my property be returned to me immediately!” Mr. Pibbers did, indeed, demand. The fact that he had squeezed into Lovey’s music room through the window but remained hidden by the door should it have opened left much to be desired for his level of comfort; and plenty more for his remaining patience as Lovey continued to play over his talking (just in case anyone happened to listen in). “And cease your scribbling!”

She merrily hummed and marked another note on the sheet of paper using a charcoal pencil, softly vocalizing the scales with her piano. “Your property?” Lovey idly wondered, “And here I thought it was already a gift given; luck works in mysterious ways, you know.”

“Never again shall so-“ he began to rave, succinctly locking his teeth when another bunny was detected out in the hall… and then proceeded, if in a lower tone, “shall so venerable a descriptor as ‘sly’ be tarnished with the name of ‘Laverne Hopps!’”

“Promises, promises,” she coolly considered, thoughtfully tapping her pencil to a lip before eagerly
pivoting on the piano bench, thusly presented the half-marked, over-sized sheet of paper to the fuming fox, “Here, do tell me what you think and be honest; spare not my feelings, I want your full and unabridged opinion.”

As his lips curled and fangs sharpened, so did his claws as he glared through the pace-kept twitch of his good eye. “It really is a wonder how such long ears could possibly fail to listen to every single word that I just said,” he growled and snarled and surely would have loomed to his full height, had he the clearance to do so. Regardless, he forced his paw to relax so not to damage his own writing and gave it a straightening flap with a grumble, vocalizing under his breath as his pruning-knife false-paw followed along. Both ears and posture of the silver bunny leaned forward, bright amethysts shimmering with rapt anticipation as she caught minutely muted chokes from behind the raised paper. “Passable,” Mr. Pibbers finally critiqued and returned it to a quite put-off Lovey, tapping the sheet with the curve of his knife, “It should be an a-sharp.”

She scoffed and snatched the music (in as ladylike a manner as possible), “A what?”

“Third line, second bar, fourth note; a-sharp,” he explained, comfortably squatting as his arms folded across his knees, smugly grinning as she disappeared behind the music and told him all he needed to know by the motion of her ears.

“A-sharp’, how utterly prepos-…” Lovey mumbled and then vocalized, sounding out its original note… and then vocalized again with the a-sharp… pivoted to hastily play through while singing the lyrics and hitting that note exquisitely… and then that specific bar several times with just the piano, alternating between the two versions. She sat in a daze and rubbed out the charcoal marking to promptly correct it, “Stars Above, it is an a-sharp…”

“Now, let’s run it through once more but this time, slow down to a nice, steady prestissimo,” Mr. Pibbers instructed.

Lovey’s eyes rolled in her head and the wit off her tongue but then caught herself to address the fox and his averted gaze, paw idly scratching through the fur of his neck. “Come again?” she asked.

“Really, Lovey, explaining the joke would only ruin it.” His green eye flicked at her again.

“You know… I never did ask-”

“Why did I write-?” he cut in but immediately chomped on his breath to flatten against the wall, wedged as deeply into the corner as he could manage behind the swung open door.

“Are you finished with your dishes, Lovey?” one of her many sisters asked, knocking on the wood while entering, a housebunny politely in tow.

“Yes,” Lovey answered, gesturing to the bowl, spoon, plate, fork, and tray just next to the door, before imploring her, “and you know that it is rude to knock while in the doorway, especially when you are interrupting,” she chastised.

“Sorry,” she retorted and proceeded to further intrude, the housebunny keeping her distance, “you’re the hardest rabbit to reach in this house when you’re at your music, and it’s not even one of your opera days anyway!”

Lovey promptly stood, her demeanor softening like cotton-stuffed silk. “Oh, goodness, you’re quite right, forgive me,” she bade, swiftly approaching to gingerly halt her sister, turning her and the housebunny back towards the hall, “I really can lose myself some days… I almost didn’t realize how late it was…”
The sister scoffed and then lightly bumped their foreheads as she stacked the dishes with others they’d gathered, “Well… no worries, then. And oh! It’s grape pudding tonight, if you’d like a nibble of dessert?”

“Tempt me, tempt me,” Lovey cooed and then the three giggled, “I really mustn’t have sugar while I’m singing, it will only tighten my throat. But thank you.”

“I suppose it would, wouldn’t it…? I’ll save you a bowl, then, and perhaps later we can play a game?” she asked, “Please?”

“That would be delightful.” The door closed but Mr. Pibbers dared not breathe until something was wedged under it and a signal given. Lovey exhaled and returned to her piano, “Sweet heavens, my heart is still racing…”

“Your heart races?” the fox groaned and raked through the fur on his head, “I’ve overstayed my welcome, that much is clear-”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Pibbers, I put you in a dreadful position…”

His eyebrows quirked. “Lest I am mistaken, this is not necessarily an apology.”

Lovey anxiously played the piano a bit. “You see… I still, sincerely want to know…”

He sighed again. “Yes?”

The grip around her heart had loosened only long enough to tighten again. “What do you miss most about your lost paw?” She dare not look at him again, for it was a delicate and uncouth topic to inquire of a predator.

Mr. Pibbers blinked, ears flicking… and looked down at the pruning knife jutting from his wrist… and then at his calloused, dirty paw. He’d crouch again, once more comfortable on his haunches as he gazed over the black-&-white beneath her fingertips. “I miss the piano…” he confessed, “though I quite imagine you already figured that out, Miss Hopps.”

The implication was evident so her ears warmed and she cleared her throat; it was unbecoming for bunnies to be “sly”… “clever”, yes, for one must be around foxes. “I thought it only a poem but found that it accepted music better than anything I ever read before…” she marveled, re-examining the sheet half-marked with notes. Lovey then leaned away as a thick, gruff paw reached over and brushed the keys with the very tips of the claws… and played a soft scale at the highest end.

“Beg pardon, I am a tad rusty,” he lamented.

“Then might I suggest the other end of the keyboard?” she offered, scooting along the bench so to free up the lower tones thereat while she stroked the higher end with a fanciful diddy similar to, but not exactly that of the song they unknowingly corroborated on, “I wouldn’t mind an accompaniment.”

A green eye gripped its cynicism but, in time, softened to abject amusement. “What could it hurt?” he accepted and shuffled over to crouch behind Lovey, readying his claws on the tiny keys to play what he could with her nimbler digits… and finding it easier the further along they went. They ran through the half of the song and even managed to fill the rest of the page (not that she was quick enough to write anything down), sharing not only in the music… but laughter, as well.

Lovey’s playing softened as she kept her warm ears pinned. “So, Mr. Pibbers…”
“Yes, Miss Lovey.”

“Why did you write this heavenly song?” she asked, eyes keeping to the keys.

He was silent for a bit, playing still, before stopping and retracting his paw to rest it with his arm on his knees. “I was inspired by your dirge for the late Ms. Rod,” he said, “I only knew her briefly but what you sang for her… stirred a brilliance in me such that I risked my very neck to share it with the world. I could be caged-&-burned for such a thing as this but… how could I possibly live keeping it locked up inside me…?”

Lovey half-pivoted to address him, struck both awed and dumb. “Mr. Pibbers, I… I’m not sure whether to rejoice or mourn this revelation… such a punishment is reserved for bloodwitches.”

“The most devious of us, I know,” he chuckled, “and look who I’ve influenced, thus far; imagine if more heard it. It’s exactly what the Blessed Court fears most of all.”

Silvery ears sprung in her indignation. “Poppycock, says I,” she argued, “such beauty can not be used for anything except the better of society; I shan’t deny that there are influencers and corruptors out there, intent to demolish our very world, but this song… is divinely inspired, of that I have no doubt.” Her ears than warmed again at the fox’s growing smirk. “Not that… I would label myself as any sort of… ‘divinity’, despite inspiring the song,” Lovey explained and then sat forward again with a clearing of her throat, “And the dirge was for Ms. Rod and Ms. Tab, as they were both lost protecting my family; it was only right to do so.”

“Of course.”

She scoffed a lady-like chortle. “I’m a bit surprised you overlooked your fellow fox,” she then teased but he did not respond to such a low-hanging bit of snark, so she peered over a shoulder once more to find him forlorn, “Ms. Tab, the Appleblossom’s late shipfox?”

Mr. Pibbers studied the waiting face. “Ms. Tab… Tabitha isn’t dead,” he said, and the bunny gasped but before she could further inquire, he promptly answered, “I met with her a week after the ceremony. She and her ‘sister’ fought off the pirates who sailed under the blackest flag, yes, and then dove for cover when the cannons turned on the ship. Tabitha was barely alive but she clung to some debris and managed to paddle away… Ms. Rod (I never did get her true name) had lost a leg and the blood attracted sharks… it seemed even then, she fought to her last.” The bunny gasped again, if weakly. “Tabitha bartered safe passage with fishers and found her way home.

“Word got around and so I made my way down to the docks to meet her, wondering why she opted not to return from the dead,” he continued, “As far as Tabitha was concerned, she couldn’t be a shipfox anymore, not without her beloved sister, and so wished nothing more than to go out into the wilderness and eke out what life of hers remained,” Mr. Pibbers explained, reclining against the bookshelf as Lovey gripped her dress at the knees, fighting back tears.

“But…” Lovey quietly sobbed, “why didn’t she want to come back? The Hoppses have always been good to their foxes…?”

Mr. Pibbers sighed and rubbed his head, perhaps confused as to Lovey’s reaction. “She sang this family’s praises up and down but did not want to return to the living… the Appleblossom was her entire life, Lovey, as was Ms. Rod. Without them… there was nothing left for her. I might have also played up the glorious memorial you provided them,” he then mused, attempting levity, “so I sent her off with a proper wake of cider and singing and celebration… the entire tavern got in on the festivities; it was quite the raucous revel.”
A lace handkerchief dried the rabbit’s eyes. “I would have liked to bid her goodbye, though… Is there anything I could do or… or send to her? She’s not completely out of touch, I hope, so perhaps there’s still a chance to wish her the best of luck?”

“Well, I…” he thought and then thought again, smirking on account of some new slyness but averted his gaze at her desperate curiosity, so she stared harder and he coughed a snicker. “I really mustn’t say.”

“Yes, you must!” Lovey implored, nearly bouncing in her seat.

“But there are innocent ears about,” he cooed.

Said ears vibrated like a cricket’s wings. “I am not some blushing kit, Mr. Pibbers, but a mature doe, and as such, shan’t sit here and be condescended to,” she insisted, “Whatever anecdote you have to shy away giggling girls is little more than uncouth to a refined lady, such as myself.”

Mr. Pibbers shrugged. “So doth the lady insist. I doubt Tabitha would decry me this, considering your pending reaction, but her last wish before departing with the dawn was for me to treat her like a ‘proper vixen’.”

Lovey allowed herself a momentary swoon and pinkening of the ear, touching a paw to her chest. “Oh, I never mistook you for a romantic, Mr. Pibbers, but what a lucky lady to be serenaded to… and perhaps even a private dance; such a weathered vixen as Ms. Tab, too,” she pondered, “You must’ve put your best face forward to win over those ironsides.”

The fox’s grin widened, shimmering and sharp as he restrained himself from laughing. “‘Innocent ears’ indeed, Lovey, for you see, what Tabitha and I did was downright carnal,” he playfully growled and then stroked his chin as the lady-rabbit’s ears flashed bright crimson, “Quite so, madam, we hardly slept at all that night.”

High squeaking was muted and muffled by pursing lips and cupping paws, though the entirety of her face lit up like a bonfire. She did, finally, manage to calm down to fan herself, “But…” Lovey breathlessly protested, “I thought… I thought foxes mated for life…?”

All the merriment and bravado he boasted sank into solemnity as he glanced down and away. “That was not ‘mating’,” he bitterly muttered, “it was ‘carnal’, as I said; fulfillment of base desires and nothing more.” Mr. Pibbers sighed, stroking through the fur of his neck to gaze out the window to say, “But I am not some rutting stag… when we awoke I convinced her to stay for just a bit longer… and that’s when we made love; properly, as a tod and vixen should. She then curled into my arms and wept for all she’d lost.”

“But…!” Lovey continued to protest, gesturing out the window, “Ms. Tab could be out there right now, carrying a kit all by her lonesome…” Her brewing indignation shifted immediately to bewilderment at his incredulity, and shrunk back onto her piano bench, “Unless… she wasn’t… I suppose…” and inclined to speak as discreetly as possible, “in season?”

His gazed changed to pity. “Lovey… Tabitha can never have kits. We shifties -- I daresay all predators born in Forestdwell -- have that taken from them…” Lovey’s jaw sagged in her least lady-like appearance yet, so Mr. Pibbers tried his best to not condescend. “Any and all preds that crawl out of the slums are, by-and-large, geldings; it keeps us in check.”

Tears welled anew in her eyes, chin trembling as she shook her head and pivoted around, fingers playing at the keyboard in a cold fury.
“Deny to your heart’s content, Lovey—”

“Miss Hopps, if you please,” she corrected with an expertly hidden choke, ears erect all the while, “I know for certain you are wholly intact, Mr. Pibbers, and though I dare not inspect every predator in the kingdom, spreading conspiracy of such an ill-fated practice in this modern, progressive age is tantamount to treason against His Majesty, the Good King Wapitius. The Crusades of King Richard were won centuries ago,” she righteously continued in recitation, “ergo, all practices of slave-marking mutilation rightly abolished and all perpetuators hereby enemies of free mammals everywhere.”

Mr. Pibbers did not argue. “Of course, Miss Hopps,” he politely abided and carefully rolled to his haunches, “I beg you turn a deaf ear to my… misgivings; I shan’t indulge them again.”

“Of course,” she hoarsely replied, the music softer and beautifully sad, pausing to speak over her shoulder but never actually looking, “a Hopps would never allow such cruelty, after all, not to any fox or mammal of ours. And… and we would thusly sever any ties to a family or business that did,” Lovey asserted, the stroke of her keyboard far heavier than she intended.

“I know,” he said, quite casually slinking to the window to check that the coast was clear, and with the sun well-set, not a single bunny was in the garden, at least, not until he lit the lanterns, “A lovely night to you, Miss Hopps.”

“And you as well, Mr. Pibbers.”

“Do let me know how the song turns out.”

“I will.”

Chapter End Notes

["For our hearts to give out"] is an old saying amongst some prey species, similar to "lose our heads"; rabbits can literally die from fright, if it is serious enough, so for "their heart to give out" means they died from unnecessary stress or fear.

["…to have replaced their lost paw with an iron poker…”] refers to the vixen near the barbecue in Judy's dream in Brave, chapter 4.

["…attempting a rabbit's ultimate penance by burying himself and so fulfill the only lot in life left to him…”] is where the modern day saying "Go bury your head" comes from.

"Prestissimo" is the musical term for "as fast as possible", ergo, and to no one's great surprise, Pibbers was being sarcastic when he implied that Lovey should slow down to it.

"Gelding" is the term for a castrated horse, adopted for this story as a gender-neutral identifier for any castrated mammal but used by-and-large for predators.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
[I must admit, I did not expect Lovey's Diary to go as long as it is but... there is important information that needs to be told. Thank you for sticking through with me, traveler.]

The curtain dropped. The audience thundered behind that crimson wall. Blossoms flooded the stage as Lovey trembled with euphoria, as she did for the previous twenty-three songs of Mr. Pibbers… but that night was the most powerful she’d yet felt, and surely, her audience agreed. For while she filled the opera house at nearly every performance, it was only his songs that Thackery Earwicket turned avid attendees away at the door when the seats and aisles could not fit another body. Sponsors came out of the woodwork to demand more space but Mr. Earwicket would not budge from his beloved opera house for a larger venue… so instead, they paid through the nose to renovate it; this, he happily obliged.

Bouquets were bundled and delivered to the starlet’s dressing room. Her gown was safely stored for auction the following week (what with five additional gowns already in waiting). Sasha’s removal of her makeup soothed better than any bath as the excitement of her heart settled into a wonderful serenity.

“Another standing ovation, Lovey,” the mink commended, skilled paws rubbing quite lightly at the tips of her delicate ears, a practiced massage traveling their lengths with gentle caresses that did wonders for any bunny, “if we’re not careful, Mr. Earwicket might have to stretch out the house again.”

Lovey softly moaned, eyes fluttering some before peering at her dear friend through the mirror. “They would need to purchase the surrounding land, first,” she mused and they giggled, “but tell me, how did Mr. Pibbers find his newest masterpiece? It felt in my heart-of-hearts his most beautiful yet; I could hardly finish practicing it I was so frequently moved to tears! Singing it on stage, though… Stars Above, it’s a miracle I did not burst into a cloud of light and drift to the ceiling.” She moaned once again, higher and sweeter while bracing her soul, “I had truly connected with each and every member of my audience… stronger than ever before…”

Gentle arms embraced the starlet from behind and a sisterly cheek touched to hers. “I only heard it from backstage but I nearly melted,” Sasha said, “and from how Big Gus tells it, Pibbers about near flooded the house weeping with such joy. Apparently, it’s a hassle to pull him out every night, wanting to hear it ‘til the end as he does.”

“Speaking of,” Lovey then requested, if discreetly, leaning up even though she already spoke low (to reserve her voice), “were there any issues with the… other audience?”

Sasha pantomimed gnawing at the rabbit’s neck, earning a high giggle. “You always ask and it’s always the same answer,” she teased, “the preds slipped out while the prey gushed over the encore; no hassle, no worries.”

A relieved sigh settled her nerves. “Oh, I shall always worry. The true miracle is that Mr.
Earwicket permits a ‘secret audience’ beneath the stage during my performances, no doubt for my sake… if the prey had even an *inking* of how many predators were nearby, right under their noses, I cannot imagine the panic that would ensue…"

The long ears were caressed once more. “Every pred in the kingdom thanks you for sharing your gift with us, Lovey,” Sasha said and then sprung back as the ears went up, pointed at the door; Ms. Mink assumed her position.

“Lovey!” Ima cried out, bursting in with hardly a knock.

“Mum!” Lovey started, shrugging her robe on, “What’s wrong…?”

“Nothing, absolutely *nothing*,” the maternal rabbit nearly wept, barely containing herself as she beelined for her daughter and only then managing a semblance of composure, “I heard the most *wonderful* news: a herald to the King was in the audience!” The air was collectively sucked into the three sets of gasping lungs, Lovey’s most of all.

“Tr- *Truly*?” she beseeched and knew it as such by her mother’s beaming nod.

“Now, you must be surprised but composed,” Ima said unironically, “because I have it on *excellent* authority that you are to be invited to sing for the Blessed Court!”

Lovey nearly fainted where she sat as Sasha rushed over, swiped a fan from the vanity, and snapped it open to fulfill its direly required purpose. “Good Heavens, the Blessed Court…?” Lovey squeaked out, paw to her forehead whilst gripping her mother’s wrist, “Am I… is my song to the bolster Kingdom’s Fortune…?” she hoped. What any opera star would give to sing before the Good King Wapitius… for their voice deemed blessed in the eyes of the Crown…

Ima was set to burst with exultation, tittering and nodding so that her ears flickered about. “There’s so much to prepare for, my dear, but don’t you worry, I’ll handle every bit of it,” she assured and caressed her daughter’s cheek, “You get dressed and calm your nerves to meet with the herald tonight.” And with that, Madam Hopps hopped away and back into the hall, the maelstrom of her news quieting, at last.

“The Blessed Court…” Lovey repeated as Sasha helped her from her robe and readied her evening dress, “It is every bunny’s greatest wish… every mammal’s! But these songs are not mine alone…” she then lamented, stepping into her outer clothes as they were pulled up and secured, “Mr. Pibbers must *surely* receive the recognition due him… mustn’t he?”

Sasha hummed with uncertainty. “Not after all your talk about a ‘mangy composer’,” the mink speculated, “a mangy rabbit, no less.”

It fell upon Lovey like a ton. “Yes, that… I hadn’t been wholly… honest… despite my rationale and… my good intentions…” She then looked up as a paw caressed her chin.

“You just get yourself to the Court and sing with all your heart and ours, Lovey,” she said with a smile, then standing and giggling, drawing a line across her neck with a thumb, “It’d be kinder to snap-his-cap than oust Pibbers as this ‘Mr. Unnamed’, whose songs are praised up-and-down the kingdom,” and when the jacket was set upon the bunny’s shoulders, she answered one last inquisitive glance, “A fox won’t do what they do for fame or fortune, but because it’s what they *can* do; they’re funny like that. Nothing rewards them more than knowing they got away with it.”

Lovey smiled and harrumphed, all in the same breath. “I’m not sure I am comforted by such knowledge, Sasha, but I shan’t deny that takes from me a great burden. Still… nothing would
please me more than revealing to the whole kingdom that Mr. Pibbers wrote these songs they love; it simply wouldn’t do to live a lie, no matter how beautiful it is.”

A new gown was ordered from the finest dressmakers that Lovey’s sponsors could find, the soonest they could find. Lily-white silks, silver filigree laces and threads, amethyst dust jewelry, all from different corners of the globe so to adorn their long-eared angel for the Good King Wapitius and the Blessed Court. Unfortunately, while the dress was set to arrive in Forestdwell by the end of the month on the Hoppes’ newly commissioned ship, “The Greenest Row”, the royal invitation suddenly set its previously nebulous date to one week prior. Therefore, Lovey would suffice for an awaiting operatic gown, which was still a breathtakingly gorgeous ensemble of pastel oranges, pinks, and yellows (if adjusted for a ball rather than the stage). The monthly celebration of the Kingdom’s great fortune -- the Gaudere, whereat the Fortunate offer up tribute for the benefit of the Court, and thus, Unfortunate -- could not wait for Lovey’s song, it seemed.

Mr. Diocles Hopps escorted his daughter in a new motorized carriage (an original model, though sized for rabbits) and though he enjoyed nothing more than taking some choice siblings out for a drive, for there were only so many that could fit, he opted to hire a chauffeur for the event. The portly merchant was glad he did, as it was clear to him that his was not the only automobile at the palace; other rabbits and similar small prey nobles whose Fortunes outranked his by-far had their chauffeurs. To say he was a bit starstruck to be included in such prestigious company would miss the mark of his current mindset (and it simply wouldn’t do to showcase his still unrefined driving technique).

“Lovebird, are you nervous?” he asked of his daughter, resting a paw on where her arm was looped with his as they walked toward other members of the rabbit community. While the occupants of Primrose Court was the upper tier of the Burrow, the foremost assortment of independent bunnies in the kingdom, there was still the cut above whose lives and businesses were dedicated to managing the estates of larger, nobler mammals.

“No, Daddy,” she whispered back, pondered, and then asked, “Do I look it?”

“Not as such but I recognize it all the same,” he endeared, to which she fluttered her fan, “You needn’t fret so much, my sweet, you’ve practiced and prepared and wished with all the might in your heart. Now, we should only be patient and allow it to happen,” Diocles explained as he ushered them both over to the mingling small prey species of the upper nobility.

As was the custom, the Gaudere began at 7-o’clock and would continue onto midnight, wherein all individuals with Fortune to offer would be brought before the Blessed Court; between midnight and 2-o’clock, just before the witching hours, the Court would deliver their judgment privately. Most all tribute was accepted, barring specific instances in which they brought ill-fortune and unless proper reparation made, could result in exile or execution for such a heretical affront to His Majesty and the kingdom. It was getting well on into the night, both Diocles and Lovey enjoying their evenings and the assortment of vegetables and fruits of the banquet table.

“So, you mean to tell me…” one elder rabbit wondered, “that you call your predators by their ‘nicknames’?”

“Oh, certainly,” Diocles confirmed, to some disgruntled curiosity of the others around him, “I find it builds a stronger rapport than simply calling them ‘Mr. Ferret’ or ‘Ms. Raccoon’ (as non-specific examples, of course). After all, nearly everyone of Primrose Court knows the grocer, ‘Big Gus’, and he doesn’t even bother with an honorific. It’s admittedly subtle but they do show greater respect and manners and, if I might be so bold to say, it suits them far better.”
“That still doesn’t explain why you have a predator for a chauffeur, Dick,” another rabbit kindly criticized, “I’ll admit it’s a surprise you found one that small.”

Diocles merrily chuckled. “Yes, Ms. Ruby is top billing for bottom dollar,” he mused and everyone mused with him, “and she keeps the motor running in stellar condition; should I find myself with another car, I might just hire her on as a mechanic, too. Her keen eyes allow her to see beyond where the light shows, and being feline, has the most amazing reflexes…”

Lovey stood amongst other does her age, idly listening to them gossip about one thing or another… she was more awestruck about the palace, ears swiveling to the language of the higher court from larger, nobler mammals overhead. The majesty of the place awed her in ways she could never understand and as the clock struck nearer to midnight, her heart fluttered all the worse for the looming performance.

“Lovey!” one young maiden beseeched, snapping her from a reverie, “You’ve such a marvelous voice but we can hardly hear it unless you speak.”

“My apologies,” Lovey begged, shying behind her fan, “the anticipation must really be getting to me, I haven’t been this nervous since my first performance.”

“Why?” asked another, confused, “Are you performing here at the palace?”

The Silver Belle shied once again but in a far more dignified manner, “As it so happens, yes,” she revealed to a shocked consensus, “Quite the surprise for us all in Primrose and the Burrow, everybunny assumed me for the next Gaudere; there was such a lovely gown prepared for it, too, and I had to pull a song from my repertoire when a new one would have better fit.” They all giggled and Lovey found herself joining in, “It’s all quite fanciful, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Lovey,” a third said, sharing some secret joke, “we thought your father had found some marvelous treasure from overseas but never thought it’d be your song fit for the kingdom.”

“‘Quite fanciful’, as you said,” one more agreed, “Don’t get us wrong, dear, your songs are beautiful, I’ve been to plenty of your concerts myself but it’s as Mama said, you’re far too passionate. An aria must be refined, like a cut diamond, mustn’t it?”

“I’ve always found her earlier songs the best,” yet another joined in, “No one sings the Tenets better.”

“Her newest songs come across a bit… sly, don’t they?”

“Masterful wordplay, one cannot deny, if perhaps a bit too much.”

“Not really operatic material, is it?”

“They sound a bit more like bar songs to me… Exquisitely sung, Lovey, no one denies that; your voice would certainly be a grand treasure for the kingdom, but don’t sully it with the lyrics of some… mangy composer, especially one you don’t even know the name of.”

“Well, one can hardly blame her, just look at her venue!”

“Might as well be dead center of all those shifties…”

“Such charming renovations, though?”

“Marked improvement.”
“Not enough, if you ask me.”

“No one did,” Lovey bitterly retorted from behind her fan.

“Beg pardon?” she sincerely asked, ears twitching.

Lovey politely laughed. “Oh, I was just going to step out for a bit of air. The cigarette smoke is choking and I simply must save my breath,” she explained with a flick of her fan and excused herself from the rest of the rabbits to weave through the other attendees at the Gaudere. She fruitlessly searched for an unoccupied balcony but found that one of the palace servants must have left a door ajar that led to a vacant hallway; her ears could pick up no more noise than fading voices and figured it the best chance for solitude. She squeezed through the gap and leaned against the door, quite at war with herself… as to whether she should abide common decency or etiquette.

“I shan’t cry over them,” Lovey told herself, already in such an unladylike position to fume, fuss, and lament about suffering those does’ barbs. True, they were not directed at her, at least not in totality, but she felt every sting of whomever they did stick into… that’s always how it’d been with her, feeling the pain and sorrow of others whether she wanted to or not; for others to feel hers, whether they truly understood why they felt it. Lovey threw her head back against the door to knock some sense into her head… she always felt it worst at parties and functions of any kind, everywhere except on stage… on that glorious stage where she could feel and share that overwhelming joy of music with her audience, as though embraced in their very hearts…

To further the unladylike actions of that evening, Lovey tumbled with a girlish yelp and fell on her cottontail as the door closed shut. She blinked in the dimly lit corridor and heaved, gathering herself to stand and study the great oaken barrier between her and everyone else… and how someone omitted the lower-level handles to open the standard cut-out for smaller mammals (which was also absent). “Oh dear…” Lovey dreaded, rising up on her tiptoes in some futile attempt to grasp the handle, even hopping in place but it might as well had been a hundred miles away (even when she attempted to sling the rope-handle of her fan for added reach). So, she crouched down to snag the attention of anyone on the other side but it was obvious no one heard her from under the door.

There were the voices, returned at the end of the corridor and disappearing again. “Oh, umm…!” she began to call out but worried she either might not be heard, throw out her voice before singing, or make an even greater fool of herself (especially in the royal palace). Opting for the safest option, Lovey hiked up the front of her gown and hurried in chase.

“There’s one,” said a young, male voice.

“Hey you, stop!” said another voice, also young and male.

Lovey caught her breath and approached the corner, wondering that she was discovered and could be escorted but found, instead, two bucks (whose antlers were not fully grown in, yet) conversing with a wolf servant (as was evidenced by their palace attire and the bundle they’d set down; his tail was thoroughly tucked and paws secured behind the back). It took a moment but she recognized that one of the young bucks was none other than Prince Shawn, fifth in line for the throne of Forestdwell; “petrified” would fall short of her current mindset, not daring to so brazenly approach a member of the royal family but afraid that retreating might make her appear as some manner of eavesdropper.

“Drop your trousers,” Prince Shawn instructed and the wolf whimpered in confusion, so the buck insisted, “Do it.” Lovey’s ears burned so hot it further worried her that they might be visible but the wolf complied and so the young prince pointed out to his cohort, “See? Still there.”
“But isn’t that dangerous?” the other said, retreating a step, “He could turn savage at any moment!”

“Don’t be daft,” Prince Shawn argued, the wolf visibly blanched where he stood, still as a statue and staring at the ceiling, wringing his trousers at mid-thigh, “It’s like I told you, we civilized mammals use chemicals to calm them. I don’t expect the son of a duke to understand.”

“At least ours had theirs removed long before we ever got them, Cousin, who knows when they’ll activate again if you just leave them there.”

“‘Activate’,” he scoffed, “you try and fail to sound as though you know anything. Those are ‘just for decoration’ now; that’s what my brother says.”

“So… does he still feel them?” the other asked, leaning in some.

Prince Shawn was not quick to answer but then dared, “Touch them and find out.” The wolf blanched further, biting back another whimper as it quite clearly wished for nothing else in the world than for the ground to engulf him as the two bucks sized each other up, posturing in the way that potential alphas their age did. The other young buck, indeed, acquiesced to reach a shaky hoof as the wolf further tensed, and snapped his wrist to flick his cloven knuckles; the lupine servant cringed and whined behind his clenched jaws but remained standing, however trembling. Snickers sounded from them both.

“Now see here!” Lovey rebuked, her voice clear and sharp as she charged the then reeling fauns, “How dare you treat him so poorly. You should be ashamed of yourselves!”

Prince Shawn gawked and then bucked up his courage, shoulders squared and chest thrust out in his finest bit of posturing. “Do you know who I am?” he demanded.

“Irrelevant!” the Steel Horn dismissed, advancing as they shrunk (the other faun almost cowering behind the prince), “I would, in fact, argue that it is worse that a crown prince of Forestdwell and the son of a duke would gleefully cause such suffering, such degradation in a fellow mammal! Shame on the both of you.” Lovey then turned to the wolf with her fan open to block line of sight of his lower half (he all the more confused), “Please accept my apologies, sir, do pull your pants up.”

“Don’t you dare!” Prince Shawn ordered of the withered wolf and then closed the gap between him and Lovey, “Now you see here, Ms. Bunny, whoever you think you are, know that I can have you and your entire household tried for treason for this affront against the royal family.”

Lovey retained her countenance. “You haven’t the nerve, Your Highness,” she coolly said, finger wagging harder than ever before, “because you are a bully and a coward. That much is obvious seeing how you treat this poor wolf.”

The prince’s lip indented beneath his teeth as his hooves balled into fists. “If my father, the King, were here-!”

“He would agree with me.”

Leaden silence weighed on all except Lovey before one of Prince Shawn’s clenched hooves jabbed at the wolf. He barked in male agony, collapsing to his knees in a hunch to cradle himself in futile attempts to mute his whining. Lovey nearly threw herself upon his shoulder to brace it in all the sympathy for his plight as she could muster (and though his breath caught, he then exhaled and wondered at her as her attention redirected), then gasping with righteous indignation at the prince.
“Your Highness, how could you? That was cruel and uncalled for-!”

“Not half-so-painful as what will happen to you and yours, Ms. Bunny, just as soon as my father, the King, finds out about this he’ll-!”

“I’ll… what, exactly?” He appeared like a specter, stilling the very sound as his gentle hooves brought him closer in the apex of regal demeanor. Prince Shawn was the only one who dared lift their eyes to him, as the other young buck kept his head bowed, Lovey swiftly curtseyed (in the manner proper for the King, not only the highest in the kingdom but of the Blessed Court, it demanded the crossed-fingers of a wish, which she crossed over her heart with one paw while the other pinched her dress appropriately), and the wolf servant pressed his forehead and paws to the carpet (wishing with all his might to simply disappear).

“Father!” he rejoiced… and paused as his knees shook some, so he assumed the male variant of the bow, as did the other faun, and crossed his hoof over his heart in a wish, and folded the other arm behind his back to bow, “My King, this Ms. Bunny, she-”

“I heard,” the Good King Wapitius sternly interjected. “Lift your heads,” he then said to everyone not his son, approaching until his hulking figure engulfed all in his shadow. The Grand Stag of Forestdwell, whose virile antlers broadly branched, towered in his royal ensemble of the modern king of a rich, red coat, gold applets, violet sash, beige leggings, and lustrous black spats all fitted against his pinnacle masculine physique. The thick wreath of mahogany fur around his neck was well-kept, as were the fatherly whiskers along his jaw and snout… which surely had tickled his fauns when they kissed him but at that moment, remained locked in a stony glower.

Lovey indeed lifted her head as she stood… but then lowered her eyes again as the king approached the servant, she stepping off to the side.

“Can you stand?” he asked the wolf, who nodded with a muffled whine, a mighty hoof aiding him to his feet, “Affix your trousers and take the rest of the night off,” he then instructed, his voice as a distant thunderstorm, “Where were you taking this bundle?”

“The kitchen, Your Grace,” the wolf muttered as clearly as he could, still not daring to look the magnificent stag in the eye.

“Very well,” King Wapitius said, “Shawn, you and your cousin are to finish Mr. Wolf’s duties for tonight.”

“But… but Father!” Prince Shawn protested alongside the duke’s son, withered beneath the harsh gaze that did not need to full direct at him, and then abided, “Yes, my King.”

Lovey remained silent, like a flower in a garden she refrained from watching all that transpired but heard every last detail; whatever was audible through her racing heartbeat, at least. When she realized that the Good King had not only remained as everyone else left but turned towards her, she curtseyed once again, “Thank you, Your Grace, you are most kind to have helped poor Mr. Wolf.”

He softly chuckled at such a trifle. “As a king should, Miss, and you needn’t adhere so vehemently to formality,” he lightly teased, “Pray tell, how did you come here?”

Her ears blushed as she stood erect once more, glanced up… endeavored to keep her eyes as high as possible, despite her angle, and held her paws and fan in front of her. “The smoking at the party was a bit much, Your Grace, and I needed a breath of fresh air, but all the balconies were occupied; I saw a door leading to an empty hallway but when it closed behind me, I was trapped,” she succinctly admitted, “So I followed the voices and… here did luck lead me.”
King Wapitius chuckled to shake his adorned shoulders while inclining somewhat, “I think I recognize you, now; Miss Laverne Hopps, yes? You are on the docket tonight.”

Lovey blushed and curtseyed once more (if a bit less formally). “Yes, Your Grace, and I’m afraid I might be late for it if I do not find my way back soon…”

“Laverne, please,” he said with another soft chuckle, “find it in you to relax; I’ve seen how you handle yourself around my son, so you needn’t be so bashful around me.”

She wrung her fan a bit. “That is very generous, Your Gra-” she fumbled, wilting the slightest bit at his paternally quirked brow, and then continued, “King Wapitius, but I would not assume such intimate association with you by… by passing every station between you and I…”

“Then as an order from your King… do call me ‘Wishes’,” the stag said and turned on a heel with a gathering gesture, “Let us walk. I wouldn’t want you to be late for your Blessing.”

Quiet paws immediately followed suit with the slow stride, and despite her strict ladylike upbringing, Lovey could not help but giggle (as politely as she could, of course). “‘Wishes’?” she repeated, “Short for Wa pi tius?”

Wishes chortled and nodded his great antlered head as they walked down the corridor. “Yes, a favored name of my family, close friends, and both of my lovely mates,” he explained, to which she continued to blush, “I shall send for your father, Miss Laverne -- Mr. Diocles Hopps, I recall -- since I know it’s uncouth for you to be alone with a mated male, king though I am.”

“That’s wonderfully considerate of you… Wishes,” she managed and he kindly chuckled, “but Daddy’s in his element and I shall see him soon enough. After all, you are trusted above all else in the kingdom. And please, if I may request it of His Majesty… do call me ‘Lovey’.”

“‘Lovey’… a love ly name,” he joked.

She joined in the light laughter. “I cannot help but wonder, Your… Wishes, why you were so nearby…?”

He grunted in thought and smiled. “Luck is a mysterious force,” he mused, “but I was between blessings and needed to stretch my legs. I thought I heard my son and nephew trotting about -- as young bucks tend to do -- and went to see what mischief was afoot… I then heard all that transpired and sought to put a stop to it. That is no way for a prince to act,” he coolly considered, “but I was quite surprised to hear you speak so eloquently and justly. If that voice is as beautiful in song as it is strong in authority, as my herald reports, it should bring a century of good fortune for Forestdwell.

“By the way,” the king then said as her fan fluttered, “would you be interested in joining me on the Blessed Court? It can become such a tedious affair and the next blessing is a…” he sighed, “it’s a ‘necessity’ and we’ll leave it at that. I believe your blessing is not long after it, so you shall be in the exact place you need to. What say you, Lovey? The Blessed Court is notably lacking in cigarette smoke and idle banter.”

The fan fluttered fiercer as she took a moment to breathe. “Me? Sit on the Blessed Court…?”

“As a guest,” Wishes assured, half-pivoting to address her, “an observer, is all. My mates will also be there; you’ll be seated with them.”

“Well…” Lovey considered of his patient look, “I can but only accept so gracious a request… Wishes,” she then smiled with a curtsey as he smiled back.
Within a brilliantly lit hall with high, vaulted ceilings, draped in beautiful banners and ornate decor, must have been several hundred mammals -- all prey species -- seated at tables around a wide, carpeted walkway that led to the throne of Forestdwell, whereat the Good King Wapitius sat with the Queen Sisters on his left, and with them, Miss Laverne Hopps. The generous demeanor that Lovey saw helping Mr. Wolf made way for a statuesque stoicism, as she suspected it might; what was curious to her was how one Queen Sister attempted to talk him out of bringing a rabbit to sit with them for that particular blessing (even though there were several other rabbits in the Blessed Court) yet the other argued on her behalf. Lovey had known that the Good King Wapitius took two wives, one for political ceremony and the other for love, (not that it were ascertainable which was which since he quite clearly loved them both); it was also quite clear that they both respected his opinion on the matter and welcomed Lovey to join them.

Even as a “guest” and an “observer”, Lovey felt herself brimming with energy for the court was alive with positivity; it was hard, indeed, not to recognize why it was “Blessed”. The Queen Sisters engaged in some small talk, chatting with Lovey about this or that; one was taller and younger while the other more robust and softer spoken, and it reminded the rabbit of her own sisters back home, how she often visited with them whenever the chance afforded itself. They wondered if Lovey had ever experienced what was to happen before and she, in all honesty, explained she had not (but did not reveal her ignorance as to what “it” was, exactly, for Lovey was very clever for a bunny). In due time, the herald (perhaps a beaver or a woodchuck…) waddled up the carpet.

“Presenting,” he announced in a clear and steady voice, “a most ancient rite performed for the Good King Wapitius, to bring him and his reign great fortune. Blest be.” The rest of the court (along with Lovey) joined in the solemnity as the herald waddled off. At the far end, the double doors, immense and intimidating, ornate and magnificent, opened with a quiet groan from the wood and iron. In was rolled a truly enormous metal crate… and leading the way was a single rabbit. Anticipation was thick in the air as he… or maybe she strode with responsibility and poise as Lovey raptly watched her… or maybe him; it was honestly hard to tell as he or she wore a thick coat of gray shades hiding their physique while their face was strictly androgynous without any adornments to suggest one way or the other.

“Your Majesty.” Even their voice hovered in a neutral tone that could easily be mistaken for either male or female; Lovey found it curious, more than anything, and wanted nothing more than to converse with them. Their gesture of absolute deference was neither a bow nor a curtsey but the deep nod of the head and crossed-fingers as one would make a wish. Subtly dark eyes did flick to Lovey when… they were close enough to finally spot her, and she looked on in bewilderment for her heart could not… feel anything from them, unlike the rest of the court bustling with emotion or placitude. Not joy, not fear, not sadness, not anger, nor disgust; they simply… were. “By blessing of the Court, I bring before you, Your Highnesses, an item of such profound, voluminous luck that it shall keep the kingdom safe for centuries… ”

One thing that Lovey had also noticed was the distribution of some manner of refreshment to all those at the court; some abided it, some eagerly welcomed it, and others seemed put off but permitted it all the same (the King was amongst the latter). Notable if only because it was the mysterious beige rabbit’s team which poured it into provided chalices, a team of wildebeests and rabbits who, like the one who led them, were remarkably neutral in their colorations and demeanor (even if their gender was, perhaps, more recognizable at a glance). Even Lovey was provided a chalice, one sized for her… and it smelled of some kind of… wine, perhaps. She figured it was meant as a toast for whatever was wheeled in, even though the ritual was completely unknown to
her (despite her devout study of the Tenets).

“Blest be,” the court said to lift their chalices and swiftly drink as They raised their paws in reverence. Lovey hesitated for the beverage boasted a most foul smell and before she realized it, the chalices were already lowered and some refilled (so she did not join in the toast; she hoped no one noticed). A startlingly whimsical gesture of permission was all King Wapitus’s response and all the reason that was needed for the bindings and tarp to be pulled away, revealing a cage to the astonishment, wonder, shock, and awe of the court.

Lovey gawked. A great, tawny lion was crouched inside the cage with a muzzle locked around his shaggy, maned head, thick steel shackles anchoring him to the mobile platform. He looked starved, beaten, disrobed and barely moving, barely flinching except for the light shining through the bars. Her heart wrenched and dropped into her stomach as she felt the lion’s pain immediately, even how far away he was… She did not know why or how but his desperation was like a miasma upon her soul, a meteoric sadness and fear that she had never known before as her eyes locked with his. All she wanted was to rush out to him and comfort him, embrace him and soothe him but she was petrified where she sat, despite the plea so evident in his eyes.

“They only need to remove it from the beast’s body,” They explained to knowing, sparse amusement of the court. The tarp which covered the cage was spread across the carpeted walk further along, and so wheeled over. “But first,” They went on, talking as the crew of rabbits and wildebeests worked with systematic fluidity to remove the wheels and walls of the cage to set it upon the tarp, “I shall cleanse its curse; by the blessing of the court.” Once more, His Majesty gestured approval (and a most unbecoming giggle; such giggles were popping up throughout the court). In were brought thin glass walls and erected, braced on either side of the tarp so to protect the eager onlookers.

They pulled a box from a pocket, loosed the decorative string, and lifted its lid; inside was a single midnight-blue blossom. One of the crew received the flower and replaced it on the end of a long-shafted device which, as it was soon clear, was used to force the flower through the muzzle and inside the lion’s mouth. Heavy ropes kept the maned head down so to remove the bindings of its jaws before the flower could take hold, and when it did his shoulders hunched, body flailed against the chains as savage power filled his weakened, growling form.

Lovey stared in abject horror, eyes only able to blink as they flooded with tears, nearly tasting blood as her teeth dug into her lip as she watched the lion’s face contort in an agony no mortal body could or should know. She saw the light in his eyes beg one last time… and then he was gone…

“Behold, O Blessed Court, the true form that we fear,” They bid in cold admiration, unmoved as the lion bellowed a carnal roar to send excited terror through the crowd, “And I, your humble servant, shall slay it.” Applause thundered. Spears surrounded the thrashing lion. Crossbows ready at a moment’s notice. Pungent blood mixed with the pandemonium.

She wanted to scream. To beg and plead for the lion’s life but she could not. Her voice, her beautiful voice which rang as a bell or a horn on a clear Sabbath stuck in her burning throat. Lovey trembled, trying with all her might to clench her eyes and close her ears but she could not, not with a dark knowledge that stabbed through her racing heart a thousand times and a thousand times again… For in that brilliantly lit hall, filled with a bloodthirsty cacophony and exultation… she feared the court more than the beast. With that last thought, she despaired and all went dark…
gripping him and striking him (though he hardly felt it… physically, at least). “It’s wrong, it can’t be true, Lovey was brave…”

Graham read through the entry again and onto the next. “Candleflame… this was all written after she returned home the next day, it’s possible she misremembered some of it…” he attempted to console as he narrated, “Ahh, as it says here, ‘Monsters! Fiends! Demons guised in mortal flesh! How could they do that to their fellow mammal, to revel in their torment and despair?’-”

“Those evil, bloodthirsty monsters!”… Judy recited, calmly and quietly but trembling still.

“Yes, exactly. Also, I’m quite sure these pages are stained with her tears,” Graham considered, ever-so-carefully rubbing the paper between his fingers. His dark purple eyes rose to her swollen and red gaze as Bo offered his shirt to wipe her face on, “You mustn’t blame yourself for what happened, Judy… it’s quite reasonable that Lovey fainted after all that. She certainly tried to hold herself together to chronicle the Gaudere to the best of her ability, and was undeniably in a heightened state throughout the night.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised she didn’t die of fright,” Bo added and his cousin nodded in agreement, “Even during the ‘savage attacks’ of the Pred-Scare, there were some rabbits and small prey who collapsed from heart attacks just from being within earshot of the predators turning; it’s a miracle no one died (and we have emergency services on high alert to thank for that). But during that day-and-age, if she did collapse, there might not have been much hope for her… especially not with everyone… y’know… preoccupied.”

Judy hiccuped and heaved, attempting to dry her eyes with her wrists. “Thanks, guys,” she weakly said as Bo rubbed her back and Graham squeezed into the chair with the two of them to attempt some kind of comfort. She focused on regulating her breath as the long-since foggy dream of her time in the Burrow was the clearest it’d been in weeks, looking again at the diary in confusion as she asked the air, “It’s just… what did I see…?”

Chapter End Notes

"Gaudere" is Latin for "to rejoice", from which the word "gaudy" is derived and was originally a celebration and eventually came to mean ornamentation.

'Ms. Ruby' is a rusty-spotted cat or a "Prionailurus rubiginosus", the smallest member of the wildcat family and native to India.

"Wapitius" comes from "wapiti", meaning "elk".

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
A knock on the door of Pop-Pop’s study alerted Judy, Bo, and Graham that the footsteps they heard prior were not merely passing by. “Hello?” someone called, “Are you still cleaning in there?”

Bo rushed over, cracking the door open and poking his head out. “Hi James,” he greeted one of Judy’s cousins, a few years younger than him, “We’re still pretty busy, yes. What’s up?”

“Aunt Bonnie wants to know how much longer you’ll be and if you’ll be eating in there or not.”

“Oh, probably, there are quite a few things we have to… sort out,” Bo assured with as easy a grin as he could manage (such grins bettering with practice), “Why, what’s for dinner?”

“Chili; spicy.”

“Great, we’ll take four bowls and some cornbread, extra spicy for Pop-Pop if that’s alright?”

“Sure,” James said with a shrug, “Also… Graham’s in there, right?”

“Sure is. Can I pass along a message?”

“Yeah, the inventory of the attic’s northwest corner finished its first draft.”

Bo’s ear flicked over a shoulder. “He says ‘Sensational, give the draft to Henry and tell Norb to continue onto the north east corner’ and…” he listened, “‘rotate the holiday decorations around to the western wall.’”

James considered the request. “Norb with one ‘b’ or two?”

Bo’s ear flicked again to answer, “One ‘b’.” James repeated the instructions aloud and then left, so the chocolate bunny pulled his head back in to lock the door anew.

“If Norb disrupts my efficiency framework by blocking the south wall with those boxes I’ll be very disappointed,” Graham muttered under his breath, peering at the afternoon fields through the slatted blinds of the study’s window, paws folded behind his back, “Very disappointed, indeed.”

Judy huffed and counted out, “One hundred,” as she stood and shook out her legs, clapping the slight burn of her thighs after the third set of squats.

Bo grinned as he returned to their reading corner. “Feel better?”

“Much,” she happily sighed, one heel and then the other pulled back to her waist to stretch her quads again and soothe their ache, “There’s nothing quite like a rush of endorphins to lift the spirits and clear the mind, right?” Judy asked, her fist raised.

“Right!” Bo agreed and then bumped their knuckles in a joined, “Boom!”

“C’mon, Little Moth, exercise with us!” Judy then invited.

Graham approached, standing upright, paws still behind his back as he came to a full stop with his
heels firmly planted. “Absolutely not; this is a study, not a gymnasium but far be it for me to disrupt your fun. Now, about my inquiry…?” he asked of the female health nut.

Judy nodded as she and Bo proceeded to bend their torsos one way with their arms stretched overhead, holding it for a tick, “As to how I knew what the entry said without reading it,” she grunted, and then they stretched the other way, “The squats gave me some time to collect my thoughts and I’d bet my cottontail that Pop-Pop read Lovey’s diary to me as a baby.”

“Makes sense,” Bo considered, glancing at the soundly napping grandfather of the Hopps house, his audiobook quite visibly on repeat, “I remember Nick saying that Judy’s mind gathers information like a catalog to be used as needed; part of her mental training throughout school and the ZPD. I wish mine did that,” he lamented as they both leaned forward, aforementioned cottontails up with palms flat between their spread feet to best stretch their hamstrings.

“And,” Judy then added, though facing away from her farm cousin what with her head between her legs, “what you said about remembering the black and white books, Graham, got me figuring that maybe -- just maybe -- I might have some similar memories. Nothing quite so clear but there is imagery of black-&-white when I concentrate on recalling as far back as I can, like, distinct blotches of black and white.” She and Bo groaned as they stood erect once more and arched their chests, gradually bending in the reverse until their paws were on the floor again (if not held for nearly as long and her arch far more severe than his).

Graham patiently grunted as his eyes rolled up. “And it never occurred to you until now?”

“Why would it?” she posited as they stood upright once more to shake out their limbs and retake their seats, “I only remember romance and adventure from those stories that Pop-Pop told… and maybe a little bit of apprehension towards certain species but nothing like what was in the Black Book. My best guess is that he only read from Lovey, not Hector, and even then he likely omitted the parts unfit for young ears; of which… I won’t deny, Aunt Lovey had her share.”

The bucks took their seats as well. “You recall her train of suitors, though,” Bo stated, amusedly, “I’m sure Pop-Pop downplayed those details, though.”

“And it’s something I really could relate with her,” Judy chuckled and nudged Bo’s knee with her foot, “Remember that one tailchaser in the blue convertible?” He awkwardly laughed and rubbed the back of his head.

“What happened?” Graham casually asked.

“It was after I already made it known that I was with Bo,” she explained, “but this one jerk kept sending me flowers, tried to posture, so he hit Bo with his car and then got all huffy when I got indignant. But boy, you should have seen the look on his face when Bo punched a hole in his engine block!”

Bo snickered and then laughed, waving his paw dismissively as Graham looked utterly mortified. “She exaggerates,” he assured, “it was a piece of rebar and it didn’t go very far through the engine.”

The butterscotch bunny gradually got the color back to his face. “You talk about vehicular collision as an inconvenience,” he protested, “Was it a ploy that you didn’t stand after I hit you with my car?”

A gentle raspberry of continued dismissal initially answered. “I hit my head on the vat when I landed; trust me, that whole thing would have gone much differently if I were conscious.”
“Just how many times have you been with a car or… similar blunt force impact?”

Bo presented and wiggled all his fingers and toes, as though to enumerate them. “More than. But who’s counting, right?”

Graham grimaced… but also leered. “And here I thought Judy was the one with Scarlet blood.”

Judy and Bo leaned close to grasp each other’s shoulders with bright smiles. “Cursedies!” they declared in unison (and Graham placidly shared in their celebratory jazz-paws). “And wow! I’m still all abuzz about it,” she added, bouncing in her seat again, “I didn’t even know about the Scarlets until recently but to find out that it continues through the Hopp family of Bunnyburrow? It’s just so exciting! I mean, I heard about the name ‘Scarlet’ and maybe it had something to do with outcasts but I never would have imagined the significance … Bobo, what do you know about the so-called ‘cursed’ Scarlets?”

His broad shoulders shrugged as he sank back into his beanbag chair. “Best I can figure, they were wiped out centuries ago, supposedly,” and then tossed a thumb at Pop-Pop, “So I’m not sure if he’s a ‘Scarlet’ by marriage or if it’s just a name given to some class of deplorables; like the Midgets.”

Graham grimaced… but also cringed. “I’d appreciate that name remain unspoken while I am within earshot.”

“Why?” Judy pried, smirking with a quirked brow, “You said it quite easily in our phone call.”

He frowned, quite bored. “I have reason to believe that I am a Midgett from my father’s side, if unconfirmed. Those were a truly cursed breed of rabbits; Scarlets were ‘fox-lovers’ while Midgets were dark harvesters and foul suppliers of the Black Sheep Market,” Graham grumbled, “Traitors to not only rabbits but all decent mammals everywhere. ‘Tis not a family so idly bandied about, if you don’t mind.”

“Alright,” Bo muttered, “sorry.”

Judy’s brow quirked the other way and in doing so, inverted her smirk. “Graham… did you know that the White Book was Lovey’s diary?” she probed.

“Of course not,” he denied, “I am as surprised as anyone here to discover whose life is hidden within those bindings.”

“Then why were you so eager to find it? You inferred that there was hidden history and, I can ascertain that you’re right after reading just these entries but how did you figure that out?”

“How did you figure that out, Graham?” Bo then pressed with equal parts curiosity and suspicion when his cousin mutely sucked on his bucked teeth.

The butterscotch rabbit had little left of his incredulity as he rubbed his forehead. “Candleflame… I recall more than simply seeing the books… stories I can only imagine Mother read me Hector’s journal during my infancy… But I agonize some nights because bits of what can only be Hector’s aren’t in the Black Book. I concluded that there was more, tucked away inside this phantom White Book I dreamt of… but what I recall was not of Lovey.”

Both Bo and Judy pondered and she snapped her fingers as he speculated, “We know that Lovey eventually meets with Hector, if briefly, so maybe you also heard some of Lovey’s diary and conflated them?” Bo suggested, to which she pointed with an affirming nod and grunt, “You were both babies or near enough, from all I’ve heard, so it’s really a wonder you remember this much.”
“We’ll only know if we press on,” Judy determined and was agreed with, by-and-large, “So, are we ready?”

“Are you?” Graham doubted.

Judy paused for a deep breath in through her nostrils, held…and then out through her mouth. “As best I can be, yes.”

“And we’re here for whatever else happens,” Bo assured her, reaching out to touch a knee as his cousin soberly nodded.

“Thanks, guys,” she minutely gushed before collecting herself to brave the brink once more…

The sun brightly shone around the heavy curtains, a blazing late-morning of an eastern window, stones baked some several hours beyond the wall yet inside… still cool to the touch. It was a sturdy and beautiful palace, no doubt; luminous to all on the outside, from every angle and miles away; an icon of the Blessed Court.

Lovey stirred when slumber no longer embraced her in its dreamless haven. All at once did memories and revelations flood the rabbit’s waking mind as the Silver Belle sprung in the downy cloud of a bed far, far too large for her. The pillow might as well had been a mattress and the sheets a circus tent; it was an abundant luxury far too great for even a Blessed rabbit like her, and as she quickly discovered, too great even for anyone outside of the royal family. She squeaked and cowered behind a simple arch of the comforter made not to lay upon her but provide a hovel that she might he tucked into (and found, indeed, that it was all too easy to be lost within its mountainous folds).

“Lovey…” the king said, “thank the Stars, you are awake.” He was not in his full regalia, but a simple silk shirt and dark leggings, along with a royal pendant whose chain was obscured by the thick wreath of his neck. The Grand Stag sat on the edge of the bed, half-pivoted with a leg folded up as he leaned in to address the long ears and bright purple eyes only just poking out. “Fear not, you are in a guest bedroom of the royal palace. Are you alright?”

“Your Majesty…” she attempted, voice not yet fully returned to her but she tried all the same, “Wishes, I mean… I am as well as I could be, I suppose…” Her deep eyes gawked at the stag still as he sadly smiled, attempting to bundle as much of the sheets against her nearly naked body as possible, at least, she should be wearing more than a nightgown (borrowed by one of the palace rabbit servants, no doubt). “If I may be so bold as to ask… what happened, exactly? Why was I brought there?”

The question weighed on his massive shoulders such that even they hinted at a slouch. “Before I answer… what do you remember?”

Nightmares little more than a kit’s phobic misunderstanding of shadows and monsters scraped at the edges of Lovey’s mind, wringing her nerves and reminding a civilized lady that primal fear always lurked in the pits of her psyche; always. “I cannot rightly recall, Wishes,” she lied and it was a rancid root to chew, perhaps even a selfish wish with which to delude herself, but at that exact moment it was a blind she needed (and she was a clever bunny), “it is clear until that mysterious rabbit came down the carpet and… there was a toast… I cannot say I’d ever smelled such a wine as that and it was strong…”

Wishes cast his eyes down. “So you did drink it…” he sighed.
“Should I not have?”

“As you said, it is a strong ‘wine’ and takes some getting used to, I would not have wanted you to suffer its effects before you sang,” Wishes explained, his shoulders weighed heavier still, “I requested the servitors not to provide you one but…” Her eyes peeked up a bit further behind the comforter and he answered her imploring gaze with such rueful eyes, “Yes, I am king and it is my court… The Stars Above are higher than I and so, it is my duty to uphold Their Tenets.

“What was in my power, however, was deciding who received an invitation to the Gaudere and when,” he continued, talking more to the air, “I heard… many wonderful things about your songs, Lovey, and knew in my heart-of-hearts that your voice will protect this kingdom and everyone in it. The songs of you and your composer, whoever he may be. What you saw was… an ancient ritual… and you needed to witness it… whatever of it you actually retained, after that wine.”

How distant he seemed on the edge of the bed, averted as though miles away. “I do recall…” Lovey attempted, lifting her head a bit higher as his ear flicked and eye addressed her, “Who… who was the lion? Is he… did he… make it?”

Wishes studied her over a shoulder, silent, and then hung his head. She trembled anew so he pivoted to face her and brace the bed, leaning closer, “Lovey, I…” he attempted but the tears in her eyes seemed to catch in his so he blinked them away and steeled himself, “He wasn’t innocent. That lion was an insurgent in one of Forestdwell’s territories who incited a rebellion. His crimes were severe enough to warrant that… that execution… as part of the ritual,” Wishes explained, though his voice did masterfully hide a choke, “It was already determined by a local judge but required I witnessed it here, in the Blessed Court. It… it was necessary. You understand, I hope?”

She nodded, the sheets drying her tears, and then nodded more vigorously. “Yes, yes, I understand,” she again lied, bitterer than before, and even stumbled over her words, “Where… where are my clothes?”

The Grand Stag also nodded. “Of course. My physician and maids tended to you after you fainted; your gown is carefully hung. Your father wouldn’t leave your bedside until he collapsed from exhaustion. I shall have him sent for,” he explained while sitting up to adjust and fasten the last few buttons of his shirt in its correction.

“Wishes…” Lovey quietly pleaded before he departed, “Mr. Wolf, was he… did he…?”

He smiled warmly, as he did the night before. “He is rested and refreshed, back at his duties; my son and his cousin both kept to their word and shall have many stories to give the servants… which I know they’ll only speak in hushed tones,” Wishes mused… and then frowned again, “Was there something else?”

It was quite clear that the bunny hesitated to ask any manner of favor or delicate information from the king.

“Speak freely, Lovey,” her king bade.

So she nodded and steeled herself with whatever nerve remained. “Was Mr. Wolf… chemically castrated…? Is every predator in the palace… a gelding?”

A momentary shock crossed the wise face, perhaps for the first time since Lovey ever saw him. “Yes,” Wishes carefully answered, it weighing on him worse than he likely realized, “It is for their safety as well as our own. That primal hunger is still in them but we in Forestdwell quell it as
benevolently as possible; the slavery practice of mutilation persists in some dark pockets of the world, Lovey, whereas the chemicals are only temporary,” he then assured, “Why, my own sons and daughters would undergo the very same treatment, were it n-…” he paused, “necessary."

Lovey was quiet a time even though her mind buzzed as a hornet’s nest. “I heard…” she then responded, “that the duke whose son I saw with Prince Shawn last night… has mutilated predators in his service… though he mentioned it happened prior to their arrival.”

That same harsh glare which he gave his son formed behind Wishes’s eyes as his jaw clenched, trapped inside the mutely grinding teeth, quite evidently none of which was directed at Lovey. “From where did you hear such a thing?” he asked as calmly as it was in him to be.

It was all the rabbit could do not to burrow beneath the mountainous bed covers. “From the son himself.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lovey answered, crossing her fingers and bowing her head as he departed. The room was then empty and the stone made it astonishingly quiet, so all Lovey had to keep her company in those short minutes before the palace help arrived was her own thoughts on the matter of King Wapitius’s trepidation, that “executed” lion, the “benevolently” castrated wolf, and why she was ever invited to sit on the court in the first place… As it often was when she was alone, Lovey tried to sing but found that her throat was still quite sore from the terror of the previous night and decided not to strain it, not when her heart still trembled at the memory.

The pain was so severe that she asked the maids who waited on her for paper and a pen with which to write (thus allowing her to document as much as she could about the Gaudere). Her nigh hysterical Father checked in and was persuaded by the royal physician that it was merely a touch of brain fever from over-excitement and stress. This, Lovey concurred and considered that it was also due to some of the cigarette smoke (which was never smoked on the Hopps Estate, on account of the family’s sensitivity to it) and for the day, she was treated as a guest at the palace of Forestdwell.

In truth, Lovey wanted to speak with Wishes again for there were still so many things she wanted to ask him… emphatically, why she was invited to the Blessed Court… to bear witness to that dreadful event. She thought again of that beige rabbit in the gray coat… and if it were possible… that They had some leverage on the Good King. Whatever information on the subject of mysterious, beige-furred visitors that she might have plied from the maids (for she was a clever bunny) was of no use to her for even the most trusted servants were not privy to the Blessed Court.

Regardless, another night of rest in the safest place in the kingdom would be enough recovery for the Silver Belle, even if she didn’t get another chance to speak with Wishes alone (for his mates were eager to meet her, if disappointed that she was not well enough for a private performance). Her father would pick her up at first light and a change of clothes was already prepared, so all she need do was sleep and dream of happier things…

“Lovey,” was her name whispered on the nocturnal sighs, once or twice and accompanied by a soft light as she lifted her head from the pillow’s downy folds. “Lovey?”

“Wishes…?” she wondered, rubbing her eyes as quickly as she may to scan the darkness, sight
adjusting upon a single candle. The voice was not his, as she immediately realized when her mind cleared, however minutely... but her bright violet eyes only confused her further to find the grinning face of a fox illuminated; notably with both eyes and both paws. His presence was certainly startling enough, kind though he was in both tone and expression, what caught her attention most astonishingly was the color of his fur and eyes... in the candlelight, as it was when walking down the lamp-lit hallways the night before, Lovey could not help but recognize that while his voice did not match the King’s, their colorations were identical.

The fox chuckled in a soft, paternal sort of way for he certainly had some age to his fur and whiskers. “No,” he answered, sitting upon the bed in a very comfortable sort of way, in his silk shirt and leggings, wearing also an amulet sized for him, “but I am his fox all the same.”

“I don’t understand…” Lovey admitted, “I’ve never heard about, well, a King’s fox…?”

“A gift fox,” he explained, eyes twinkling quite merrily, “Many, many years ago I was given as tribute to ward off hexes and have since saved Wishes’s life and he mine, so by a fox’s ancient rite of trust, we are bound... but not important,” that old tod mused as he studied her face from a polite and safe distance, “It’s been a year if it’s been a day that I’ve wanted to meet you, Lovey, and I am not disappointed but I must be brief. Tell me, please, did you drink of the wine at the Blessed Court?”

Sleep still clouded her thoughts as she tried to focus on his face, for that tiny flame danced so beautifully. “No, I didn’t,” Lovey revealed and it washed him in relief, to which she then demanded, “Who are you? Why was I made to witness that horror?”

The fox bowed his head in a gesture of remorse before waving his candle to transition into a sort of greeting. “Because it was necessary... but if I may answer your first question first. I am the King’s eyes, ears, and nose in the kingdom; I go where and say what he cannot, limited though that still may be,” he solemnly said and then gently smiled, “We are both appreciators of your songs and spirit, so believe me when I say that it is a great misfortune that I cannot sit with you and banter until the dawn. You see, I’ve attended your performances and purchased a copy of your sheet music whenever it was sold to the public only to realize that this ‘unnamed, mangy composer’ of yours must certainly be a fox; there is no other mammal so sly or brazen as to weave a fox’s cant into lyrics as they have,” he riddled, “I see this news mortifies you but rest assured, their secrets remain entrusted to you and you alone for I cannot decipher the cant without intimately knowing the fox who wrote it.”

“I see…” Lovey gently choked, shrinking back into the pillow, “I am in my right mind to scream here and now, Mr. Fox, and what you so freely relayed would be motivation enough to assault me with such a vile prank as last night…” Yet she trembled still, even as the indignation churned and settled within her. “Even so... your eyes are the same as our King’s not only in color but desperation... and I cannot help but feel your plight, greatly confusing to me as it is. It is well within my understanding for a fox to... to mean more than they say. Fear grips my heart once again but not for you,” she said, and dared sit forward, out of the pillow, “but for what the King cannot say.”

“Please accept this for the compliment I mean it as,” the fox requested and his eyes sparkled as the candle neared, its aroma quite delightful to her, ”You are perhaps the slyest bunny I ever had the good fortune to meet. Listen well, Silver Belle: the wolves of the palace know a story, howled from one pack to the next throughout the ages yet outright dismissed or decried as a rebellion by those who do not heed its warning. Wishes asked me of its meaning and I gave it to him in full... now he seeks salvation but never above a whisper... all due to a story of the strong who fall and the weak who lift them up again... Do you know it?”
Lovey blinked for her eyelids were much heavier. “Yes… yes, I have heard it before… is it not from the Chronicler faith?”

The fox grinned all the wider. “It is. By my reckoning, you have the answers you seek, Lovey, and are sly enough to understand them; as a cant tells you nothing and everything at the same time. Whoever this fox is whose trust you have gained, I know you both will do wonders, and with any luck, you might just save us all.” Though she protested, he brought that delightfully scented candle about and puffed out its light, the smoke wafting her nostrils for an instant but that was all it took to drop her back onto the pillow and into blessed sleep.

The drive home was mercifully muted by the automobile’s engine as it deprived Lovey of any coherent thoughts. Observations from Diocles of what passed by was politely agreed to with rote platitudes; there was even some thrill as Ms. Ruby smoothly drove or zipped beneath the axles of larger vehicles, they ducking their heads and ears at the opportune moments). It was a pleasant distraction from what happened at the Gaudere and the familial welcome she received nearly burst her with joy. Surely, as she played, read, and relaxed amongst her loved ones, no one picked up on her internal distress… except for the gardener.

It was some days before Mr. Pibbers approached Lovey for it was only then that she snuck out of her music room in the dead of night with naught but a waxing moon to guide her way. Every other rabbit on the Estate or even Primrose Court was fast asleep, thus affording her the solitude she so wantonly desired, to be apart from any and all else… except for the gardener.

“Lovey?” the fox asked, poking out from around an orange tree in the newest grove he’d planted earlier that season, approaching the moonlit rabbit with such silent steps as silver beams danced through the canopy and about him. His tall form accepted the other half of the bench on which she sat… and because there was a slight chill in the air, enveloped her trembling form into the crimson fluff of his tail. “You’ve been uncharacteristically terse this week,” he teased, resting his smirk upon a folded paw as he sat in a slight slouch and squat (for it was a bench sized for a bunny), “How is your voice?”

“No better,” she answered in hoarseness on no account of her physical health, “the doctors suspect a curse of some manner and prescribed me a tonic. It helps.”

Mr. Pibbers softly grunted in recognition but not necessarily acceptance. “The papers and the rumor mill are quite aflame with what happened at the Gaudere,” he kindly pointed out and then implied, “it’s not often that they agree on much of anything so of course I’m suspicious.” Lovey curled up a bit more in quite an unladylike fashion and so his tail, likewise, curled tighter in a most unbecoming manner, even sliding her closer to him. “I understand if you’d prefer it to stay a mystery; I know I would.”

The chirp of crickets and buzzing of flies stilled for a moment as the cotton-soft collision of her leaning figure echoed off the fox’s side, and the single sob which followed tore the world asunder in its grief. “What do you perceive to have happened, Mr. Pibbers?” she dared to ask.

It took all of his masterful composure not to weep then and there, for she was an emotional force to be reckoned with. “I truly cannot say.”

“‘Cannot’ or ‘will not’?” she muttered.

“Neither.”

Tiny silver paws wrung his shirt. “Please, tell me. If you love me, Mr. Pibbers, as you profess in
so many actions but never a word, then you will lighten my heart with your honesty…”

The fox did not have the luxury of turning his blind eye to her, so bore witness to her full, tearful gaze and realized he could deny her nothing. “It’s reported that you were choked by cigarette smoke in the ballroom prior to your blessing. You disappeared, perhaps for some fresh air, and chanced to witness some terrible thing, stealing the life from you; no doubt, it was brought from overseas to be safely dispelled in the consecrated space of the Blessed Court,” he speculated, “All of that, I read in the paper and heard on the grapevine. I suspect it possible but I cannot for the life of me figure out what you saw…”

“And the does with their gossip, yes,” Lovey bitterly said but Mr. Pibbers could not help but feel as though some of that might have been directed at him, “I’ve heard all that… and understand that there is more to this radiant kingdom than is seen… darkness… but what do you say troubles me? What could I have discovered to rattle me so?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You would never lie to me, not even to spare my feelings if you believed it in your heart-of-hearts that I am bettered by the truth than a beautiful falsehood, yes?” she nearly demanded, brow furrowing as her grip tightened on his shirt. “Are you not so clever as to see it written behind my eyes, as you have done countless times before? Perhaps something you want to tell me?”

His brow furrowed as well before arching into a facial shrug. “One of us is beating around the bush, Lovey-”

“Your heavenly songs,” she then interrupted, “Whether it was a dream or a trick I cannot say, but a fox came to me the night I spent in the palace, whose fur and eyes were identical to the king’s… claiming that they are both appreciators of mine. Tell me, do you recognize this tod of whom I speak? Do you recall him in the audience beneath the stage?”

Mr. Pibbers was incredulous for only an instant before he was dumbstruck. “Oddly enough, yes, I thought what a unique set of colors it was but it never occurred to me that-”

Lovey trembled fiercer. “I doubt you knew it but a cousin of mine is a cryptographer, making sport of script hidden in script… this king’s fox told me that the lyrics of your songs hide a cant, Mr. Pibbers, which he seemed to believe I already knew about… And though I defied that you would obscure such a thing from me, I asked this cousin of mine to read anything between those lyrical lines… and he did, Mr. Pibbers, despite every ounce of doubt he harbored.”

The fox’s blanche was visible even beneath his fur, beneath the moonlight, and beneath his charming, masterful composure. “Lovey, I…”

“Did you write a cipher into our songs?” she did demand, her voice on the verge of breaking, “Have I been singing secrets to thousands of mammals all this time?”

“It’s just…” he attempted, scratching behind an ear with his false-paw and gesturing plaintively with the other, “it’s how I write, y’see, jus’ a simple fox’s cant, not a curse or anything of the sort…”

Lovey fumed and threw down the folds of his shirt as the tail once embracing her sprung away as though she’d caught fire. “Do not dare perform your simplicity charade with me!” she rebuked, “I would have fairly considered whatever you said or whatever style you hoped to say it in… had you told me!”
Mr. Pibbers scrambled off the bench and promptly tumbled over the armrest, popping to his feet as he came back around to further plead his case on bended knee and in the calmest manner he could manage. “Truth be told, Miss Lovey, I likely didn’t even realize I was writing it, so inspired by your voice as I was,” he attempted, “but rest assured, any and all writing henceforth produced will be devoid of any manner of cant, intentional or otherwise. I swear it on my life,” he vowed and then touched his cap to his heart with the good paw while holding up the false one in an oath.

Silver ears and back stood taller still as she gripped her dress instead. “I am trying with all my mind and soul to cast aside the idiom, ‘Can’t help a fox’, Mr. Pibbers, but you are making my doing so very difficult. What was the cant you wrote?” she asked, voice saturated with despair and indignation, “What message did you send in those twenty-three songs, songs that you knew I would never suspect of duplicity?”

The color could not return to the fox’s face as he tried to scavenge even an iota of confidence. “Well, that is to say…” he muttered, a claw tracing the curve of his pruning knife beneath the waning patience of her gaze, “It… is a good message… I’d reckon… philosophically speaking…”

“I shall be the judge of that.”

His jaw snapped shut so he forced his lips to speak. “The cant, what I remember of it, in any case…” he mumbled, finally regaining the color in his fur but surely not for the reasons he wanted, “It is… a message of…” he cleared his throat and averted his eye, “Well, of… love.”

“‘Love’?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You hid a message of love from me?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“I can nearly feel the heat radiating off your ears, Mr. Pibbers,” she sternly countered, causing him to further wilt, “Is this a message of ‘love’ or lust?”

He mumbled as quietly as possible, unable to tuck his tail any further beneath him, “It might be lust…”

“I see,” she coldly stated, “A city full of barren vixens, like our ‘dearly departed’ Ms. Tab, would certainly prove ample prowling grounds for a virile tod, such as yourself.”

“No-!” he dreaded.

“And maybe not just vixens but all manner of females you can woo from the audience beneath my stage and into a tavern bed, thanks in part to clever lyrics of courtship hidden within an aria,” she icily considered, towering over the fox from her seated position, “Well… I count my blessings that you’re finally honest with me.”

“It’s for you!” he barked and wept as he trembled against the grove’s soil, “I lust for you, Laverne Hopps… but I don’t know why!”

Lovey’s training as a lady and the slyness learned in the company of a fox both fell away like curtains torn from their moorings, leaving a girl to face the penultimate test of unmitigated honesty.

“It’s not…” he choked and struck his fist into the ground, forcing himself to stand though every part of him shook as he delved into her moonlit eyes, shimmering with curiosity and concern, “it’s
not a carnal desire… I prayed it was at first, that maybe it could be fixed but it’s not.

“I cannot be caught looking at you for fear of being hauled off and skinned; dare I show more than a glint of teeth or growl above a whisper, I could be wrangled and then chained to the ground. Heaven forbid I should hold you… kiss you… love you… else there be nothing left of me to hang. And the absolute worst of it is…” the fox pleaded of the rabbit, “I would gratefully suffer it all just to be with you…”

For all her earnestness, enunciation, and erudition, Lovey’s divine voice was stricken mute, hardly able to vocalize the over-abundance of bewilderment that filled her from pale ears to clenching toes.

“I… I am surely enchanted…” Mr. Pibbers then weakly, fearfully realized before disappearing amongst the grove with a whisk of his tail, truly a ghost of his former self.

Lovey staggered to her feet as he vanished, recovering to the best of her ability and calling out as loudly as her thorny throat would allow, ears scanning desperately but met only her echo and absolute silence… both without and within.

Chapter End Notes

The mental training that Bo references was first discussed in Brave, chapter 3, to help explain how Judy could be so cognizant of her own dreamstate (even if it eventually faded to a peripheral acknowledgement the longer she remained awake).

[“You talk about vehicular collision as an inconvenience”] This is just poking fun at the visual gags in the movie wherein Judy walked off impacts that would have crushed her tiny bunny body (namely, when a rhino punch her into the corner of the training ring). While there are multitudinous rationalizations for this (i.e., the rhino literally pulling their punches, padded training equipment, etc.), it’s still fun to nit-pick.

The “a story howled from one pack to the next throughout the ages” about how the weak must lift up the fallen strong references Loyal, chapter 17, and then Officer Alphonse Kela talking with Officer Bogo after the Lions Gate Sting. His concern was that Zootopia was another “fallen city” because of its obvious participation and bolstering of kidnapping and selling young children, a.k.a., the “pet trade”.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
"Hold on to your lifelines, gents! It's gonna be a bumpy ride!"
-Captain Amelia Smollett, as the R.L.S. Legacy fell into a black hole

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rabbit & Fox

Once upon a time, there was a great kingdom ruled by a great king who was kind and good and loved his subjects who, in turn, loved him. The kingdom was Blessed by the Stars Above to stand for a thousand years as a beacon of justice and mercy for the world. In the villages around that kingdom, there lived Rabbit and Fox; Rabbit was dutiful and courteous and always kept their warren well while Fox was cunning and sly and never stayed in one place for very long; theirs was a feud from time immemorial. One day, while Rabbit was farming, the royal tax-collector came by.

“For the good of the kingdom and its Unfortunate, I offer the best of my produce, sparse though it is,” Rabbit said and did so, for they were dutiful and courteous. The royal tax-collector thanked them for their contribution and were on their way until they chanced to meet Fox upon the road.

“I have only the shirt on my back but the king may take the best swatch from it,” Fox said, for he was cunning and sly. The royal tax-collector chased Fox but were not fast enough to catch them.

Later that day, Fox came to Rabbit for any left over produce that they were to throw out, as they often did and as it often happened, Rabbit set out a sack of vegetables for Fox. Unlike their usual arrangement, Rabbit met Fox. “Why do you do that?” Rabbit asked, indignant.

“Do what?” Fox said, eating from the sack.

“You live on only what you need and give nothing back to the kingdom even though you are more than capable to do so!”

“I give back plenty to the kingdom however I can,” Fox coyly said, “You grow crops while I solve problems.”

“Problems that you make?”

“Problems that are not easily identified as such. I go everywhere in this fine kingdom and witness all manner of secrets which would rather be forgotten than taxed. It might be said that I provide a great service... not so great as you and your produce, of course.”

“‘Secrets’, indeed,” Rabbit scoffed, foot thumping for Fox’s influence was quite strong but they were dutiful and courteous, “I am obliged to wish you good luck but I hardly think you would know what to do with it.”

“And yet, I shall forever cherish it. Wonderful vegetables as always,” Fox endeared as they finished off the sack, “If that is your worst, then I can only dream about how your best would taste!”
“Better you eat my vegetables than eat me!” Rabbit called as Fox walked away with whatever ‘secrets’ they claimed to have.

Later that month, Rabbit was bringing their produce to market when Fox showed up, quite unusually and hastily. “None of these are for you,” Rabbit said, guarding their best vegetables.

“I do not want them,” Fox implored of Rabbit, “the royal tax-collector has their hounds out for me and I must hide!”

“Then it will be a proper comeuppance you pay your debt to the kingdom by not only the shirt but the fur off your back, as well.”

“Please! It will surely be my head if I am caught…”

Rabbit, at last, relented and lifted the lid of their most pungent vegetables, “Hide in here, where they cannot smell you.”

“Blest be, I shan’t forget this,” Fox lauded from the hiding spot, “I shall find secrets to grow your fields ten-fold.”

“I accept no bargain from the likes of you but shall spare your life because it is just to do so,” Rabbit insisted, for they were dutiful and courteous. As Fox said, the tax-collector and their hounds came, sniffed around, and as Rabbit expected, had surely reached another ‘dead-end’ of many trails, for Fox was cunning and sly. When they left, Rabbit asked Fox, “Why are you chased? Surely, after so many years, they do not think to collect on your fur, much less your head?”

Fox climbed out. “I have a secret that they want forgotten and must flee the kingdom, and now I feel as though I just might be able to.”

“Then I bid you the best of luck and thank you for not sharing that secret with me,” Rabbit said.

“Thank you, my friend,” Fox said, “I bid you the best of luck, as well.”

Later on that year, Rabbit found that even though Fox had not appeared since they fled the kingdom, they were never too far from mind. Rabbit stopped leaving out a sack of vegetables, for there was no Fox to eat them and decided to make them into a pie. The tax-collector was much kinder to Rabbit when they came to collect and even stayed for tea on occasion, especially grateful for when there was hot vegetable pie to eat. There was one time when Rabbit found that the pie cooling on the windowsill was missing, for it was one made from some of their best produce.

“Absolutely delicious!” Fox exalted when Rabbit came out to investigate, “My friend, just imagine your fortune if you made all your vegetables into these pies.”

“Typical, gone these many moons only to return with an empty belly!” Rabbit fumed but softened as they hurried Fox inside, “And what manner is this about being ‘my friend’?”

“Are we not?” Fox mused, lips and fingers licked clean of crumbs and sauce, “You blessed my life and I blessed yours; we are practically blood.”

“I saved your life once which I hardly had a choice in the matter, to all the good it’s done me!” Rabbit argued.

“On the contrary, there are secrets aplenty to growing healthier, fuller vegetables that I’ve learned and am more than happy to share with you,” Fox boasted.
“I said that I accepted no bargain from the likes of you.”

“And no bargain is this, for it is just to share these grand secrets to better yours and everyone’s fields, ten-fold.”

“What secrets could possibly have such power?”

“Only those that I could lose my head for.”

“I also said not to share that secret with me!” Rabbit rebuked.

“Indeed, my friend, I have not shared that secret for which you showed mercy upon my life those many moons ago. No, that is my burden alone to shoulder and I would not trouble you with it,” Fox assured, “These are different secrets, ones that only bring good fortune for you and yours to know, but none for the likes of me.”

“Then I shall accept those secrets, my friend,” Rabbit said, “Thank you for sparing me from ill-fortune… perhaps I have thought too little of you.”

Later on in life, Rabbit was mated and had many kits, their farm prosperous and produce delicious, but Fox had once more disappeared even if their secrets proved the boon to not only Rabbit but all in their community. The royal tax-collectors accepted the tribute from the farmers, as they often did, and there was still plenty left over for Rabbit and their community to share with those around them. But there was news of a criminal caught and hanged for their crimes, as they often were, and Rabbit mourned to find out that the criminal was Fox so they left out a sack of vegetables, as a tribute to their memory.

Rabbit thought about the secrets Fox freely shared, all except for the one for which their life was spared. Again and again they wondered what it could be until they remembered that Fox was cunning and sly, and though they said that the secrets were ‘different’, that maybe they were not too far apart. Their ears flung to the heavens as they ran outside, for eating from the sack of vegetables was none other than Fox, alive and well and smiling.

“Typical!” Rabbit could only cry out.

“Delicious as always, my friend,” Fox replied, “but these must be your best yet.”

“But you were hanged…”?

“Death is the same as any fallen king and no fox is so easily caught.”

“Ever so sly… but tell me… what was the secret for which I spared your life, those many years ago?”

“I think you’ve already figured it out, clever as you are,” Fox mused.

“The king has fallen, hasn’t he, though still enthroned?”

“Yes. The taxes are for no Unfortunate in this or any kingdom but why they are still collected I know not…”

“Are you to find out?” Rabbit asked.

“‘We’ are, yes.”

Rabbit looked to their farm and their family and then back to Fox. “I cannot abandon my mate
“Nor shall you. I need only a safe haven to which I can entrust my life and secrets,” Fox said.

“And you shall have it, my friend. I am honored to wish you good luck.”

“Though I hardly know what I would do with it,” Fox mused and was once more gone.

Rabbit returned to their farm and family, their warren a safe haven for Fox for they were dutiful and courteous and kept their promises. Soon, they learned the secrets that Fox found, cunning and sly as they were, and shared them with the community.

Bu-u-ut as it happens with sly influence, the community suffered immense ill-fortune as the Stars Above inflicted a terrible wrath upon their farms. Rabbit was the only one left, holding still the secrets that Fox entrusted to them until they both were turned to ash and scattered to the winds with their secrets. And they all lived happily ever after.

The End.

Days passed as Lovey busied herself teaching grammar, spelling, and pronunciation to those of the Hopps Estate. When not teaching, she researched what little she could on the Chronicler faith and the story of “Rabbit & Fox”; the Tenets were rife with their interactions but never cooperative, always antagonistic (namely, the latter against the former which she considered a tad hyperbolic). Unfortunately, her family home (or any home in The Burrow, for that matter) hadn’t much to say about any Chronicler tales that she did not already know, and so her days were filled with teaching and learning. It seemed that her voice had healed well enough for oration but it was clear to her that there was still no song in her heart. So, Mr. Earwicket repurposed her time slot at the theatre to cover expenses, and though Lovey coached the operatic troupe who stood in for her, they could not fill the seats as she once did.

Mr. Pibbers remained at the Hopps Estate on Primrose Court and his flowers were as beautiful as ever but she hardly saw him anymore, not really… nor had she heard from him… His green eye no longer stole a grin for her nor had they crossed a single wit from outside her music room…

Most painfully of all, there was no music written by the mysterious “Mr. Unnamed”, the so-called “composer cursed with mange”, regardless of how many times Lovey asked her mother, sisters, or housebunnies about any deliveries for her. She’d hoped against hope that the night in the grove was just another terrible nightmare; that her dear friend, Mr. Pibbers, had never confessed all that he had; that there was no cant in their songs; that he had not run from her in abject terror. Maybe he truly had no more songs, either … or maybe he was being his especially sly self and awaited her to seek him out (in a manner of speaking). So, Lovey shouldered the responsibility to directly ask the grocer who “delivered” the heavenly music (for Mr. Pibbers would simply hand them off at an opportune time, to the best of her understanding).

“Why, ‘allo Miss Lovey!” the wolverine gushed in a horrendous accent (if jovially inflected) as he unloaded a dozen crates in succession to a well-oiled machine of bunnies from the kitchen (including Otto, who had kept up with his studies with marked improvement). Big Gus was true to his name, being quite large for Primrose Court; the wolverine was an absolute giant beside any rabbit or fox but stout when compared to a deer or a bear. From his prominent lower lip to his barrel gut and weathered mitt-like paws, the simple grocer upheld with gusto his reputation as a kindly brute. “Don’t usually meet you at the scullery. Blessed morning, innit?” he greeted with a tip of his hat, both eyes twinkling and mouth grinning so that his teeth did not glint too much (save for one fang on his bottom jaw which always seemed to poke from his mouth) and the customary
curl of his fingers into his palm so that the claws were not very visible.

“Good morn, Big Gus,” Lovey responded as sweetly as she may and then hinted, “I don’t suppose there are any parcels for me?”

His crest promptly fell but in such a manner that it was endearing and heartfelt. “Not t’day, Miss, I’m quite sad to say… the kingdom is truly robbed of your singin’ after what happened, there’s no denyin’…” The sentiment was shared by all bunnies within earshot as they bustled the groceries into the kitchen, doubly so when Lovey’s ears fell down her back. “But not to worry, I been wishin’ for your betterment ever since; I bet my tail that the whole kingdom has! Why, you’ll prob’ly get another bouquet for your health this ev’ning, I wouldn’t doubt,” he assured and the sentiment was again shared by all nearby bunnies (for they were quite accustomed to his heavily accenting manner of speaking and understood the gist of what he said).

Lovey’s room was already filled with bouquets and other such well-wishing gifts sent for her betterment. “I shall then check tomorrow, should my composer feel the urge to write another song. I know it would be just the thing to stir my heart again, were I to hear from him,” she implied as the last kitchen bunny carried in the last of the groceries, bidding them both a fortunate day.

Big Gus looked pensive as he scratched under his cap, resting his other paw on a handle of his enormous wooden cart, still loaded with plenty of deliveries to make. “Tha’d be somethin’ you’d hafta talk to him about, Miss Lovey…” the wolverine quietly doubted, glancing away, surely along the hedge to where the shack of Mr. Pibbers quietly hid, and then addressed her with a quieter tone, ear flicking towards the scullery door, “There… will be more songs, I hope? I do love ‘em so…”

“Truly, I cannot say,” she admitted, perhaps awkwardly, “It will be another week without performance and purposelessness is weighing upon my spirit… I wished that another song came in but barring that, I had hoped to revisit a previous proposal of mine?”

His eyes quirked and glanced in incomprehension but were always sure not to direct at her. “Which proposal was this, Miss Lovey…?”

“I would like to teach you grammar and pronunciation,” Lovey brightly offered, “and worry not, consideration and accommodations have already been made as to my traveling with you, so long as you do not mind my bringing a small set of bells.” She then leaned up with a quick gathering gesture and a wry grin, “They’re mainly for the other rabbits, Big Gus; I trust my life and luck to you wholly.”

“Tha’s…” he replied and wrung his cap to his chest, smiling as politely as he may, “Tha’s awfully generous of you, Miss Lovey, my speakin’ could stand some learnin’ but I wouldn’t want to be a bother…”

She giggled and brightened. “Not a bother at all, education is an honored duty of mine and I believe it is for every one, predator and prey alike. I’ll need just a minute to grab some books and the bells and then shall meet you down here. Since you finished with our deliveries early this blessed morn, we won’t even be late with the rest of your route,” Lovey assured and then hurried back into the house with a beaming smile over her shoulder.

Big Gus wrung his cap a bit more as he waved her off… and after a half-minute, carefully released the brake on his cart to quietly roll off the estate when he heard no tinkling bells. He, indeed, continued delivering groceries or any manner of morning papers that he was paid for (the latter cost a little bit extra since he had to remember which crate they went in). It was nearly noon when he returned to Musty Dale -- a downwind, heavily-wooded community of shifties nestled in the shade of The Burrow -- and his cozy little den built from wood, stone, and part of a hillside.
The neighbors mutually greeted, mostly fellow wolverines and badgers, along with skunks and weasels and raccoons (and a few foxes though they kept closer to the nearby canine community, "The Caern", on the other side from where The Burrow was, along with the bordering feline community, "Fell End"). Big Gus’s cart was parked behind a drawn curtain to separate it from the rest of his homely hovel, wherein he had his stove, bed, visiting chairs, a shelf full of knickknacks, cherished pictures, the cracked stone of the Chronicler, and one of his most treasured gifts, a music box that could play for over an hour with a few cranks of the key. He hung his hat and jacket, shrugged his suspenders, set up his good shirt to dry and smooth, and pulled a stew from his coldbox to be warmed on the stove for lunch.

His ears flicked and nostrils flared, head lifting as he stood to shrug his suspenders back on, and then crept towards the curtain storing his cart. A low growl rumbled in his chest (for it was not uncommon for someone small to hide inside an empty crate, even if the kits and pups and of the Dale knew better than that). The bulky shadow cast on the curtain before he 

wrenched

it open…

and both mammals let out a yell (if one far more surprised than the other). Who popped up was a rabbit, certainly no bigger than a kit or pup of the Dale, as he threw off the lid and tarp he hid under to look the wolverine dead in the face.

“Big Gus!” she then said, for her gleeful voice was definitely female if dressed in male clothing.

“Miss Lovey!” Big Gus barked and reeled back to land on his tail, gawking in absolute terror, “What’re you doin’ here!”

“However did you know it was me ?” Lovey asked as she leaned on the edge of the cart, clearly put off as she touched some dirt applied to her cheek, “I rather thought my disguise spot-on… My sisters and I would borrow our brother’s clothes and sneak out of the estate all the time as kits, you see, quite the adventure even though I tagged along purely to see the kingdom’s many sunsets. We were rather convincing as scampish boys if I do say so myself.”

The wolverine scrambled to his feet in a fit of dread, claws digging into his scalp as he gnawed his bottom lip. “Oh, it’s my neck in the rope for sure!” he muttered.

Lovey kindly corrected him. “I wouldn’t dream of it, you are an upstanding and recognized contributor to the Burrow, and you didn’t kidnap me-”

“Tha’s not how they’ll see it!” he whined.

“Now hold on,” the bunny offered, “if I explain myself-”

“They’ll say I ‘influenced’ you!” he went on, perhaps more to himself.

“What nonsense,” Lovey dismissed and carefully sat on the cart’s edge, “Please calm down, Big Gus, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“What’re you even doing here?” he demanded, turning on her, perhaps showing a bit more of his teeth than he intended.

“What nonsense,” Lovey dismissed and carefully sat on the cart’s edge, “Please calm down, Big Gus, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“What’re you even doing here?” he demanded, turning on her, perhaps showing a bit more of his teeth than he intended.

“What’re you even doing here?” he demanded, turning on her, perhaps showing a bit more of his teeth than he intended.

“Really, there’s no need to get upset, I simply thought-”

“No, you didn’t think!” he interrupted in a harsh drawl, “You’re all kinds of muddled, Lovey, and look what’s happened!” He proceeded to dryly sob before any attempts at breathing.

Lovey hopped down from the cart and stood as straight as she might (and perhaps recognizable as her ladylike self, if not for her attire). “You’re right, I’ve been upset and it has clouded my judgment,” she abided, “and only I shall suffer for my actions. That said, I would expect you to
have a cooler head than what I’ve seen; you are above reproach as far as Primrose Court is
cconcerned and have been lauded for returning wayward bunnies before. No part of this warrants
criminal prosecution.”

“Aye, I bring back kits and the like,” he argued and collapsed into his chair to hold his shaking
head, “but not you, Miss Lovey, not a lady of Primrose who’s obviously touched in head. I might
not be hanged or shaved but they sure won’t let me br-” he belched but immediately cut off to
purse his lips (that one tooth still jutting) and wring his paws. “Why’d you steal away into my
cart?” he asked with forced calm.

She woefully sighed. “I wanted to speak with you, Big Gus, but you’ve been quite avoidant. I
assumed you were being awfully clever, hinting that if I wanted a private audience that I should
reach beyond the hedges of the Estate… but that’s my fault for assuming too far into your
intentions,” Lovey admitted, “for that, I apologize.”

He accepted it in his own way. “Well… no one’s seen ya’ yet, so no harm done. We can sneak
you back up when it’s later; I know a time no one’ll be too wary of,” he grumbled and glanced at a
curtained window before cradling both eyes in a palm, “What does a fine lady wanna talk with me
for? My speakin’ ain’t the best; ev’ryone knows it.”

One of the massive, comfortable, weather-beaten chairs provided solely for visiting was gestured
to so that the wolverine’s guest might sit (if in a manner more befitting her station than appearance;
her cap was set adjacent). “I would have made myself known sooner but I hit my head on the cart
after a sharp turn and only woke up a moment ago. You are a Chronicler, correct?” Lovey asked,
violet eyes spotting the symbol on his hearth, to which he curiously nodded and so did she in turn,
“There’s a story I’ve been chasing ever since the Gaudere, one that I thought I knew but my heart
tells me to keep searching. Are you familiar with ‘Rabbit & Fox’? Not from the Tenets, of course,
I’m quite familiar with those stories.”

His beady eyes quirked with his brow as he chewed on the thought. “Y’know… not sure I’m up
for talkin’ kits’ stories,” he further grumbled and rubbed his arm, eyes darting around his den, “I’d
rather jus’ get you back home before anyone spots you in here… Sorry if I don’t offer any tea,
Miss.”

A long ear tilted… violet eyes following his. “Are relations particularly tense between the Burrow
and Musty Dale?” she inferred, “I know there was that horrendous misunderstanding with the
fishery a few months back.”

“Well… no…” he awkwardly admitted, attempting to smooth the shaggy fur not only atop his
head but his chest, belly, and arms, as well, “things’re the best they’ve been, honestly, it’s jus’… I
s’pose I worked right hard for my good standing… not that I’m sayin’ you would do anythin’
‘gainst that-”

Lovy’s brow arched the slightest bit at the pink tint of his ears. “Forgive me, I have made a
terrible mess of things,” she plainly stated, “Inviting myself into your company, demanding
favors… not even an unruly child would act as heinously or impulsively as I… I wish you find it
in your heart to forgive me, Big Gus, and that I have not marred the Hoppses’ reputation with you. I
bid you farewell and good luck.” With that, she hopped from the chair and curtseyed despite her
slacks before departing.

“Wait!” the wolverine worried anew, “You’re not going out now, are ya’? You’ll not want to be
seen, I’m sure, with what you said about reputation,” he continued, “Look, I’m sorry I bust my top
at ya’, Miss Lovey, it weren’t right of me to treat a lady like that no matter the ‘why’ about it.” A
few words were tripped over as he stood. “Why… umm… I hadn’t even gotten your tea, yet, so
can’t very well call m’self a wolverine before doing that, aye? Me mother would spin in her grave,” he assured and scurried to the stove to put on a kettle, “I’d never hear the end of it on the other side, ‘Gussy,’ she’d say, ‘you had Lovey Hopps in yer den but didn’t even have the good manners to serve tea!’” he continued in a high pitch (to which his guest couldn’t help but giggle), “I might even have some biscuits aroun’ here somewhere…”

Her seat was once more taken and feeling brighter because even if an odd clinking sound kept playing on her ears (perhaps from the stove). “Well, if you insist, Big Gus, and thank you for overlooking my folly,” Lovey conversed as he peered over a broad shoulder, “You’re absolutely right, I am quite muddled… never have I felt such a severance than with Mr. Pibbers… it’s as though I’ve lost a limb or an ear.”

“Aye…” he lamented, returning to where he sat with a plate of biscuits, “tha’s an amazing thing, earning a fox’s trust… and equally awful to lose it. They don’t trust easily, y’know,” he then warned, “and only each other because that have to. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve a few fox friends m’self even if that full trust isn’t really there… but one of the best I ever had was the Cap’n, and we’s only seen each other at the Estate!” Big Gus merrily laughed which Lovey shared.

“‘Captain’?” the rabbit then wondered aloud as the realization came full, “Do you mean Mr. Pibbers by any chance?”

The wolverine laughed a bit more as he continued, if more at the prospect of it all, “You didn’t know he was a shipfox before he peddled flowers?”

It struck Lovey a bit harder than she thought it would. “There are quite a few things I do not know about him, apparently… is ‘Captain’ a term of endearment?”

“A what?”

“Is he actually a captain?”

Big Gus shrugged his mighty shoulders. “Tha’s a great question, come to think of it... kinda wish I asked. Maybe when I drop you off. Well, can’t worry about that now,” he assured, “I s’pose we could pass the time talking about that Chronicler stuff but I only know a bit of it. ‘Rabbit & Fox’ wasn’t my favorite story so I didn’t hold onto it as I did ‘The Badger Who Healed a Prince’.” The kettle whistled and so her host stood to fix the tea (and some more of that clinking sound was heard, as he checked on his warming stew) but he returned soon with a cup for the both of them.

“Thank you, Big Gus,” Lovey accepted, taking great care to hold a teacup as big as a bowl to her, “and I would love to hear all you have to tell.”

He nodded. “Well, lessee… there’s Lucy the Rabbit (a healer, like Badger) and Edmund the Fox (who’s just a bit of a rogue, honestly); she’s friends with a goat named Tumnus but Edmund just kind of shows up (can’t help a fox, ‘eh?). There’s also Susan the Deer (an archer) who loved Lucy like a sister and Peter the Wolf (maybe a knight-errant?) who I think was in league or at odds with Edmund but can’t rightly recall. There’s also the Beavers (I forget their names).”

Lovey reeled in her most ladylike manner. “I thought Peter was the lion who Edmund betrayed, later named ‘Aslan’? He was Peter Wolves bane and symbolized by the hawk, to the best of my knowledge.”

“Nah, Miss, Peter was a lone wolf, y’see, not part of any raiding pack and the bane of their existence (the hawk bit is right, though),” Big Gus explained, “Anyway, this is when the world was covered in ash and smoke, right? Well, I know the Tenets will say that a great, antlered Queen -- a
reindeer -- ruled the snow and used her magic to bring back life outside her frozen kingdom, and so on,” he dismissed with a wave of his paw. “Us Chroniclers tell it that the Queen was actually a Witch who brought that awful winter and kept the secret of growin’ food and plants to control everyone else. All the other mammals were at each other’s throats, y’see, bein’ hungry and afraid.

“Now, Aslan was His own thing, a wild lion,” the wolverine revered, “but also a noble fella. He also knew the secrets to bringin’ life back and freely shared ‘em, even though not many listened to Him; He was also spreading the word of love when trust was even harder to find than food, so goes the story. Lucy did listen, though, but she didn’t have a way of spreading His word; tha’s where Edmund came in, for he was sly and cunning and couldn’t help but hear those secrets and spread ‘em like seed. Well, the Queen grew wise and caught Edmund, tricking him into revealing where he learned them. She never intended to not kill Edmund for spreading her secrets, of course, even after he spilled every bean he had.”

The silver rabbit mulled it over plenty as Big Gus poured himself some stew (she politely declining since it had meat). “Is that when Pe-… I mean, Aslan then gave his life for Edmund’s?”

“Aye,” Big Gus said around his lunch, “but not before Aslan led Peter to raise an army to fight the Witch and her fiends, who’d captured and killed lots to ensure their control on anyone who rebelled.”

“How did the Witch catch Edmund, though?” Lovey asked, “Every story I ever heard is that foxes are supremely elusive… that must have been when the Turkish Delights came into play; they are synonymous with payment for betrayal, after all.”

The wolverine pondered it with a soft groan. “It was because of Lucy’s goat friend Tumnus, I think, he was scared into revealing what she and Edmund were up to. Depending on who you ask, though, Edmund sought out the Witch either to give himself up for her safety or was tired of all the Winter and being chased; the foxes are fond of that first one,” he mused, “It was then the Beavers who brought Lucy, Susan, and Peter to meet with Aslan, they received blessings, and then what happened at the Great Stone Table…” he choked a bit, “This part always gets me…"

“Aslan gave his life for Edmund and was bound against the table, shaved, mocked, tortured… all for the jollies of the Witch and her fiends,” he said, gradually recovering, “I hear the Tenets say that was this which healed the land and ended the Winter but us Chroniclers know that it was Aslan who returned the Spring well before and then came back after His murder.”

It was some small mercy that the teacup was so heavy and already secured in its saucer because Lovey’s nerves went numb at the recounting. She recalled that there were… discrepancies between the Tenets and the Chronicles but had never heard of such a horrendous schism concerning the circumstances of Aslan’s death… nor had she heard that rendition of the Tenets… “So…” she managed to say, throat tightening anew, as the night of the Gaudere clarified in her mind, “one might say that the lion was… sacrificed?”

Big Gus gave it some thought… and sincerely shrugged before downing the rest of his stew, lowering both bowl and spoon to wipe his face on an arm. “Never thought of it like that … must’ve been to the Witch, I reckon. I do know it was Susan and Lucy who found Him or He found them, either way, they all joined up with Peter and Edmund to defeat the Witch.” He then frowned after the happy ending to find that his heart wrenched to shed a tear along with his guest, “Miss Lovey, wha’s wrong…?”

A handkerchief pulled from her coat pocket dabbed her face dry (and smeared the dirty makeup). “It’s nothing,” she lied, for she could still not accept that Forestdwell abided, much less encouraged, such an evil “ancient ritual” as what she just heard, regardless of any supposed
bountiful fortune, and needed something to hearten her, “It is such a powerful story, Big Gus, I truly thank you for sharing it with me. There is still time before we can rectify my lack of judgment, though, so perhaps you might introduce me to these wonderful wolverines sitting on your hearth?”

“Oh!” he chuckled, nodding and rising to approach the row of pictures (his guest in tow, ears flicking to that odd clinking sound), “I s’pose there’s no harm to it. Well, this here’s me Paw,” Big Gus said, showing first his family of six, “he was a grocer, too; that cart’s been in my family for generations and spurred as needed. And there’s Maw, she was caught readin’ but was always sharp as a whip. And my older brother and younger sisters (rest his soul, he left us too young); they both live on the edge of the kingdom, though, watchin’ over the family’s ashes and takin’ care of Maw. I visit ‘em whenever I can.”

“How utterly wonderful,” Lovey marveled, already feeling herself lighten with pride gushing from the wolverine (and even touched his thumb to brace standing on her tip-toes to better see the stoic family). Her violet eyes wandered to another frame on the hearth, and so she gasped in delight, ”And who’s that beautiful maiden?”

Big Gus beamed and blushed as he set down his family to clumsily pick up, “My sweetheart, Ellie. It’s not official but we’re very close to it!”

Lovey swooned a bit more before she caught sight of something that fluttered to the ground, so she retrieved it. “May I be so bold as to inquire about this?” she asked, extending what looked like a telegram still in its envelope (reading it would have been rude, after all).

He blushed all the brighter, smiling in a sublimely simple manner as he brushed off the envelope on his pants. “This here’s my ticket to the good life… been saving it for many years now, bein’ only on my most best behavior. It’s why I was so worried about you bein’ found out, Miss Lovey, because if it got out that I was any sort of bad predator, I’d lose this in a heartbeat.”

A tinge of concern was washed away by curiosity as the rabbit hoped to further probe. “Is it a special little plot of land for you and Ellie?” she hoped, “I know there are farms on the kingdom’s outskirts perfect for raising a family.”

“Naw, Miss, I could never afford a thing so grand as that,” he chuckled as kindly as he may, setting the envelope beneath the picture on the hearth to instead pick up a humbling depiction of a veteran wolverine, “That there’s my pedigree. I’m the greatgrandson of Augustus Turntide, was even named after him, you know!”

“Squire Augustus Turntide!” Lovey exalted, “So named for his pivotal bravery in service to the King during the Hichen War. He saved thousands that day at the cost of his own. I never knew our grocer was of such a heroic lineage,” she adored.

Big Gus rubbed the back of his head and grinned in all his bashfulness. “Well, I do be aimin’ to raise a whole litter of kits with Ellie, jus’ as soon as her pedigree comes through. Her great-auntie was powerfully loyal to the crown, back in the day, but it turns out she had an uncle who… well, I don’t wanna shake you any more than I already have, Miss Lovey, but jus’ know that he wasn’t at all… civil,” he said with as much significance he could as he set the picture down, “Not a too uncommon thing, around here, but we try to keep others safe from them. I only need to stay well-mannered until the Blessed Court passes her and then we can be mated. Shouldn’t be too much longer, by my reckoning.”

Her heart lightened once more. “I do hope it happens soon. Might I chance to meet her someday?” the bunny then asked, “And if it’s not too impertinent, will there be a ceremony? I’ve never been
to a Chronicler marriage but I hear it’s utterly delightful.”

He grunted uncomfortably. “It won’t be a thing more than us at the Court, y’see, we turn in our pedigrees, a paw-print on their records, and then… well… there’s the unlockin’.”

“An unlocking… of a safety deposit box?” Lovey genuinely wondered.

His great mitts wrung as his face burned hotter. “It’s… umm … how do I say it to a lady…” he tried, clearing his throat at something he was obviously unprepared in explaining so he simply gripped the waist of his pants for a single jostle… and with it, that mysterious clinking sound.

Lovey tried not to stare as her ears fell down her back. “Ellie’s got one, too, but for her, y’see…” he attempted, “I was all set for Placation but then they found out about my pedigree, said I was ‘docile’ so I could be, well, locked and it’s better than bein’ snipped or… or drugged… umm… I’m sorry, Miss Lovey, I didn’t mean to shake you again…” he regretted, “I thought you knew…?”

Lovey’s heart sunk further and further as she gazed up at Big Gus… who seemed as surprised as she was that tears flowed down his cheeks, too. “There are quite a few things I do not know, apparently…”

The Burrow’s library was extensive, as was the library of Canopy Heights, the adjacent neighborhood of a more well-to-do tree-dwelling community (their retinue of feline guards was quite impressive), but no matter whence Lovey ordered books on the subject of the Hexward Tenets or Aslan’s Chronicles, there was no mention about a Witch or her fiends or a lion sacrificed to them. Additionally, what answers she could find of forced chastity practices were “unbecoming of a lady” but as she was a clever bunny… for all the good it did if it meant that the Hopps name would be associated with a prurient subject matter. In truth… she could no longer fool herself or busy herself from seeking the one answer, and its absolution, that she yearned for above all else… but he still greeted her the same as any other bunny on the Estate…

So… Lovey played and played and played their first song in all its prominence… with out the A-sharp. In time, her ear turned toward the open window at the silent spectator no doubt lounging with his elbow hooked on the sill… She did not bother to address the gardener but simply slowed her playing.

“That’s not how it goes, you know,” he kindly criticized while slinking inside to crouch behind her, the tips of his claws tracing the keys as he played the chord with its proper A-sharp, “There, now you try.” She repeated the notes in perfect tempo, if with shaking fingers. “Exquisite,” Mr. Pibbers commended and played it again but accompanied the piano with the lyrics he knew by heart, “Now… let’s hear you sing.”

Her knuckles were taut, doused in steady tears while wringing the dress at her knees. “I cannot…” Lovey choked but before any wit of his could retort she spun about on the bench and threw herself bodily into his chest, desperately gripping and soaking his shirt with each sob, “There is no song in my heart…”

“Oh, come now…” he soothed, caressing the back of her ears, “You need only a warm-up to get back into the feel of it.”

“I was a terrible friend… I hurt you…” she confessed, “You tried to tell me but I wouldn’t listen…”

“All is forgiven,” he assured and hugged her closer, “In truth, it was wrong of me to withhold my cant from you… one cannot help a fox, it seems, not even the fox themselves. But perhaps a
truce?” he offered and to which she tearfully giggled, “I shall accept that as agreement. You will be happy to know that I was not idle in our time apart, my dear Lovey, for there is a solution to my little… lust issue.”

Lovey then gasped her shock to reel, looking first to his face and then… to where such a “solution” might be implemented.

Mr. Pibbers haughtily gasped and sat upright, bringing his tail about as an obstruction. “Madam! How utterly scandalous.”

As it so often is with laughter, Lovey’s was involuntary even at so base and vulgar a joke. The fox provided a handkerchief (that was more a towel) and so she thoroughly dried her face from the previous bawling. “Thank you.”

“Always,” he said, “but what I meant was I sought other inspiration for my lyrics. Yes… I thought of Tabitha and your dirge for her… the first song young Otto found that fateful day in the garden was rife with subtlety. Hearing you sing my posthumous sonnets for her stirred a passion in my heart I had not felt in years… and perhaps I too wantonly looked for what was never there to begin with. Fair’s fair, however, you caught me rightly and made me realize just how far up my own tail I’d crawled.

“I recalled that the Tenets initially inspired your career,” he continued, “and so visited a few venerable Chroniclers to hear their songs and tales, for my kithood recollections needed a thorough polish and I always did enjoy their metre; I’m quite inept when it comes to the Tenets, at least, any other than those that explicitly keep me out of trouble,” he said and then mused, tapping his chin, “I was tickled to discover that it was no one else but Aslan Himself who brought a good deal of them into this world during that whole… escapade in Narnian times.”

“…He did?”

“So they say,” Mr. Pibbers relayed, “He sang the stars into place, upon which there were seven he wrote Tenets for all the world to treat each other justly, along with three more for those who follow Him explicitly and then another two to summarize each of the first two groups; all of which fall by the wayside if not for the last one laid down when He died for Edmund’s sake,” and then paused, “Shall I assume you know of the story? Very good. Now then-”

Lovey did not take long to count them, only to recognize the number. “That’s… thirteen…?” she blurted out and reflexively knocked thrice on the wood of her piano bench.

“And… what of the Crossed Crows?” Lovey then asked, looking at her wall with its hanging iconography of two simplistic crows upon a windowsill, four wings spread to different points with one head pointing back and the feet pointing forward, “They have represented the Tenets since the time of King Richard.”

Mr. Pibbers shrugged. “And hardly before then, to the best of my knowledge, but that I learned long ago,” he playfully dismissed, “The point of all this, my dear, is that while I can’t keep a cant from my best writing,” he chuckled, “it’s certainly possible to work its meaning into something a bit more… wholesome but still quite beautiful; I shed as many a tear on my latest works as I have my previous. So, I’ll go fetch the cleverly hidden drafts to get your eye and ear-”
“I cannot .”

“Tish tosh, you’re out of practice, nothing more.”

“No, Mr. Pibbers…” she argued and it pained her to do so, “my voice is healed but my heart is not… The chords you heard are the best my rote playing can manage but there is no passion in it… surely, you heard as much?” His lament was all the answer he could give and all she needed to understand. “What’s more… it is clear now more than ever that I am a hypocrite… to uphold anything critical of ‘influence’ when my emotions prove the better of those around me time and again.”

The fox deflated, squatting still but leaned against the bookshelf behind him. “I shall always be by your side,” he offered and earned a trying smile for his kindness, “What are you to do now, then? Your students have certainly come quite a ways… I believe Otto has been with you the longest and has even become something of a protégé.”

“Yes, he certainly has.” Lovey struggled to regain what composure remained and smoothed both dress and ears. “I cannot stay in Forestdwell…” she confessed and took heart to answer her partner’s stricken gawk, “but neither can I rightly leave. Musty Dale, the Caern, Fell End… wicked slurs vandalize the homes and doors with the full knowledge that those who live there cannot read it… yet if they could, they’d surely be ousted for their comprehension… And even if I spent the next hundred years cleaning each word, they are still controlled as breeding stock,” she dryly sobbed but righted herself again.

His green eye softened as he frowned. “I see… it was never my intention to pull back the veil of the predators’ plight, Lovey… We’ve all accepted that it is simply what’s done.”

“But that does not mean it should be done. I am but a single bunny… I have no clout in the government or upper nobility… what is only in my power is a song to reach the hearts and minds of all who listen,” Lovey said, “I was not idle either and learned as much as I could since that night in the grove, seeking out wiser souls than I… which you no doubt recognized, sly fox as you are,” she dared to tease.

“I did, yes,” he grinned.

She smiled, genuinely so. “As a girl, there was no greater inspiration to start my song than the Tenets… and a sunset over the western wall. First, I watched from the garden, and then the second-story window, and then the roof… on and on I would chase it all across The Burrow, the kingdom…” she sighed longingly, gazing outside, “The Appleblossom’s successor will soon set out on her maiden voyage… and I shall be on it. I need to see the sunsets of the world… I need to see the mammals who look to them and learn their songs… I must bring that music to Forestdwell… This great kingdom has nearly fallen and it’s up to us to raise her again, to reignite her beacon of justice and mercy.”

“‘Us’?”

“We are the spark,” she said, facing him again.

“And how do I play into this?”

“It is the old Chronicle of ‘Rabbit & Fox’, my dear Pibbers; we are tasked to help those lost to the darkness.”

“Smashing.”
“Our songs shall send the message of love and unity like seeds spread across the soil.”

“Brilliant.”

“It is written in the stars and on the hearts of our ancestors that we overcome our differences to forge a path to a better world.”

“I have yet to see my role even hinted at.”

“The Willowbranch needs a shipfox,” Lovey offered, hopefully so, “someone who will see the world with me and share in that grand inspiration.”

“I’ve sworn off adventure,” he politely dismissed.

She vocalized a minor boast before stating, “You’ve adventured before, then.”

He coyly hummed, “That life is far behind me and there it shall stay.”

“And not even I shall convince you otherwise.”

“You shan’t.”

She wondered aloud and then asked, “We are to be honest with each other from here on, are we not?”

He scoffed his amusement. “Be careful what you wish for.”

The Silver Belle took great care in what she next said. “The elders of The Burrow whisper about a legendary pirate of singular physical description and mannerisms, as close to nobility as a fox ever was… but also infamous for his bloodlust and ruthless executions… said to have been devoured by the Devil Himself and made all the eviler,” Lovey told, carefully watching the fox as he turned his blind eye to her. “His name is a curse to never be mentioned aloud: Captain Piberius Savage.”

His tail airily swatted the floor.

“I feel I know you, Mr. Pibbers, perhaps more intimately than I am allowed but I have your trust, do I not?” she probed.

“That you do, Lovey,” he answered, his unnervingly green eye just peeking at her from around the bridge of his nose.

“Would you agree that the so-called ‘common knowledge’ about Captain Savage could not align with any mammal capable of such heartfelt music and beautiful flowers?” she probed and implied as more of that emerald orb showed, “That he, perhaps, ‘died’ to escape some terrible fate, some evil … to seek peace? That maybe… he came back to life under a blind so absurdly similar on the surface yet diametrically opposed to the legend as to be immediately dismissed by any rational mammal?”

“Yes,” he breathed, eye full upon her.

“Are you Captain Piberius Savage?”

“…”

“…”
“Yes.”

Unfortunately, “Mr. Pibbers” (or “Captain Savage”, as Lovey truly and secretly knew him) refused to set foot on a ship again… by his reckoning and despite its many radiant flaws, Forestdwell was the safest place in the world for a fox. Instead, Mr. Pibbers introduced a fourth (or fifth?) cousin to the Hoppes, a vivacious tod fresh into his prime but with plenty of years experience as a shipfox (for he started young); he had both eyes and both paws so was quite true to the Tenets (or else, sly enough to remain uncaught). His tan fur was tinged with an earthen-red and eyes a rich brown (with the most curious flecks of green), could shanty and jig with the best of them, knew very few good jokes, and was known by the moniker “Mr. Swift”.

The Willowbranch was the Estate’s largest and grandest ship that the Appleblossom’s insurance made so much grander. So much so, that Diocles sought to employ a crew of any able-bodied predator or prey, large or small and even went into debt to assure the comfort and safety of every species aboard, be they family or employee… and as time went on, the two were nearly synonymous. The mercantile trade was exquisite for the Hoppes in that time as they traveled the world, bringing goods from country to country thanks to the many diplomats and businessmammals in the family.

Lovey’s heart swelled with each new voyage as she learned all she could of the nations and cultures outside her own; she even kept a maritime diary, one specifically for the Willowbranch, to detail anything and everything the world had to teach her (along with her vigilant cabinboy, Otto, who kept to her lessons closer than any other); there were plenty of adventures for her and Mr. Swift (much to Otto’s gradually diminishing dismay). There were hard times, yes, and conflicts, of course, but the Willowbranch remained stalwart in its unity, even when family or employees left and new ones boarded. Each day healed Lovey’s heart a bit more… each sunset closing the wound and fading the scar… and found that she could begin to sing again, little-by-little.

Mr. Pibbers (as he preferred to be called) remained on the Estate to keep its gardens healthy and beautiful, for there were still three-quarters of the Hoppes who did not sail (he taught Mr. Swift everything he would need to know for eluding pirates, from scavenging brigands to the scourge of the seas himself…). It was a marvel every time Lovey returned and from them did songs cascade of such beauty and majesty that her return to the stage was marked a triumph… even if she would be gone for two months at a time, she sang three performances a week when home and each time the doors were busting with her appreciators. It even seemed that… that there was no need for a “secret audience” to hide under the stage anymore, not when they all could hear her voice and unite in songs of love and reverence.

The world was bright again. Lovey’s fame resonated throughout the kingdom and along the merchant lines but she remained humble… remembering always that there was still another sunset to see and song to sing. One day, a foreign prince gifted her seven opals -- unique in all the world - - for her voice brought joy to his heart; Diocles called on the finest jewelers in the kingdom to craft a carcanet which she then wore for every performance thereafter. There were rumors (and nothing more) that Lovey would be called back to the Blessed Court to sing for the Kingdom’s Fortune (an unheard-of event) and she was terribly torn on it… she was already singing for it, after all, in her own way but it would give her the chance to speak with King Wapitius again. The world was brighter and righter with each dawn.

As night fell and Lovey enjoyed her tea with Mr. Swift after another of her “Sunset Sonnets”, she read a book by a lantern he’d just finished lighting. His nose then flared and fur pointed… “Rotting seaweed,” he declared and snuffed his lamplighter to stare out over the waters, “tell the Captain to get everyone in the Safe.” But she barely had time to drop her book when the darkness
itself loosed a shot, skewering Mr. Swift through the chest and pinning him to the deck several feet back. He coughed blood onto the ebony shaft, gawking as he gripped it with trembling paws; Lovey shrieked to wake the heavens and the sea and all who lay reposed therein. “Run, Lovey!” Mr. Swift gargled, blood tingling his tan fur all the redder, his body lurching as she held his arm before hiking her dress and sprinting for her life.

Other crew members and rabbits were already on deck, the Captain and Diocles included. No sooner had they seen Lovey’s blood-marked dress than did they spot the cause of her panic: an arrow of sordid pitch ran through their shipfox and into the Willowbranch, as long and strong as a spear. It was the Ill Omen, a harbinger launched from a giraffe’s longbow, an archer with gauges and machinery bolted into their very flesh operated by a team of scurrying vermin spotters; a herald of the Devil Himself:

Bag-o’-Bones

“Everyone to the Safe!” Diocles shouted, gathering what family had followed him from their cabins to return them below deck and to a hardy steel room (for just such an emergency). Lovey was not far behind.

“All hands on deck!” the Captain commanded as the retinue of private guards, already at the ready behind the grizzled lady-hare and that was the last any Hopps heard before ushering themselves into the armored bunker; Otto clung to Lovey the closest. The vents were opened to allow fresh air in as they huddled on the floor or on benches.

Long ears either pinned flat or sprung high to hear whatever they could above deck… but even the bravest amongst them could not stand to hear the gunfire… the metal on flesh… the rending of bones and agonized wails. What nightmares they heard whispered of the Cursed Crew flaying and eating and violating their victims… was but a naïve fantasy to what scarred their very minds and hearts that night. Blood saturated the air as they quietly wept inside their Safe until the last scream faded to only the demonic cackles and euphoric bellowing of the monsters outside.

They waited.

They listened.

They wished.

Heavy footsteps… soft sniffing…

Breathing…

Scraping…

Paws muffled screams and gasps as they heard someone or something directly overhead…

Wooden planks were torn away and splinters landed on the steel roof of their Safe (a great piece of protection bolted to a giant buoyant structure, just in case the ship was lost).

Hot breath poured in through the vents, a rancid stench to choke the rabbits for the second it stayed and many tried not to vomit.

Loud, joyous wails ignited terrified screams of the rabbits inside. More stomping, louder, closer, and the Safe began to jostle as it was wrenchen to-and-fro, rabbits tumbling over each other as they huddled and sobbed until the bone-chilling shriek of rending steel tore them free from its moorings. They were carried along like a picnic basket and dropped onto what could only be the
deck for there were more voices, more laughing, and such anticipation… such hunger just outside their impenetrable walls. And then came the prybars. Thick lengths of hooked iron wedged into the creases of the walls and ceiling as the steel strained to protect the rabbits… but it wasn’t enough…

A thick, gnarled, cloven hoof wrenched into a gap and then another right beside it to rip off the roof and door… There, towering almost ten-feet tall was a behemoth that at one time was perhaps a moose or an elk, its antlers shorn and deformed into a wretched crown of spikes, carnal, blood-red eyes sunken into a sallow skull, pelt pulled tight across the bone yet thick muscle taut as steel cables ran the length of his body. His face… his long, salivating, ripped face was filled with dagger-like teeth as he growled with unmistakable hunger. He reached in for the rabbits, Diocles at the very front and ready to be the first to be eaten alive…

Soft tapping stilled the air and the waves and so the hoof paused, withdrawing as the monster it was attached to receded. The soft tapping neared and from what lanterns remained, the Hoppses could see the vile and twisted crew of the Blood Pearl … and there she stood in her putrid brown sails, hull adorned with sharp iron and bones of all species… the fanged skull flag flying high overhead beneath a storm cloud; crackling with lightning but not a drop of rain. There was so discernible identity amongst the Cursed… for they might have been wolves with wool sewn into their flesh, or tigers with sharpened hooves jutting from their knuckles, or bulls with teeth replaced by fangs… They prowled on all fours or stalked, hunched, their original bodies mangled into corpses but still, they stood and growled, their wounds fresh from battle not phasing them… whereas the bodies of the Captain and her guard were nowhere to be seen except for their shredded uniforms, only a deck painted red amongst the five-to-one that outnumbered them…

From the Blood Pearl to the Willowbranch was the gangplank traversed by a single figure, watched intently, eagerly, wantonly by his Crew as they stomped and whistled and howled for his arrival. A figure donning a high-collared coat black as tar, fur a pallor as bone, eyes red as blood… He marched with purpose, with authority… with evil majesty.

Tap.
Clank.
Step.
Tap.
Clank.
Step.

Bag-o’-Bones arrived to a tumult of hungry cheering, claws raking the ship’s wood and hooves stamping until they were quiet again. He stood tall… but his ears stood taller still. He was a rabbit… missing one foot and half-an-ear, leaning on a false-paw hook as though it were a cane… a wicked curve of metal sharpened and stained dark crimson.

Tap.
Clank.
Step.

He stared callous and calculating at the other rabbits, still huddled in what remained of their Safe… yards away and yet one-by-one, each Hopps was overcome by mortal terror, worsening until their
hearts mimicked an avalanche of stones. Fiends had perched on the Safe’s splintered walls, long, clawed paws reaching in at the shrinking rabbits…

“I hunger…” the mutilated rabbit said, his voice as low and clear as a warhorn heard across an emptied battlefield, reeking not only of dead flesh but the sickeningly sweet pungence of poisons, “I thirst…”

The claws swiped and the Hoppses ducked, scurrying from the walls to squeeze into the center of the Safe as best they could, for whatever good it would do.

“But my scavenging is for naught… sated by one and one alone…” he lamented, “Curse whatever ill-fated star you were born under for the death of your crew… but count whatever blessings remain that my intent lies elsewhere.” Bag-o’-Bones turned his back on the stunned Hoppses as another of his menagerie retrieved the black arrow and the shipfox still skewered through, his lifeless limbs bobbing along with each step that the wretched monster took. The arrow was lodged into the deck and a lamp brought over for Bag-o’-Bones to get a better look as Mr. Swift’s head sagged and jaw gaped. It seemed the entire Crew hung on what their captain would do.

The rabbit’s gloved paw turned the face this way and that, bringing the light in closer… but then the crew began to wail but not in joy or hunger… but despair. They flailed and beat at the Willowbranch, tearing into their own flesh with claws and hooves as though to mourn.

“No…” the captain conceded, trembling paw clenching into only a momentary fist before cupping the dead face, “it’s not him.” Some of the crew raved and barked, pacing amongst the weeping few. “It was every trick of his but not him!” he raged, wringing the hook’s rusted crescent. He then looked again… and peeled back the fox’s eyelid to study the orb inside. “Impossible…” Bag-o’-Bones doubted, “but how…?”

His eyes were crazed as he turned again to the Hoppses, stepping along the torn steel wall dropped to the deck. Diocles stood between the Devil and his family as tall as he could, ears pinned in any attempt to scrounge his courage. He could barely speak, though.

“I am Captain Hector Howard of the Blood Pearl,” he quite politely introduced and even spared a single bow, as a gentlerabbit should.

Through the stuttering and squeaking, he finally said, “I am Diocles Hopps, of Primrose Court.”

His bloody eyes studied and narrowed as knuckles audibly tightened around the hook. “Charmed, Master Hopps, but I bear ill tidings. One of you does not belong,” Bag-o’-Bones then stated quite plainly, as though some universal truth, slowly pacing over the metal as the circle of monsters tightened, “Show yourself and spare these poor rabbits a horrible fate. You’ve already inflicted upon them this tragedy by merely existing.”

Lovey clutched Otto close for he wept and sobbed, luckily drowned by the rest of the family, trying with all his might not to wail as she hushed him as best she could…

Someone did step forward… he stood tall and indignant in the lapse of any immediate voice. “Captain Hector,” announced a fiancé of one of the Hopps daughters, standing even in front of Diocles as he rattled off his noble litany of a higher position in the Forestdwell rabbit community, “and I am to be married into this family before season’s end. But know this: if I am harmed then you shall have the entirety of my prestigious house and their backing to answer to!” The Hoppses heartened behind him.

Captain Hector eyed him intently but… languidly, as he slowly removed one of his gloves… a
skeletal paw then waving in front of him. “Such courage…” he observed, and faster than a blink that claw was around the fiancé’s neck in a rasp, “draining away as if it were never there…” The Crew voiced their palpable excitement but also their unmitigated fear. “I seek no bunny of such respectable standing as you,” he warned, watching as that fear built to a fevered pitch such that it was a deluge to the Hoppses, huddling against each other as they watched that brave noble scream and gawk… until he choked on his own terror, staring into the eyes of Bag-o’-Bones and trying to look away but unable to… He let out an unholy shriek as he thrashed and then went limp, simply let to fall from the loose grasp; his once future wife wailed and rushed out of her family’s protection to hold her once intended husband.

His face was contorted… as though he had been scared to death.

A bony finger then directed at the remains of Mr. Swift as the arrow was removed and his corpsed tossed to the sharks in the Blood Pearl’s wake, for not even the Cursed Crew would dare eat his flesh. “That fox is of a lineage long since exterminated yet he was slain this very night, therefore, hidden amongst you is a traitor to your species… you might not even know it…” He considered and tapped his hook once to the metal door. “Only a Scarlet could draw out such a fox as he, as they had for centuries… but I am not without mercy…” he announced to the rabbits at large, eyes and ears scanning them all (Otto biting his paw to keep from screaming), “You know who you are. Surrender or else I shall go through each of these fine Hoppses to find you… for it is amongst the dead of their kin that a Scarlet is revealed… without exception.” He snapped his fingers.

The behemoth who opened their steel Safe like a cardboard box reached out a sharpened hoof, salivating as it grabbed the fiancé’s corpse, the daughter bawling as she tried to hold on but was pulled back, the family watching in horror when sharpened teeth tore off his lifeless head in a sickening crunch, smaller imps launching up to grab the remains and rend it limb-from-limb. Bag-o’-Bones gazed up at his Crew as their bloodlust was sated, arms spread in reverence… in exultation.

It then happened, as it often does, in an instant.

Lovey, a very clever bunny, had slipped from her aghast family and grabbed that outstretched paw. She thought to reason with him… because though a monster, crawled from the Abyss and rampaging about the world… he was still a rabbit… and she knew that no rabbit could deny her. Her dainty paws embraced his… and felt for a fleeting eternity the whole of his anger and pain… an emptiness formed from the decay of knowing only hatred, hunger, struggle… envy… She knew in his voice that he was brilliant and tortured, and felt in his grip a… a longing as its fingers closed, perhaps not even knowing why.

Hector’s eyes locked with hers… and then he reeled away with a yelp. The first noise stopped his crew. The second noise of his falling hook turned their rapt attention upon him… He looked at his paw as though it were radiant… and as she made to apologize, he stumbled back and tripped over his peg-leg, gawking up at her. Hector grabbed his hook and scrambled to his feet, a palm dissuading her attempt to return the glove he’d dropped.

“Please…” she begged, “spare our lives. Whoever this rabbit is you think is amongst us, surely some exchange can be made on their behalf? Take what you want from the cargo, take it all but please, spare us… You are merciful, are you not? If riches is not enough, then I offer to you my voice and my song; yours forever if you but let us live.”

He audibly gulped and slowly steadied his breathing, stance still quite shaky as he didn’t seem to be listening just… hearing. “Yes…” he abided, voice distant and… peaceful, “Yes, yes, certainly.” His crew seemed… confused… and so the circle of monsters closed tighter and as he turned to
leave, one of the many blocked his path, its teeth gnashing as hot saliva hung in great dollops.

“Hunger…” it growled… some of the others shook in fear, some in anger. The ocean itself dared not shift a single wave.

“You hunger?” Bag-o’-Bones then demanded after a pause, “You hunger? Have you crawled from a grave in the Abyss? Do you ache with each passing day as your very body devours itself?” The monster growled but shrunk back as its captain advanced. “I am hunger. I am thirst. I can fast a hundred years… and not die. I can lie a hundred nights on the ice… and not freeze. I can drink a river of blood and not burst,” he then bellowed, voice rising in an unholy abhorrence, “No one hates better than I!” His arm swung and a glint of light flew from it, a needle stuck out from the monster’s gums… it cringed… and then collapsed where it stood, wheezing in terror and wracking pain.

Bag-o’-Bones then raised his hook high, gleaming off the lantern light to plunge into the monster’s skull; it convulsed but still breathed when the jagged tip was wrenched out. He pulled down his high-collar, serrated teeth and the stitched corners of his mouth flashing in the dim as he bit open a vein of the heaving neck and drank of the hemorrhaging fountain. He stepped away to fix his coat and declare a single commandment: “FEAST.”

Snapping jaws and swiping claws converged on the still convulsing monster as it was disappeared from the world with repulsive euphoria by all those who gorged. Not even a puddle of blood remained, lapped from the wood by eager tongues… and so the fate of the missing Captain and her guards was explained.

It took all of Lovey’s strength to remain conscious, frozen as she was, covering under his glaring vitriol. He held out his hand… she presented his missing glove… and so his bony fingers raked across her pelt and all she felt was incomprehensible darkness.

“What is your name?”

Though her throat seemed cinched with burning barbed wire, she managed to croak an answer. “Laverne Hopps.”

“Miss Laverne Hopps… yes, I recognize you, now;” he greeted with a bow after donning his glove again, “Such an angelic song as yours echoing across the waves is treasure enough but you see, it is not that simple. You have blessed me with a curse… so I shall curse you with a blessing: any house, any ship, any kingdom harboring you is hereby warded against me,” Bag-o’-Bones announced, leaning in toward her (if not too closely) as his departing demons howled and raved in sadistic glee, “but know that I will revel in your absence.”

Tap.
Clank.
Step.

Chapter End Notes

"Musty Dale" is a pun on "mustelidae", the genetic family of the wolverines, and a reference to the archetypically smelly species. Likewise, “The Caern” is a pun on
“canines” and “Fell End” a pun on “felines”.

“The Badger Who Saved a Prince” is a reference to the character Mr. Badger from the movie “Prince Caspian”.

The Hichen War is my own creation and any similarities to existing wars, either historical or fictional, is entirely coincidental.

[“But that does not mean it should be done.”] comes from “Cinderella (2015)”.

"Narnian times" is an archaic term for "ancient" or "Biblical" (for the sake of this story), referencing "The Chronicles of Narnia".

"Mr. Swift", a la the "swift fox", a North American species of fox with similar colorations.

[“I am hunger. I am thirst. I can fast a hundred years... and not die. I can lie a hundred nights on the ice... and not freeze. I can drink a river of blood and not burst...”] was said by the werewolf, from "Prince Caspian".

A slight note for chapters going forward: my AO3 is now caught up with my original FF.net, so chapters will be more spread out.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Belo~ved mine, belo~ved true
Tell me what so weighs on you
May I shoulder that burden, too?
When there’s nothing we can do
Just hold me close, so close in lieu
Beloved mi~ne, beloved true~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Hopps Estate on Primrose Court of The Burrow, in the kingdom of Forestdwell, weathered fires, bankruptcy, earthquakes, droughts, and plagues… but never once in their long and noble heritage had they suffered so terrible a misfortune. The Willowbranch was condemned as a cursed ship, blood-soaked and marked for ruin by the Devil Himself; a calamity of such magnitude that no reputable insurance company would touch it. It was still on their heads to afford the rites of her proper disenchantment, lest his curse taint the very seas of that great kingdom. There was still the recompenses to the families of the captain, her crew, and the guards… along with the prestigious family of the fiancé who was killed. For it was surely the ill fate of the Hoppses which brought that ravenous horror upon them, and they had plenty to atone for. So, the Appleblossom’s sister ship, the Fig, was sold to keep them out of the poor house.

Siblings and cousins married out into more fortunate households, several of which took pity on Diocles and his warren, for despite such a thing to happen… the Hoppses was a long and noble heritage, and more than that, they were still rabbits. It simply meant that they would be back in the dirt for a generation or three until the Stars Above shone on them once more. Luckily (arguably so), Diocles maintained friendly relationships with mammals who were… not as devout in their Tenets and opted for a less traditional method to their investment, and as it so happened, the Hopps patriarch had a good head on his shoulders to survive even the illest omens. All that he and his warren needed was time to recover.

Time… was not what Lovey needed for she had it in droves and it passed like the wind. Her ears gathered word of what Bag-o’-Bones did outside the walls of Forestdwell, his dominion growing with each week; ships were devoured, villages plundered, mariners converted into his crew, pirates sailing under his colors, and the Royal Navy of Liondon was kept busy all around the world by unspeakable atrocities (she even folded clippings in her diary). The veil of his myth lifted as the Hoppses’ claims that he was a rabbit of all things (a notion promptly dismissed because “everyone knew that he appeared as yourself, the primal darkness lurking within”) was proven as fact. The fact that he was a rabbit did not stop his savagery, though, and the daylight no longer deterred the Blood Pearl…

The world outside rang of innocent voices cut off by monstrous slaughter, crying out to anyone who would listen but left unanswered.

The world inside whispered of rot and a rapturously enslaved populace, praising any addition of a single link to the chains around their necks.
It was all she could do to wake each morning, clean her face and ears, put on a dress… and not weep for the powerlessness to do anything about it. Lovey’s coffers were drained, invested directly into the Estate, as did the rest of the Hoppses who stayed; economies had to be taken and the help was dismissed with glowing references, many finding employment in more financially stable households, whether inside or out of The Burrow.

The house seemed so empty… but not all was bleak… Lovey, along with several of her siblings, dedicated their free time to chores instead of hobbies; some studied modern advancements in business, technology, and agriculture, instead of purely academic interests; by the grace of the Stars Above, there was enough in the scholarship fund to send a single Hopps to the Royal Academy of Sciences in London (rather than the usual dozen), a niece of Lovey’s whom she always cherished and one of her brightest students. Otto was both saddened and relieved that she was chosen over him, being one of the top two prospects, if only because it meant he could stay in Forestdwell to “keep an ear on things” (even though he was not yet of age).

But perhaps the brightest star in their night sky was not only the beauty of Mr. Pibbers’s gardens but the fact that Ms. Sasha had left her job at Mr. Earwicket’s theatre to keep the tidiest house for the Hoppses (who needed a few modifications in the kitchen to accommodate her size). She was happy for whatever salary the Hopps Estate could manage, for it was well-known in not only The Burrow but the bordering communities that the Hoppses were always good to those in their employ.

Diocles was reluctant of such drastic changes, after all, bucking tradition on account of dire fortunes was unbecoming and illogical. But then, it seemed he developed the habit of articulating his thoughts aloud on his morning constitutionals through the garden -- when Mr. Pibbers was quite dutiful in his care of the flower beds -- and found it to be the best time for “very good advice” to “simply come to him”. Tangentially, the Hopps patriarch was sure to express his gratitude for having such a lucky fox as Mr. Pibbers as politely as possible, by looking him directly in the eye, for even in their dark times, he proved a true ward against any further misfortune to the Hopps Estate.

Perhaps most nettling of all, it was difficult to keep up appearances and some of the other rabbit families… constructively critiqued in their own way but the Hoppses managed to stay just above water, at least, for the time being.

“Daddy,” Lovey then addressed her father one day, curtseying at the door of his study, “may I have a minute?” From the suds wiped off her arms and onto her apron to the handkerchief around her ears, she was the epitome of the humble housebunny; after all, she and her sisters had just helped Ms. Sasha wash the kitchen after lunch.

“Of course, Lovebird, come in,” he happily bade, setting down his pen and standing to offer a chair in front of his desk, doing his best to smile even though he calculated the upcoming month’s budget (which always made him pale in the ear). She sat and then he sat, reclining in his chair a bit, “Goodness, you’ve certainly an eager bounce to your step,” he noticed with a quick quirk of his brow.

She loosed a breath. “It is an issue I’ve thought long and hard on, and one of great import… even if I can only hope that it is a candle with wick enough still to light,” Lovey attempted and flushed in her ears. “Daddy, I…” she said, gathering her ladylike composure anew, “I was wondering if I might have your blessing to… accept a suitor…?”

Diocles’s ears and eyebrows nearly rocketed off his face, sitting erect as he removed his reading glasses. “This is magnificent news!” he calmly rejoiced, almost bouncing in his seat as his paws
folded on the desk, “It is celebratory that any son or daughter of mine finds love, my dear, so tell me, who is this potential mate that I… perhaps have not yet met?” he implied.

Lovey blanched some and pursed her lips. “That’s the thing… I was hoping you might provide me with a… with a husband,” she pattered off.

The paternal head canted its evident confusion. “Lovebird, I’m afraid you’ve lost me. Decision was never your lacking and dozens of suitors have passed by you before,” he kindly critiqued, settling in his chair again.

“Yes…” she conceded, “thus, my concern. I am no longer famed as I once was… and there is speculation that I…” Lovey shuddered and crossed her fingers with a bow of her head to speak softly, “that I engaged in some manner of wager or… or congress with Captain Redbeard…”

Her father was quick to circumnavigate the desk and wrap an arm about her shoulders. “Heed not those forked, wagging tongues, Lovebird, they did not see what I saw: you braved his evil influence and turned his head,” Diocles assured, touching under her chin to lift her eyes, her paws then around his wrist. “For a single, fleeting instant there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes… I’d daresay that for the first time in his entire wretched life, someone blessed him. That is powerful, my dear, and you saved us all from a fate worse than death. Never be convinced otherwise. Now,” he then said caressed her sadly beaming cheek, “tell me what business is this of courtship?”

Lovey gently nodded and folded both paws in her lap. “It happened the other day… Jeanine, Katherine, Tiffany, and I were dumping out buckets of water at the sluice when we encountered a fluffle of young bucks across the way (I think they’re of the Carrotwrights over at #2) and as it was a warm morning, my sisters did as young does do and flirted from the other side of the sluice. Well…” she tenderly blushed, “I caught eyes with an older brother but… I recognized him as already mated and if I recall correctly, expecting his first kit soon. He seemed in quite a state, as if only just realizing that he was flirting; I almost thought it scandalous until he quite guiltily beckoned his brothers away and so I followed suit with my sisters. That event played on my mind ever since, Daddy, that perhaps…” she hesitantly suggested, “I might still be viable as a wife?”

His paw wrapped around hers again. “Lovebird… I beg you not feel obliged to mate for this family’s sake… we are not so desperate as to revert to such barbaric traditions as selling off our daughters and sons as breeding stock,” he said, both trying not to tremble; the shadow of other… cursed, unnamed families was too terrible a past to simply forget, “Should you find a buck who brings you happiness and love, then by the Stars Above, you have my blessing… but I shall never permit a Hopps or any mammal in our charge to be used as goods.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Lovey responded, truly feeling a weight lifted from her, “your integrity has always emboldened me. But I must insist… not to be used as goods but because I know you would choose a husband that will be good to me… good for this family…” she said and then lamented, “I have let too many honest, handsome rabbits pass me by, so dedicated as I was to my singing that I assumed the world stood still for me and me alone. I entrust my life wholly to you and know that I will love whomever you find.”

“I must protest,” Diocles answered, holding her paw tighter still, “your mother was so much better at matchmaking,” and gently huffed, “Why do you seek now to court? I hope that is not because your heart is leaden with what happened with the Willowbranch; you exhibit every sign of a rabbit distressed.”

She frowned and shrugged somewhat. “I am distressed… and have not been able to even touch my piano in all this time… but after that day at the sluice, however briefly… I felt that I could hum a soft hymn…” To which his eyes brightened. “Please, Daddy, you must know many eligible
bucks… perhaps it is time I am a doe rather than dream of it?”

Diocles sighed but smiled, leaning in his plush cheek to tickle her kiss with his whiskers. “Very well, my dear. I shall permit courtship… but on a single condition…”

It was handled with the utmost care and delicacy for while an opportunity to court a young maiden was superb to any young buck in The Burrow, when Diocles first spread rumor and then officially offered up the paw of his daughter, Laverne Hopps, it shook the foundation of rabbit society in Forestdwell. The Estate was spruced up to accept suitors and though many sought an attempt, the competition was promptly thinned by the most prestigious and Fortunate bucks in the kingdom, along with some a day’s message down the merchant lines. Diocles’s condition was simple: his blessing for mateship would be given to whoever returned the song of the Silver Belle.

The procession lasted nearly three months with half of the suitors arriving in the first few weeks but proving themselves either boorish or pompous or some other manner ill-fitting of husbands. Their lavish gifts and bridewealth hardly passed Lovey’s preliminary probing as to their innermost intents; it did not help their case that the lot of them considered their “gifts” as antes and freely released them from their possession as soon as rejection was returned. It did seem, indeed, that they were all as shallow and arrogant as they appeared.

“Aslan’s Mane…” Mr. Pibbers marveled through a window of the drawing-room, wherein the suitors were received, promptly gawking at a tapestry from the most recent attempt, “this couldn’t possibly be from the 4th century.”

“That is the claim,” Diocles answered, inspecting the other side of it through a jeweler’s lens, “I will need to have it inspected… if he thought to use a forgery I might have a case for fraud.”

The fox sniffed at the fabric, propped up by the elbow of his false-paw arm while cradling the weave with his good one, before touching the very tip of his tongue to it. “I’m no expert—”

“So you say,” Lovey teased.

“But I would bet my tail that this is authentic,” he coyly judged, not bothering with his simpler accent in front of the master of the house.

“Which is still hanging out the window,” Diocles calmly critiqued as he nodded at the fox’s haunches after removing the lens from his eye, “Do decide whether you are coming or going, Mr. Pibbers, if you insist on avoiding the door. Also, I thought these suitors bored you?”

The gardener’s upper half promptly retracted back through the window in a comfortable squat. “They do, Master Hopps, but I came about to let you know that the calcium nitrate budget still has some leeway before the end of month and thought to add some color to the southern flower beds,” Mr. Pibbers explained, “Would you prefer I plant something in an orange or a blue?”

“What shade of blue?”

“A rabbit of refined taste. Either lilacs or forget-me-nots would look delightful.”

Diocles mulled it over with a groan. “Which do you suggest?”

Mr. Pibbers grinned, hooking an elbow on the windowsill to talk behind his paw. “Lilacs; the southern gardens are most visible by the Dimples at #5 and the lady of the house is bitterly jealous of anyone with better lilacs than hers.”
Oh, lilacs, please,” the old buck chuckled, which was shared by his groundskeeper, and then turned to his daughter, “I would extend my apologies for allowing that pompous cad onto the Estate, Lovey, but I’m afraid he’s the nephew of an old friend of mine and you are being picky.”

Lovey sighed, still fuming after the conversation with the potential suitor. “I’m terribly sorry, Daddy, I know this was my idea but never imagined so many educated bunnies mispronounced ‘egregious’; the irony is almost too much…”

“And he is a pompous cad,” Mr. Pibbers off-handedly reminded, “What a shame that he and the rest of those fops scared off all the down-to-earth, grammar-conscientious bucks.”

“Away with your slyness, Mr. Pibbers,” Diocles playfully shooed, “you’ve lilacs to plant.” The fox had already tipped his cap and bowed himself out but did not go very far before poking his eyepatched-head back in as the Hopps patriarch was handed two more envelopes. “Actually, you can stay a moment longer; I know you enjoy the suitors’ letters and we have two late-comers,” he said, “How odd, this one does not have a sender’s name.”

The fox hummed and hawed, gradually inching away, “Tempting but I really must tend to those flowers…” he said but as Diocles flapped the missives to push their mystery-laden scents toward the window, the scarlet scalawag was drawn back in like a moth to flame, both elbows hooked onto the sill with a wagging tail, “Aye, Master Hopps?” A polite chuckle was shared between the two rabbits as their dear gardener and friend made a choice of which envelope to first inspect, “Now then, let’s see who this next candidate is…

“Hmm…” he enunciated, daintily clasping it to sniff and then examine the handwriting, “Ink and parchment specific for long-term voyages; not cheap, so they are likely seasoned mariners and learned scholars who have been abroad for several weeks… no doubt they sought to find the perfect gift for you as soon as word hit their ears about your availability. Why else wait so long to post a letter? And this is securely sealed,” he mused, returning the letter only long enough so that Lovey might open it, “so all his aromas should be preserved, as well as could be with paper, of course,” and then learned all he needed by breathing in.

Lovey (whose spirits had lifted little by little during the past few weeks) stood beside her father with an exchanged giddiness; she’d long confided in him the true identity of their housefox, no facet or secret left obscured… and while Diocles had reacted exactly how Mr. Pibbers said he might, at least initially, it surprised them both that the Hopps patriarch thanked his each and every lucky star that they were blessed with so clever a fox as he (and his flowers were the best in The Burrow, bar none). He’d surely proven a boon to the Estate when no manner of falsehood remained between them, and his slyness sent a subtle thrill up the rabbits’ spines.

“Clean… groomed…” he hummed, “he favors the quality of his stationary over that of his cologne and keeps a tidy writing desk, what with his lack of spilled smells,” and then carefully slid the still folded letter out just enough to sniff inside it, only to smirk, “Well well, I never thought I’d meet another bunny who upheld such a strict script as to not drag or brush their paw across the page as they wrote, but does not press hard enough to indent the paper. Surely, his letter will be a delight to read,” Mr. Pibbers decreed and tucked the paper back in to return it to whom it was addressed, “Not that I would be so uncouth as to read a lady’s mail.”

Diocles accepted the envelope as Lovey read the missive, grinning from ear-to-ear as he identified the sender. “I recognize his name, now, a rabbit of the Liondon nobility; one of the lesser houses, in fact,” he said and then added in a stage whisper, “I always found the higher sort quite stiff.”

“Daddy,” Lovey playfully chastised before reading through the letter with a curious flick of her ears and a giggle (in her most ladylike manner), “Oh goodness, he’s using Clawcer to satirize
maritime law! I know I shouldn’t laugh but it is awfully clever. Oh!” she gasped again, “He signed his name using the King’s Script; I’m not familiar with this rendition of it, though, must be specific to Liondon,” she speculated, “And you’re correct, Mr. Pibbers, his handwriting is artistry; not half so as yours, of course, but certainly an honorable mention. Mr. Pibbers?”

Either rabbit addressed the ashen fox outside the window growling in agony as he clutched his mutilated arm, every muscle seizing along it.

“The phantom pain!” Diocles fretted and then pointed to the daughter who delivered the mail, “Go fetch some water, hurry!” and she was off before he beckoned a few sons digging up a stump in the garden, “Help get his shirt off!” He and Lovey leaned out the window as her brothers aided in opening the fox’s shirt to remove a sleeve and unlatch the false-paw from his arm.

Luckily, there was a trick for those with phantom pains and all Mr. Pibbers need do was focus on opening and closing of one paw while mimicking the motions with his other, as best he could, and though his arm tried so desperately to unclench what was not there, it did release in time. “A thousand gratitudes…” he weakly offered as his claws raked the still trembling muscle of his arm, huffing and cringing less with each second, and accepting the drink of water when it was provided, “That is the worst I’d yet felt it…”

“What happened?” Lovey worried, reaching out the window to touch the back of his head… and almost immediately petrifying with the fear still in her dear friend.

“The second missive, that handwriting…” Mr. Pibbers warned, neck craning to her and pointing a wary finger, “it’s him.” He need not say a word more as to whom that letter was from yet all those within earshot froze with fright. He was the sole mammal named as equal to Captain Piberus Savage, locked in conflict prolific but no more material than the shadows and mists in which it was confided… The very blaggard who forced Captain Savage to watch his crew be ravaged all those years ago but in the end, could only claim the fox’s hook as a trophy… the same curved steel implemented as a cane… and a tool of execution…

Still sealed, the letter lay face down near the window where it had been dropped… Diocles picked it up first as he looked to his disparaging daughter. “Lovey,” he said, “I can burn this here and now.” His voice was strong… but his countenance hid the terror they shared.

She stood a bit straighter -- as a lady should -- and steeled herself. “No,” Lovey decided and held out her paw, “even the Devil Himself is bound by the promises he makes… Forestdwell is warded against his rage and I place my faith in the Stars Above.” So, she accepted the letter and then opened it as any other but… such ephemeral confidence she might have gathered in his absence truly meant nothing to the hint of his return.

Diocles rushed her to a chair before she collapsed. “It cannot be…” he gasped, reading what she did, “that fiend… he claims sole ownership to Lovey’s voice and song… and fancies himself her fiancé!” All bunnies gathered at the window and the door collectively gasped and some dared to faint.

“Can that bypass the ward?” one rabbit worried.

“Is he coming here?” another dreaded.

“Certainly not!” Diocles then declared, “As Lovey’s father and initiator of the challenge, I have ultimate say as to who may or may not vie for her paw in holy matrimony… And my decision is that he is not allowed!” He fumed as he examined the envelope before shoving the letter back inside, “And since he deemed it unnecessary to provide a return address, a lack of response shall
imply denial,” Diocles reasoned, as was custom for the Tenets and rabbit society, “Even so, we should take the proper precautions.” He then put that envelope inside a box, which he put inside another box, addressed it to himself, and handed it off, “Here, as the youngest present, you are to bury it upside-down at the northwest corner of the garden beneath the second plum tree and then stamp the dirt three times.” The young rabbit nodded as they repeated the process out loud and scampered off without another word. He and the rest of the Hoppes let out a relieved sigh and made the sign of the Four-Leaf Clover… all except Lovey, who was still quite shaken.

The weeks progressed as Lovey worsened and worsened, unable to even rise from her bed for family, worship, or the songs that Mr. Pibbers wrote for her. Yes, the letter was buried and all appropriate rites implemented to stay the dreaded Captain Redbeard (so named for the gore pouring down his jaw) but such was not the only cause of her dismay… The demon was right, her voice was exchanged for the safety of her family… he had truly taken that and everything else from the Hoppes, yet still, he wanted more; a realization too terrible for her heart to bear. What’s more, the box beneath the second plum tree was dug up to further dispel the cursed letters he continued to send to Lovey and each one cinched the vise around her heart, though she never dared open them.

In time, that charming young noble from Liondon scheduled a visit and the house was prepared for him. All of Primrose Court and even the whole Burrow was atwitter as to his arrival, for it seemed he hailed from a prestigious lineage indeed; a grandson of a head administrator for an executive of the Liondon Parliament and a second cousin of an assistant to the Royal Treasurer of Forestdwell. He was clever, kind, humble, thrifty, studious, devout, educated, athletic, classically trained in both the piano and violin and if eyewitness accounts were correct, quite handsome. He arrived with a large crate that carried what he insisted came from a hidden village of foxes in a remote corner of the world; it was the slimmest chance that his weather eye caught sight of the secreted place and by his reckoning, the greatest gift for the Stars Above to bestow on the world.

Ms. Sasha Sleek, one of Lovey’s dearest and longest friends, took it upon herself to ready her finest dress, wash her with the best-perfumed soap, and touch her up with the best makeup. In appearance, at least, Lovey was ready to entertain the noblest rabbits of the kingdom and true, the tenderness and love which Ms. Sasha doted thereupon livened her spirit enough to meet at least one rabbit that day, it was evident to all that she could handle no more than that. So, it came to pass that Diocles, Lovey, and the bright young buck were in the drawing-room, like so many before him but unlike his predecessors, he held a riveting conversation about… absolutely nothing at all and yet, Diocles found that he needn’t input a single word as his daughter did all the talking.

And then came the gift.

It was perhaps the first time in over a month that any real color shone beneath Lovey’s silver fur, for it was the first time in over a month that any real emotion surged within her heart. From the very depths of her being did a voice rise, a voice strong and true, one that the Hopps Estate had not heard ring through its halls in many a moon… but it was no song of the Silver Belle. No… it was the clarion call of the Steel Horn.

“How dare you…” Lovey seethed as she stood from her chair, pointing first to the “giftfox” he brought, a vixen chained, in rags, and with a vinegar-laced sack over her head, “How dare you!” she then rebuked, blasting through any rationalization of his, “You think to earn my favor, the favor of any rabbit in this household by bringing me a chained doll… No!” she quickly corrected with furious tears, “You would have treated a doll better than you did her! Get out and never darken our doorstep again!”

Large, stalwart brothers had answered her call, grabbing the noble by his arms to escort him from
the premises and Diocles was sure that he went all the way to the door. As the blaze simmered and Lovey was comforted by her sisters and Ms. Sasha, she was suddenly aware that the vixen stood nearby still, tail tucked between her legs as she attempted to remove the pungent blind.

“Oh, my goodness!” Lovey gasped and rushed over, “Get that key there!” she instructed of a sister while Ms. Sasha removed the vinegar-sack, “A thousand apologies, Miss, I didn’t-” She’d turned for only a second to receive the key for the shackles when she looked up at the blinking face of the vixen, stunned to utter stupidity as their eyes focused and locked… Those beautiful, amethyst eyes that she’d seen in every mirror of her life, only then realizing that as she held the vixen’s paws to unchain them, their fur differed only in cleanliness.

The part of their conversation where the noble explained how it took him weeks to find “the right one” and how he “didn’t have time for proper preparation” suddenly recalled to Lovey so vividly. She recalled most of all the giftfox of King Wapitius, that older tod who might as well had been the king himself, but as a fox rather than a stag. She wondered if that was how Wishes first felt upon seeing his giftfox…

“There I stood… a fox in chains…”

“She doesn’t have a name,” Ms. Sasha reported, taking great care to dry off the newly-bathed vixen.

“No name?” Lovey speculated, pacing as she did, “She is already well into her prime, how can she not have a name? Exactly what manner of village was she found in?” the rabbit then rhetorically asked.

The dark-ear-tipped vixen spoke again in a strange dialect that sounded… adjacent to the more common tongue in ForestDwell but was an obscenely accented pidgin assembled from the proximity of its speakers. If anything, it was a token of her cleverness to have picked up as much as she had… though it required someone as sly as Ms. Sasha to decipher it.

“I’m not as keen on fox cant -- mink that I am -- but as best I can figure, she’s either ‘truth’ or ‘prudence’,” Ms. Sashsa then groaned, “though I think she’s just being ‘honest’ because she only refers to herself as ‘kit number seven’.”

“Well, ‘seven’ must have certainly seemed the luckiest of the lot,” Lovey bitterly remarked under her breath and of no one present, “If only Mr. Pibbers were here, he could discern the exact location of her village by that stupid rabbit’s flowery description of the clouds…”

“He’d do wonders with figuring out exactly what she’s saying, too…”

The mysterious maiden was quite patient as the mink brushed her sleek pelt, shy in every way except about her body (it seemed). Her eyes were bright with curiosity but courteous, observant as she seemed to wait for the exact moment to act or speak… as soon as she could determine what to do or say. At present, she was guided into a chair.

“Bless me, the state of this fur…” Ms. Sasha tsk’d, “I’m still floored how it could be so similar to yours… it plays tricks on me mind that it feels and smells the same.”

“And you’re positive it doesn’t?” Lovey worried, “I’ve heard of bloodwitches and the like with the power to cause such things…”

The mink waggled her grooming scissors before implementing them. “Of course not, Lovey, she’s still very much a fox and you very much a bunny; not at all the same,” she assured, transitioning to
an ethereal musing, “Though I must admit… I’ve wondered how you might look as a mink or a fox and I can’t deny that Seven here is as close as I’ll ever see.”

“Not at all the same…” Lovey repeated and then approached to study the silver-furred, purple-eyed vixen… who reciprocated the studying stare, “I wonder about that.”

“How d’you mean?” Ms. Sasha conversed whilst grooming.

“Oh, just…” she faltered, the thought edging her mind, “I’m not sure…”

A soft, teasing *harrumph* whisked Ms. Sasha’s tail to brush away some clipped fur. “So where is that wily flowermonger at, anyway? A fine time to be so inconveniently absent but I suppose with the Estate’s luck as it is, a stroke of mercy that there aren’t two foxes present.”

“And poor Otto is inconsolable,” Lovey lamented, to which Ms. Sasha agreed, “but Mr. Pibbers seeks for that King’s fox I told you about. I feel terrible for rejecting his message when I did; in retrospect, he and Wishes were sincerely concerned for my well-being after what transpired on the Willowbranch … fool that I was to let my emotions get the better of me…”

“Don’t beat yourself down, Lovey,” Ms. Sasha said, pausing for a moment, “this has been a hard time for us all and best I can figure, you forgot that ‘Wishes’ is your king and not a close friend that you can reschedule on a whim,” the mink then teased and leaned over to playfully snap her teeth behind a long ear. They both giggled (and the vixen watched). “Alright, up you,” she gestured and continued lower on the vixen’s body, alternating between comb, brush, and scissors with ease and precision.

A paw cradled Lovey’s mouth and tapped a cheek. “I cannot recall ever seeing you tend to another mammal, Sasha; you’re quite masterful,” she commended and then giggled again, “*Really,* though, you needn’t groom her for her wedding.”

Ms. Sasha lightheartedly chuffed as she sat the vixen back down (after a very light touch of perfume) and retrieved her makeup kit. “Oh, Lovey, this isn’t half so much as what I’ve done for Ellie when she and Gus were unlocked; this is just getting Ms. Seven here up to code. After all, I’ll need to take her dress shopping, won’t I? Can’t have her walking about Musty Dale like she’s been stuffed in cargo all month; I have a reputation to uphold.”

Lovey started with a gasp. “Of course, she hasn’t a thing to wear,” she realized and regarded the discarded sack with disgust, “I should have some money set aside to-”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she immediately cut off, “there’s plenty of quality dresses I can touch up on the cheap; as you said, this isn’t for her wedding.” Ms. Sasha then spoke a bit more discreetly, “And don’t you worry about a single thing, Lovey, I’ll take Ellie along so we won’t get so much as a sidelong glance, not with a tough girl like her.”

The rabbit dismissed such a concern with an airy swat. “I fully trust that you and Mrs. Turntide can handle a day in Shift Down by your lonesome,” she said and then asked, “Why, should I be concerned?”

A facial shrug preceded the roll of her shoulders. “Ah, my apologies, I forget that rabbits can’t smell it like us shifties can. It must have been what that suitor meant that she wasn’t ‘prepared’,“ she implied, “It’s why I dabbed the perfume, to let all those tailchasers know what’s what. Not a worry for ladies like Ellie and me, she’s mated and I’m Placated, but this vixen has had neither cut nor chemical. Us ladies must look out for each other.”
They both took a step back to admire the mink’s craft after the vixen pulled a robe over her. She’d sputtered and spat several times whenever makeup somehow got into her mouth -- whether it was the fur-powder, lipstick, blush, perfume, or *eyeshadow* -- but the end result was an absolutely stunning display of subtle and natural beauty that put life in her cheeks and an air of refinement to her face.

“Ex *quise*,” Lovey gushed and clapped her paws together, “*oh*, Sasha, I did not compensate properly you for your work at the theatre.”

She dismissed so fanciful a trifle with a titter. “The work is its own reward.”

“Truly, if the Hoppses should be graced with Fortune enough to invest again in this generation or the next, I would be *honored* to sponsor any boutique of yours.”

Ms. Sasha swooned and cradled her cheeks at such a thought. “Well, that’s for the future but as it stands, I’ll fetch a dress to lend our dear Ms. Seven, and I think I know just what she needs,” the mink pondered and whisked out of the washroom.

A soft sigh lilted from Lovey’s lips before she retrieved the burlap sack and twine that once comprised the totality of the vixen’s wardrobe; it was folded, the rope coiled, and then set aside for disposal (or repurposing as a sack for potatoes and other such vegetables). As lucky and holy as “seven” was to the Hexward Tenets, it was not a *fox* name, necessarily… and Lovey could already see the face on Mr. Pibbers if she allowed this new vixen to be known as such… but what to call her…

“*Truth*.”

“*Prudence*.”

It became more and more a matter of “*providence*” to see a vixen so closely resembling herself… *chained*.

How could she not see it before?

How could she not recognize what stared her in the face?

They were all “chained” in fear, from the smallest mouse to the biggest elephant… from the lowest housefox to the Grand Stag himself. Predators feared retribution for acting in accordance to their nature; prey feared to act as anything *but* a homogenous herd. They would be cast out and isolated… feeling naught but oneself… no connection to any other mammal… a living death…

Such warring fears overwhelmed Lovey’s heart at the Gaudere… every virtue in her *rebelled* against the Court’s torture of that lion but every instinct *trembled* at opposing them. Their intoxication might have hindered their memory of her opposing some “ancient ritual” but *They* were still there, ever-vigilant and ever-critical. Lovey steeled what she could against the memory of that beige rabbit and their team of emotionless workers, acting with such dispassionate conviction.

The mountain she set to climb alongside Mr. Pibbers proved an impossible task, indeed, affirmed as she was as to the chain choking her own neck. Perhaps he knew all along but had no way to communicate it with her head buried so deep in the ground…

Noise stirred Lovey’s reverie; a welcome distraction from past mistakes. The vixen had risen from her seat and opened the window to lean out (and being a fox in a rabbit’s washroom, looked a bit silly). Lovey then noticed that she still had her robe on… but unfastened. It was a testament to her
ladylike bearing that Lovey so promptly covered ground and affixed the vixen’s modesty without tripping over her own dress.

“‘Trudence’ is a portmanteau of ‘truth’ and ‘prudence,’” Lovey clarified as she sat with the vixen affectionately nicknamed Trudy, her father Diocles, and a very nervous bunny of a lower noble house from Liondon; his fur was like sifted dirt of a dry summer with harlequin patches and his jacket a more utilitarian combination of green and ochre. Tea, cakes, and pickled vegetables were all set out for an afternoon meeting in a gazebo with the former-suitor, once banished from the Hopps Estate but permitted into the gardens for a single chance to redeem himself in the family’s eyes.

He quite politely acknowledged the identification with a momentary grunt. “I did not know that was her name,” the noble rabbit confessed, affording himself a single courteous sip of tea but remaining as still as possible, “your name, I mean, and quite lovely it is,” he then corrected in direct address to the vixen, “It was my understanding that you were called by your birth order, ‘Seven’, at least, as per your parents’ explanation.”

Trudy simply smiled for she was the most at ease of the four. “Yes, I shall admit that its significance was lost in translation,” she said, her diction audibly improved under Lovey’s masterful tutelage, “but Lovey was clever enough to discern a name for me, lest I be known by a vocalization unique to my species, however beautiful such a sound would be. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us,” the vixen continued and then paused to consider the correct way to address him, “Sir Flanders Lapis.”

Sir Lapis was then his most nervous as he presented both paws in placation; any noble bearing of his was promptly dropped. “Rest assured, the gratitude is all mine!” he pleaded, “Eternally, at that, to allow me this opportunity to make amends.”

“Well,” Diocles abided as he savored a slice of pickled beet, “your thanks should be directed towards Trudence, she advocated on your behalf.”

He started. “Truly?”

Both Lovey and Trudy nodded. “She presented quite the case,” the former explained and smiled to her dear vixen as she touched her arm, “I would have certainly enjoyed her just defense if I were not the one it was directed at but I am no less proud of her.”

The father chuckled at the vixen’s modesty. “If a fox such as her were allowed in the practice or enforcing of law, the Burrow would be the safest community in the kingdom. By my reckoning,” he then continued, returning to the topic at paw with a cool warning, “it was a mercy to let you scamper off with both of your feet. Do you know why, Sir Lapis?”

Sir Lapis blanched. “I do not, Mister Hopps.”

“Simply put,” he said after a sip of his tea, “the Hopps family was beset by such egregious misfortune because the Willowbranch’s deck was bloodsoaked long before Captain Redbeard sunk his fangs into her, the same with the Appleblossom and the Fig. After that cataclysm, our longest-standing business partners fled from the Hoppses’ unluckiness -- and who’s to blame them -- but took with them secreted dealings in ‘legal’ slave trade; this, I discovered only after a harrowing audit of every cent and number on our ledgers. Now,” he asserted, “while I would never - not in a hundred years -- deem what happened to us a blessing-in-disguise… it certainly forced us to reevaluate everything. Not that I would boast anything of the sort to the rest of Primrose Court… after all, we are still rabbits and do not so crassly demonstrate our private affairs.”
The noble’s paws wrung.

“Why do you fidget so?” Lovey asked, “You were quite cool-headed when you reminisced about your battle with that water serpent and we are nowhere near as deadly. Technically speaking, we haven’t even a proper case against you.”

He cleared his throat. “By my reasoning, Miss Hopps, my intentions for today are misinterpreted and I only now realize how tremendously I have injured the members of this household,” he explained as best he could, “You see… I sought Trudence’s forgiveness before returning to Liondon but… it seems my list of sins is greater than I anticipated.”

Mild confusion and curiosity were exchanged between the Hoppses. “You are not making any sense, Sir Lapis,” Diocles then said, “just how did you expect us to receive an enslaved fox as a gift?”

Noble paws wrung further. “Trudence was not the gift I chose for Lovey,” he revealed, “I had acquired permission from an elder of your village to bring back a tiny piece of the gargantuan geode. Your species has been nestled in its protection for who knows how long and so you see it more like plantlife than a wonder of aural resonance, as we rabbits can hear it. ‘Surely,’ I thought, ‘this would help Miss Hopps find her voice again.’ I must have tapped a tuning fork against a hundred thousand crystals before finding the right one; I hardly had time to clean it before hurrying back.

“Unfortunately…” Sir Lapis lamented as he smoothed the fur on his head, “I was in such fervor to set sail from Liondon that I overlooked the exact demeanor of the captain and his crew. He muttered some repugnant thing under his breath as soon as he saw the crystal-furred foxes but immediately played it off as dark humor. Displeased though I was as to his irreverence,” he continued with mounting regret and disdain, “there was no chance of finding another, more trustworthy crew without losing the village forever; we circled the jagged rocks hiding it for four days and never dared to brave its labyrinth until I caught the geode’s chime again, assuming our small ship could navigate it. When our weather eye spotted the crystal’s glint, we knew Fortune smiled on us. That was when the captain’s true colors showed.

“I managed to converse with the elder, who was a learned vixen, to explain why I was there… thinking on it now, I suspect she knew about the other’s intents before I did and reasoned they could handle them well enough should the need arise,” he thought, “It didn’t take long for them to complain about mounting inconveniences…”

Diocles sipped as he listened and politely cleared his throat to interject. “What say you, Trudy?”

Trudy politely chuckled and helped herself to a cake. “We knew what they wanted and made any endeavor on their part woefully difficult,” she humbly boasted, “‘Twas the most fun our village has had in years, according to Papa. All the while, Flem busied himself with the crystals and we thought it endearing,” Trudy idly considered and then caught herself, “Oh! My apologies, Sir Lapis, I did not mean to be so casual.”

An involuntary snicker (as all genuine laughter is) escaped Lovey’s mouth before she could smother it but regained her ladylike demeanor immediately (especially when a kind but withering look was paid by her father). “‘Phlegm’?” she then wondered aloud.

‘Flem’ blanched but smiled as he rubbed his neck. “It is short for ‘Flemish’, as in, ‘Flanders’. The captain and crew were quite fond of it… as is the entirety of my siblings, cousins, and friends. Do not consider it an insult, though, ‘Flem’ was the nickname of a grandfather of mine, ‘great’ in both relation and achievements. He was a giant of a rabbit and overcame the ‘bunny curse’, so
something of a family hero; sadly, he was lost in a train accident but his daughters have shown no sign of passing the curse onto their children or children’s children, of which I am one of many.”

“Your family overcame the bunny curse?” Lovey then awed, “You never thought to mention such a miracle?”

Again, he rubbed his neck. “Only he truly overcame it and Lapis bucks have always been resilient to it but since the curse is not prevalent in the Hopps line, I hardly deemed it of importance.”

Diocles hummed. “Are there any other astounding tidbits that you did not deem ‘of importance’, Sir Lapis? Trudence already elaborated as to her own lifelong wish to see more of the world,” he explained and the vixen agreed with a nod (if a bit abashedly), “which explains how the village let you leave alive with one of their daughters.”

“I snuck aboard when no one was looking and then was ambushed by the crew,” Trudy said, “I thought you’d be happy to see me, after all of our talks… well, suppers together, but feared I made a grave mistake in judging your character. Why did you never look inside the crate I was hidden, Flem?”

Flem’s paws wrung all the worse. “We had two crates prepared; one with the crystal I found along with some traded fabrics and the other with what the captain claimed was a songbird, one of many that flew about the geode. I have crippling ornithophobia, you see, and would not dare go near the crate… he said it was a marvelous find for the Liondon’s Academy of Science, though,” he exposited and crossed his arms in thought, “Our crates must have been switched by accident when we docked at Forestdwell.”

Lovey quietly sipped as she continued to watch the noble rabbit. “Flem,” she then said, “your ears keep twitching and your pitch hints at suspicion. Are you alright?”

“Well,” he said and cleared his throat, letting his ears freely scan the surrounding gardens, “I cannot shake the feeling that someone is eavesdropping…”

The Silver Belle beamed quite demurely, as though amusement and confidence radiated off her with but a single grin. “He certainly is,” she calmly said, and to her father’s chuckling, spoke a bit louder, “though I explicitly warned him not to.” The faintest rustling of a hedge was then heard before all was silent again. “You see,” Lovey continued as she set her teacup down, “it was not only Trudy who played your advocate but also our housefox, Mr. Pibbers. He bent both my ears to hear your side and I agreed on the condition that he would corroborate your claim,” she said, “He must have interpreted that differently and should be headed to the docks as we speak.”

“I suggest you blame him for this little setup,” Diocles added, “Sincerely, I was more than happy to accept that you bringing an enslaved fox into my home was, in fact, an accident… perhaps even a blessing-in-disguise. By my reckoning, the Stars Above rescued this fair vixen from a terrible fate and you were their herald.”

The noble’s lips pursed as his foot thumped the gazebo’s wooden floor. “Be that as it may, I should feel affronted by this invasion of privacy and perhaps would, Miss Hopps, were I not seeking forgiveness,” he then sighed, “It’s better than I deserve for my mistake. Shall we, at the very least, say that business is concluded and we can walk away on neutral terms?”

“But at all,” Diocles responded if a bit jovially, “but do not jump from your pelt, Flanders, from what all I have seen and heard, your only fault is that you trusted a foul company. I could not, in good conscience, condemn a fellow rabbit who fell victim to business partners secretly engaging in the slave trade.”
“Am… I forgiven?” Flem asked.

“I forgive you, yes,” Trudy answered, “Though we did not know each other very long, you seemed to me of good heart.”

“As do I,” Lovey agreed and then continued, “but if any reparations are to be made, it would be that you help us reunite Trudence with her family.”

Noble paws wrung fiercer, still. “I’m afraid cannot…” he confessed and withered at their remorse, “I stole back onto the ship and burned the captain’s maps as soon as I found out who was in his cargo. They can never find that beautiful place again… but it seems no one else shall, either… I did manage to locate where the crystal and fabrics had gone, though,” he considered, “If I cannot yet bring you home, Trudence, then may I offer you a piece of it, so to bring comfort during your stay?”

The vixen nodded solemnly. “If I could but get close enough, I surely would be able to detect the crystal; I still could even when sailing away,” she considered and then considered again, “You say ‘yet’…?”

“It will take some research,” Flem said, perhaps a bit hopeful, “There is a decrepit map at my family’s manor that initiated my search of that sea, where phantom songs rang out across the waves and deterred all who sailed too close. I wondered if there was some truth to it, some scientific fact for its incorporeal melody and do remember the steps I took to find it. Time is all that I need to reassemble my notes.” His face brightened when Lovey’s did (though it was not directed at him). “A cargo ship leaves for Liondon tonight and I can be on it.”

“A cargo ship, tonight?” Lovey doubted, eyes meeting him full-on, “You needn’t be over-charged and unaccommodated aboard a cargo ship on our account. Isn’t there a rabbit sloop sailing for Liondon in a week’s time?”

He politely shrugged as he explained, “Yes but with my traveling funds as they are, I could not afford room-&-board until then and safe passage the whole way. Do not fret over my comfort, Miss Hopps, I have been curled inside a ship’s cabinet before and shall be so again.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Diocles interjected, “I know the captain of that fine vessel and shall speak to them your behalf. In the interim, I extend an invitation that you stay on the Estate,” he offered and then coyly inclined towards his daughter, “provided there are no objections?”

“Of course not, Daddy,” she giggled in all her ladylike demeanor before smiling to their then houseguest, “and please, call me ‘Lovey’.”

Flem flushed from cheeks to ears, though he handled himself quite well, a sentiment shared by the Silver Belle. “As you wish, Lovey.”

Fortune had not forsaken the Hopps Estate. Gone were the days of their mercantile exceptionalism and prolific presence of investors, but they still had a few Stars shining on them. Some young Hoppses were trained to peddle flowers by their dear housefox, Mr. Pibbers, whose gardens knew no equal in The Burrow or Shift Down; in fact, it was from the back of Big Gus’s grocery cart that most of their business came as they traveled along his routes, earning pennies at a time but theirs was a welcome addition of color to every delivery. Additionally, it seemed that the mysterious “Mr. Unnamed”, whose songs then numbered in the forties, was writing again and his lyrics all the sweeter, all the more passionate… It even seemed that the Silver Belle might once again chime.
Denizens of The Burrow gathered at the Hopps Estate for a small concert one evening, much to the surprise of all within earshot. The gardens were bright and the halls festive, not on the virtue of an invitation but the playing of instruments and the singing of songs which attracted those of Primrose Court (though some were still quite wary of any lingering misfortune). For a time, Lovey was the starlet of her own little drawing-room theatre and her own little familial orchestra, a far cry from the prestige of the operatic stage yet welcome all the same. A need for food arose soon enough, for there were more guests than they anticipated in the height of the event, and by the good graces of the rest of Primrose Court, steamed vegetables, fried delights, and baked goods came in a sort of potluck.

As Lovey’s singing came to a close to rest her still recovering voice, she reflected as she stole out into the night for a breath of cool air. It had been nearly a month since Sir Flanders “Flem” Lapis stayed at their home and his last letter from aboard that sloop to Liondon showed no signs of cutting off contact… but the fact was the sloop arrived but he did not, having disembarked at one of the ports along the way. And what a shame, too, what with Diocles about ready to not only permit their marriage but pay for it! At least he was courteous enough to send the crystal and fabrics to Trudy, which livened her spirit in ways that Lovey could not comprehend. And Mr. Pibbers’s songs were as beautiful as ever, so like when he first wrote them…

Lovey then wondered where Trudy was at and swept her long ears about. She spared one more glance at her family attending the guests on their departure before slipping into the moonlit gardens. The night was full of sounds for the season, enough to keep a heart entranced but Lovey did not have time to sit and marvel… not when concern for her dear Trudy bubbled anew. She had taken a fancy to that charming Mr. Pibbers, as many ladies before her, but he reverted to his old ways of avoiding contact. Not in any malicious way, Lovey knew, only that he was so… busy all the time. However, as she also knew, it was best to not chase a fox, for they will not leave their loved ones for long.

It was that old storage area along the side of the manor -- where she first discovered the duplicity and brilliance of Mr. Pibbers -- which was presently cleared but he still used to clean his tools (and himself) at the end of the day. Her ears tickled with footsteps and voices as she crept down the stairs and peeked around a corner, the draining water still running as she then spotted Mr. Pibbers washing beneath it, but unlike the first time, he still wore trousers and his back was turned, hunched over the drain. And she saw Trudy, her tail bristling as she only seemed to have arrived, as well. Lovey knew she shouldn’t do so naughty a thing as eavesdrop but…

“Mr. Pibbers,” Trudy greeted, arms crossed.

“Aye,” he plainly responded, as calm and collected as ever.

“Good evening,” she continued after a pause.

“That it is.”

The vixen’s foot tapped before folding her paws behind her back and inclining. “We missed you up at the party,” she politely attempted.

“I very much doubt that,” he politely countered, head never lifting, “Primrose Court would be aghast to see two foxes in the same room together. It was best that I kept my distance.”

“They asked to see you, though.”

“Yes, I’m quite sure they asked to see this mangy composer, whose songs they adore and praise to the high heavens,” Mr. Pibbers stoically retorted, “I heard Lovey sing them and that is gratitude
enough for me.”

“… I wanted to thank you for them,” Trudy then said.

His head did lift and ears flick, but still, his gaze was averted.

“Never had I heard such beautiful music… the family says it’s as if that Captain Redbeard never cursed her.” The vixen took a step closer.

“Aye,” he placidly agreed as he stood, to shake the water from his paw and stretch out his back.

“Lovey said that it was she who inspired you to write those beautiful songs.” Trudy stepped closer again.

“Aye.”

“And that you plant those beautiful flowers for her.”

“Aye.”

“And that… those songs and flowers became all the more beautiful when her voice returned.”

“…Aye.”

Trudy stood just out of range of his tail’s swaying tip. “Mr. Pibbers,” she said, “I am told that you are witty and a delight to converse with. I heard it from Sasha, Big Gus, and every rabbit I’ve yet met. But to date, I have only experienced this ‘wit’ or ‘delightful conversation’ secondhand while I was in another room.”

His head bowed and tail curled so she dared a step closer.

“You are the only other fox I have seen outside my village and yet… I have never met you,” she nearly accused, tail bristling again as she tried to see his elusive face, “Why? Why do you not look at me, even as I seek you out and stand in your presence?”

“Because…”

The water flowed to fill the silence.

“The flowers… the songs…” he continued with a weak gesticulation, “they’re for you.”

Both Lovey and Trudy held their breath.

“Never had I been so willing to give all that I am to a single mammal, Trudy…” he said and looked over his shoulder to her with that single, brilliant green eye, “Were I to look upon you, I would know what my nose and ears and heart told me from the outset: that I would fall desperately and irrevocably in love with you.” His whole body then turned to face her and with his one good paw, he grasped hers, “If I were to touch you… then every moment spent apart would be an unbearable agony…”

Lovey’s ears flushed bright red such that she feared their glow would be visible.

“And…” Trudy attempted to say as she was guided to his bare chest, “if you were to kiss me?”

He smiled in such a way that it took all his steel and composure to not burst with jubilation. “Then I would know that there truly is good in this world… and that I am worthy of it.”
Though Lovey did not linger to watch, she did see that Mr. Pibber’s head ducked as Trudy was brought up onto her toes. She felt her heart might burst with joy and love, so much so that it could jump from her mouth in a song to explode in the night sky as a new star. So, the Silver Belle hurried back to the manor… inspired to finish the newest music of her dear friend Mr. Pibbers, his forty-eighth still-unnamed ode to beauty and truth… A song so grand that it could only be their final aria.

Chapter End Notes

"Clawcer" is the Zootopian analog to the "Chaucer Tales".

The "phantom pain" mentioned here is the "phantom limb" phenomenon which affects those with missing limbs. Basically, their mind thinks that they're clenching a fist that isn't there but they can't unclench it (because it's not there) so it just hurts for no discernible reason. One therapy is to use a mirrored box to reflect the good hand and trick the mind into thinking that there is still a hand there and that it is releasing.

While the process that Diocles described here is a Tenet/superstition with no real-world reference (to my knowledge), the "box inside of another box... mail it to myself" is a reference to Yzma from "Emperor's New Groove", because I find that whole line of thinking was utterly hilarious.

Sasha's surname "Sleek" is a reference to the character Trisha Sleek from my friend NieveLion's story, "To Mend a Broken Heart".

"Shift Down" is a collective term for Musty Dale, The Caern, and Fell End.

Isolation as a form is punishment/torture is an idea explored previously in Neverwere Moments, namely concerning Gideon's isolation in pred-therapy. All mammals need some kind of connection with another mammal, even the solitary ones, as an empathic lifeline so a lack or severance of this connection has serious ramifications not only on an emotional and mental scale but ultimately, physical.

"Crystal-furred foxes" is a nod to the crystalline foxes from "Star Wars: The Last Jedi". The idea behind Trudy's species is that they, like the foxes of the Knottedwood, seclude themselves inside a differently electromagnetic field resulting from some natural phenomenon (in this case, a giant geode). Within the geode, the foxes have a certain crystalline bristol to their fur the longer they are away from it.

The Flem/Flanders name refers to the largest breed of rabbit, the Flemish giant rabbit which comes from Flanders, Belgium; for those curious, "Flemish" effectively means "from/of Flanders".

Thanks for reading and reviewing!
A few stars brightly twinkled in the night sky over the Hopps Estate.

Mr. Pibbers, whose flowers bloomed so beautifully, had finally followed their example and opened up. His fantastical adventures from days as the notorious “Captain Savage” were outlandish enough to be dismissed for foolhardy yarns from a veteran mariner… and it was that secret shared by nearly the entire household which made his stories so utterly amazing. So much so that both the façade of the simpleton housefox and the cynicism of an obfuscated intellectual were tempered by Trudy, who seemed to wrap him around every finger of hers. He had no more reason to hide, in fact, every reason not to.

And yet, Lovey was cross.

Gus Turntide, the stalwart grocer of The Burrow, was branching into special deliveries thanks to the Hopps children who read the addresses of his packages for him so that he needn’t memorize where they went. He’d even begun to work directly out of the Estate’s kitchen, using their excess storage for his produce and distributing the occasional baked good. What’s more, his and Ellie’s pronunciation lessons from Lovey improved with each week so that their accents charmed rather than deterred, so much so that Ellie showed an aptitude for sharing her knowledge with the kits and pups of Musty Dale. It was especially fortuitous as she revealed to friends and family alike that she was with kit herself; the Turntide family was growing and the prospect of a larger homestead was, for the first time in Gus’s life, a possibility.

And yet, Lovey was cross.

Sasha Sleek, whose skills in housekeeping helped the once-well-to-do rabbits of the Hopps Estate maintain a lifestyle, also aided in their learning to run a home whether it be cooking, cleaning, or mending. While such skills were not unknown, the clever mink demonstrated tricks and shortcuts to make more efficient use of their time, energy, and resources (ideals upheld by any respectable warren, no matter their place in society). It was her skill at grooming which really shone – as noticed by the other rabbits of The Burrow when a Hopps was out at market -- so much so that Sasha was eventually convinced to pursue the trade. She (by Diocles’s blessing) set aside an hour-and-a-half in the early afternoon to “properly style” a customer or two who, indeed, fancied the exemplary grooming of the Silver Belle at the peak of her prestige.

And yet, Lovey was cross.

Oh, so very cross. Whether at anyone, in particular, the Hopps household could not determine and it was best not to inquire. Neither Mr. Pibbers nor Trudy, her cherished foxes, could correctly discern why she was in such a state. Not even her father, Diocles or her prized pupil, Otto had an inkling as to why she stormed about in a ladylike huff, hiding how her cheeks puffed and darkened with indignation. She immediately denied and cleverly subverted any probing until she could continue her crossness in secrecy. It was not until a sister of hers went to fetch the Steel Horn that she caught her ranting in front of the bedroom mirror…

“‘Let them breed’?” Lovey chastised of her reflection, seemingly a well-practiced diatribe as she transitioned seamlessly onto the next portion, “Why not just ‘let them’ off a leash or sit at the table. If you actually managed to get your head out of the ground, you would recognize them as
foxes -- mammals -- not some pet or thing to keep.” And then she huffed again while pacing.

“Lovey?” the sister spoke up and poked her head through the door.

“Tiffany!” Lovey started and whisked about, a most unladylike behavior but then, she seemed awfully out of sorts of late. “My humblest apologies,” she recovered, “How may I help you?”

She giggled, as most young does do. “Are you practicing for a play?”

“Oh, no no, that wasn’t-”

Tiffany stepped further in and nearly closed the door behind her. “Was that meant for Daddy…?” she then interjected in a whisper.

“No!” Lovey assured, flushing a bit, “Stars Above, certainly not.”

“You did blindside him, requesting that his blessing for your marriage go to Ms. Trudy and Mr. Pibbers, instead,” she then said, having her turn at rebuking with a gentle wag of her finger, “It was downright sly.” Lovey rebuffed her with a cynical scowl before joining her in giggling. “If utterly romantic,” Tiffany swooned, blushing to fill her ears.

The Silver Belle sighed as she gathered her books on reading and writing comprehension. “I am at odds with myself…”

“That is a rarity.”

Lovey quietly harrumphed but hardly had a counter, so she hugged a book to her bosom and gazed out the window and the Burrow… and the kingdom beyond, knowing how powerless she was to help any one out there, from the palace to the Iron Bridge… “What more can I do when my song is not enough…?”

“In any case,” Tiffany tacked on as she slid back out the door, “you’ll be late for your class if you dawdle much longer, big sister. ‘It is unbecoming of both a Hopps and a lady-’”

“To dare be truant for one’s own event’,” Lovey finished, remembering well the quote of their mother, a bittersweet memory though she was, “Yes, I know-” The door was left ajar as Lovey felt adrift in her own mind… reading and rereading the title of her own lessons book as though for the first time in her life. “I know…” she repeated, caressing its cover, soon awash with so paradoxical a sensation as cold dread and warm serenity, “I know what I must do.” She set the text down as a single tear from each eye was spared, longing toward the eastern horizon and remembering the sunrise several hours before. “Stars Above…” the Silver Belle paused and steeled herself, crawling up on the window seat to kneel, crossing her fingers and bowing her head, “O Aslan… O Vernal Husband… help me… I wish for every blessing You have…”

“Only I.”

A private performance was afforded every third week at the Hopps Estate, and in time, its gardens sang with a divine voice… though not for very long or too often. The Burrow knew who it was but dared not press or seek it too readily for fear it would be scared off again and her lighthearted ditties were widely welcomed. So much so, that many an ear sprung and activities quieted to listen to the angelic echoes of a heart touched again by hope. Additionally, there were plentiful kits from not only Primrose Court, but all of The Burrow’s households who gathered in the dozen-dozens for lessons in reading, comprehension, diction, and if they were especially lucky, they might get to hear a lullaby just for them.
Mr. Earwicket did permit the use of his theatre during off-hours for Lovey to teach adults, for even though she and her still mysterious composer, “Mr. Unnamed”, wrote songs that were sold in shops across the kingdom, she did not feel the stage call for her arias anymore. After all, there were other starlets who rose in prominence and prestige in her absence, some further than she did, moving on to grander venues nearer Forestdwell’s center. As for Lovey, she would sing a favorite to all her students that attended classes in the theatre: “If You Would Come With Me”. It was a marvel of lyrics and melody which spanned a vocal range in classical style while also simple enough to hum and put words to with ease. So simple, even children and the least musically adept could manage it.

One day, when Lovey was teaching a group of adults who’d not fully learned their letters, she’d called up one of her bravest students to write his name upon the chalkboard.

He’d written a “G”. It was by no means the King’s Script but none could deny that its tidy curve executing in a hard angle was rigorously practiced.

He then wrote a “U” whose lines were parallel until meeting in a bowl; a clear and concise letter was it (one he especially frequented).

And then he began writing the “S”. “S”s always confused him because it was so similar to “C” (which was one of the first letters to learn) but it wasn’t “C” (which could also be confused for a “K”) but then he remembered that “twist” did not have a “C”, it had an “S” (just like Lovey taught him) so he twisted his wrist to double-back.

The student took a moment to admire so balanced an “S” before he had to write it a second time and thus, finish his name: “AUGUSTUS”. Luckily for him, the trickiest tribulation in that penultimate test of basic comprehension was to elaborate on how his nickname was derived; he need only to (cleverly) underline “GUS”.

“Oh, simply marvelous!” Lovey gushed and clapped her dainty paws. Big Gus bashfully stepped aside for his fellow adult students to applaud, howl, and roar their congratulations for his bravery to tackle such a long word in front of everyone. His mate, Ellie cheered the heartiest. Each and every one of the class was a predator, a “shifty”, from small otters to large lynxes, from sly foxes to fierce badgers. Their chairs were spread in a fan upon the rear of the stage with the chalkboard at the fore (so that anyone standing at it would not feel intimidated by the empty seats of the audience). Some had only learned to recognize their own names, others a few words, mostly by their own cleverness, but none truly grasped the comprehension of reading… until they were taught. And with it, the liberation of knowledge about their world.

“I thank you, Miss Hopps,” he enunciated, nearly gushing himself but with tears. Lovey grasped his mitt-of-a-paw in both of hers before he sat down (to some further, quieter back-patting).

The cheering immediately ceased when bells seeped in through the theatre’s front door until it was a din, a warning each and every shifty learned to fear lest they be caught imposing their “influence” upon helpless prey. As was custom… reaction, clawed fingers tucked into padded palms and grinning fangs hid behind closed lips; heads bowed and tails tucked, eyes averted and seats shifted to await the arrival of the Blessed Court. If they were especially lucky, the bells passed them by… but that was the chance for soft bells, brass bells that jingled and chimed, carried by rabbits or squirrels or other small prey… it told them that the vigilant Blessed Court was nearby…

But no… what came for them were the heavy, terrible iron bells that struck the air with their clanging majesty… Such were bells boasted by the largest prey, prey that could pin even the strongest shifty beneath their stony hooves or tusks. Each of Lovey’s students knew the risk of learning to read and write but they trusted that she would protect them… and so… she walked around the chalkboard, ears held high to greet whom came through the theatre’s front door.
Light glinted off a pair of spanning, metal antlers curved and sharp with simple artistry and authority, the standard helm of a doe in the King’s guard, and that particular magnificence worn only by the captain thereof. She was tall for the theatre and towered over the seats, head ducking just enough to avoid the upper reaches of the door (though… perhaps letting her metal tongs scrape its frame the slightest bit), a cloak of rich forest green with embroidered gold shone, as did her armor, as she strode down the center aisle. Step-by-step, the iron bells marked her approach as upheld by the banner of the Crossed-Crows, the House of Blessings.

“Miss Laverne Hopps,” she said and the rabbit in question politely curtseyed.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” Lovey responded quite coolly, quite amiably. Her students remained absolutely still in the knowledge that the two (albeit bigger) stags flanking their captain was only a small selection of who surrounded them, and the interjection of several tons of force was possible within a matter of seconds. “How may I be of service to so distinguished-?”

“You can cut the pleasantries,” the Guard Captain snapped and the Silver Belle courteously abided, the stags astride kept their immediate distance as she approached the stage, still standing much taller than whom she addressed. “This needn’t result in bloodshed, Miss Hopps,” came the offer.

“I agree.” Indeed, she was unshaken.

The doe jut her jaw. “I am here to apprehend these criminals,” she clarified, gesturing an armored hoof to the cowering shifties at large, “of which there are multiple reports about, from the palace to the Iron Bridge.”

“Incorrect,” Lovey retorted with a dainty smoothing of her dress; the Guard Captain flinched and her eye twitched, the stags behind her exchanging momentary bewilderment, “they are not to be apprehended because they are not criminals. Furthermore-” she went on, practiced exposition at the ready.

The doe ground her teeth. “These shifties are literate,” she declared, her demeanor granting no quarter for sly games of any sort. A graceful step was all that she needed to prop herself up onto the stage and though she would not be the largest mammal there, she certainly dwarfed any who dared rise from their seats.

“See here-!” Lovey attempted but it was too late, for a knight of the Blessed Court knew best how to spot a literate shifty. She first pulled the chalkboard back to read what was written upon it… and immediately scanned all the betraying recognition in those blanching students. “That is uncalled for!” the rabbit rebuked, scurrying nearer.

The Guard Captain grinned, for surely, her experience caught sight of the hastily hidden papers and classwork tucked away in coats, under seats, and behind backs. “Who is ‘Augustus’?” she quietly demanded but when no one responded, her nostrils flared and gaze swept the dreading lot, “Stand up, ‘Gus’.” Yet still, all remained petrified under her watch. Suddenly, with a harsh shove was the chalkboard discarded and she pointed to a flinching ferret to announce, “You look like a ‘Gus’. Collar him.”

“No!” Lovey pleaded as the ferret yelped and flailed, for one of the stags pulled out a rod with a noose at the end, perfect for catching a panicked shifty, and with an athletic bound he was on the stage and charging.

“I wrote it!” Big Gus yelled, at his feet and nearly throwing himself in front of the sobbing ferret, “I’m Augustus and that’s my writing.” His mate and fellow students muted their terror… knowing
that there was no hope for him after such an admission. So, the stag looped the noose around his neck instead to be knelt before the armored doe. A frightful growl came from Ellie but it was quieted immediately by the lightning draw of a sword.

“I suggest you calm yourself, Mrs. Wolverine,” the Guard Captain warned, glistening steel already pointed as she then considered, “I can see you are with… cub. I think it’s called? I have a faun myself,” she then said, sword never lowering, “and would rather not deal with the paperwork for harming a ‘pedigree’… assuming you are of such. Now,” the Guard Captain continued, sheathing her weapon only when Ellie and every other shifty sat down again, and then retrieved a notebook, “who taught you to read and write, Mr. Wolverine?”

No answer came as the bitten-back whines, whimpers, and mewls of the students nearly deafened. Gus heaved as he screwed his eyes shut so that a frightened glance would not betray his teacher and friend…

“If you do not answer,” the Guard Captain conversed, “I am permitted to exact immediate retribution for the literacy of you and your cohorts, and so sever any further attempts to lead astray the good citizens of Forestdwell.” She nodded to the Guards at the theatre’s door when neither Gus nor anyone else responded and so brought in a royal surgeon, who could remove an eye or a paw as swiftly and painlessly as possible… and with their mobile tools, do so anywhere in the kingdom.

“It was I,” rang a small voice, who found that fear no longer clutched her heart… a fear that stayed her from saving a life before.

The Guard Captain flicked an ear before addressing the tiny rabbit and sighed, flipping the notebook shut. “As well it would be,” she accepted, “It is a more a disappointment than a surprise, Miss Hopps, I am rather fond of your songs… though I suppose one literate wolverine would not be the fall of the kingdom.” The surgeon then set their bag on the stage and pulled out a device that, quite clearly, was designed for the quick and clean removal of a paw and another that, quite clearly, attached to the skull for the quick and clean removal of an eye. “You shall receive your summons to appear before the Blessed Court in the mail, then.”

Big Gus was brought closer, his spirit resisted but his body did not. Ellie was kept back but not by any of her fellow shifties, for it was the same fear which kept them all at bay.

“Stop!” Lovey then shouted, hurrying over, “Only I taught him to read, no one else.”

Quivering eyes marveled at her.

Vehement eyes doubted her. “This wolverine did not teach himself?”

“No, he did not,” Lovey assured, courage mounting with every word.

“Miss Lovey…” Gus choked through the noose, “No…!”

“By right afforded to me by the Hexward Tenets-” she continued.

“Do not quote me the Tenets, Miss Hopps,” the Guard Captain cut in, a hoof stamping the stage, another itching at the hilt of her sword while another still thrust into the air, “You and I know full well the punishment for empowering a shifty’s influence on those of us who need protection from it, from them,” she said.

Lovey stood taller. “Then so be it. Take my eye,” she offered, stepping forward, “take them both and both my paws, if need be.”
The doe stiffened, gripping the hilt tighter. “Cease your games, rabbit, that is not the punishment for heresy. But perhaps you are ill, hexed by this sorry lot,” she reviled, glaring at them.

“Incorrect!” Lovey repeated, “I, Laverne Hopps, of sound mind and body do hereby declare that I taught these small predators to read and write… uncoerced.”

“… All of them?”

“Each and every one,” she affirmed and allowed herself to gaze upon them with pride as they gazed back, raptly, “and let it be known that it was I and I alone who did so, should anyone inquire.”

The doe scratched the tip of her hoof along the sword’s handle before inclining to whisper. “There is still a chance to walk away from this, Miss Hopps,” she offered, “I take one of his eyes, you give me a list of whom all you taught, and we say that’s that. He will hardly even feel it,” she said, nodding at the wolverine.

Lovey studied the does’ face and simply, daintily straightened her dress again before saying, “I do believe I -- not they -- am to be arrested pending trial since no one else can come forward to dispute my claim of responsibility; in adherence to the Tenets.”

The Guard Captain stared at Lovey in doubt, betrayal, and cynicism. “Indeed,” she admitted through her teeth and directed the stag to release Gus and for the surgeon to put away their tools, “come along, Miss Hopps,” she ordered. As the stag collapsed the noose-ended-rod, he instead pulled out a folding cage with a small bench and secured it.

Lovey lay flat her ears and willingly stepped inside. The door locked as she stood and watched her students clamber to their feet with soft cries for her, some even following (at a distance) as the royal guards carried her off. She knew it was only a matter of time, that she could not sly her way out of every guard who discovered their sordid class… She knew she had to be strong for her students and she was… maybe not as long as she’d hoped, though…

“No!” Gus cried again when he could stand, nearly rushing to the front of the other small predators as the Royal Guard exited the theatre, he pushing a door open, “Wait!” Many ears and eyes turned to him, Lovey’s filled with tears as he suddenly barked in pain… and pulled his paw away from his own bloody eye-socket. “If you want an eye, then take it!” he roared, chucking it high overhead to land at the Guard Captain’s hooves, “Jus’ give her back!”

“Gus!” Lovey called, assuaging his ire, “Only I am culpable… and Stars Above, only I shall face the punishment… please.” And so, he and all under her tutelage kept their distance, watching in despair as their beloved Silver Belle was carted off. The Guard Captain had turned a blind eye to Gus’s outburst… but it could not be unseen.

“Only I.”

The Forestdwell prisons were unkind, as such places tend to be. Luckily, a section was set aside for mammals of Lovey’s ilk… namely, those that were minuscule and heretics of the highest order. She wore sackcloth but was prevented any physical contact, for fear that her blasphemous ways would infect others who could still be saved. Her cage was big enough to stand ears-erect, move around, and she could hear noises from outside (such as the occasional bird or weather). What few times her family was allowed to visit proved small mercy (who also managed to sneak in her diary). Every day and night, Lovey was beset by… not visitors but mockers, slanderers, and even at times… beseechers who tried to turn her from whatever “influence” she might have “suffered from”. She tried to sing as she had in the past and though suffered from terrible
depression in her lavish home of Primrose Court, found that those worst times could not compare to that ironclad pit, where she could not even hear the voice of another to brace her spirit…

“Lovey?” someone whispered at day’s end. He was familiar and so repeated, “Lovey?”

She sprung awake, remembering him from what felt like ages ago. “Mr. Kingsfox!” she nearly cried, as that older tod whose colorations mirrored the king’s stood outside her cage.

His smile was sad as his fingers reached in through the grid, her paw grasping one. “You’re doing well, all things considered,” he observed, the waning light baked a far wall and softly set his earthen fur aglow.

“I’m so, so very sorry that I spurned you when you last visited me,” she begged, “I was in such a terrible state, blaming you and Wishes… please, forgive me…”

His chuckle was as sad as his smile. “It is in the past,” he assured, “But tell me, why do you turn away those who would help you escape?” he asked, “This path ends only at the gallows.” Grief struck his face as she released his finger and caressed the knuckle.

“If that is the consequence of my cowardice, then so be it…” she choked and then cleared her throat, “Thousands upon thousands of mammals suffer in this kingdom… kept in chains by ignorance, mocked by words written across their homes… Should they recognize that they are downtrodden, their eyes are gouged out in some corrupted ‘justice’… If they try to climb up, their paws are cleaved off at some falsehood of ‘mercy’…” Lovey recounted and then touched her own neck, “Those clever enough to educate others are killed. But I… I am loved,” she said, “Surely… the Forestdwell’s Silver Belle might be joined in speaking out against this travesty where others had not? Could not a single Tenet be turned for the better?”

“If only that were possible,” the Kingsfox seethed, claws curling around the cage, “I would tear this door open here and now, Lovey, yet I cannot free you…”

“Why not?” she asked, touching his finger again, “Is not Wishes the king? Is not his rule made law?” Lovey then trembled to the fox’s bowed head, discovering that her faintest grip was stronger than his. “Is it not…?”

Those scared, brown eyes lifted though he tried to smile. “His power is not his own… I am afraid that freeing his mind only made him aware of his own chains…” the old tod confessed, “King Wapitius of Forestdwell, whose hoof directs armies; whose antlers reach higher than any tower or tree in the land; whose voice is heeded by all… is no more than a frightened fawn because of what he learned from me. We foxes are a frightful influence,” he darkly chuckled.

“But who? Who holds his chains?”

The old tod thought a moment. “Dare I wax so poetic as to say ‘The Stars Above’…?”

“I… I don’t understand…”

“The law you broke is not Forestdwell’s, it is from the House of Blessings and beyond recorded history,” he tried to explain and when it only furthered her confusion, kept on, “Lovey… not his mates nor his children nor any member of his court know that I am literate… or that he was my teacher,” he further confessed, “Wishes did not mean for it to happen but I was clever, insightful… ‘nigh prescient’, by his reckoning. I learned because of him.”

“he would hang with me?” Lovey doubtfully concluded.
“I kept eyes, nose, and ears to news and events, aided the Blessed Court with world affairs in ways that they could never understand… if They knew…” the old tod dreaded, “It’s happened before… mammals of noble history and lineage, annihilated all the way to their ancestors and generations to come, for less than what he or you has done; friends and family… heartstrings cut to destroy their spirit. Wishes comes from an ancient line of Good Kings and Grand Stags, reaching almost as far back as King Richard… he could be cut down and replaced without a second thought but They would only grow stronger,” the fox explained, “Please, tell me, Lovey… what do you hope to accomplish by doing this?”

She was quiet a long minute. “I cannot ask Wishes to rend the kingdom asunder on my account,” Lovey quietly considered, “nor can I abandon all those small predators who live in the shadows, shackled in illiteracy… I should have protested when that lion was brought to the Blessed Court but I was scared… I’m not scared anymore.” Lovey breathed deep. “The Tenets say that a small predator is absolved of their heretical practices if they reveal who taught them to read and write… you -- a fox -- would never betray those whom you love and trust above all else…”

Mr. Kingsfox frowned, gawking as his jaw tried fruitlessly to answer.

“So, those who came before paid with their eyes and paws and lives before surrendering a single name… all throughout history,” Lovey said and then beseeched him again, “Please, tell me while there is still a chance… why was I brought to the Blessed Court that fateful night, if not to go down this very road?”

He shook his head. “You were supposed to save us, Lovey, all of us… but not like this…” he sobbed, “It just came into my head one day, that if you -- who had earned a fox’s trust to sing their secret cant -- saw that nightmare… then you could do something clever; figured something that Wishes and I failed to see, do what we could not beneath the vigilant eyes of the kingdom,” he bashfully admitted, “I agonized over that thought for months; we tried to avoid it until it was the only option we could think of… because it was the first time in my adult life that I felt that same kithood faith for a better tomorrow. I think… I see it now,” he then said, trying to hold her paws through the cage, “You are the bravest of us all.”

The sun faded as Lovey held his paw as best she could, feeling it slip away into the night until the jailer came to light the lantern and reveal that she was alone. Time had passed and the kingdom outside grew agitated, from all that she could discern… her keen hearing caught news from the guards and her honeyed words pried gossip from their lips. Riots broke out, from the palace to the Iron Bridge, and were quelled as predators large and small, and friends thereof were arrested for conspiracy of heresy. It happened with alarming frequency that a new shifty was brought in to substantiate their claim that Lovey had taught them to read and write… and though she’d never seen them before in her life, she confirmed it and slyly befriended each that was brought before her; indeed, her sins in the eyes of the Blessed Court mounted higher but still, no one else accepted the blame.

“Only I.”

“Lovey?” The voice was soft and sweet, strumming her heartstrings as though it were a harp.

“Lovey!” The voice was strong and coy, filling her sails with a tailwind.

She sprung awake in the gray morn and rushed to the bars, tears cascading around her smile as she grasped a finger of each fox on the other side. “Piberius! Trudy!” Lovey delighted, “Forgive me my drab appearance but how uncouth to drop in uninvited!”
Piberius and Trudy held back their own tears as their fingers rubbed her paws, even touching the very pads of their noses to her. "‘One must make do with what one has, no matter the circumstances’," Piberius teased.

"Is that not what it means to be a Hopps and a lady?” Trudy tacked on.

“I shan’t have my words thrown back at me by a scallywag, much less two of them,” Lovey (playfully) rebuked and shared in the chuckle, “Oh, Stars Above, I have missed you both… I surely missed the ceremony, much to my utter dismay… It was always a fancy of mine to see a Chronicler wedding, I hear they are so festive.”

"Oh, Lovey…” Trudy tsk’d, “All this time in the company of foxes and you still think everything requires some ceremony or other.”

Piberius dramatically (but kindly) sighed at her momentary confusion. “It’s quite similar to the Chronicler faith -- in fact, that’s surely where we go it from -- that if we exchange our vows in the presence of one whom we both trust above all else, then we are mated for life,” he said and continued as Lovey’s eyes grew brighter, “It was the night you followed Trudy down those steps… granted, we did not know you were eavesdropping,” he assured her blanching flinch.

“We smelled you there afterward,” Trudy confirmed and grasped her mate’s paw, “but what we said to each other that night… was all true. And you witnessed it.”

“So... I married you...?” Lovey realized, quite beside herself as he looked between the tod and vixen, “Does that make you... Mr. and Mrs. Savage?”

Mr. Savage nodded as he pulled something from his coat pocket. “Much to your further delight, we would like to make it official in the eyes of the Blessed Court,” he mused with such a grin, “Even if it is only written on one of your music sheets.”

The rabbit gasped and covered her mouth as he unfolded the familiar paper with a familiar script... but unfamiliar content. It was a marriage certificate for “Capt. Piberius Savage” and “Trudence Hopps”, already signed by Diocles Hopps and notarized. “Daddy, he...?” Lovey asked, gawking in starstruck wonder at the parchment.

“It was truly a whirlwind, Lovey, Diocles adopted me as a daughter and then handed me over in matrimony on the same day... almost the same hour! He insisted on it,” Trudy revealed, “said that ‘Forestdwell and rabbits everywhere had a long road ahead of them and that it might as well be a Hopps to take the first step’. But...” Trudy also mused, her grin far more reserved as her mate pulled out a quill, “seeing as how this is a Chronicler mateship, we will need the signature of our trusted witness.”

So overcome with joy was Lovey that it hardly crossed her mind when Trudy pulled a key from her pocket and unlocked the cage, simply accepting the quill and quickly reading over the certificate (as is prudent when signing one’s name). Tears filled her eyes once more (and a handkerchief provided by her dear vixen) as she looked up to the solemn tod in reverence, “It would make a terrible song, Pibbers, but this is one of the most beautiful bits of legal writing I have ever read.” Her name graced the bottom next to her father’s and beneath her foxes’, feeling serene as she knelt on the floor beside the certificate. Lovey then realized she was on the floor beside her cage and inquired either fox with astonishment.

Trudy giggled and held up a jailer’s key. “A lame kit could have swiped this; the guards might as well be wearing pots over their heads,” she coolly boasted, “You unlocked my chains so I thought to return the favor.”
Piberius blew on the ink and folded up the documentation for him and his mate, tucking it away with the quill. “Now then, we’ve all got our wits about us so let us escape while the window is still open—”

“No.”

Sly eyes stopped and stared, exchanging brief bewilderment of the rabbit’s denial.

“But Lovey… you’re free,” Trudy begged, “we knew we could not convince you so we tricked out of that cage, to escape with us.”

“There is a ship ready to sail with the morning tide,” Piberius continued, though his confidence waned as Lovey implored him, “A few of us are ready to flee to safe harbors, including Sasha, the Turntides… a new life awaits us across the sea, in a village north of Liondon. A cousin of mine can… give us… sanctuary…”

“I cannot,” the rabbit weakly protested, “thank you both for risking so much to save me but… I cannot run from this… if I do, then all those small predators who put their faith in me will be abandoned. All that I have done would be for naught if I do not face my punishment. I applaud your cleverness,” she added, holding either paw to comfort their stricken faces, “and wish you both a safe journey to your new lives… my sole regret is that I cannot yet join you.”

Piberius looked to Trudy and she to him before he offered, “Then we will stay in Forestdwell,” and then scoffed when she denied it, “And why not? I have survived worse and might very well be paramount in some manner of heroism.”

“As though I would simply leave you to hang!” Trudy agreed, placing both paws around Lovey’s.

Those silver paws were then touched with the pearlescent tears of the rabbit, her face upon them. “Truly, I could not ask for better friends… but to know that you are both safe and beyond Their clutches would be my dearest wish fulfilled. I can face my punishment knowing that you cannot be used against me,” Lovey explained as best she could, “Please, forgive this selfish plea… go, have faith as I do, that this will end for the best.”

Trudy choked and recovered. “You ask a harsh thing of us, Lovey,” she said but embraced the Silver Belle with all her might and Piberius was soon to join her, “but we understand. There will not be a heart alive in this world that does not know about all that you gave for us.”

“I wish it does not come to that,” Lovey truly believed, “but I am ready if it does.” They embraced a moment longer… until the rabbit spoke up again. “Trudy…?”

Either fox chuckled as Trudy corrected her posture and pulled back her coat, revealing the kit-and-kaboodle that the rabbit’s paws had found. “A surprise for when you got on the ship, but now will have to do.” The unintelligible blathering which followed -- uncharacteristic of Lovey -- proved remarkable not only in its enunciation but just how sufficiently her ladylike composure surrendered to utter girlishness.

“We figure he’ll have Gus and Ellie’s kit to grow up with, at the very least,” Piberius reported as the rabbit loved upon the rounded belly of the expectant mother, “Should be leaps and bounds for future fox-wolverine relationships.”

“He’?” Lovey adored, “A son for certain? Have you decided on a name?” she then probed when it was confirmed, as determined by Trudy’s intuition.

“I think ‘John’ or ‘Robin’ would be excellent choices, classic names for any charming tod,”
Piberius recounted, resting a paw upon his mate’s stomach.

Trudy hummed and scratched under her mate’s chin. “It is my understanding that the firstborn is named after the father, in some manner or other,” she teased.

Piberius reviled (despite the attention to his jaw causing his leg to kick), “A *nonsense* tradition, truth-be-told. Who would ever name their kit ‘Piberius’? *Awful* name, really,” he ranted, though his audience had already heard it before and it amused them no less, “I only got it because my two older brothers got the better choices of the family while *I* was stuck with some roustabout uncle on my mother’s side.”

“Well, *I* love the name but we’ll see what fate has in store for us,” the vixen decided and as the frivolity died down, she addressed their trusted witness with barely restrained sobs, “We truly cannot convince you otherwise, Lovey?”

She shook her head, likewise only just maintaining her countenance. “You know the law as well as I: because I stepped forward to take the punishment for another, any escape on my part would only return it ten-fold for whom it was originally intended. True, I might be the first rabbit, the first non-predator in all of recorded history to invoke it… but invoke it I did,” Lovey extrapolated, “So now… I place my faith in the hearts and minds of the very kingdom of Forestdwell and all her denizens, that they might see the error of an unjust law before I am set to hang for my ‘crimes’.”

Indecision was never a failing of the Silver Belle’s and both her foxes knew it… Their tears could no longer be held as they embraced one last time… and the most terrible of all… Piberius was forced to lock up the first rabbit he ever let into his heart… and without a doubt, his dearest friend.

Perhaps it was an omen of amazing fortune, that kit in Trudy’s belly. Perhaps it meant that Lovey’s path would turn out for the better… that she might get to see that young kit and help raise him, whoever he turned out to be. Though she was alone again as the day began anew, Lovey felt a sliver of hope shine with the waking sun… Perhaps there need be no more lives taken by an unjust law, from the palace to the Iron Bridge… Perhaps she would be the last to ever stand trial for it… Such a prospect heartened Lovey, that she might close that wretched door and lock it for all time. She need only be the final mammal to face whatever punishment was decided for her.

“Only *I*.”

No voice came in the dead of her sleep… only the soft clink of a stirring spoon.

Lovey slowly rose to the rich smell of brewing coffee, cream, sugar, and frosted cakes. She started, wondering if she might have dozed off in the middle of a visit at the Hopps Estate but discovered that… no, she was still in sackcloth, still in her cage… and that no one informed her that she hosted a guest. Any reflexive plea for forgiveness was immediately stifled by the presence of a beige rabbit, whose gray coat was hanging on a nearby hatrack.

He (she?) sat quite comfortably in their cushioned, snakeskin leather chair with an extended back designed specifically for the long ears of a rabbit to rest upon. Another rabbit had refilled her (his?) cup with hot percolation and casually walked through the open door of her cage as… They poured some cream, provided by a tray on a nearby end-table (which was of a cute, modern design). There was a crew of rabbits just outside (including a stenographer), along with some wildebeests who were all doing *some* manner of business… there was even a small band softly playing some common, delightful piece that Lovey was quite sure she recognized (and could name, if bothered to).
“Good morning, Laverne,” They plainly said, affixing a bookmark before closing their reading material to express the utmost courtesy, “Might I interest you in some coffee? Tea? These cakes are delicious, do try one.” Their smile was stale and etiquette forced, as though capable of presenting nothing else than a façade, eroding them until all that remained was the husk everyone else saw.

“Thank you,” Lovey responded, sitting as straight and tall as any lady of the King’s court, “but I would rather have your name; you have me at a disadvantage, you see.”

They considered it for but a fleeting moment. “No,” was the simple answer as They continued munching on a cake, “my name is irrelevant. All that matters is that you understand what you’ve done and that you are in the wrong.”

Unkempt brows arched over purple eyes as the attached head canted in rapt incredulity.

“Which is a shame, really,” They continued matter-of-factly, “a rabbit from a merchant household rising to such prestige as to have turned the king’s head with her song… you’d have been a powerful asset.”

“My song has reached many ears, hasn’t it,” she idly mused.

“It is the sole reason you still breathe. Now,” They said, “don’t misunderstand this meeting, Laverne, this is not a ‘last chance’ but an ultimatum—”

Silver fur bristled as Lovey’s leg flexed to prevent it from thumping. “‘Comply or else’? I do not doubt your power and influence, whoever you are or represent,” she reviled, the music outside her cage undeterred, “but we Hoppses are not so easily intimidated. Surely, you had some paw to play when the kingdom took everything of ours? Everything we scratched together after Captain Redbeard’s curse?” The Steel Horn huffed quite haughtily. “The Estate, our ancestral home, stolen out from under us in some vain attempt to dissuade me… We are only a few dozen who remain, crowded into a hovel on The Burrow’s border by the pity of those still accepting of us, yet still, my family and I defy you.”

They sipped. “Accidents happen all the time to the Unfortunate, warren-collapse chief amongst them,” They coldly reported and then set their coffee down, “but besides the point. You are ignorant as to what is really happening in the kingdom. Shifties tear out their own eyes for you and even lop off their own paws; some bleed out in the streets or catch an infection in this pitiful attempt at rebellion. All that remains is to clean up the mess.” They shrugged. “Honestly, we could not have asked for a more bolstering demonstration than this. To top it all off, your intimate circle of rabble-rousers has already fled to some backwater hamlet; if need be, extermination is easily accomplished with our only quandary as to whether it is quiet or not. No,” They said and repositioned how they sat, “what we want from you is to elaborate on how you affected Bag-o’-Bones that night on the Willowbranch.”

Lovey was genuinely stunned such that she couldn’t hide it from her interrogator. “This is about Hector?” she found herself asking aloud.

Their eyebrows also arched incredulously before sighing, paws folded on their knee with a smack of their lips. “Captain Redbeard is our mad dog and has been straining his leash ever since. We cannot get a clear answer as to why he ravages the world in broad daylight and quite frankly, his tantrum wears on our resources and patience; were he not such a tremendous investment, he and his abominations would be at the bottom of the ocean long ago. But...” They sighed again, “as it is, you are the only other mammal in the entire world who can reliably detail the events of that night, so... here we are.”
Silver and beige studied each other for a solid minute.

“You said this was an ‘ultimatum’,” Lovey finally said, “so what shall I get out of this, were I to truthfully answer?”

They chuckled… a hollow attempt at laughter. “Not your life, if that was your concern. No,” They said, “you shall hang and be mourned the minimal length of time for a rabbit of your station and former prestige; not remembered as the ‘Silver Belle’ or the ‘Steel Horn’ but only as…” They snapped their fingers to point at the stenographer, “‘Loony Laverne’, there we are; make note of that one, it’s rather good. Oh, maybe there is something we can do with her association… consorting with foxes, yes, that’s the ticket.”

“I am still quite alive,” Lovey interjected.

“No,” They dismissed in reclining languish, “you are dead. Your body shan’t nourish the soil but be cremated, the ashes scattered to the winds amongst your precious, departed shifties. The name of ‘Hopps’ is still an old one, though, can’t have that go to waste,” They considered, “Some other rabbit families can marry into it, build it up again; fairly simple stuff, really.” They grinned. “So you see, Loony Laverne, you are inconsequential… but after you recount what happened on the Willowbranch, truthfully, you might possibly be remembered as the ‘Silver Belle’ who… tragically fell to the sly influence of foxes, even though she gave her very life and heart to share a bit of her Fortune with them. You can even be laid to rest in the gardens of Primrose Court, alongside your ancestors, while the Hopps Estate flourishes anew. Let us also promise not to regrow your family as slave-traders for the nobility, should you comply.”

Dainty paws wrung the hem of her sackcloth… and then smoothed it out. “I am sorry but I simply cannot abide this any further,” Lovey then said with only a momentary glance to her ‘guest’ before pivoting to address the band, “Excuse me? Excuse me, yes, please forgive my interruption,” she then continued when the playing paused, some looking to Them for direction, “but… ohh… ‘Second Violin’, would you be so kind as to tighten your D-string?” Lovey requested, “I fear it is a bit flat in an otherwise beautiful performance.”

The second violin looked genuinely concerned and tuned their instrument, testing it with a soft pluck.

“A little more,” Lovey guided, “like this.” She sang a single note and the violinist adjusted to match the sound. “Perfect,” Lovey commended and so the violinist beamed (as adjacent bunnies nodded their agreement), “Let’s pick it up from the sixth bar if it’s not too much of a bother? I do love that part. Now, everybunny, with ‘First Violin’; ‘Cello’, in c-minor, please,” she instructed and so they flipped a page back, awaiting the thump of her foot to start them off.

They quietly fumed. “I was warned about you.”

Ever the clever rabbit, Lovey returned her attention to the exchange. “Rest assured, I am quite harmless. And I do apologize for ignoring you but music so rarely graces this drab place that a slight correction was imperative to its appreciation,” she offered, “As to your ultimatum… why are you doing this when you, quite clearly, have the means to work towards a better world? You, whoever it is you work for… why do you wrench chains and heartstrings in so ironclad a fist?”

They scoffed and sipped. “Because it is for a better world and always will be, no matter how many times self-righteous types like you ruin everything with your misguided heroism,” and then set their cup in its saucer, “We are but humble administrators ensuring that laws are kept, quotas met, and bureaucracies maintained; that history reflects what is correct, for future precedence.”
“Just what is Hector to you, to accomplish such lofty intentions?”

“Captain Redbeard is… a boogierabbit, to strengthen the fear of the dark… a common enemy, if you will,” They mused, “Like us, he is the ‘necessary evil’, doing what good mammals cannot and should not.”

“But… all those lives he takes… ruins to sate his bloodlust…?”

“Necessary sacrifices for the greater good,” They assured with a patronizing flick of the wrist, “It’s a delicate balance but as a whole, everyone is kept either happy, purposeful, or… both, in some cases.”

“Happy?” Lovey argued, “Mammals are kept in subjugation! Slaughtered in untold numbers!”

“Only what is necessary,” They sighed, “Perhaps it is better that you weren’t conscripted, the influence is on you like a stink.”

Her heart fluttered and nerves steeled. “The sly influence, you mean?” she aloud wondered.

Languid brows arched again but over bored, rolling eyes. “Shifties are such a nuisance, we’ve tried for centuries to pin them down -- sparing successes, mind you -- but they always prove unpredictable; foxes especially and especially to rabbits,” They reviled and shuddered, “We almost eradicated the worst of them, too… but, as you know, it’s nigh impossible to kill a fox unless they give their life. Redbeard had it down to an art so we simply cannot lose him quite yet.”

“Of course,” Lovey coyly answered and relaxed the slightest bit where she sat, “and since it does appear that we are conversing, perhaps it is proper to use one another’s names… Wouldn’t you agree, Ms. Midgett?” Coffee sprayed from mouth to cup as the beige rabbit gawked angrily over its rim, the band outside abruptly stopping as she grabbed a napkin to wipe her face. “It was no great leap of logic, ma’am, my hearing is exemplary and I can discern a female voice from male, no matter how well you hide it.”

Ms. Midgett stammered. “Y- You… would… how…”

A piece of invisible lint was picked from Lovey’s sackcloth. “I am well versed in rabbit heraldry, spanning centuries, and there is one family who claimed such a rationalizing moniker as “necessary evil”; who bred rabbits for slavery and the Black Sheep Market during the darkest times in history… the cursed lineage of the Midgetts. More to the point,” she continued, “that night at the Gaudere is etched into my memory, replaying every night until I can fall asleep… so I see that rabbit who presented the lion and know his face… while you were the doe who poured my beverage. Why you deemed it necessary to flaunt that authoritative gray coat in some attempt to fool me is the only confusing part of all this.

“So, that night on the Willowbranch,” Lovey recounted and waited for the stenographer to recover, “I can say with certainty that Hector fell deeply in love with me… and it tortures him… tortures us both. He wrote me letters… beautiful prose of a soul who knows only darkness and hate… who seeks absolution, rest… but you keep him as a monster, to control others with fear.” The Steel horn scoffed and sat so tall that she towered. “I had never given it credit before but those foxes you despise so much tease me as an ‘alpha-rabbit’; utterly absurd, of course,” she half-mused, “but I cannot help but wonder if I am Hector’s alpha.” She then stood over the cowering beige rabbit, filthy and garbed in sackcloth but regal. “…Am I your alpha?”

The teacup rattled in her paws as she stared up at Lovey… longingly… unable to tear her eyes
away…

“What is your name?” Lovey kindly asked, leaning forward with a presented paw and beaming such an angelic smile that it reflected off her beige fur. Their fingers nearly touched and her lips nearly spoke… but then the world clattered and quaked in a terrible racket, sending both rabbits off their feet.

One of the wildebeests had struck the cage and was looming over them both, contemptuously awaiting their reactions.

Ms. Midget looked up, remembering how she leaned forward to grasp the offered paw and then was thrown into Lovey, holding each other on the cage’s floor. They shrieked, vaulting back as though the silver rabbit had caught fire, hopping after stepping on a piece of the broken cup which shattered on the floor. Disheveled fur was smoothed and the gray coat wrenched off the hatrack, cold daggers glared before They hissed, “I will watch you choke and swing.”

Lovey lifted herself as best she could, re-establishing line-of-sight. “Then you will lose Hector. I am the only thing in this whole world that keeps Forestdwell safe from his rampage… and he will throw himself upon this kingdom’s spears… Too many lives will be lost to his terror as the navies of the world battle his armada… Please,” she then begged, grabbing the gray coat before it was whisked away, “if you can rescind the law for which I hang, pardon all who are guilty of it… then maybe I can speak with Hector, quell his bloodlust?”

Their features hardened as the coat was yanked free to exit the cage, the chair, broken cup, and all else gathered up in departure. “You are a very sly bunny, Laverne Hopps. It would be easy to allow even one of King Wapitius’s pardons for your life to see the light of day… the only thing easier is preventing them.” They snarled, affixing their coat, “Bag-o’-Bones will fall in line once you are gone and any shifty or mammal who dares deviate from our established order will be annihilated. No Tenets from ‘past kings’ in the Stars Above; no ‘quick and clever’ Aslan whispering to his Chroniclers … only us, who know how things should be. Fortuna Regenta.”

“Fortuna Regenta,” those outside repeated.

And then They were gone.

The jailcell was empty… and it seemed that the whole world was, too, as the day continued on with or without her regard. A final chance had come -- one she had not even known was possible -- but despite her cleverness, it was for naught. So… all that remained was a dying wish known only to whatever Star Above heard her wringing heart…

“For years, they heard my voice; today, let them listen.”

Tears for a Sunset

All of Forestdwell gathered at the Iron Bridge, where the worst heretics hanged for their crimes. Scaffolding erected on the level above the foot traffic… where her gallows were visible in the fiery light of a sinking sun. Large mammals stood on stone walks and wood planks; smaller mammals stood atop the canopy frames and outcroppings. A three-way war of emotions waged amongst the populace between indignation, shame, and despair… many who supported her had forgotten her… many who suffered from what happened during the riots hated her…

It seemed that after her closest supporters fled the kingdom, the only ones who remained that still loved her were less than two dozen Hoppeses. They stayed on the outskirts of the spectacle to see
their cherished Lovey hang for an unjust crime… Otto snuck closer… Though unable to reach her, he wanted to see her one last time… even if she would be covered in filth and regret… he knew she was a good bunny. He knew, even if gossip and slander were thick on the lips of all who gathered to see her hang and justice exacted…

His and many other ears perked at the approach of an armored carriage, one transporting the most dangerous mammals in society… surely, Lovey would be inside. It came to a creaking stop for a guard to open its door… and out she stepped…

And oh… how she shone…

The kingdom, it seemed, had not seized all of her property… the gown which was ordered those years ago for the Gaudere remained “in transit” and so never in any one mammal’s possession, somehow snuck onto her between the prison and gallows… but there it was, the grandest, most beautiful dress for a bunny to wear, one meant to hold an audience with the king himself… A lily-white dress with lavender accents and silver filigree lace that bounced and swayed with each step, cut low upon her chest to show her treasured carcanet -- Tears for a Sunset -- resting below her neck… No sackcloth-heretic was she… but the Silver Belle that everyone knew… that everyone loved…

Four guards marched astride her as those of Forestdwell were struck dumb and mute, her tiny form escorted, it seemed, to the wooden steps… and when the dress proved a great hassle (as it was meant to stand upon the stage), a guard even helped her up on the platform… The operatic gown billowed its subtlest in the bare breeze, and as she took her place beneath the noose -- her paws uncuffed and folded before her, as a lady should -- Lovey resembled a deity… with her silver-powdered makeup and gentle emphasis to every feminine feature on her face, the tiara around her head and curved decoration up her ears… It was as though she were crowned with pearlescent antlers and framed in magnificent wings…

For a brief moment… Lovey stood above the awed, wonderstruck crowd as it dawned on them just who, exactly, they sent to the gallows… whose neck that the executioner cinched a rope around… and yet… seemed confused as to why it happened…

They began to weep… and wail… and protest in despair for their cherished Silver Belle… and she cried with them, try though she might to keep her chin aloft as tears trickled down each cheek to splash upon her glistening opals… Even the executioner choked beneath his black hood, paws falling from the lever… And the crowd gasped as Lovey hurried to him and though the tips of her ears barely reached his shoulder, she attempted to prop his arm back into position.

“We are where we need to be when we need to be,” Lovey said, her soft voice echoing across the sound… and the executioner nodded, clawed fingers gripping the lever as best he could. He seemed to ask something which she then considered, returning to the trapdoor… and gazed across the western sea, “I thought myself ready for such a thing as this but… if I may… I would like to watch one last sunset…”

Some… many collapsed to their knees and wondered, agonized as to why she was to hang… The orange-red light faded but before it could, Otto cupped his mouth and tried to sing, his voice hoarse from crying and drowned out by every other sobbing mammal around him… And then it happened, as such things often do, in an instant: another voice echoed across the sound, loud and clear and majestic… His ears swiveled to find its source…

He recognized the voice! And such a magnificent, powerful voice that Otto wished he could see where he stood… it was Mr. Pibbers, singing “If You Would Come With Me” as though the whole kingdom were his audience… there were other voices, all joining him in their own way, in their
own key, in their own harmony… all singing for Lovey…

Her eyes opened and blazed with a heartfelt glory, grasping her heart and gushing with a radiant joy as she marveled, “Can’t you hear them? It’s beautiful.” Soon, the crowd came to hear it as well… and soon, many joined… even some of the guards sang though they might not understand why… The light traveled down her rope as she settled back on her heels, paws folded at her waist as she beamed such a smile that it outshone the sun. Lovey breathed, listened, and then said, “I am ready.”

The song stopped.

The rope, taut.

The church bells mourned.

Thousands… upon thousands of glistening eyes watched from the inky shadows, watched the prey who had gathered on the Iron Bridge… and then they were gone.

The lanterns were lit.

The crowd lingered.

The night grew cold.

Otto returned to his family. His family returned to their hovel. The kingdom continued on… as the song echoed in every heart from the palace to the Iron Bridge.

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Hopping ahead…

Judy almost couldn’t read the diary’s final entry… needing Bo to finish it as she fought every instinct to throw herself upon her dear grandfather and hug him… Oh, Pop-Pop, she adored, simply unable to speak, it must have been so terrible for you but you recovered her diary… Maybe it was smuggled out when she changed into her gown… Truly, you are amongst the bravest bunnies to ever live, Pop-Pop… Lovey would be proud!

“He even a saved newspaper clipping,” Bo remarked, taking great care to unfold the pressed piece of media from the last century to confirm that it, indeed, said:

LAVERNE HOPPS TO HANG FOR HERESY

“He was there,” Judy managed to say, gazing at the back of Pop-Pop’s aged head as he nodded off in his seat, “and Piberius returned! Did anyone else, I wonder…? And what happened afterward? Ohh, if only we could know!” Her arms were soaked from drying her eyes so much and her sinuses were an absolute mess, but still, Judy’s heart was practically a hot-air balloon with how big, warm, and lofty it felt. So, she busied herself with gathering up the scraped-clean chili and ice cream bowls while Bo -- ever-so-carefully -- secured the delicate proof of history erased.

“I know a publication history nerd from my online message board who can authenticate this clipping,” Bo said, “it’d have a very specific parchment composition, among a dozen different ways to pinpoint who printed it when and where. With any luck, they won’t be in league with that Them!” he joked.

Laughter was shared between the two of them… but only the two of them.
Graham sat aghast, paws trembling as he gripped the air. “Is that it?” he quietly demanded, vaulting and nearly wrenching the White Book open to skim its final pages, urgency gaining in his voice, “That can’t be everything, there should be more…”

“Whoa, cool it!” Bo pleaded, practically diving as the diary flung from his cousin’s clawing clutches to allow for his skull to, instead, be wrung, “Aren’t you OCD about this sort of thing? Throwing around priceless artifacts like they’re a dime-a-dozen…” the history buff grumbled.

“Useless, useless,” he ranted under his breath.

The stacked dishes were guided to one paw while the other braced her hip, the first in a chain of disapproving gesticulations. “What’s gotten into you, Graham? I get that you’ve got questions -- I’ve got buckets of them -- but the only one who can answer them is Pop-Pop, and as I said, it’s a miracle that we got as much out of him as we did.” And why are you being so guarded around me? I thought we could be wholly open with each other, she huffed.

Coffee-spotted ears sprung and pointed at one Hopps and then the other, he then looking directly at Judy. “Yes, yes, a thousand apologies…” he said, correcting himself, “So you… recovered his memory?” he considered, a dark excitement filling his features, “Perhaps you can do it again? Or tell me how you did it.”

“That was a fluke,” Judy argued with a roll of her eyes, “Getting more could take… weeks of professional therapy.” Though I can definitely see now why he confused me for Trudy, it almost felt like Lovey was talking about me in some of those entries. I wonder if that had something to do with my being named ‘Judy’, aside from being named after Aunt Judith… or was it Uncle Jude…?

“Yeah,” Bo agreed, “we don’t even know who you would sound like, Graham, if anybunny at all.”

Graham’s ear pointed at his larger cousin. “‘Sound like’, you say?” he quietly inquired over his shoulder, sauntering past the yawning centenarian on his way to the door, arms folded as he idly scanning a bookshelf near there, “From Otto’s past, you mean.”

“Apparently, he confused Judy’s voice for Trudy’s because he didn’t have his glasses,” the chocolate bunny continued, directing attention with the book before catching himself and tucking it under an arm, “thus, the name mix-up.”

“Let’s call it a day, I’m bushed,” she suggested and rolled her shoulders in a shrug before using both paws to hold the bowls, And, I think we’ve run out of viable excuses to stay holed up in here. We’ll be up all night explaining this to the rest of the family.

“No,” the butterscotch rabbit then said and with a frightful heave as he wrenched the bookshelf from where it stood to crash in front of the door, “No one leaves until I get answers!”

Chapter End Notes

“Vernal Husband” references the Stag or Elk from the finale piece of "Fantasia 2000", originally hinted at earlier in Loyal (e.g., "His spanning antlers"). He is a deity in this Zootopia world revered by antlered ungulates and this is his most common name; the name itself is derived from the Stag’s animator, Ron Husband, and the Stag’s association with the "Spring Sprit", i.e., "Vernal Sprite".
“I thank you, Miss Lovey” is the same note that Big Gid gave to Lovey in Brave, chapter 1.

[“Oh, simply marvelous!” Lovey gushed and clapped her dainty paws.] While not intentional, this is reminiscent of how the Sultan reacted to Prince Ali's procession in the movie “Aladdin” and the degree of sincere exultation to how Lovey felt is comparable.

It is worth noting that the noose at the end of the guard’s rod is made of snakeskin leather.

[“…a village north of London…”] is a subtle nod to Nottingham and Sherwood Forest from the movie, “Robin Hood”.

[“…friends and family… heartstrings cut to destroy their spirit…”] This should sound familiar to what Chester Vandersnatch explained to Jackie back in Loyal, chapter 13.

[It was as though she were crowned with pearlescent antlers and framed in magnificent wings…] This describes a creature from Germanic mythos called the "wolpertinger", a bunny with antlers and wings, that for the sake of this story is a deific figure in rabbit culture. The reason for this is that birds are considered divine, by-&-large, and antlers analogous to crowns, ergo a winged and antlered rabbit would be a mythic figure to a historically subjugated species.

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