Zootopia Detectives!AU

Judy and Nick are wrapping up their careers as patrollers and moving up in the echelons of the ZPD. Not a moment too soon, as a seemingly open-and-shut case reveals a deadly conspiracy that could tear the megalopolis apart. Once again, Team WildeHopps must race against the clock against cunning old enemies and dangerous new ones.

Notes

ARTIST'S TUMBLR

http://mistermead.tumblr.com

TVTROPES PAGE (show me some love!):

http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/WaterUnderTheBridge

TRANSLATION NOTE:

If you want to translate this fic into any language, go ahead! You have my permission!
DON'T WANT TO READ?
GREAT!
I GOTCHU COVERED FAM
AUDIOBOOK LINK HERE:
https://soundcloud.com/comicanon/sets/audiobook-water-under-the
The Sun Sets
The massive pursuit car sat behind a tree on the side of the road, lying in wait. Its great
great engine idled, humming like a sleeping lion. Inside, two figures watched the road intently. One, a
small grey rabbit, tapped her fingers on the wheel of her mighty steed, her face drawn into an
almost wistful expression.

“Last day on the beat.” She broke the silence, looking over at her partner. “Gonna miss it,
Nick?”

“Nah,” the officer opposite her replied, he was a slender red fox with a dour, focused mien,
his eyes hidden and intent behind a pair of reflective aviators. “I’d say our business here is just
about finished. One more day and we’re on our way, Carrots.”

The rabbit smiled. “One more mission.”

“Our white whale, Judy.” Nick smirked, notching his aviators down his snout to wink at
her. “Our Moby Dick.”

A red sports car raced past at just under the speed limit, Nick grinned. “Speak of the devil!
Speeding the limit, as usual. Officer Hopps, fire up the roof.”

Judy snapped on the lights and sirens, pulling out of their enclave and into traffic. The
pursuit car thundered over the open pavement, easily gaining on the car as the lights flashed and
sirens pealed. The sports car acknowledged its authority and pulled off to the side in an aloof,
orderly fashion; Nick wrung his hands together. “Avast, Starbuck! Man the harpoons!”

“To the last I grapple with thee!” Judy laughed and waved her fist dramatically. “From
Hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake, I spit my last breath at thee!”

Nick leveled his sunglasses, his face stone once more. “He piled upon the whale's white
hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as
if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon him.”

Judy simply blinked in surprise as Nick smirked; on his face was that practiced smug
expression. “Not a huge Melville crowd in Bunnyburrow?”

“I never actually finished Moby Dick,” Judy admitted, bashfully.

“Well, it’s not an easy read,” Nick said, waving her off. “Also, Whale War stories probably
don't strike the same chord in the heartland as they do out here.”

“He’s waiting, Officer Wilde,” Judy reminded, pointing at the car. “Hop to it.”

Nick inhaled deeply. “You smell something, Rabbit?”

Judy sniffed sharply and nodded. “Fear.”

Nick opened the door with deliberate flair and marched over to the parked car, his face a
mask of impassive determination. The window rolled down and out leaned an infamously poker-
faced wolf: ‘Stony’ Steven Staziak.
“Good afternoon, Officer Wilde,” Stony said as he reached out, his license and registration in hand. “What appears to be the problem?”

Nick’s face did not slip as he took the notation, his pen a blur. “Do you know how fast you were going back there?”

Stony paused and answered flintily. “65.”

“63,” Nick corrected.

“Isn’t the speed limit 65?”

“Yep,” Nick answered, pausing for a moment before asking. “Do you know why I pulled you over just meow?”

Stony blinked, the first chip in his mirthless armor. “Excuse me?”

“I said: do you know why I pulled you over…” Nick repeated. “…just meow.”

“Did you just say ‘meow’?” Stony asked, the corners of his mouth curling upwards, an unprecedented feat.

“Why the Sam Hill would I say ‘meow’?” Nick said, his voice convincingly stern, he looked at himself in the side-mirror. “Do I look like a cat to you? Do all us non-wolves look alike to you or something?!”

“No! No, I just…misheard, I guess.” Stony rubbed his arm nervously, his defense smashed.

“Alright, we got that all clear up meow?” Nick said, only just holding back his own laughter as he went in for the kill. “Meow, I gonna ask you again: do you know why I pulled you over?”

Stony clapped his hand over his mouth as a series of chuckles escaped him, Nick could have called it off there, but he wanted total victory. “Meow, what is so goddamned funny?! You’ll stop laughing right meow yiff you don’t want a ticket!”

Stony Steven doubled over and loosed a hearty laugh, slapping the dashboard hard. Nick smirked and clicked the receiver on his radio. “My time, Officer Hopps?”

“1:12!” she cheered over the radio static. “A new record!”

“Beat Stony and in record time, too. A good cap to a career.” Nick let the act drop and joined in laughing alongside his long-time quarry. “It took a while, but I finally figured you out, Stony. Or should I call you Chuckles?”

“You can call me a little sad to see you go, Officer, you and Officer Hopps,” Chuckles said between giggles, waving to Judy, who waved back. “Last day on patrol, right?”

“You know it.” Nick nodded. “Maybe we’ll see you around.”

“I hope not,” Chuckles shook his head. “Detectives. Man, that’s a rough trade, Officer. If you ever see me on the job, I hope it’s to arrest my awful neighbors!”

“Well, you keep speeding the limit, Chuckles. Our replacements might not be so keen on making you laugh.”
Nick turned around and headed back to the cruiser when Chuckles called out to him. “So, why did you pull me over?”

Nick casually kicked the rear end of the sports car, just above the bumper, causing the trunk to pop open with a snap. “Improperly secured trunk. We’ll let you off with a warning this time.”

Judy smiled as she watched Nick hop back into the patrol car. “Have fun?”

“Oodles,” Nick said pithily.

“Tomorrow’s the big day,” she said as she pulled away from the shoulder of the road. “Today, the sun sets on patrol officers Hopps and Wilde, but tomorrow it’ll rise on two new detectives!”

“About time you got a promotion,” Nick reached over and punched her shoulder playfully. “Shoot, the whole thing is basically a formality. You’ve solved how many cases as a patroller? Four? Five?”

“Me? Zero.” Judy turned to look at him, her smile warm and loving. “But us? We’ve solved six.”

Nick chuckled and shook his head. “I always forget the Nighthowlers Case.”

“To six and many more, partner.” She offered her fist.

Nick reached out and bumped hers with his. “Partners for life.”
Is it bad that I want a legit detective show starring cartoon animals?

Because that's what I want...badly.

Judy’s eyes snapped open; she was staring at her ceiling. Despite having been asleep not five seconds ago, she was fully conscious and alert; to day was the day, the big day. Judy squealed in delight and leapt from the bed, shedding her nightie and putting on her uniform in a blur of motion.


“Hey!” Pronk shouted from the room over. “Shaddup in there! Tryna sleep!”

“Dude, don’t be an ass,” Bucky chided. “She’s getting that promotion today.”

“Oh, right. Well, shaddup in there, detective! Tryna sleep!”

“Better.”

Judy rolled her eyes and raced out the door to her car, trying and failing to keep the excited skipping to a minimum.

A few minutes later and Judy pulled up to the precinct, pulling her car into the underground parking lot. She waved hello to the various cops going about their business, most of them returned the wave or in some way acknowledged her back, a far cry from when she had first arrived some year and a half ago. Judy entered the foyer, her eyes searching the various uniforms ambling about until she found who she was looking for. Nick stood casually next to the reception desk, chatting with Clawhauser as the two shared a coffee and donut; at the onset of their partnership Nick had taken to schmoozing the tubby cheetah as an in for an extra set of eyes and ears. Clawhauser being not only the receptionist, but also the primary dispatch for the area, this practice had paid off on multiple occasions over the course of their time in patrol; and all it cost him was a dozen donuts a week. That was just one of the things Judy admired about her partner, his ability to scrounge up advantages and angles from seemingly innocuous places. She caught herself staring at the fox for a moment too long and bounded over to him.

Clawhauser saw her coming and waved excitedly. “And the better half of WildeHopps has arrived! Officer Wilde has been parked here like a puppy, waiting for you to show. Pining…”
Nick casually flicked a candied pecan from one of the donuts into Clawhauser’s open mouth, sending him into a coughing fit that invariably turned into friendly chuckling. “*Cough-cough!* Good shot! *Cough!*”

The fox turned to her and smiled that practiced self-satisfied smile. Judy knew this smile, Nick was just as excited as she was, but was loath to show it. If there was anything she could admit to finding less-than-wonderful about him, it was his apparent inability to be frank and open. No matter the situation, Nick Wilde always kept something to himself. To call it frustrating was an understatement. “Morning, Carrots.”

“Good morning, Officer Wilde,” Judy said as she walked by, waving to Clawhauser. “Officer Clawhauser, how’s life?”

“Sweet,” he said through a mouthful of donut. “By the way, your whole department is meeting in the showroom today. Chief Bogo has a few announcements to make.” Nick and Judy took a moment to exchange knowing glances, followed by playful elbow nudges. Clawhauser simply watched them contentedly. “…in five minutes. So you better hurry, WildeHopps!”

The duo made their quick farewells and set off for the showroom, Clawhauser sighed dreamily. “Ah, love…”

“What was that he called us?” Judy said as they speed-walked through the precinct. “Wild hops?”

“WildeHopps,” Nick corrected, gesturing at himself and then Judy. “Clawhauser has some…ideas about us.”

Judy felt a blush building up in her ears but willed it away, taking a page from the Nick Wilde handbook of obfuscation. “WildeHopps? Heh, sounds like a bistro.”

“A good bistro,” Nick agreed. “With a quaint little deck, a novelty wood-fired oven, and overpriced hot cross buns.”

“And a special hops and dandelion salad with roasted almonds and blueberries in a basil balsamic reduction,” Judy looked into the middle distance and framed the imaginary banner. “WildeHopps, where being hungry is a crime!”

Nick laughed and clapped her on the back. “Sounds like someone skipped breakfast.”

“Can’t eat, too excited!” Judy squealed. “Aren’t you? I mean, we’re going to be detectives! Solving crimes, busting cases, and really making a name for ourselves!”

“We did all that just fine on the beat,” Nick said and paused, leaning in and whispering, his eyes lighting up with genuine excitement. “But yes, I’m completely freaking out! What do you think the Chief has in store for us?”

“It’s in the showroom, right? Maybe he’s planning a big ceremony? Maybe–maybe he’s gonna give us our badges in front of everyone!” Judy said, starry-eyed.
“I’m imagining all the beat officers lined up as we walk down the aisle, The Throne Room starts playing, and Chief Bogo, rocking a shiny silk dress and silver necklace combo, deferentially loops our badges around our necks,” Nick said, pulling Judy close and swept his arm out in front of them, “…aaand scene.”

Judy laughed and elbowed him gently. “Be serious, Nick!”

“I’m always serious!”

They entered the showroom; it was full of their fellow police officers, more than a few heads turned as they entered. They took their seats and sat patiently as Chief Bogo prepared his dissertation behind the podium at the fore of the showroom. Behind him the projector screen had been deployed, clearly for some kind of demonstration. He cleared his throat and addressed the assembled officers.

“Alright, first things first,” the burly buffalo rumbled, gesturing glibly at Nick and Judy. “Everyone, meet our two new detectives, Detective Nicholas Wilde and Detective Judy Hopps.”

A smattering of applause rang throughout the room; a few sarcastic quips could be heard. “WildeHopps out solving cases? Color me surprised.”

“And this just in, the sky is blue.”

“No, see, they’re official now. They get assigned cases instead of stumbling bass-ackward into them!”

Bogo silenced the crowd with a snort and a glare. “Well, maybe now that it’s actually your jobs, you’ll follow procedure and do things by the book for once!”

“I will!” Judy announced with a salute.

“She will!” Nick quipped with a sarcastic salute, getting a round of laughter from the surrounding cops.

Bogo rolled his eyes shuffled the papers and pulled a suitcase from under the podium, opening it. “Anyway, second order of business; I am pleased to announce that our new self-defense units have just come in, allow me to introduce the Multi-Species Incapacitation Module.”

“MSIM?” Nick muttered. “How long until we get our Miss’Ims, Chief?”

“Shut up, Wilde!” Bogo snapped as another round of laughter rose from the crowd. He pulled out the new weapon, Nick and Judy blinked and glanced at each other; it looked suspiciously like the dart guns used by the perps in the Nighthowler case. Bogo continued, turning on the projector as he did, “As you can see, this is a much different take on self-defense and neutralization than any system we’ve had before. The MSIM includes the standard pepper pellets and pepper-spray that we are all accustomed to, but has several new technologies that will allow even the smallest of us to apprehend and neutralize the largest of suspects. First and foremost, the zap-net:” the projector flicked and showed the projectile in both stages of deployment. “With the use of a laser range-finder, the net stays compact until a certain distance from the target, whereupon it deploys and ensnares the perp, reactive fabrics in the net become stiff and constrict. For smaller sized suspects the net can be a full-body restraint, this will make it exceptionally useful in Rodentia and other small-persons districts. Against larger perps, it can sufficiently restrict the range of motion enough for officers to subdue them manually.”

“ ‘Zap’-net, sir?” an officer asked.
“I was getting to that. In the event where the suspect is not sufficiently subdued, the net also doubles as a tazer, with a transmitter on the gun beaming electricity to a receiver at the center of the net. Reminder, this function is strictly forbidden against any persons below forty pounds, the last thing we need is a police brutality case, especially after what we’ve been dealing with these past few months. Any questions on the zap-net? No? Moving on.”

“Beam me up, Mr. Spock,” Nick whispered to Judy. “We’ve got some new toys, Carrots.”

“Shhh!” Judy hissed. “No more quips!”

Bogo gestured at the cylindrical piece under-slung on the barrel. “This is a flashlight.” Judy glared at Nick, who made a dramatic show of biting his knuckle in restraint. “It also houses a laser sight and a dazzler. Be careful with the latter as species with keener eyesight will react more strongly that those without. In most species, effects range from vertigo, flash blindness, and severe nausea. Like the net, it’s meant to facilitate manual takedown. Any questions on the dazzler? Alright, that covers it for the Miss’Im—ergh…the MSIMs, you will each be issued one by the end of the day. Now, onto item number three…”

An hour later and Judy and Nick sat about their desks, languidly filling out paperwork and arranging contacts in order of value. Judy sighed and leaned back in her chair. “Man…he didn’t even wear the shiny silk dress.”

Nick snickered and spun around to look at her. “I guess we should have expected that. We’ve kinda been a tick in his ear for a year and a half, figures he’d want to mess with us.”

“Yeah…” Judy said, rubbing her belly. “You down for brunch? I’m starving!”

“I could eat.”

They rose to their feet and made for the door when Chief Bogo surged into the room. “Listen up, people, listen up! We’ve got a B’n’E near Savannah Central Park, Rikko Electronics Warehouse. We have a perimeter set up and crowd control in effect, forensics teams are just wrapping up the prelim, so we need to get some feet on the ground and survey the scene.”

“Any witnesses?” Officer Fensworth asked.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Bogo pointed at Judy and Nick as they gathered their things. “Detective Wilde, Detective Hopps; you’re on the case.”

The two detectives looked at each other and nodded, their expressions suitably indifferent as they gathered up the necessities before heading off to their squad car. Only when they were in the squad car did Judy loose a triumphant squeal, jumping over and hugging Nick. “Our first case!”

“As detectives,” Nick clarified, hugging her back as aloofly as possible. “You still up for brunch?”

“We’ll have make it a drive-through,” Judy said as she turned the key, the squad car roared to life and thundered out of the station’s underground parking lot.
The cruiser pulled up to the perimeter of the crime scene, beat patrol cops served as security and crowd control as forensic teams picked the building apart for clues. A flash of their badges and they were escorted into the crime scene. The building was large and spacious, a store front with a sizable warehouse in the back. The only point of entry was the large portal where the storefront window had been, a great fan of broken glass stretched out on the floor, the shards shimmering as the forensic teams took pictures with high-flash cameras. The on-site officer, a burly goat named Hircus, clopped his way over to them.

“ Detectives,” Lieutenant Hircus grunted. “Looks like a pretty standard break and enter. Earlier this morning the storeowner, one Mrs. Mabel Hannity, came in to open up, only to find the window blinds swaying in the morning breeze. None of the other storeowners or passersby noticed the window was broken, and no witnesses to the actual crime have come forward. Mrs. Hannity has given us the inventory list so we can find out exactly what was stolen, so far it seems like they targeted the big LCD TVs and laptops. I’ve got a team on it and they’re wrapping up as we bleat. Projected losses are coming in at maybe fifteen, twenty grand. A plucked eyelash for a place like this.”

“Good, get that to me when you’ve compiled the list so we can put out an APB for any of the goods that show up on the streets.” Judy jotted down in her notebook. “Detective Wilde, do you have any contacts out there that’ll be able to keep their ears up for this kind of thing?”

“Already on it, Detective Hopps,” Nick said as he thumbed at his phone, drumming up a list of middlemen and peddlers to call. “Yeah, I got two or three…dozen. Big fancy TVs and small, overpriced laptops? Easy sell, low-level hawkers and flea markets will probably be our best bet, and it doesn’t take much to make those guys squeal.”

Judy smirked, Nick was never an actual criminal, in fact he’d never even been arrested before joining, but he knew people, knew organizations and, most importantly of all, knew exactly who did what in Zootopia’s seedier markets. He’d done business with them all at one point in time or another during his twenty years on the streets, and knew how to keep tabs without looking suspicious. It was another thing she admired about him, how he so gracefully and organically used his checkered past to his advantage and turned a once small-time conman into a valuable resource for the ZPD. It was almost inspiring.

Judy and Nick made their way into the warehouse where nearly a dozen SOCOs were meticulously checking the inventory of the spacious warehouse. Judy closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, the smell of cardboard mixed with the dusty scent of concrete served to underline the richer, more verifiable scents of the mammals within. She could smell sheep, she could smell various felines, and she could even scent the raccoons and lemurs checking the inventory in the upper level some twenty feet over their heads. Her ears rose slowly in dawning alarm: something wasn’t right, there was something…hidden?


“No sure,” she said, sniffing again. “Take a whiff, tell me what you smell.”

Nick sniffed the air; his nose was somewhat more attuned to animal scents than hers. “Yeah…yeah, this is interesting. Someone was here that isn’t here now, someone musky, but the scent is covered. I smell…bleach and…something soapy. Cleaning supplies? Something else, too,
“Yeah, kinda smells like…like a fridge?” Judy offered.

Nick blinked, his own ears perking in alarm. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“Scent-blocker,” Nick huffed again. “Unscented fur products mixed with hydrogen-peroxide and baking soda, fridge deodorizer, it neutralizes natural smells. Someone didn’t want us knowing who or what knocked this place over.”

Judy drummed her fingers on her arm, her keen mind humming; she turned to an ocelot SOCO walking by. “Do we know what the egress point was?”

“Loading bay,” the SOCO jabbed a thumb at the shipping area. “Hard pack dirt and gravel out there. Tracks suggest a two-ton flatbed or box truck.”

“Tracks? Any prints?” Judy’s carrot pen danced as she made notes. “Foot prints, paw prints?”

The SOCO shook his head. “First thing we did was dust the place down and check for trails. What we found were inconclusive, they were these big wide indentations.”

“Flat-foots,” Nick said with a sigh. “They’re these padded planks some crooks use to hide their tracks. Tell me, what are we looking at for hair? Any shedding, fibers, or catches?”

“Yes, we have hair, but keep in mind that this place has twelve workers, Detective, and three species amongst them.” The SOCO flipped through his notes. “We’ll run a quick DNA match with samples from each worker and wire the findings to you.”

“Much obliged,” Nick said, signaling his partner to follow him. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Fur-nets,” Judy replied. “Combine that with flat-foots and scent-blockers and we’ve got some awfully careful burglars.”

“Yeah…we’re gonna wanna check the security system when we get back to the precinct. Place like this, stuffed with electronics and other expensive toys, ought to have a pretty good one.”

“Cameras” Judy said, pointing at the little black sphere hanging from the ceiling. “And all those doors and windows are pretty wired up. So why didn’t we get this call last night when the alarms went off?”

“Because they didn’t,” Nick cocked his head; this whole thing was really starting to rub him the wrong way. “You thinking a hack-job?”

“Or something,” Judy shrugged. “In either case, it’s a lot of work and planning for, adjusting for street mark-down, ten-maybe-fifteen grand? They wouldn’t be able to fit much more than that in a two-ton.”

“And that’s before re-sell, risk assessment, the whole nine,” Nick rubbed his chin, Judy was right: this case stank. “Not to mention you’d need three or four big fellas to move the goods quickly, a driver, a lookout, maybe a hacker. So split a small pot more than five ways…would it even be worth it? They should have brought a bigger truck, no reason not to.”
Judy nodded thoughtfully. “No reason at all.”

Judy and Nick stepped out of the storefront and scanned the street, a few rubberneckers had shown up to gawk for a bit, but by and large the crime had gone relatively unnoticed.

“Thoughts, Detective Hopps?” Nick said, putting on his sunglasses.

“Standard break and enter,” she answered, not even bothering to sound convinced. “Perps break in, say, two or three in the morning. Newer, nicer part of town, not many nocturnals about so no one sees boo. They get in, grab the TVs, and have their truck in the waiting. In and out in maybe half an hour.”

“Open and shut,” Nick said with a nod. “All we have to do is wait for the itinerary to come in, get a couple beat cops to shake down the schmucks selling stolen goods, they squeal, we get names, arrests, convictions. Bam. The first official WildeHopps case closes inside of a week. Clean, pretty, and a nice shiny star on our record.”

“Case seven, closed,” Judy smirked wryly. “Truly, we are the juggernauts of the ZPD.”

Nick grunted and struck a muscleman pose. “We just! Can’t! Be! Stopped!”

Judy sighed and looked serious. “But it stinks.”

Nick grinned and nodded. “Like a hippo’s privy.”

“And neither of us can put a finger on it!” Judy exclaimed. “It’s just…”

“Too clean,” Nick opined, counting off the points. “Hacked alarms, broken window, missing stock, tire tracks…”

“But no prints, no scents, and probably no fur,” Judy added. “It’s like a crime just happened without any people being involved.”

“A grim thought,” Nick grunted, pointing over at the cafe across the street. “What say we grab a coffee and interview the neighbors?”

“Sounds like a plan, Mr. Man,” Judy said, skipping over to the café called Beans ‘n’ Beyond.

Across the street three mammals sat in a white Ford F-150, watching the cops scurry hither-thither about the crime scene. The trio had seen their share of police cordons and CSI gatherings, and this one filled them with confidence: even the geek-squad of forensics was desultory and uninterested. This case would be shut inside of a week.
“I still don’t like it,” said the muscular Lynx behind the wheel. “It’s too much attention.”

“You kidding, Grigori?” the gnu in the seat over snorted. “A broken window and nothing stolen would have drawn the wrong kind of eyes; neighborhood watch, old bored shut-ins with binoculars, not to mention the owners and workers getting antsy. And if they did call the cops, who knows what they’d be looking for or what they’d find? Nah, this way the cops keep the busybodies out and focus on finding a bunch of TVs and laptops, instead of what they might find if they didn’t know what to look for. It’s strategy.”

“It’s stupid,” Grigori growled.

“Beat me at chess and we’ll talk.” The gnu laughed.

“Plus…” said the ferret in the back seat. “We each get a free TV and laptop!”

“Still,” Grigori reprised. “The operation is compromised. There are police maybe five feet away from six kilograms of thermite and high explosive, not to mention the catalyst.”

“Oh, I’m not saying that this wasn’t a colossal fuck-up,” the gnu agreed, gritting his teeth. “What a time for Dick-Dick to grow a conscience. I swear, when I get my hands on him…”

“You’ll give him to me, right?” the ferret chuckled, flashing a wicked shark-like grin.

Grigori shuddered at the thought and pointed out at the police cordon. “Wait…I know them.”

The gnu and ferret looked over to see a fox and rabbit in detective garb bantering with each other. “Yeah…that’s, uh, those hero cops. You know, the ones that stopped the Shearer vigilante.”

“And a bunch of other stuff, like the Nighthowler plot,” Grigori said pointedly. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

“Cute, cute, cuuuute bunny…” the ferret crooned, licking his lips.

“Calm your glands, Finn,” the gnu snapped, his brow creased with worry. “This is fine. No, we’re okay. These two basically walk into huge plots and conspiracies all the time. There’s no way they’d take a break and enter seriously!”

The three sat in tense silence as the pair walked across the street and into a café, they could tell that neither of them liked the smell of this case, them and their damned instincts. The gnu hissed a string of foul curse words and punched the dashboard. “Finn, when we get Dick-Dick, can I watch what you do to him?”

“You bet, Elim,” Finn chuckled, his tongue racing across his shiny white teeth. “Oh, I love an audience, really inspires me to get creative.”

“If anyone deserves it…” Elim rumbled, turning to Grigori. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. We need to lay low for a while.”

“I hear that,” Grigori replied, firing up the truck and pulling away in a casual manner. “Should we tell the boss?”

“Not yet…” Elim muttered. “But let’s keep tabs on this case. Reeeeeeal close tabs.”
Shows like CSI and True Detectives would be a lot weirder if crime scene investigation required deep, involved sniffing.
I'm thinking the Shearer would be like a Disney-esque Punisher. Only instead of painting the walls with people and bullets, he'd shave off all their fur and leave them trussed up someplace public with incriminating evidence.

I guess that would make him more of a Brow-Beater than a Punisher.

The café air hung heavy with the smell of coffee and food. Nick and Judy sat opposite of the manager of the café, a curvy and decidedly nervous-looking pig by the name of Rachel Schwein. She wrung her hooves together as Judy pressed her.

“There’s no need for you to be nervous, Ma’am,” Judy said soothingly, she typically took up the slack as the ‘good cop’. “No one’s accusing you of anything, we just want to know if you heard anything last night, or saw anything or anyone suspicious yesterday.”

“I know, I know…” Rachel said, sipping her coffee from a trembling hoof. “It’s just… things have been so tense since all that business with the Predators that went savage and the, uh, the cause of it. My old neighborhood practically fell apart, no one trusted anyone anymore. And even after the Predators were proven innocent, people still feared them and they felt betrayed. It’s why I moved here to Savannah Central, it felt safer. But now this happens!”

“We have no reason to believe that this crime was species-motivated.” Judy reached across the table and patted her hoof. “But I understand. It’s not easy watching things change. But we have to try and heal the rift between Predators and Prey, and that’s going take trust. Do you trust us to do our best to find these perpetrators?”

Rachel nodded and smiled, her eyes darting to Nick and back to Judy. “Yes. Of course, Detective Hopps; my girls have followed every one of your cases, you’re something of a hero to them.”

Judy smiled radiantly. “Well, we won’t let them down, will we, Detective Wilde?”

“Of course not,” Nick said, with a smirk, as he sipped his tea. “This green tea is excellent, by the way.”

“Thank you, Detective,” Rachel said, warmly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help. I didn’t see or hear anything, that’s why I’m so shaken by this.”

“Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Schwein. If you remember anything, give us a call,” Judy said as she handed her a card.

Rachel took the card and pocketed it, calling out to them as they left. “Detectives! Would you mind, er, taking a picture with me? It’d be something to put on the wall, and my friends probably wouldn’t believe that WildeHopps was here!”

“There’s that name again,” Judy whispered out the corner of her mouth. “How long have
people been calling us that?”

“Like, a while,” Nick whispered back. “You seriously never heard it before today? Go get your photo-op over with, it looks like there’s a commotion outside.”

Judy walked over to Mrs. Schwein, the pig looked confused for a moment as Nick continued to gaze out the window at the disruption. “Err…Detective Wilde? Are you coming?”

Nick blinked in surprise; he could believe a Prey wanting to take a selfie with Judy, but him? “Oh, uh, sorry, I just thought…”

“Come on!” Judy said, waving him over. “It’s not WildeHopps without the Wilde.”

Nick rallied quickly, posing next to Rachel as Judy huddled in close, a happy grin on her face. Rachel handed him her phone and he held it out, smiling winsomely.

“Oh, you’re barely in it, Detective Wilde!” Rachel said, wryly. “Get in here!”

Rachel pulled herself into Nick, practically grinding her plump hip into his lap; he barely suppressed a squeak when he felt her give his rump a hearty squeeze. Judy pulled in close as well and said: “Say ‘cheese and crackers’!"

“Cheese and crackers!”

The picture turned out surprisingly well; Nick was relieved to see that his poker face had held, as he was his usual naturally handsome and photogenic self in the picture.

“Perfect!” Rachel squealed in delight. “Oh, the girls will be so jealous! Thank you, Detectives!”

“Don’t mention it,” Nick replied flatly as he walked out the door, the bell rang as he did.

“Come back anytime!”

“We will!” Judy followed after him, a huge, smug grin on her face as she pulled up alongside.

“Shut up,” Nick said glibly as he flicked out his aviators and put them on.

“I didn’t say anything,” Judy replied, still smiling; it wasn’t often that she saw her partner flustered.

“Shut up.”

Judy and Nick closed on the commotion; two patrol cops were exchanging heated words with a leopard dressed in what appeared to be a ratty, tattered play costume.

“Holy…Judy, what’s the date today?” Nick said, picking up the pace.

“July third. Why?” she answered, matching his speed.

“It’s our old pal Shakespeare, Carrots,” Nick said, amused. “He’s always in Savannah Central this time of year. Something about the moon.”

“Shakespeare? Your ‘acting coach’?” Judy said, recalling the superlative job Nick did in fooling Bellwether; in a way, they owed him their lives. “Well, we’d better help him out, then.”
“Good idea,” Nick said fondly. “Crazier than a shithouse rat, but I’ll be damned if he doesn’t play a good Richard III.”

As they walked away, a small antelope peered nervously from behind a garbage can, his large amber eyes, wide with terror, were trained intently on them. He gave an askance glance in either direction, ensuring the coast was clear, and in a few short bounds the tiny antelope, also known as a dik-dik, crossed the street and pushed his way into the café.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said, perfectly masking his nervousness as he bumped into Mrs. Schwein. The pig snorted in surprise. “Oh! I’m sorry!”

“S’nothing,” he said, planting himself at one of the smaller chairs. “Gong-show out there, eh? Cops all over the place!”

“I know!” Rachel said, readying her notepad for his order. “I just don’t know what this neighborhood is coming to!”

“Well, wasn’t that Judy Hopps out there?” The dik-dik asked. “She’ll sort this out, eh?”

“Her and her dishy partner!” Rachel giggled. “We need more cops like them if Zootopia’s going to get back on track. What’s your name, hon? For your order.”

“Richard Richardson,” Richard said with a smile, sliding Judy’s stolen calling card into his pocket. “And yeah…they’ve got a tough job ahead of them. I hope they’re up to it.”

“Sir, what are you doing with a…” The Wolf Officer asked, holding up a bleached skull, turning to his partner. “Cougar?”

His partner, a hippo, nodded. “Cougar.”

“With a cougar skull?” He resumed, turning back to the incensed leopard, who was dressed in matted, dusty pantaloons and a tattered, stained silk vest.

“Ah, but that is none other than Yorrick, good sir! Jester to King Hamlet himself!” Shakespeare said with a trilling, dramatic voice. “Alas, poor Yorrick! I knew him, Horatio!”

“Uh-huh,” the Hippo Cop intoned. “Yeah, okay, but where’d you get it?”
Shakespeare scoffed and gestured broadly. “Yonder graveyard, of course!”

“Okay, that’s it,” the Wolf Cop said. “We’re taking you in, Mr. Theater.”

“On what charges, O gaoler of the arts?!”

“Obstruction of justice, vagrancy, and illegal possession of mammalian remains.” The Hippo Cop moved in on his side, grabbing him by the shoulder. “You have the right to remain silent, so, please do.”

“Vagrancy?! I’ll have you know, sir, that I am an actor! A performer and conveyor of works of the Bard of Avon himself!” Shakespeare spat as they apprehended him. “Unhand me, you oafs! You philistines! I desire us to be better strangers! Thou and thine mothers hast the most unpleasant of similes!”

“What appears to be the problem, officers?” Judy said smoothly as they approached, sure to brandish her detective’s badge.

The Wolf Cop cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Well, ma’am, just apprehending this suspect. We came over to ask him if he had seen anything last night and he let slip that he had spent the night in the park across the street, so that’s vagrancy. Suspect then became belligerent, that’s an obstruction of justice, and a further search revealed that he had mammal remains in his possession. We’re taking him in for—”

“Good job, Officers, that’ll be all,” Nick interrupted, patting Shakespeare on the shoulder. “We’ll take the interview from here, thank you.”

The two turned back to Judy, who made a shooing gesture. “You did good. Thank you.”

The Hippo and Wolf exchanged confused and annoyed looks, but ambled away regardless, heading back to the perimeter. Shakespeare spat and bit his thumb at them as they left.

Nick waited until the cops were well away before turning back to Shakespeare. “Shaky-baby, what’s good?”

“Nicholas! My boon companion!” Shakespeare cheered, clapping him on the back. “O but the downtrodden, the wretched, and the chiefest recipients of woe are made proud, jocund, and fortunate in the presence of friends! Truly, it is mammals such as yourself that inspired the Bard to breathe life into the clever Prince Hamlet, the noble Othello, and the wise Prospero!”

Nick wiggled his eyebrows at Judy, getting a giggle from her. “I always thought of myself as a Falstaff or a Mercutio, maybe an Iago on a bad day.”

Shakespeare laughed and turned to Judy, bowing deeply. “And the Lady Hopps! The cheer and amiable disposition of a forest nymph with the beauty and poise worthy of a whole bible of sonnets! Pray tell, fair maid, how may this sotted old stage-tapper be of service?”

Judy withstood the torrent of praise with a humble bow. “Shakespeare, you’re too kind. But yes, Detective Wilde and I were wondering if you happened to hear or see anything related to the break-in last night. I hear you were in the park around that time?”

Shakespeare nodded gravely, his ears flickering down as he recalled. “Yea, and lo I did witness the foul act of vandalism.”

“Vandalism?” Judy pressed. “You mean the break-in?”
The leopard shook his head. “Nay! Verily, it was a action worthy those sackers of Rome, the Vandals and their creed live on in such willful destruction!”

Nick took a seat on a bench and patted the spot next to him. “What did you see, Shaky?”

“First, I must establish the setting!” Shakespeare leapt up onto the bench, hand out and over his head as he gestured at the sky, while also adroitly tossing a wide-brimmed hat onto the ground. He spoke, his voice strong and stentorian: “‘Twas a clear night and the moon hung high in the sky, round and turgid as though fit to burst in a wash of platinum light! I, like many of my ilk, feel a strong bond towards this softer, gentler celestial body, her cold luminance and full figure pulled at me, bidding the passion within me to brim forth with which to woo her!” As Judy jotted down notes she heard a metallic clink from behind and turned around to see a small crowd of pedestrians, someone had tossed a handful of coins into the hat.

“In my ardor, inspired thus by my silver mistress, I broke out a copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream and read aloud. Ah! Reading such divine comedy beneath a Savannah moon’s light in the titular season is pleasure so rarely pursued! It was only when my fair lady resumed her eternal journey towards the horizon that I heard it! The sharp, icy sound of shattering glass, the clatter of an endless multitude of shimmering shards, and the clamor of shod feet!” Several more handfuls fell into the donation hat, a member of the audience began to shovel popcorn into his mouth.

“I turned in time to see a small figure, I could make out naught of their features despite the moon’s assistance and my crepuscular heritage, for they were clad head to toe in textured black garments! They were small and dainty, whoever they were, but sleek and fast as they sped down the dim road. They were readily pursued by a duo of larger, burlier, and similarly vague silhouettes that join’d the street through unlatched door, but they were hopelessly outmatched by the vandal’s fleetness! A heated debate ensued, and the two brutes hurried back inside. And that, good friends and venerable constabulary, is all that I saw of the crime.”

A round of applause rose from the crowd and Shakespeare bowed deeply; Nick turned to Judy with a questioning eyebrow. Judy waved her notepad at him and shot him a chiding look, ‘of course I got it all’. “Well, Shaky, I see you’ve gathered an audience, as usual. I’ll leave you to your good work. Thanks for all your help.”

“Detective Wilde! Detective Hopps! I bid thee farewell! I know as the sparrow knows the air, as the fish knows the ocean, as the sun and earth do surely spin that you will get to the bottom of this mystery. I bid you good day!” Shakespeare made off towards the park and his portable stage, followed by an assortment of intrigued mammals.

“Zootopia’s a livelier place with people like Shakespeare in it,” Judy said fondly.

“His testimony might as well be about dragons for all the good it’ll do as evidence, though,” Nick said solemnly. “I trust him, but no court ever would. But we’re ahead of where we were five minutes ago, at least.”

“We know that one of the burglars broke the window between one and two in the morning, when the moon is waning, and that they appeared to already have access to the building when the window was broken,” Judy said, consulting her notepad. “And our guess about the fur-nets is confirmed.”

“And that the door was unlocked, with no alarm, and there were at least two larger accomplices.” Nick grunted and shrugged. “Well, let’s get back to the precinct and hit up those security logs. Then we put our case together and start sweeping for the stolen goods.”
“Why, Mr. Wilde! I dare say that sounded borderline professional of you!” Judy exclaimed with faux-revelation.

“Bite your tongue,” Nick retorted. “You’ll go and give people all the wrong ideas.”

It was later that night and Elim cracked a Tusker Lager and plopped himself down on the couch, the cheap springs squeaked and protested as he did. He sipped the light, malty beverage as he searched the Internet on his phone, trying his best to ignore the occasional grunt of effort that came from the far side of the room.

“15…16…17…” Finn counted, sitting on the bar as it rose and fell. “Why you doing this? I’ve seen you bench twice this much and you’re sticking with this baby-wipes stuff?”

“Not…about…weight,” Grigori growled through gritted teeth, notching the laden barbell on the stand once he hit 20. “It’s about strength. I don’t need to bench 400 five or six times. I need to press 200 as much in a row as I have to.”

“Yeah, well, I still say all this gym stuff is for the birds,” Finn snorted. “You’re risking natural speed for fake power, and that never ends well.”

“Speed is for the weak,” Grigori scoffed, getting under the barbell again. “Like claws and fangs. Only when you beat your opponent do you truly defeat him. With claws and teeth, you might get lucky and hit an artery and it’s over; with fists and grapples, you must first truly best your enemy and bloody your hands.”

“Personally, I prefer the blood in my mouth, where I can taste it.”

The lynx snorted and started hoisting anew. “That’s because you’re a psychopath.”

“Better a psycho than a de-clawed, fangless kitten!” Finn snapped back.

Grigori growled and notched the barbell, swiping at the agile ferret. “Little shit! I’ll wring out your guts like you’re a big-mouthed icing bag!”

“Try it, powder-paws!” Finn hissed, dodging his swipes with aplomb. “I’ll gnaw open your throat and crawl inside your lungs before—”

“Dammit!” Elim roared, hurling his beer across the room, where it exploded across the concrete wall in a shower of glass and foam. “Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!”

“What’s the rumpus, Elim?” Finn said, unaffected by his outburst.

“Hold on!” Elim seethed, sending the link to their phones. “Found this while trying to keep tabs on the Rikko Case. Read from the top!”

Finn and Grigori opened the link, before them was a pleasingly laid-out blog, with various symbols of mammalian solidarity and Zootopian ideals. The blog title, in bold black and white text,
Outrage! Vandalism! A crime to eclipse the combined heinousness of the proto-fascist Leodore-Bellwether administration!

...

Well, not really. Earlier last night in Savannah Central, a troupe of thugs broke into the Rikko Electronics Warehouse and Sale. The theft was significant, sources claim in excess of ten thousand dollars, and the crime itself was unusually sophisticated in its execution. Regardless, it would seem that our two-faced friends in the media would like us to think that this incident is of no concern were it not for two very important factors: Detective(!) WildeHopps (#WildeHopps4life)!

Yes, Zootopia’s star team is back on the streets with shiny new badges and a dirty new case! ‘But Honey!’ you say. ‘What could this case possibly be, besides a common-as-dirt B’n’E?’ Well, I ask you to look no further than the dynamic duo’s decidedly colorful resume.

- A missing mammals case: Corruption in city hall, illegal kidnapping, and a Prey-Supremacist conspiracy (which a certain someone *cough* Honey B *cough* totally called, BTW)

- A speeding sloth: Dangerous, corrupt, and brutal underground racing rings in the Nocturnal District

- An urban legend: Actual giant cockroaches! A genetically engineered foodstuff bred and unleashed by a jilted scientist!

- A brutal mob war: Well, it actually was a brutal mob war. But funded clandestinely by Reptilian gangsters!

- A bog-standard arrest for public intoxication: Drug ring bust.

And, last but not least:

- A calm, mild-mannered antelope taxi-driver with a few outstanding tickets: None other than the dreaded vigilante known as The Shearer, bearing the souls, flesh, and wrong-doings of his victims to all!
Notice a pattern yet? If you’ve been with me from the get-go, then you know full well what I’m getting at! Anyone with even basic pattern recognition can see that every time WildeHopps has bumped into a case it has exploded into a massive, horrifying conspiracy! The first two or, say, five times it happened, pssh, yeah it’s just a coincidence, but six ?!

What, exactly, aren’t the ZPD telling us about this case? Why assign WildeHopps to something so mundane? Just where can I find one of these marked down street-TVs I’ve been hearing about? Only time will tell, I’m afraid, but yours truly will be digging, and no amount of hissing or gnashing of teeth from the powers that be will dissuade this reporter of that most vital resource: the truth!

Now, let’s discuss the new uniforms on our favorite duo. As detectives, they have been freed of their blue slacks and are now open for a more casual mien, and might I add that this is paying major dividends for the bouncier half of the team.

‘‘With a tight pair of corduroy pants, a tastefully unbuttoned purple top with rolled up sleeves, and a pair of charmingly aloof sunglasses, our grey law-bunny is looking good. The ensemble…’’ Ugh.” Finn grimaced as he flicked through the article. “It goes on like this for pages.”

“So,” Grigori grunted. “What’s the big problem? It’s shit written by an idiot on the Internet. Like saying, ‘ugh, that spit bubble in a bucket of spit is especially gross!’”

Elim shook his head and sighed. “Look at the views! It’s shit, yeah, but it’s popular shit!”

Finn looked at the page view counter for that article alone and gave an impressed whistle. “Nearly six digits in, what, five hours? I think we’re in the wrong business, Kitten.”

“Call me ‘kitten’ one more time,” Grigori growled.

“Kitten,” Finn grinned a toothy grin.

The two moved to launch at each other when Elim stomped his foot on the ground. “Dammit, guys! This is fucking serious! This article is going to get millions of views, millions of extra eyes looking where they shouldn’t be! Media attention! This is a big deal!” Elim turned away from them and rubbed his temples, breathing deeply through his nose as his mind raced through his options. He rallied and smiled. “No…it’s no biggie. Well, yes, it is, but it’s a small biggie. A biggie smalls.”

“’Throw your hands in the air, if youse a true player.’” Grigori and Finn droned in unison, pumping their hands in the air.

Elim ignored them and got out his phone. “I’m gonna have to call the Boss.”

Finn and Grigori’s faces dropped and they became silent, the muted sound of the phone ringing echoed throughout the room.

Someone picked up, the voice was rough and metallic, obscured behind a modulator. “Since when do you call me, Elim?”

Elim looked nervous, but his voice was strong and steady. “It’s an emergency.”
“I’ll say,” Boss responded, even through the modulator the frustration was clear. “Did you read Honey B’s new magnum opus? We don’t need this kind of attention, Elim. What happened?”

“Dick–uh, Mr. Richardson had some…reservations about the job,” Elim ran his hand through the crest of fur atop his head. “And he felt that a brick was the best way to convey them. He got away.”

“Never mind him!” Boss snapped. “Why steal the merchandise?”

“To throw them off our trail. If they thought it was just a robbery, they’d focus more on the stolen goods than the warehouse itself, while also keeping it clear of busybodies as a crime scene.”

“Hm. Clever.” Boss paused. “We’ll see soon enough if it’s too clever by half. What do you propose?”

Elim gulped and cleared his throat. “Our driver, the one that the rental truck is registered to, can he be bought?”

“He already is,” Boss said, glibly. “A patsy? Elim, how fiendish.”

“Yeah, well, I figure City Hall will want this one shut down fast after that article hits the wind. We need him to go around selling the merch like an idiot, get pinched, and cop to the whole thing. Can you get him to do that?”

“Elim, my boy, if I say ‘jump’ he says ‘off which bridge?’” Boss said with a decidedly disconcerting chuckle. “He’ll do it.”

“That’s why you’re the boss, Boss,” Elim said, mustering a final measure of courage. “And we need one more thing.”

“You want more? Careful now, my boy; I like you, but don’t go thinking I’m Santa Claws.” Boss rasped. “What is it?”

“Richardson is still out there, Boss,” Elim said, clenching his fist. “He knows too much, hell, he knows everything! When we try to get this case closed he’ll come forward. He’ll come forward because he knows we’ll be after him and he’ll go to the Fuzz for protection. He knows that the only way he’ll be safe is if we’re all behind bars, or dead.”

“I’ll get some people to find him, then,” Boss said flatly, clearly unimpressed.

“Richardson can disappear, sir.” Elim pressed on. “He can get gone and stay gone for a good long while, but he’ll try to sell us out first, it’s his way. I know who he’ll try to contact, either Detective Hopps or Detective Wilde, and I need an ear on the police line so we can get to him first.”

Boss considered this for a second, no doubt reviewing Richard Richardson’s impressive resume in their head. “That won’t be easy. But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, sir,” Elim said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Clever boy, so clever,” Boss crooned. “There’s a place in my organization for people who get things done, Elim. Don’t disappoint me.”

“I won’t, sir. Thank you, sir.”
With that, the line went dead.

After a pause, Grigori spoke up. “So?”

Elim smiled and exhaled, feeling as though he had not taken a breath in years. “Boss is on it. The case should be wrapped up in a few days. Bing-boom, no more WildeHopps, and we can get on with our job.”

“WildeHopps,” Finn scoffed. “Sounds like a fancy pub.”

“Yeah,” Grigori agreed. “One that sells a bunch of craft beers and microbrews.”

Finn nodded. “With some seasonal options and local brands to pad out the holiday rushes.”

“Maybe even a decent international selection?” Elim opined, deeply regretting hurling his last Tusker at the wall.

All three murmured in agreement, a lull passed until Elim spoke up. “You guys wanna go grab a beer?”

Finn smirked and nodded. “I could drink.”

“I’ve been having carb-cravings all day,” Grigori said. “I’d kill a Guinness or four.”

Judy slumped over at her desk, massaging her sore eyes with her fingers, detective work required a lot more staring at screens than one would assume. She felt as though her eyes were trying desperately to look at one another, or at either side of the room, or anywhere that didn’t have an obnoxious glowing screen in it. Despite this, she felt exultant; she had unearthed even more info with which to build their case. Security logs and documents were so much easier to acquire with her new clearance; she didn’t have to threaten or bribe anyone at all…yet.

“Nick, do you have those print-outs?” Judy called tiredly.

“Right here, Carrots,” Nick said, sounding just as worn-down as her. “You heading out?”

“Yeah, I’d say we’ve scrounged up just about everything we can until any matches on the merch comes up.” Judy stretched and sighed. “Want to head back to my place and give the case a once over?”

“Is that Judy-Talk for ‘hey, Nick, wanna hang out’?” he said as he stacked all the papers and pushed them into his briefcase.

“…Yes.” Judy smiled as she prepared to leave. “Besides, I’ve got a little surprise for you~”

Nick blinked and looked over at her, a sly smile on her face. There was something in her eyes that he couldn’t quite place. “Well…when you put it like that, what are we waiting for?”
They packed up their things and padded tiredly through the foyer, their overcoats slung over their shoulders in the still-hot July air. Behind the reception desk was Ben Clawhauser, briskly sorting through dozens of files, appointments, and to-do assignments.

His plump face lit up when he saw them, his infectious grin beaming. “Ah! Nick! Judy! Finally heading out, huh?”

“Yeah, Claw,” Nick replied. “Leaving work to go work some more. Carrots is on a roll.”

“Oh?” Clawhauser’s face lit up even more. “Gonna spend some quality time together?”

Nick scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Gee, Ben! Talk like that could see a dozen plain donuts on your desk tomorrow.”

Clawhauser’s smile vanished, his ears laid flat against his skull. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would,” Nick smiled menacingly. “And you and I know full well that you’d still eat ‘em…eventually. Joylessly, but eventually.”

“I take it back!” Clawhauser proclaimed. “I hope you and Detective Hopps have fun on your totally professional case review.”

“My man!” Nick laughed and snapped his fingers. “I guess variety packs are the best deal, when you get right down to it. See you tomorrow, Claw!”

Clawhauser waved goodbye, squealing happily to himself once they were out of earshot. “Those two are soooo cute!”

The door to Judy’s flat swung open and Nick stepped in, a look of distaste on his face. “I never get used to how itty-bitty this place is. It’s like a broom closet.”

“I don’t mind,” Judy said as she squeezed past him. “It’s not much smaller than my room back in Bunnyburrow.”

“What’s rent?” Nick said, spreading his arms, noting that the span was almost the width of the room. “Or do they pay you to live here? Whatever it is, it’s not enough.”

Judy sighed and rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Homes and Gardens. Help me set up the corkboard.”

From their suitcases they produced the relevant documents and set them up on the large corkboard that took up much of the opposite wall. Inventory lists, confirmed missing goods, and security logs festooned the wall alongside pictures of the crime scene and forensic reports. Judy and Nick sat next to each other on the bed, laser pointers in hand.

“Alright,” Judy began. “The rundown: the initial break-in is believed to have occurred some time between midnight and one in the morning. Of course, we can only guess because after
reviewing the security logs we found that the entire security system had been down due to a bug. A week prior, Rikko had reported said issues to Maxbell Security, the installer and maintainer of their security systems. This means that cameras, window, and door sensors were down during the robbery. Coincidence?”

“Could be anything,” Nick said, pointing at the assembled mug shots of the owner and employees. “For instance, say any of these chuckleheads is frustrated and heads out to the bar where, after a few drinks, they let fly that the security system is totally bunged.” Nick scratched his chin, pointing at the Maxbell Security business card they had taken from the Rikko manager. “Or…the crooks have an inside mammal at the company and took advantage of a backdoor in the programming. Either way, it doesn’t change the fact that our boys quite literally walked in through the front door.”

Judy rubbed her temples and pointed at the mug shot of Shakespeare. “So, if Shaky’s testimony is accurate–”

“He only overacts when he’s Lear,” Nick said, somewhat defensively. “If he saw someone in a fur-net put a brick through a window, then he did.”

“But why?” Judy exclaimed. “If they were wearing a fur-net, then they were part of the job. Why break a window if they were already in the building?”

“Maybe they had a disagreement on how to split the cash, maybe they’re the type that likes to break things, maybe anything!” Nick said, gesturing flippantly. “Makes about as much sense as anything else in this case! …It’s way too hot for this crap. Don’t you have AC?”

Judy chuckled and opened the window. “Ta-da!”

“Will the wonders ever cease?” Nick snarked, unbuttoning the top of his shirt and airing himself out. “We’re not even near Sahara Square, for God’s sake!”

“I know what’ll cool you down!” Judy exclaimed happily, bouncing over to the fridge. “Your surprise!”

Judy cracked the little fridge and bent over to grab something from inside, Nick’s ear perked up at the view as his eyes were drawn down.

‘Yep…’ he thought to himself, ‘Still there. You give it a check every day and it hasn’t gone anywhere yet. Okay, stopping in three…two…one and half…one and a quarter…are those corduroys?’

Judy spun around; in her hands were two small black bottles, Nick’s eyes darted up just in time. “Here we go! I got these to celebrate our promotion!”

Nick took a bottle, it was small, maybe a quarter-pint, but it felt wonderfully cold in his hand. “What is it?”

“Blueberry ale,” Judy said, cracking the cap and taking a sip. “I got some from my dad when I visited over the holidays.”

Nick pressed the cold bottle against his neck and sighed, savoring the cold. “Blueberry beer? Whoda thunk it?”

“Bunnies, obviously,” Judy said, offering her bottle for a toast.
Nick capped his bottle and clinked it against hers, taking a swig. The beer was light and cold and refreshing, with mild bitter notes and a crisp finish. The real star was the blueberry flavoring, unsweetened and barely present on the tongue, a pleasant aftertaste that rose into the nostrils after each sip. Nick smacked his lips together and smiled. “I’m gonna have to rethink my stance on the subject of dumb bunnies! Does your dad make this?”

“No, that’d be our neighbor. But dad supplies most of the raw materials. When I told him how much you liked our blueberries he bought a huge amount of the stuff and sent some back with me to share.”

Sufficiently refreshed, Nick and Judy resumed their discussion on the case, but found that they were hitting wall after wall; there just wasn’t enough evidence. So, naturally, the conversation drifted away from work and into their personal lives.

“Well, I think your standards are too high,” Nick said, finishing his forth blueberry ale, the bottles were rabbit-sized, after all. “That said, most relationships that start with an autograph tend to run down the same road, if you know what I mean.”

Judy groaned and lay back on her bed. “Bluh! Guys are either intimidated or awestruck; no one ever approaches me for me! So what if I’ve solved a few crimes? How does that make me this big scary person?”

“Right?” Nick said, lying next to her. “I mean, back in Bunnyburrow I bet all your boyfriends had to get to know you before getting scared off, but now they’re terrified right from the get-go!”

“Shut up!” Judy laughed, bopping him with a pillow. “How about you? Any lady-types living the Wilde-life?”

“No,” he said glibly.

Judy took this short response to mean ‘don’t go down that rabbit hole, Carrots,’ and noticed the empty bottle in his hands. “Get you another?”

Nick upended the empty bottle over his mouth, catching the few stray drops still inside. “I don’t want to drink all of your beer, Jude.”

Judy scoffed and reached under the bed, pulling out a palette of bottles. “In Bunnyburrow, even microbreweries sell by the skid. If anything, I’d like some help, seeing as how you can knock ’em back like they’re nothing.”

“They are nothing,” Nick said, holding up the small empty bottle. “Tiny, little bottles of tasty nothing. Sure, I’ll have another one or four.”

Judy got two more out of the fridge, she wasn’t even trying to keep up with Nick, trying to outdrink someone four times your weight was sure end poorly, besides, she was already feeling the effects of her two. She tossed him his bottle, which he caught in a flash of Predator reflexes. He wasted no time capping it and taking a swig.

“Ahhh…” Nick said, just starting to go from pleasantly buzzed to happily drunk. “Your dad is insidious.”

Judy laughed and cracked her bottle. “On the list of adjectives I’d use to describe Stuart Hopps, ‘insidious’ is definitely near the bottom.”
Nick sat up and gestured at the bottle. “I’m serious! He must be some kind of criminal mastermind! Sending his pretty daughter out here to push free samples of this highly addictive product onto a poor and unsuspecting officer of the ZPD! He knows I’ll need more, and soon. Just you wait; he’ll be calling me up for favors, info, the works; it’s all part of his master plan!”

Judy giggled and sat down next to him, tapping her blunt claws on the glass bottle. “Hey, Nick.”

“Hey, Judy.”

“I’m going to be taking a week off in September to see my family, help with the harvest, you know, that sort of thing.” Judy cleared her throat; suddenly feeling flushed and distracted, was the room getting hotter? “You, uh, you want to…tag along?”

Nick turned to her, a smile pulling at the sides of his mouth. “Finally introducing your boyfriend to the parents, eh?”

“Shut up!” Judy said, punching him in the shoulder. “You already met my parents, Dumb Fox!”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick said, thinking back to the Gazelle concert and the nice dinner they had after; Judy’s mom would not stop looking at his teeth.

“And I don’t need any of that talk from you of all people, Mr. Wilde!” Judy said with indignation, preparing to take a hefty swig from her bottle. “I get enough of that at the precinct, thank you very much!”

“Right?” Nick said sourly. “Every day a different person is asking me how deep the rabbit hole goes!”

Judy let out a choked sound and lurched forward, clasping her hand over her lips as her mouthful of beer threatened to spray out. Judy willed her self to swallow it and loosed a racking sputtering cough that soon transformed into hearty laughter. Nick chuckled bemusedly, a perplexed look on his face as her laughter soon became mirthful howls.

“Yeah, see?” Nick said as he patted her on the back, beginning to chuckle alongside her, “Every day they come at me with material like that, I just can’t keep up!”

“Oh! Oh, man!” Judy gasped, still giggling. “I almost died! Holy moly! Oh, you think you have it bad? The girls just will not let up on it! There’s probably a betting pool or something.”

“I dunno.” Nick shrugged and took another sip. “The guys bust my fuzzies pretty hard. At least I can shut Clawhauser up with a box of donuts.”

Judy shot him an unimpressed look. “Okay, you want to take it out and measure? Remember when all the girls on the force took me out for a birthday party?”

Nick nodded. “Yeah, that was pretty sweet of them.”

“It was,” she agreed fondly, her expression quickly shifting to exasperation. “But then I started opening the presents. Most of them were kind, thoughtful, even really nice, like Francine got me this really cute ensemble that I’ve worn out a few times…” Judy felt herself getting off track, a flush building in her ears; she suddenly realized what she was about to tell Nick.

“And?” Nick pressed, noticing the deepening red color of her ears.
Judy took a few hefty pulls of blueberry ale and continued. “But then, I got a present that they ‘all went in on’ and, well…it was a toy. A fox toy.”

Nick blinked in confusion, scanning the bed top and room for a little facsimile of a fox. “Like, a plushie or something?”

Judy felt her ears flush anew, not looking at him. “No.”

“Oh.” Nick scanned her face, thinking for a moment when the answer came to him. His eyes went wide and his ears bolted upright. “Oh…”

“Yeah,” Judy replied. “Had a little nametag and everything. Guess what it said!”

Nick snorted a laugh and slapped his knee. “Well! You win! Maybe the guys aren’t that bad!”

“Judy Hopps: Queen of Workplace Harassment,” she said, doing a faux victory dance.

“Did you–” Nick began to say before catching himself at the last moment; suddenly aware of how much he had had to drink.

‘Did I what?’ Judy thought to herself in the split second it took for her partner to rephrase. ‘Did I keep it?’

Nick feigned a cough, making it seem as though that was the cause of his interrupted question. “Excuse me. Had a thing in my throat.”

‘Like your foot?’ Judy thought to herself, smiling.

“Did you, uh, tell them off or anything?” Nick said, insincerely. “I mean that’s pretty inappropriate.”

‘Smooth, Nick. Real smooth,’ they both thought, sarcastically.

“Pssh! No!” Judy scoffed, waving her hand dismissively. “It was all in good fun! Besides, I couldn’t take that thing seriously! It was ridiculous! I mean, how is anyone supposed to even use something like that?”

Nick smirked and cleared his throat. “I think we better change the subject before someone’s feelings get hurt.”

“Agreed. Any ideas?”

Nick scanned the room, his eyes darting around until he saw what was sitting under her TV: an old gaming console. “Hold on…is that an 86-X? I had a friend who owned one when I was a teenager. I’d go over to his house all the time and whup his lily-ass at fighting games!”

“What was your favorite one?” Judy said, a smile spreading across her face.

“Fatal Fight V: Fangs Forever!” they said in unison, cheering and high-fiving each other.

“Well?” Judy said. “Hook it up!”

Nick nodded and hopped off the bed, getting on his hands and knees to connect the ancient console to the television. Judy’s ears perked up and reddened as she admired the view.
‘Yep…’ she thought to herself, ‘Still there.’

Chapter End Notes

I very rarely shoehorn my opinions into my stories, but damn, do I have a powerful lust for a subtle, refreshing berry ale.
Best thing for a hot day, I tell you hwat.
Build A Chair

Chapter Notes

My chapter names sure are weird, huh? For this one I was torn between 'Build a Chair' and 'Stay Gold'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chief Bogo licked his finger and turned the page on the dossier, sipping lightly from his coffee mug. The case was a real corker, as his father would have said; a major drug ring with distributors from Sahara Square to the Canal District, at least four potential cut-and-run factories for dilution, and nearly five million dollars per annum in illicit trade.

He was presently organizing a crack team to bust, or at the very least, disrupt the ring while the bean-counters traced the money and got to the real root of the problem. All because a certain pair of beat patrollers had stumbled, yet again, into a massive SNAFU that ended in several ganglords dead or in prison. The Tundra Town Syndicate had wasted little time absorbing the remains of the rivals and was now all the stronger, if not easier to track. All because of a wise-cracking fox and a busybody bunny; at least with their new case they’d be stuck with something mundane, and maybe give the department time to catch its breath.

It hadn't been all bad. The press had been good and the new Mayor, a tundra lemming named Karl Ketchikan, had said some very reassuring things regarding next year’s budget, but the department needed a break from the spotlight. Drug busts and gang wars and vigilante hunts were all fine and good if paced accordingly, but all three and more in the same year? Ridiculous!

Bogo pinched the bridge of his snout and sighed. They were good cops, the both of them, he allowed himself that; a bit busy and more than a little frustrating, but together they were almost like superheroes. Bogo found himself wondering just what it was about them that worked. Was it because they were Predator and Prey and the little differences in outlook formed a more comprehensive worldview? Was it because they were a fox and a bunny, and some dynamic therein that allowed them to drum up solutions better? Was it because they were Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, an academy super-star and an unconvicted career criminal-turned cop? Was it some…fourth thing? All of the above? Regardless, those two had generated mountains of paperwork that they, as beat officers, were not qualified to handle at the time, so the lion’s share fell on the bean-counters and, unfortunately, Bogo himself. Now that they were officially detectives, maybe a tiny increment of that bureaucratic nightmare would finally get off his desk and allow him to focus on what actually mattered.

Gazelle.

Also, the drug ring.

His office phone sang its shrill, familiar song and Officer Clawhauser’s soft, friendly voice sounded over the speaker. “Chief Bogo. Mayor Ketchikan is here to see you.”

Bogo blinked in surprise, the Mayor was making an unannounced visit? He was in no position to decline, but his general opinion of the subject was regardless of what chair your rear polished, you follow procedure and make an appointment; a crease of irritation settled in his brow.
“Send him up.”

The door opened and the little lemming entered the room through the newly installed small- persons door next to the main entrance, his expression was incensed and he was waving a tablet over his head. “Bogo! What is the meaning of this?!”

“The meaning of what, sir?” Bogo said, patiently.

The lemming tapped his tablet and Bogo’s smartphone buzzed. Bogo opened it to see a blog page; it looked exactly like the kind of Internet tripe he tried to avoid. “This, Chief! It’s a standard break and enter case, so why is it the top trending article today?!”

“I don’t know.” Bogo paused, skimming the article. “Memes, sir?”

“Don’t get smart!” Mayor Ketchikan seethed. “It’s been a day and people are already crying conspiracy! What were you thinking, assigning those two to a pointless case like this?! Of course people are going to theorize, it’s basic pattern recognition!”

“I was operating under the assumption that it’d be standard case with a standard workload and a standard amount of paperwork to deal with,” Bogo answered honestly. “Something to cut their teeth on as new detectives.”

“They ‘cut their teeth’ when they were busting elected officials for capital offenses!” Ketchikan exclaimed. “If you wanted a quiet week, why not give them an unsolvable case to work on? Missing mammals, mystery cases, internal affairs, the Loch Ness fucking Monster?!”

‘Because they might actually solve them!’ Bogo didn’t say.

The Mayor continued. “Why’d you give them a B’n’E? The city’s buzzing, Bogo, buzzing all because of those two and their stripy, foul-mouthed promoter!”

Bogo withstood the Mayor’s theatrics, the little guy had to make a lot of noise to be heard and he had gotten quite good at it. “I wasn’t aware that a blogger was on your radar, sir.”

“Anyone who gets five million local views in ten hours is on my radar, Chief. I follow social cues, read the tides of the herd, it’s kind of my thing!” Ketchikan smirked. “Honestly, she was just saying the right nonsense at the right time. That whole ‘Prey scandal’ and her coverage of Officers Hopps and Wilde just helped her along. Regardless, she’s connecting dots that I hope to God aren’t there, and I want to know what you’re doing about it!”

“What, exactly, can I do about it, sir?” Bogo asked, reading through the article in question; overall, it was tactlessly inflammatory in its composition and Honey B’s fixation with Hopp’s hindquarters was nothing short of disconcerting. “Policing the Internet just doesn’t work. You remember what happened to Congressman Llama Smith, don’t you?”

Mayor Ketchikan shuddered. “Don’t remind me. No, I want to know what you’re doing to get this case closed and done with! How much freedom are you giving Detective Hopps and Wilde? How much assistance? Are their needs being met?”

Bogo arched his eyebrow. “What are you getting at, sir?”

“Look.” Ketchikan put his hands together a touched his fingers to his lips. “The fact of the matter is that since the Leodore-Bellwether Scandal people don’t trust City Hall anymore. They don’t trust us, Chief, but they trust, no, they idolize those two! I don’t know what it is, maybe it’s the Pred-Prey angle, maybe it’s the bunny-fox shtick, or maybe people just like how they get
results. It doesn’t matter; what matters is that there are no other cities in the world with genuine hero cops. Do you know how many cities can claim a 90% positive opinion of the local police force? I could count them on one hand! People trust them, but we need them to trust us. We need to make it clear to the citizenry that Detectives Wilde and Hopps are with us, see? To that end, we need this case closed quickly, cleanly, and in a press-friendly manner. I want people to say ‘wow, the Ketchikan Administration and the ZPD get things done!’ Understand?"

Bogo rubbed eyes and sighed. “That would…we’d be devoting a tremendous amount of mammal-power to solving an otherwise insignificant case. I am presently working on a major drug bust that could—”

Ketchikan waved his hand dismissively. “No one cares, Chief! Hell, eighty percent of the city would see us legalize most of the junk those chumps are peddling, anyway! If it weren’t for the fact that half of our legislators are in the dealers’ pockets, we probably would have already! No, I want a good press-project put on for us, this administration needs every boost it can get after being saddled with the cluster-fuck from last year!”

Chief Bogo scowled and gritted his teeth, but only one person in the room approved budgets, so he simply nodded. “Alright, sir. I’ll have them submit their findings to me ASAP and I’ll put together a dragnet for the perps and the stolen merch. I’ll need some legislative support on this one, though. Cut through some red tape?”

“Leave that to me,” Ketchikan said with a buck-toothed smile. “The gears of justice will get a little coercive grease for this case. Afterwards, you assign our good friends to a suitably mysterious and unsolvable case so they don’t kick up any more dust for a while.”

“Done and done,” Bogo said, only somewhat disgusted with how this meeting had turned out, he pressed the reception desk’s button on his phone. “Officer Clawhauser, get WildeHopps in my office ASAP!”

“Yes, sir! Right away!”

“Wild hops?” Mayor Ketchikan asked, perplexed.

Bogo shrugged. “It’s what we call those two around here. Clawhauser said it at a staff party once and it stuck.”

The Mayor pondered this for a moment. “It’s catchy, I like it! Sounds like the name of a café, with specialty cold-brews and gourmet drinks. Hmm…maybe a soup of the day, a nice clam chowder with soft, fresh dumplings…” Ketchikan noticed the look Bogo was giving him and cleared his throat. “Hey, I skipped lunch to talk with you!”

“I’m touched,” Bogo said flatly.

“Check your attitude, Chief!” Mayor Ketchikan grumbled as he made for the door. “I’m trusting you to get this thing wrapped up! Have a nice day!”

“And you, sir.” Bogo sighed as he reluctantly closed the drug ring dossier and waited for the detective to arrive.
“Okay, so maybe I was a bit out of practice,” Nick said as he walked the halls with Judy. “And also drunk.”

Judy shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Excuses, excuses! Just admit it, I whupped you. I whupped you good! I always win at Hopps Family Tournaments. Always.”

“No, no, I admit it,” Nick said with faux-nobility, placing a hand over his heart and the other in the air, as though under oath. “I, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, being of sound mind and body at the moment of this confession, got totally dunked by Detective Judy Hopps last night, who is some kind of freak at Fatal Fight V: Fangs Forever.”

“I’ll need that submitted to me in writing by the end of the day.” Judy playfully punched him on the shoulder.

“So, what do you think the Chief wants?” Nick said as they approached Bogo’s office.

“Can’t say.” Judy shrugged. “Honestly, I figured that he gave us this case because he wanted us off doing something quiet and pointless.”

“I’d wager that he’s not going to be crazy about the inconsistencies we noticed.” Nick cracked open the dossier he was carrying, the ease and professionalism with which the perps had conducted the crime seemed laughably at odds with the value of the stolen goods. “What do you think?”

Judy thought on this for a moment. “Personally I’m betting on him being all ‘you want HOW many patrollers? This case is bottom priority, Hopps; you think I’ve got enough uniforms to drown every theft case in blue? Get out of here!’ Sound about right?”

“Hmmm,” Nick said, unsure. “I dunno, since we have no actual evidence I think he’s going to go more with a ‘that’s a damn flimsy case, Wilde! You couldn’t pin a gnat with your evidence folder! If I walked into the courtroom with your case under my arm, I’d get sent right back out, but not before the judge tattoos the whole thing straight onto my ass!’ But that’s just me.”

Judy reached up to the doorknob, turning to Nick, her expression somewhat anxious. “I guess we’ll find out.”

ONE HOUR LATER

“Seems pretty straight-forward. Eight LCD TVs of varying size, ten large-sized laptops, and six various-sized laptops. We have their serial numbers and their make. Should make finding them easier.” Bogo said, putting down the missing items list, leveling a look at Nick. “And I assume you have some idea as to where that merch is headed?”

Nick shrugged, still perplexed by how smoothly this meeting was going. “Given the neighborhood, Reggie’s Surplus and Retail is our best bet for the TVs, as for the laptops…well, some nice stuff have been known to mysteriously show up in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Electronics from time to time. But we can’t rule out street vendors, so we’ll need some extra patrollers for a sweep.”
“How many?” Bogo said, turning to Judy.

Judy went over the projected sweep in her head. “It’s a large-animal district so…ten patrol cars searching in a grid pattern. Maybe more as the day goes on and we have to start doubling back.”

“Done,” Chief Bogo grunted, setting the dossier down and pushing back to her. “Get copies of the item list made and I’ll drum up the patrollers. Meet in the parking lot in, say, an hour. Dismissed.” Nick and Judy started in surprise and gawked at each other, Bogo leveled one of his classic buffalo glares at them. “Dismissed, detectives.”

With that they hopped out of their seats and made a rapid exit. When they were well out into and down the hallway Judy suddenly turned to Nick, her large purple eyes wide.

“What!”

“Right?” Nick returned the incredulity. “Didn’t you say you could make it work with five?”

“Three, even!” Judy ran her hands over her ears, trying to get them to appear less perky with excitement. “I expected him to haggle! What are we even going to do with ten cruisers?”

“Our jobs,” Nick said with a chuckle. “We might even find something today!”

Judy squealed happily and hugged him. “C’mon! Let’s print these off and map out our route!”

The truck sat in a parking lot nearby the Bug-Burga rendering plant, where millions of pounds of insects were shipped from vast underground farms per day and processed into all manner of food items. The raw protein could be molded and formed into any shape, color, or flavor; some particularly morbid companies even made and sold synthetic meat crafted from this substance. Between Burga-Brand rendered bugs, Cachalot Sea Produce, and the more protein-rich products supplied by the OmniGreen Corporation, no Predator wanted for variety in their diet.

“See that?” Grigori rumbled through a mouthful of a double-decker beetle burger, pointing at the produce truck. “Crickets, termites, and ants, mostly. The beetle and locust processing starts later in the year, they take longer to fatten up.”

“Huh,” Finn said, disinterestedly, popping a roasted grasshopper into his mouth. “Izzat right?”

“Jeez, would you look at that…” Elim said, disgust clear in his voice as he saw the writhing mass of insects pour out of the trucks and into the funnel that led to the primary pulverizer. “I mean, yeah, they go through all kinds of mashing and boiling and stuff, but how can you stand eating those things?”

“Like this,” Grigori and Finn said in unison, taking mouthfuls of their respective meals.

The gnu shuddered and went back to munching on his grass-pack, the soft, tender chutes grinding into a pleasant paste in his mouth. He checked his phone and sighed, now came the
waiting game, the long, boring waiting game. When Richardson had run off, he’d left his money, cards, and phone with them. Not that it mattered; Richardson was the kind of guy who could scrape together such things in less than a day. He was their backdoor, their forger and hacker, if he wanted to leave, he could. Elim smirked at this; he could leave if he wanted to, but he didn’t, so he wouldn’t. Rich didn’t want to run away, he wanted to be safe, he wanted them gone because he knew that if they found him, a nice long play session with Finn was his fate. The little ferret liked the taste of blood, he liked the feel of meat between his teeth; Finn liked to chew; Richie knew that, too. To Elim’s knowledge, the ferret had never actually eaten anyone, Finn once compared his ‘hobby’ to wine-tasting, swish for flavor and spit the substance, but that almost made it worse the more he thought about it.

So he didn’t think about it, instead Elim chose to dwell on how clever he was; a connection here, a chat there, and all the stolen goods would show up in places not too close but not too far from the warehouse, the cops would find them inside of a day, arrest the retailers, plea bargain, plea bargain, and their driver would be caught, charged, and convicted. Then the police would bend over and give themselves a good lick and City Hall would make some kind of statement to counter all the Internet gossip: that’s when Richie would panic, and that’s when they would get him.

See, Elim knew people, knew how they worked, it was the reason he’d gotten as far as he had in his line of work. He knew that Richie, guilty conscience or no, would keep close to the ground and hope that the problem would go away, that the hero cops would figure the whole thing out and arrest his evil co-conspirators, allowing him to get off scot-free. But Elim knew that the second it looked like the case was wrapping up, like attention was going elsewhere, Richie would call them up and spill some of his guts. Richie was a cagey sort, the kind of person who never went all-in on anything, so even when he called the cops there’d be virtually no chance of him actually compromising the mission. No, instead Richie would dangle the carrot in front of the bunny, giving her insider info to get her nose wiggling, but keep the real meat to himself until he was good and protected. Prey, especially small Prey, tended to think alike: stay quiet, stay still, and act only when provoked. Prey like Elim preferred to be instigative, reading social cues, negotiating the herd, and covering one’s back with someone else’s body. It all worked out well enough.

When his phone finally went off he’d be given directions by Boss’s ear on the Fuzz-line, then they’d haul ass and snatch up the little loose thread and then their backs would be covered. Elim smiled and gripped the steering wheel tightly, wringing it like it was a certain narrow, delicate throat. It was only a matter of time now and they’d all be filthy rich.

“So,” Finn said through a mouthful of locusts. “What’re you guys gonna do with your thirty mil?”

“Forty,” Emil said without looking back at him.

“What?” Grigori said, arching his eyebrow.

“Forty mil,” Emil clarified. “Once we pick up Dick-Dick, it’s forty for each of us. He’s not gonna be in any shape to claim his share, is he?”

Finn began dooking, a sort of ferret chuckle. “Eh-heh-heh-heh! Nnnnnope!”

“Forty mil?” Grigori said thoughtfully. “Changes nothing. It’s all going to the same place.”

“Yeah?” Finn said with a smile. “Up your nose with a rubber hose?”

Grigori swatted back at the ferret, who effortlessly dodged it. “To my Mama and my sisters
back in the old country! Every penny!”

“So, I guess those gold-plated tungsten fangs you bought are for them, too?” Finn snorted.

Grigori sneered, revealing the four little metal bolts that would serve as anchors for his new eyeteeth. “I am restoring what was taken from me. For them, I will restore what they never had! They will finally get what they always deserved!”

“Really?” Emil said, perplexed. “They didn’t seem too badly off when we all visited them over the holidays.”

“Yeah,” Finn said. “They seemed comfortable, seeing as how you paid off the mortgage and all. Anya and Cseniya liked that you dressed up as Santa Claws to deliver the news. That was sweet.”

“That was pretty cute, Gori,” Emil agreed.

Grigori waved his paw and hissed. “It’s not about ‘comfortable’, it’s about what they deserve, and they deserve the world on a golden platter! Mama always worked hard to keep us fed and in school, Anya and little Cseniya always lived humbly so Mama would not have to work so hard. I started bashing heads just so they could live as little girls ought to, with pretty things and fancy clothes! So I do this job, and then we all go and live someplace warm, with good schools and supermarkets that deliver. They’ll live how they always should have lived, and so will their cubs! They will know that Grisha will do this for them!”

Emil gave an impressed whistle and smiled in bemusement. “Shit, man! I just wanted millions of dollars! To be rich enough to just do anything. Write a novel, whatever. I don’t even talk to my mom anymore!”

Grigori’s ears went flat and he turned to look out at the parking lot. “That is because you lack character.”

“Maybe,” Elim allowed that, loyalty had never been his strong suit. He turned back to Finn. “How about you, Shark? What are you gonna do with your money?”

“Dunno,” Finn said, fidgeting somewhat. “Build a chair, maybe.”

Grigori’s ears perked up and he slowly turned around, exchanging a confused look with Elim as he did. “What.”

Finn smiled and pointed at the large mountain overseeing Zootopia. “Yeah, right up there. I’m gonna get all my money and have it split into a bunch of loaves, yeah? Then I’m gonna stack them up like Lego and make a chair. A great big chair of money. A whatchamacallit, a throne! Maybe buy a telescope or something. Then, I watch.”

“Watch?” Elim asked. “Watch what?”

Finn smiled toothily, his black little eyes lighting up. “Watch as the stuff hits the water. I’ve seen what it does to folk, you know? Imagine a whole city going down like that, millions of folk! Damn, if that wouldn’t be a sight!”

“Uh-huh,” Grigori said, not sounding at all surprised. “And then what?”

Finn once again looked at a loss. “Hm. Dunno, open a restaurant, I guess. Finnigan’s: Authentic Food from the Emerald Islands!”
“Sounds homey,” Elim said, internally tickled at the thought of his brutal, bloodthirsty friend overseeing a family restaurant. “We’ll all eat there when it’s over and done with.”

Nick and Judy eyed the road ahead, both were giddy but focused; they’d never even been part of an operation this size before, much less led one. The GPS had ten dots moving around, the patrollers were scouring their parts of the city as the detectives headed to the most likely points of retail, nothing was going to slip through the cracks.

“So, what’s this new merger I keep hearing about?” Nick said as they pulled up to Reggie’s Surplus and Retail. “The big food one?”

“Hmm?” Judy replied. “Between Bug-Burga and OmniGreen, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“Don’t know,” Judy shrugged. “According to my dad, they’ve collaborated on this new plant genome, one that eliminates the need for pesticides. A bunch of staple crops on the market use it. It’s so they can send excess farm waste and spoiled produce to the bug farms without the animals getting sick. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah,” Nick said, opening the door and stepping out into the sweltering summer heat. “A real nice little food cycle they’re putting together.”

Judy turned off the car and followed. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” Nick shrugged. “Everyone seems to have a strong opinion on those two mega-corps getting together. You know, blah, blah, blah, dystopia blah, blah shock collars, blah.”

“Talk like that has really gone up since the Nighthowler’s Case, hasn’t it?” Judy said sadly. “It created a fissure between people.”

“The crack in the wall was always there, Carrots,” Nick said, holding the store door open for her. “Someone just pulled away the feel-good poster that covered it up. Now, it’s up to us to go to town with the Bondo.”

“I think I’m rubbing off on you, Detective Wilde,” Judy said with a sly grin.

“You should see a doctor about that,” Nick chuckled, following after her.

Judy and Nick strolled into the store; it was a large building with an expansive interior, all of which was filled to the brim with bric-a-brac. A wolf in a cheap-looking suit slid up to them, a decidedly sleazy smile on his face. “Niiiick! How good to see you again. It’s been far too long!”
Nick saw Judy reach into her pocket for her badge and gestured at her to stop, he turned back to the wolf, grasping his hand in a firm handshake. “Reggie! My man! What’s good?”

Reggie laughed and walked with them. “The weather, the economy, even my wife’s cooking! Everything’s going just great, Nick! How about you?”

“Pretty good, Reg,” Nick said slickly. “In fact, I’d almost say things are damn fine. Came into something fat, recently, so I’m looking to do some sprucing up.”

“Oh, you don’t say!” Reggie said, gesturing at Nick’s ensemble. “I must say you’re looking well dressed, not to mention fit. Have you found…” he eyed Judy with a look that made her shiver, “…A lady-friend? Buying some presents, eh?”

Nick snorted and laughed. “In my experience, those things don’t leave extra cash lying around. Nah, what I’m here for is a bit of an upgrade in the entertainment department, if you know what I mean?”

“I’m smelling what you’re stepping in,” Reggie said, nodding knowingly.

“You’re picking up what I’m putting down?” Nick retorted, gesturing appropriately.

“And I won’t drop it like it’s hot,” Reggie reassured, gesturing down the aisle. “This way, my friend. I just got a new shipment of products you may find interesting!”

“Oh, I bet I will,” Nick said, gesturing for Judy, who was still trying to piece together their conversation, to follow.

They came to a quintet of LCD TVs, ranging from 25 to 50 inches in size; the majority of the stolen sets, but not the three most expensive ones. “As you can see, I have a wide range of screens for you to choose from, I also have audio-video set ups, home-theater packs, and those little digital TV microconsoles. The works! What do you think, Nick?”

Nick and Judy approached the largest TV and began looking it over, quickly finding the serial number. Nick looked at Judy, who nodded and began to type the number into her phone as he turned back to Reggie.

“Say, Reg…” Nick said with a handsome smile. “You, uh, keep up to date with the news recently?”

Reggie’s smile faltered for a moment, but he rallied. “No, not really, Nick. You know me, I’m more of a, uh, ‘small-circle’ kinda guy,”

“Ah, well, that’s a shame.” There was a beep behind Nick, Judy stood up and showed him her phone, the serial numbers matched. He looked back at Reggie, his smile suddenly a lot less friendly. “Because if you peeked outside your ‘small circle’ more often, you wouldn’t have tried to sell a cop hot goods.”

Reggie’s ears went flat, a sneer pulled at his mouth. “I’d heard Slick Nick had gone straight, but I didn’t want to believe it! You came in here and asked me if I was holding, this is entrapment!”

“Did I?” Nick said innocently, turning to Judy. “Carrots, did I say ‘show me the stolen TVs’?”

Judy pressed the playback on her phone. “*drop it like it’s hot.”
“Nope,” she said, smirking at a horrified Reggie. “I couldn’t make ear or tail of what you guys were saying. Honestly, to me or anyone else, really, it sounded like you just said some nonsense and then tried to sell stolen TVs to a pair of cops.”

“Tough luck, Reggie,” Nick shrugged. “This is strike three, too. Don’t worry, they really cracked down on Hoth up in Tundra Town, they only add sawdust to their bug-loaf every other day, now.”

“Hoth?” Judy whispered.

“Hothstein Min-Sec Penitentiary,” Nick whispered back. “And I was lying.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Reggie said, rushed forward. “No need for that! I’ll talk! I’ll talk!”

Judy reached into her pocket and produced cuffs. “Yes. Yes, you will.”

“No, listen!” Reggie said, stepping back. “He was a cheetah, see? About five-three, thin, wore a stained white wife-beater. He drove a two-ton box-truck, Hino I think, with a great big faded OmniGreen logo on the side! Uh! His license plate was, uh, 2FST-4U. He said he was stopping by a few other houses on his way to Downtown!”

Nick smirked and nudged Judy with his elbow. “See, that’s why we came here first. Ol’ Rotten Reggie, he keeps tabs and has a memory, and wallet, like a steel trap. Thanks Reg, get those TVs on the curb and tell one of your peons to say they saw a guy with that description drop ‘em off. I don’t want to come back here.”

Reggie slumped nearly to the ground, clutching his chest, panting with relief.

“We’re letting him go?” Judy exclaimed. “We caught him in possession of stolen goods!”

“Yeah, but he’s a known quantity,” Nick whispered back. “We don’t want to lock him away and have someone else take his place and do this all over again. Besides…” Nick said, now speaking audibly. “Reggie knows who’s in charge, doesn’t he? He’ll be an ear and eye for his good pal Slick, won’t he?”

Reggie cleared his throat and fidgeted when Judy pressed playback on her phone again “*-smelling what you’re stepping in.”

“Yes!” Reggie said, a desperate smile on his face. “Ol’ Slick Nick, Shit Don’t Stick! You have a man in Savannah here, yes sir!”

“Glad to hear it!” Nick said, speaking into a radio as he walked away. “This is Detective Wilde. APB on Two-ton Hino box truck with faded OmniGreen logo on the side, license plate 2FST-4U. Suspect is male cheetah, approximately five foot three inches, last seen wearing a white sleeveless undershirt, headed for Downtown.”

Judy moved to follow Nick, turning back to Reggie with a stern expression, she gestured at her eyes with two fingers and pointed back to the nervous wolf. ‘Got it?’

Reggie nodded and backed away.

Nick and Judy got in their disguised cruiser and pulled out of the parking lot and made for Downtown. Judy tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, her brow furrowed.
“Alright,” Nick said, turning to her. “What’s up?”

“You ever feel like this whole thing is too easy?” Judy replied. “I mean, we started today with a list of stolen goods and now, all of one hour later, we have a plate-number and a perp description!”

Nick shrugged. “That’s how it goes sometimes, Carrots. Some guys just don’t crime so good.”

“Do guys like that also hack security systems and wear identity concealment? Do guys like that leave the crime scene we found?” she retorted.

Nick paused and looked out the window his ears bolting upright. “Do guys like that try and hock stolen goods from a box truck on the side of the street in broad daylight?”

“No, because that’d be an incredibly stupid thing to do.”

“Rhetorical question,” Nick said, pointing at the adjoining street. “There he is, Carrots!”

Parked outside of a large communal building was a two-ton box truck with a patchy, faded OmniGreen logo on its side. The door to the box was open and standing inside was a cheetah in a stained wife-beater and long, baggy cargo shorts. He was talking to a bizarre-looking bald creature, Nick could make her out to be a feline of some sort, mid-sized and rangy, but beyond that she could have been anything from a panther to a cougar for all he could tell.

Judy doubled around and pulled the camouflaged cruiser into the street, casually pulling in and parking opposite of the Hino; the suspect and his strange, bald customer were too busy haggling to notice.

“Should we go for it?” Judy said, pulling out a map and pretending to read it.

“He’s fast,” Nick said, pointing to some random part of the map as part of the charade. “Much faster that either of us. Let’s call for backup. Quietly.”

Judy discreetly turned on the radio. “What’s the nearest car?”

“Uh…” Nick checked the GPS. “93.”

“Car 93, Car 93, this is Car 52” Judy spoke into the receiver. “Suspect sighted, requesting immediate back up. Over.”

The radio buzzed and a voice rose out over a commotion. “Negative on that backup, Car 52. We’re currently held down at the Humpty’s on Fifth Avenue. We have a large mammal dressed as a knight, suspect is belligerent and possibly under the influence. Over.”

“Do you require assistance?” Nick asked, concerned.

There was a blast of commotion, crashing furniture and breaking glass along with the rattle and clank of metal plates and chainmail. “I, Sir Marcius, shall never pay thee with cash, ONLY WITH DRUUUUUUUGS!!”

“Negative, Car 52. We have the situation under control. Out.”

The radio went silent and Nick turned to Judy. “Hey, Carrots. Remember when life made sense?”
Judy rolled her eyes and sighed. “God, it feels like ages!”

Nick reached over and set the radio to broadband. “All cars, all cars, this is Car 52. Suspect sighted at 2021 Hallcrest Drive, requesting ETA of nearest vehicle. Over.”

“Car 52, this is Car 27,” the radio crackled. “ETA ten minutes. Repeat, ten minutes. Over.”

“Looks like he’s wrapping up out there,” Nick said urgently. “Now or never, Carrots.”

“Copy that, Car 27. Requesting immediate backup, Detective Wilde and I will apprehend suspect. Over.”

“Affirmative, Car 52. We’ll be right there. Out.”

“So…” Nick said, looking out the window. “What’s out first move, Carrots?”

Nick saw a little grey shape speed over to the two-ton and affix a boot to the wheel. Judy sat with her back to the tire and gestured at Nick to come.

“Well, thanks for letting me know…” Nick grumbled, stepping out of the car and onto the street. “Hey!”

The cheetah’s head snapped around, his ears up in alarm; Nick smiled and walked over, crumpled map in hand. “Hello! Uh, sorry to do this, but could you help me get back on Highway 7? My GPS has no idea what’s going on!”

“Uh, sure?” the cheetah said, looking at the map when Nick brought it over. “Yeah, man, you’re way off. You gotta–”

The cheetah’s eyes went wide as his nostrils flared, Nick’s badge chain was dangling out of his jacket pocket. Nick locked eyes with the cheetah, his smile still as friendly and good-natured as it had been before. “Don’t.”

The cheetah leapt back in a flash, in the same amount of time Nick had drawn his sidearm and leveled it at the perp. The cheetah deked off to the side, cutting across and in front of the strange bald cat-lady, who screamed and covered her face with her hands. Nick cursed and brought his gun up, stepping around the civilian as the cheetah streaked behind the truck on the passenger side. By the time Nick had made it around, the cheetah was already in the cab. The truck roared to life and started forward, only to have the metal boot dig into the wheel-well and stop it cold.

“What the–?” The cheetah said, leaning out the window to look at the tire. Judy darted out from under the truck, her new MSIM drawn and aimed.

“Step out of the vehicle!” she roared, impressively so for a bunny. “Now! Get out, now!”

As the cheetah hurriedly rolled up the window, Judy fired three pepper-shots into the narrow slit still left. The solid pellets struck the roof, the glass-hard capsaicin infused substance was forged similar to a Rupert’s Drop, with tremendous internal stresses focused onto a single point at the tip which, when compromised, caused the entire pellet to fracture and explode into burning, choking dust. A millisecond later and the three pellets had filled the entire cab with pepper-dust, the cheetah coughed and retched, crying out as his eyes stung and watered and his mouth and throat seized. Nick ran up to the passenger-side door and moved to open it when, propelled by a kick, the door swung open and knocked him on his back. The cheetah sputtered and coughed, his eyes red and weeping, he saw Nick on the ground and cursed to himself, taking off down the street at nearly forty miles per hour. Judy strode over to Nick from under the truck, her
sidearm at her hip.

“Should I take the shot, or do you want to give it a go?” she said jokingly as the perp sped down the sidewalk.

“Take it!” Nick said impatiently.

Judy spun around, took aim, and fired in under a second. The lower muzzle of the new weapon coughed a cloud of smoke and fire, the heavy zap-net canister left the barrel at just under 200 meters per second. Its secondary engine hissed to life as a thin trail of smoke billowed from the rocket motor. It overtook the speeding cheetah instantly, the compacted micromesh unraveled and opened into a net two feet wide. The nigh-unbreakable fibers engulfed his legs below the knee, a charge from the little black tab at the center of the net caused them to contract and become as unyielding as steel. The cheetah cried out and face-planted into the concrete, tumbling and skidding painfully.

“That! Is! How! It’s! Done!” Judy cheered, pumping her fist in the air.

“Good shot, Carrots,” Nick admitted, dusting himself off. “Careful you don’t lose him, though.”

The cheetah was already up and on his feet, hopping away with surprising speed. Judy stepped forward to pursue, ready to run, when Nick’s hand settled on her shoulder. He pointed at the little button with a lightning symbol on the side of the grip, a wry smirk on his face. Judy smirked back and casually pressed the button.

“Heauegerkergerk!” The cheetah gurgled as the net suddenly became electrified; he collapsed bonelessly, like a puppet with its strings cut.

As Nick and Judy strolled over to their fallen prey, Judy regarded the MSIM in her hands. “You know, I could get used to these Miss’ Ims.”

Nick pointed, still walking casually. “He’s up again.”

Judy pressed the button once more, only a short jolt, but enough to sweep his feet out from under him. “Stay down, please.”

The cheetah whimpered and tried to crawl along the ground like a worm, looking up helplessly as two figures loomed over him. “Hey, man! I have rights!”

“Like the right to remain silent,” Judy said, brandishing the weapon. “And the right to put your hands on your head.”

The cheetah grumbled and complied, Nick was on him an instant later, bending his arms back and zip-tying them together. “See, I was trying to spare you this before.”

“Hey, fuck you, man!”

“Say, what’s your name, sport?” Nick said, hoisting him to his feet.

“Manny Beetz!” Manny spat. “And you’ll hear from my lawyer!”

“Looking forward to it, Manny,” Nick said pushing him towards their cruiser. “Until then, Manny Beetz, you are under arrest for suspected breaking and entering, suspected burglary, possession of stolen property, resisting and evading arrest, assault on an officer of the Zootopia
Police Department, and…” Nick looked over at the Hino, which was parked in front of a fire hydrant, “…one parking violation. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Exercising that right’ll be the smartest thing you do today.”

Judy spoke into her radio, trying in vain to keep her triumphant smile out of her voice. “All cars, all cars, primary suspect detained. Repeat, primary suspect detained. Finish your business and meet back at the precinct. Out.” Judy let out a breath and sighed, a happy smile on her face. “Phew! So, Nick, thoughts?”

“I think…” Nick turned to her, a smile on his face and a wink in his eye. “That’s case seven, partner.”

Judy squealed with joy and hopped over, pulling him into a tight hug, which he returned after a moment of apprehension.

“D’awww…” the cheetah said dreamily and Judy brandished her sidearm, silencing him.

A nervous teenaged antelope clopped into the interrogation room; he was still wearing his uniform from Reggie’s Surplus and Retail. He sat down at the table opposite the pair of detectives, both of which had stern, unyielding expressions on their faces. He had heard of them, the fox and bunny cop team, how they had brought down criminal empires and stopped that mad scientists and, of course, the Shearer. He felt fear creep into his guts, was his crappy job really worth lying to WildeHopps?

Reggie could go fuck himself!

“Please state your name for the record.” Detective Wilde said, his stony expression and cutting green eyes tunneling through any vestige of willpower the young antelope had.

“G-Gregory Prouse.”

“Mr. Prouse. Did you or did you not see the following merchandise,” he pushed forward a picture of the TVs Reggie had told him to put on the curb, “deposited on the side walk by this mammal, one Mr. Emmanuel Beetz,” another picture, this time a cheetah whom Gregory had never seen before, “earlier today between the hours of 12 and 1:30pm?”

“Yeah, but–” Gregory began.

“Yes? Okay, then. Next question,” Detective Wilde leaned in. “When you noticed the TVs, you asked your boss, one Mr. Reginald Torrio, what was to be done with them. He then told you to leave them alone like any upstanding, law-abiding citizen. Is that correct?”

“Hm…”

“Some guy, your boss,” Detective Wilde interrupted, tossing him his card. “He’ll probably
give you a raise for this. If he doesn’t, gimme a call and I’ll sort him out. You’re free to go, Mr. Prouse.”

“Uh–”

“Next witness!” Detective Wilde called out, shooing him away.

Gregory stumbled out of the interrogation room looking somewhat dazed; well, at least he was out of there, and he got a paid day off work, too!

The last witness entered the room, sitting down across from them with an oddly serene look on her bald face.

“Uh,” Detective Hopps said, looking at Wilde, who gestured for her to proceed. “State your name for the record, please.”

“Starlight Shimmer,” she said matter-of-factly.

She sighed and rested her head on her hand. “Of course it is.”

Judy groaned and flexed her right hand, having spent the last two hours filling out paperwork. “Is this what we’ve been doing to the Chief all this time? We should be in jail!”

“Occupational hazard, Carrots,” Nick replied, also feeling the burn in his wrist, “And this was a small case! Can you imagine what covering the Shearer Case must’ve been like? I mean, we blew up a warehouse!”

“Well, let’s get all these testimonies dated and checked so we have a solid case against Beetz. Maybe if we show him the pile of testimony and evidence against him, he’ll flat-out confess!” Judy said sourly.

Officer Wolford leaned in the doorway, his ears up and tail wagging. “Yo, WildeHopps! Did you hear? Beetz confessed! Said he masterminded the whole thing, he knew stuff that wasn’t released in the press coverage like the scent-blocker and fur-nets. His story lines up with evidence, it’s solid! Congrats on case seven!”

Wolford left and Judy groaned, leaning her head back as she threw a handful of papers into the air. “Yaaaay. Confetti. Poosh.”

“We’ll still need those,” Nick said, burying his face in his arms as paper fluttered around him. “But yeah, congrats.”

“Had to talk to Madam Razor-Burn for nothing,” Judy said, massaging her temples. “I mean, I thought she just had a condition or something, like Uncle Chanticleer. Nope! Shaved. I mean…what?!?”

Nick shrugged audibly, still too drained to do anything but rest his head in his arms. “Didn’t you hear her? Fur sours the aura, keeps negative energies from escaping the chi-circuit and into the ether. Some people say that fur is the bodily manifestation of sin, but they’re pretty weird!”

“Ha!” Judy laughed, even though she was beat, talking with Nick always seemed to pick her
Judy heard his chair squeak followed by the taps of footpads, a moment later and a pair of strong, wiry hands grasped her shoulders. She gasped and tensed. “Nick?”

“You have a lot of tension in your voice,” he said from behind, his fingers began to dig in and rub in a circular motion. “What’s up, Carrots?”

Judy tried to shake off his hands, but almost immediately noticed how good they felt. There was pressure, but not too much, and his technique was amazing! She sighed as she felt the tension melt away from her shoulders, replaced with warm feelings of contentment. “I dunno… I guess I was just expecting this great big thing to snowball out of this case. I mean, yeah, we had plenty of mundane stuff to handle on beat patrol, but we also got up to some pretty crazy shenanigans, too. I guess I was just…winding myself up for a big case, not some idiot with delusions of grandeur stealing TVs.”

Nick nodded, his skilled hands working their way up her lithe neck. “I know what you mean. But, it’s almost a relief, you know? We didn’t have anyone try to kill us, no huge conspiracy, and I didn’t even get the snot kicked out of me; it was just an easy case that we wrapped up in record time.”

“I guess…” Judy said, rolling her head back to look at him. “Say, since when are you Mr. Magic Hands?”

Nick chuckled rubbing his thumbs between her shoulder blades. “An ex of mine was a masseuse, a damn good one, too. She was a sun bear and she really got in there, like, right up to the knuckle! She also gave good backrubs, too, I guess.”

“Ewww!” Judy laughed, pretending to pull away. “Nick! Gross!”

“Learn to be more accepting of people’s kinks, Carrots,” Nick chuckled, his hands tracing up her head to massage her scalp and temples. “Hey, Starlight Shimmer was right, you are hiding a lovely bone structure under all this fluff!”

Judy rolled her eyes, trying to keep from moaning as he rubbed around the base of her ears. “I get ‘up to the knuckle’, it’s fine with me. I just don’t get the shaving thing, I had to get my belly shaved for surgery once and it was awful! It was cold, itchy, and all my shirts were really uncomfortable! I just don’t get why someone would hack off all their fur, it does not compute!”

Nick shrugged. “I don’t get why smaller guys put on scuba gear and hire big gals to swallow them whole, but that doesn’t stop it from happening.”

Judy clapped her hand over her mouth and stifled a laugh. “Oh, please! Like that’s a thing!”

“Am I laughing?”

Judy blinked and turned to Nick, her eyes wide and questioning. “What? That…happens?”

“Oh, you didn’t…” Nick laughed and backed away, his hands up. “Stay gold, Carrots.”

“Nick!” Judy called after him. “No, seriously! What?!”

“I’ve said too much!” Nick said mock-serious, as he picked up his coffee mug. “Your innocence is like a precious flower, to be nurtured and protected! It’s my knightly duty!”
“Ha-ha! Very funny, Sir Marcius!” Judy said, tossing him her mug, which he effortlessly snatched out of the air. “Get me a coffee, will you?”

“As Her Ladyship commands!”

“Wiseass,” Judy muttered, a smile on her face; no matter the situation, Nick could always make her laugh.

The phone rang, Clawhauser’s voice sounded over the speaker. “Call for Detective Hopps.”

Judy depressed the button and picked up her phone. “Put it through.”

There was a click and then silence; Judy’s ears could pick up the sound of breathing and traffic. “Hello?”

“Congratulations on solving the case, Detective,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Really, that must be a new record. Too bad you got duped.”

“Sir, this is private line to the ZPD, it is a serious offense to prank-call a police officer.”

“How is Ol’ Manny Beetz, by the way? He took an awful tumble during that little chase of yours,” the voice asked, Judy’s eyes went wide. “And no, there’s been no official press release, yet. I was just keeping tabs on him, see? I figured something like this would happen, after a job like this one goes sour, you need a fall guy to take the heat. It’s basic shit.”

“Sir, where are you now?” Judy said, reaching for her pen and a piece of paper.

“In time, Detective,” he replied. “I’m here to help, not tease. You think you solved a burglary, you didn’t, you just followed their false trail. Now, listen very carefully, because if you don’t…millions of people are going to die.”

Chapter End Notes

This story has a plot? Whoda thunk it?
Okay, so this chapter was actually part of a larger one that I split up so I could update faster. I might add the rest once I’m done writing it, or I might just make that into another chapter and update again sooner.

Whatever, let me know what you think of the story, things are going to come to a head pretty quickly!

Judy pressed the pen to her notebook, her sore wrist all but forgotten in the excitement. “Alright, you have my attention, Mr…?”

“Richardson,” he answered, his tone somewhat resigned sounding. “Richard Richardson. Sounds fake, I know, but it’s not.”

Judy jotted this down. “Alright Richard—may I call you ‘Richard’?”

“Call me Richie, since we’re about to become best friends and all,” Richie said, his voice more than a little sarcastic.

“Alright, Richie,” Judy said, chipper as ever, always willing to humor someone. “In that case, you can call me Judy. How does that grab you?”

“The fewer things that grab me, the better! I’m going to tell you what I know, some now, and all of it once I’m in protective custody.” There was a pause, when he spoke again there was a sudden sincerity in his voice that cut into her. “I’m scared. I’m real scared. If they get me, I’m… look; you think you can send some blueberries over to pick me up? …Please, Judy?”

“Blueberries?” Judy blinked, how much did this guy know?

“Cops,” he clarified, sounding somewhat annoyed. “Because of the blue uniform?”

“Oh, I know,” Judy rolled her eyes. “It’s just weird, my family grows and sells blueberries.”

“Really? Tell you what; I’ll buy a bunch off ‘em when I’m safe. How’s that grab you, Judy?”

“I’ll need more to go on if I’m going to get you approved for protective custody, Richie.” Judy tapped her pen on the paper.

There was an audible shrug. “Alright. There were four of us, a gnu, a lynx, a ferret, and me, a dik-dik.” ‘Small and dainty, sleek and fast; just like Shakespeare said,’ Judy noted, growing more and more convinced that there was some truth to be found. “I was their in-guy, their hacker. I got the security systems down and picked the lock, we walked in through the front door. We were wearing body-nets, footpads, gloves, and scent-blocker. For the ferret, the smelly little shit, but in general it’s just good sense. I bet your fox friend noticed something under it all, though, am I right?”
Just then Nick walked through the door holding two cups of coffee. “Who you talking to, Carrots?”

“That him?” Richie said warily.

“Detective Wilde just entered the room, yes.” Judy waved him over. “Is that a problem?”

“No. You and Detective Wilde are the only people I can turn to right now. He smelt something, right?”

“Yes,” Judy said, shooting Nick an urgent look, he rushed forward and set her coffee down next to her, dragging his seat over. “He said he noticed something musky under the scent-blocker. You said there was a ferret with you?”

“That’d be Finn,” Richie said, disgust clear in his voice. “Vicious little monster. He’s our break-in guy; he can slip past any security system that I can’t shut down. He’s also our… interrogator. Likes to chew…” there was a noise, a terrified wheezing squeak of some kind, when he spoke again his voice had renewed its desperation. “Is this enough, yet?”

“Can you give us more information on your accomplices?” Judy said, switching the phone to speaker and gesturing at Nick’s laptop. “Full names, basic descriptors, anything like that?”

Nick brought his laptop over and punched up the criminal database, he nodded at Judy when he was ready.

“Yeah, I can do that,” Richie said, sounding relieved. “First is Elim Boakye, a brindled gnu with a big crest of fur on his head, he’s our leader of sorts, he’s a smart one, kept his ears up and his nose to the wind; there won’t be much on his record. He’s up and down every suspect list with Interpol though; he’s just made it so nothing sticks, yeah? He made a point to have dirt on the right people. Spelled b-o-a-k-y-e, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Nick muttered, tapping away at his laptop.

“Next is Grigori Yevgenyevich, he’s a lynx, very strongly built, and he’s been rounded off. He builds whatever we need to get built, and he’s also our muscle. And, boy, does he muscle! He’s just a lynx, but I’ve seen him break a cape buffalo’s neck with his bare hands! Very dangerous, tranq him if you can. You’ll have no trouble tracking him down online, his file is fat and juicy, Ol’ Gory Grigori is a lot of things, but subtle he ain’t.”

Nick cleared his throat awkwardly, tapping his finger on the table. “Yive-ghenny-vitch?”

There was a sigh. “Y-e-v-g-e-n-y-e-v-i-c-h. Yevgenyevich.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Gimme lip for not being able to spell that off the top of my head.” Nick grumbled as he typed it in, his ears perking up as the results came through. “Whoa…bad guy.”

“What do you mean ‘rounded off’?” Judy said, looking at Nick, who returned her look with a shrug.

“Oh, yeah. Zootopia doesn’t do that,” Richie said, almost wondrously. “Across the pond, if you rough up a public official or government employee one time too many, they put you under and remove your pointy bits; fangs, claws, horns, antlers, some folk get it so they can’t open their mouths any wider than they need to eat.”
Judy’s ears dropped as she grimaced. “That’s barbaric!”

“Yeah, and it doesn’t work!” Richie said with a hard, bitter laugh. “Grigori never bothered with fangs and claws, he just breaks people apart with his hands. That’s how he got rounded off, actually; snapped a cop in two over his knee, so they took him back to the precinct, tied him down, and did the procedure with a pair of pliers. All his eye-teeth and all his claws.”

Judy shuddered and shook her head. “Good God!”

Nick nodded thoughtfully, his expression almost sympathetic. “Zootopia may not be perfect, Jude, but there’s plenty worse out there.”

She pressed her claws against the tabletop, imagining how agonizing it must have been. She cleared her throat and continued. “You said there was a ferret?”

“Finnegan McNulty,” the dik-dik said icily. “He’s like Grigori, only not as nice. His file has some horror stories in it, and no mistake.”

Nick whistled as he read, if the rap-sheet of ‘Gory’ Grigori failed to impress, the gruesome reputation of Finnegan surely wouldn’t. “Wait, a ferret is your muscle?”

“A ferret is our teeth. He gets past whatever security I can’t hack, he’s also something of a chemist. Makes bombs and the like. He’s also a sadistic, murderous little monster who gets some kind of sick thrill outta chewing parts off people.”

Judy reviewed the files Nick had drummed up, each one was just as Richie had described. But, again, it wasn’t conclusive evidence that he was telling the truth. “Richie, look, I know you’re scared and I know you probably don’t have the best opinion of cops, but I’m going to need more information if I’m going to be of any help to you. Please, tell me what was going on that night.”

“Alright,” Richie said. “You’re not getting the whole story, not now. I trust you, Judy, for some reason I trust you. As Grigori would say, trust is not a cheap bottle of wine you pass around at a party, it’s a rare reserve of scotch you share with a worthy few.”

“A fellow scotch drinker,” Nick muttered approvingly.

“I’m flattered.” Against her better judgment, Judy found herself coming to like Richie. “What makes you trust me, Richie?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you came here and changed things despite being so small, maybe it’s because you didn’t let what you are keep you low, or maybe it’s because…well, I wanted to be a cop, once upon a time. But, ah, things, well, they didn’t pan out that way.” He chuckled bitterly. “Maybe I could have been like you? Nah. I don’t think so, but maybe some other kids out there could. God willing, maybe my kid, if I ever have one, could go and do something no dik-dik’s ever done before, just like you. You and Detective Wilde, you guys give me a bit of hope, okay? That’s rare in this day and age. It’s kinda like finding gold on the sidewalk.”

Judy felt her heart swell, she was suddenly and unequivocally proud to be a member of the ZPD. “Well, Richie, I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

There was a pause followed by a small laugh, Richie’s voice had taken on a strange quality, almost…happy? “You’re welcome. Okay, so you want to know what happened that night? Well, I picked the door and we walked in. See, about a week before I’d hacked the security system, all Maxbell systems have the same backdoor in their programming, it’s just well hidden. They’re
pretty good, affordable and reliable; you could do worse. Anyway, I introduced a little something of my own design that mimics a programming flaw, just the sort of thing that goes wrong all the time. So no one really raised an eyebrow outside of the usual bristling fur and bared teeth what comes with a total security collapse.

“We got in and got to work, Finn and Grigori were the beasts of burden in that regard, Gori slapped together the merch and Finn installed it where it needed to be. Elim and I were talking, yeah? Talking about…what was going to happen.”

“Richie,” Judy interrupted. “What were you doing in there? It sounds like the four of you, uh, have a very specific skill set. One that doesn’t lend itself to television theft.”

“Ah-bup-bup-bup!” Richie hissed. “I told you I was keeping some things to myself until I know I’m safe. I trust you, Judy, but I don’t trust your bosses. They may feel a little ancy about cooperating with a terrorist-turned-accomplice to genocide! I want my protection order in writing, signed, and underway before I tell you how to stop them. We’ve got a week or so before saturation reaches ideal levels anyway, plenty of time if you don’t drag your asses.”

“Well, you’re consistent, I’ll give you that,” Nick said flatly. “Look out for number one, eh, Dick?”

“No one else signed up for the job, Slick,” Richie retorted. “The TVs and shit, all that was a distraction, to keep people from snooping around the crime scene and to get the cops chasing their tails. Elim’s idea, I bet, he takes risks but he’s smart like that. He probably set Manny up to take the fall, too. See, he knew that with all the media attention this case was getting that the higher-ups would not only give you the push you needed, but that they’d also shut you down if you brought up anything…inconvenient. To that end, he basically tossed you the perp red-handed, all tied up in a neat little bow. It’s working, too. I can already see the administration lining itself up to give its bits a good lick; just like Elim planned.”

Nick tapped the desk and sighed. “So what, Elim’s some kinda supergenius or something?”

“No, but he’s clever. He can read people and make good predictions. But he’s a risk taker; he goes all in on everything he does, if you catch him, here, now, he’s too far away from his connections to get off. You’d have him dead to rights. He can call shots and make predictions all he likes, but I bet he didn’t see this coming, you and me talking. Probably figured I’d make a run for it.” Richie paused, tapping his hard fingers against the phone. “Heh. I told him. I told this job was rotten, but would he listen? Noooo. It’s the money, you see, we were each gonna get thirty mil if we could pull it off. Thirty million…can you imagine what someone could do that? I’m frugal by nature, Judy, I’d do very well.”

“Who’s writing that check?” Nick said, astonished.

Richie sighed, frustrated. “That’s what I’d like to know! None of us have ever seen them; they only talk to us over the phone with a disguised voice. And even then, they only ever talk to Elim. It was one of the first things that got my back up over this job, actually. Then…well, we all found out just what it was we were doing. Boss, we call them. Just ‘Boss’.”

“Richie,” Judy asked, her voice was even, but she was starting to get impatient. “I need more. Why did you break into Rikko? What were you doing in there? Please, if I’m going to help you, you have to help me!”

“I get that, Judy,” Richie said glibly. “But if I let it slip now, your bosses will hang me out to dry with the rest of them.”
“That won’t happen, Richie,” she said reassuringly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

There was another pause, a long one, before Richie spoke again. “You have the Maxbell Security files on hand, right? You must, given the case.”

“We do,” Nick said, punching up the appropriate files. “What d’you got, Dick?”

“I want you to look into their records over the past month, look for ‘anomalous system failure: total shutdown’. There, you will find a list. From that list find the following addresses: 681 Agave Avenue, lot 3341, and 992 Shady Place. Tell me when you have ‘em.”

Nick’s fingers flew over the keyboard as he located the addresses on the database. “I got ‘em. What next?”

“No one can access this database without a warrant, right? Well, how else would I know this: both places reported total systems failure on the dates of June 17th and June 24th respectively. Want to know how I know? Because I did the exact same thing to those two places that I did to Rikko. Only, you know, without the brick throwing.”

“Judy, it checks out,” Nick said, his brow creased in worry. “I think he might be…”

“Go tell the Chief!” Judy said urgently. Nick shot to his feet and streaked out the door, Judy turned back to the phone. “Alright, we’re getting the ball rolling. Just stay on the line and I’ll keep you updated.”

“Right, okay,” Richie said, sounding relieved. “That took some doing, huh? But trust me, if you think you’re a hero cop now… I gotta sample of the stuff we were gonna use, a little vial I took when no one was looking. It’s hard stuff, I tell you. All told, Boss gave us maybe ten gallons of it, but Finn says that we’d do just fine with half that. Just a few parts per billion and wham, you bring the whole thing down.”

“What is it? Poison?” Judy inquired.

“Oh, it’s not poison…” Richie said, distractedly, “Not really. We’ll talk about it face-to-face, yeah?”

Judy sighed and rolled her eyes; he just wasn’t budging. No matter, they’d pick him up, bring him in, and learn what he knows. Still, she found herself feeling uneasy, was this really the sort of person they should be helping? He’d essentially admitted to being a terrorist, not to mention being present for at least one murder! But again, he’d compromised the scene, deserted his team, and made some very dangerous enemies, all over a crisis of conscience.

Judy almost spoke when he started talking again. “Want to know what made me do it? Give up all that money? Betray my friends? And yes, they were my friends…my best friends. Even Finn was a decent bloke most of the time. Isn’t it funny how you can hate something about a person, but still like them?” His voice began to hitch and catch, he loosed a laugh that sounded more like a sob. “Nah, I guess you wouldn’t be wondering why. It’d all be pretty cut and dry to Judy Hopps, eh? But us? We were the same, see? Just a bunch of mammals who, I dunno, woke up on the wrong side of life, I guess. Things went wrong from the get-go and we just went with it, it was the only life we knew. But when I learned what was going to happen, what we were going to do and, and… oh, God…oh, God!” Richie began to weep, his voice thick and wavering. “We’ve hurt people before, but this? I begged them to back out, to walk away, but they wouldn’t! I helped them for as long as I could stomach it, but in the warehouse I saw one of those smartphone covers, it was all pink and covered in cartoons. It was for a kid! An innocent little kid! How many kids in this city,
huh? How many little boys and girls and babies would die because of what I was doing? Is any amount of money worth that?!

“Richie…” Judy whispered as he wept, her heart went out to him; here was a mammal who, after long years of detachment and cynicism, was for the first time feeling for others, and it was tearing him apart. “You have to believe that what you’re doing is right, Richie. You made mistakes, you broke the law, you hurt people; but all that can change, right now! You are on your way to being something more than you were. If you help us to stop your teammates, to save Zootopia, well, I guess that’d make you a hero, wouldn’t it?”

There was a sniffle. “Y-you think so?”

“Richie, would you have called us if you didn’t care? From what I’ve gleaned, a mammal like you could have skipped town and disappeared. But you didn’t. Do you know why?” Judy pressed on as he tried to answer. “Because you knew it was wrong, because you knew you could help, because, despite what you may think of yourself, you are a good person, Richie. Can you say that back to me?”

“I’m a good person?” Richie said, uncertainly.

“With feeling, Rich, c’mon!” Judy said, thumping her fist on the table.

“I’m a good person,” he said, with more confidence. “Yeah, I am, aren’t I?”

“You are!” Judy cheered, looking up to see Nick walk through the door to grab his jacket, he gave her a thumbs-up and smiled. “Okay, Richie, we’re coming to get you. Care to give me your location?”

“Yes, sure,” he replied, happily. “I’ll be near the phone booth at by the OmniGreen off of Troop Street in Savannah Central.”

“See you soon, Richie. Nothing’s going to happen to you, I promise.”

“Thank you, Judy,” Richie hung up.

Richie sighed and clacked the phone down on the receiver, he felt lighter and the world seemed brighter. Soon, this whole mess would be wrapped up, he’d be in witness protection, and the world would be one atrocity poorer. Well worth thirty million.

He reached into his pocket, feeling the small glass vial there, a reminder of what lay ahead. He grabbed it and pulled it out, feeling the weight of it in his hands; though it was feather-light, he felt the weight of the world in his tiny palm. Remembering the change he still had in the phone, he pressed the return button and reached up to collect his due.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh…” a horrifyingly familiar chuckle echoed in the booth. “Hey, Dick-Dick. Why’d you run off the other night? You gave us all quite the scare.”

Richie slowly pulled his hand back from the coin return; the nickel and dime tumbled out of his empty, trembling palm and hit the floor with a ‘clink’. He glanced over his shoulder to see a broad toothy smile and two black, glittering eyes.
“I knew it!” Judy said, thumping her fists on the dash as the cruiser sped to Richie’s location. “I knew there was something about this case!”

“Try to sound less excited about the potential terrorist plot, Carrots,” Nick said flatly.

“Sorry. It’s just, well, we called it, Nick! Team WildeHopps strikes again!” she said with an apologetic grin.

Nick grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t recall saying ‘ay, you know, this just might be some kind of city-threatening conspiracy’. At worst I’d suspect a corporate espionage or something.”

Judy shrugged. “I mean, we both felt that something was wrong. It was like…I dunno.”

“Like seeing Finnick smile without a victim?” Nick offered.

Judy laughed and nodded. “Or seeing Clawhauser sad!”

“Right?” Nick said, turning to Judy, relieved. “So, it’s not just me! Remember when that perp called him ‘Tubhauser’? It wasn’t even clever, but he was so sad! Threw off my whole day!”

“Awwww!” the radio crackled. “Niiiiiiick! Thank you!”

After a long pause, Nick cleared his throat and answered. “Clawhauser,”

“Hi.”

“The, uh, the radio was on the whole time?”

“Yep,” Clawhauser chirped. “The button on the radio in car 52 is pretty sticky.”

“Yeah, well…” Nick sighed and shrugged. “Just keep smilin’, babe.”

“Will do, Detective!”

“Babe?” Judy said, arching her eyebrow.

“Claw’s a total babe, Carrots,” Nick said with a playful smirk before pointing to the road. “There’s the OmniGreen. Let’s get into character.”

Judy leapt out of the car as it pulled over and raced over to the phone booth; there was no one inside. She looked around; her nose wiggling as she sampled the air, over the scent of the nearby traffic, pedestrians, and the food inside the OmniGreen building, there was little she could conclusively detect. She reached out and grabbed a passerby. “Excuse me, sir? Did you see a male dik-dik around here, near this phone booth?”

“What’s a dik-dik?”
Judy sighed and shook her head, the pedestrian wrested his arm from her grasp and continued on his way. She turned around and walked over to the payphone, she opened it up, breathing deep. There was some unfamiliar smell there, the mild, distinctive scent of Prey, but also something else, something chemical: bleach and baking soda.

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “Nick! Get over here!”

“What is it?” Nick rushed over, his hand hovering over his sidearm. He leaned into the booth, his nostrils flared as his ears perked up. “Smells like Ol’ Dick had company…it’s fresh, definitely ferret.”

“Oh, God!” Judy leapt out of the booth and looked around desperately. “Nick! We have to find him, they’ll kill him!”

“Judy, we have bigger problems than that!” Nick grabbed her by the shoulders. “If what he was saying is true, we’ve got maybe a few days before they attack. We have to get back to the precinct and tell the Chief everything.”

“Tell him what, Nick?” Judy retorted, gesturing at the phone booth. “Everything we had for this case was in that booth five minutes ago! We can’t just walk in and say ‘we have a bad feeling and a missing terrorist, put together a dragnet’!”

Nick sighed and rubbed his eyes under his aviators, Judy walked over to the booth and slammed her fist on the glass. “I promised him, Nick. I promised him he’d be safe!”

He reached over and patted her shoulder. “…Can we at least entertain the possibility that he was leading us on? Having a laugh at our expense, there’s weirder kinks out there.”

“Don’t say that!” Judy spun around, her eyes blazing. “You weren’t there when he came apart! I could hear it, Nick, it doesn’t take a good actor to spot a bad one and he was…broken. He’d seen and done horrible things, but he was ready to make up for them. He was ready to change.” Judy turned back to the booth, staring sadly at her reflection in the glass, something shimmering and metallic on the floor caught her eye. “…Change. Nick! Change!”

“What?” He walked over and saw her snapping on rubber gloves. “So he left some coinage on the ground, what’s the big deal?”

“He said he’s a frugal person, Nick, frugal people don’t drop change. Hold on a second…” Judy said as she reached over and pushed her fingers into the change slot, her eyes lit up as she pulled out a small glass vial filled with a bluish translucent liquid. “Richie…you’re a good person.”

“Damn straight!” Nick said with an impressed grin. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Not poison?” Judy said as she slipped it into a plastic bag. “Could be. We need to take it back to the lab, though.”

“I’ll radio us in.” Nick headed back fro the cruiser. “See if they can get the lab set up for us by the time we get there.”

The cruiser pulled up to the precinct and was immediately beset by a throng of press. Nick and Judy exchanged baffled glances, the questions of the reporters overlapping into an almost insectoid drone. An elephant bellow cut through the chatter and Chief Bogo and Officer McHorn barged through, flanked by Officers Trunkaby and Delgato.
“Clear a path! Let them out, for God’s sake!” Bogo shouted, greeting Judy as she stepped out of the car. “Detective Hopps.”

“Chief, what is all this?”

“This,” Bogo scowled and gestured for her to follow, “is what this new administration calls an ‘impromptu press conference’. Mayor Ketchikan wants to get the two of you in front of a couple hundred cameras and reassure the city that this case was just a standard B’n’E, that there’s no awful conspiracy, and that you two are the pets of the administration. Just smile, nod, and it’ll all be over soon.”

“Uh, yeah. Chief, about this case…” Judy fidgeted uneasily as they approached the podium where the Mayor was standing, staring guiltily up at Bogo.

Bogo’s eyes widened, a dismayed look spread across his face. “No…I know that look. Hopps, you are going to tell me that the caller was a fraud, some crazy homeless guy with a handful of quarters and a story to tell, then, you will march right up there and tell the Mayor ‘No problems here, sir!’ That’s what’s going to happen, right? …Please?”

“Sorry,” Judy said sheepishly, dangling the little plastic bag containing the vial.

Bogo clapped his hand to his face and groaned. “Heaven knows what would happen if I assigned you two to a murder! Alright, what’s in the vial?”

“Something? Sir, we need the techs to look this over, it could be incredibly dangerous!” Judy put the bag back in her pocket. “I can’t waste time with the press right now, get Nick to handle them.”

Bogo looked around, turning to Officer Trunkaby. “Francine, where is Detective Wilde?”

The elephant shrugged. “I thought he was with you. All the press and hangers-on went to the other side of the car when we broke them up, so maybe they got him as he was getting out?”

Bogo rubbed his temples, his usual dealing-with-the-mayor headache had set out on its way to becoming a migraine, a dream that it followed with enviable resolve. “Well, go get him! Alive if possible.”

Francine nodded and stomped back out into the crowd, trumpeting and bellowing as they fled from her. The Chief sighed and started to turn back to Judy. “And you! The Mayor is going to chip a tooth if you bail on this conference, so I don’t care if there’s pure anthrax in that vial, you’re going to…Hopps?”

He spun around just in time to see Judy disappear around the corner on the far side of the room. Bogo scowled and snorted in disgust as Francine returned and plopped a disheveled, haggard-looking Nick down next to him. “Wilde, you handle the press.”

“They handled me plenty, Chief!” Nick said, wiggling his hips around as he adjusted his pants. “This isn’t my shirt and I’m pretty sure my underwear’s on backwards.”

“Just get up there and schmooze with the Mayor, the sooner this day is done, the better.”
The room was cold and austere, save for a trio of chairs around a large-screen laptop and a space heater, there was little to be said of creature comforts. Grigori huffed as he pulled his chin up to the bar one-handed, switching out before slowly lowering himself back down. Now that the traitor was in hand, all they had to do was wait. Unfortunately, this also meant living and sleeping in a cold, dilapidated subterranean crypt of concrete and water pipes, but it was the only way to make sure the alpha-site stayed safe. All the other locations they had visited were private property or workplaces, but the alpha-site actually required them to clear out a half-dozen vagrants before they could set up shop. Grigori grinned, he’d gotten to kill a polar bear, a soused and raving polar bear, but it was satisfying regardless.

His tufted ears turned as the door opened behind him, Elim entered the room and shuddered, a harrowed look in his eyes.

“Is he finished?” Grigori rumbled, letting go of the bar.

Elim shook his head twitchily, a morbid smirk on his face. “N-nah. Ha! No, he’s just getting started. You know, when Finn says he’s going to get creative, he’s, uh, he’s not joking. I actually feel bad for Dick-Dick…”

A shrill, muffled scream echoed through the halls, Elim flinched away from it and clapped his hands over his ears. Grigori sighed and shut the door, thankfully cutting off the sound. “I told you, you shouldn’t have watched.”

“What?” Elim exclaimed. “No, you didn’t!”

“Oh yeah,” Grigori grunted, the flicker of a smile on his dour face. “That’s right, I didn’t tell you on purpose. Because seeing you like this is very funny to me.”

“Yeah, you look just tickled,” Elim grumbled, heading over to the cooler. “I need a fucking drink. You want anything?”

“Beer me.”

Elim tossed him a bottle; the lynx brought the bottle up to his mouth, his new, glittering metal teeth made short work of the cap. The two sat themselves down in front of the laptop; Elim pulled out the wireless keyboard and mouse and navigated to the Zootopia streaming news site. As predicted, the Mayor was congratulating himself and the police force, simultaneously putting down suspicions of conspiracy and boosting confidence. Elim sighed, sometimes he wished that people weren’t so goddamn predictable. Next to the Mayor was a fox in a cop uniform, something that personally baffled to Elim, but then there wasn’t a whole lot about Zootopia that made sense to him.

The fox, Detective Wilde of the super-cop duo whose portmanteau name made Elim’s eyes roll, was a well-spoken, slick son-of-a-bitch; with a handsome smile, charmingly obtuse answers to questions, and a well placed joke, he soon had the press eating out of his hand. Over the course of his research, he had discovered that Wilde used to be on the other side of things, legally and morally speaking. Elim knew a hustler when he saw one, and he was looking at a chieftain. Wilde had little of the flash or panache of big-time scammers and con-men, but many things about him...
told Elim that he was just as talented, if not more so. First of all, he carried himself like a con-man of fifty, yet he was either near or just through the door of his thirties; this spoke of an early start, a rough childhood that nurtured nascent talent. Here was someone who had kept a low profile, hadn’t turned too many heads, but had made a decent living doing whatever smalltime shtick he had adopted, and in the meantime had contacts and eyes on every street corner. Elim had suspected two days, maybe one, for them to track down Manny, because even when trying to get caught you shouldn’t make it too easy.

The fox had done it in one hour.

Elim found it troubling, but of no actual concern; all con-men are made up of the same stuff, the same basic ingredients: opportunism, cynicism, and superficiality. Wilde had attacked the case with a wit and ferocity that would have been impressive, were it not for the fact that he had been utterly duped by a feint. His con-man instincts would lead him to tackle the surface, the superficial, while the true crime slipped between his fingers. It was a simple matter of knowing people and how they worked. Elim chuckled to himself; he had a good bead on things.

“Where is the bunny?” Grigori asked.

“What’s it matter?” Elim grunted, sipping his beer. “Do you think he practices?”

“Huhn?”

“That look,” Elim said, pointing at the screen, Detective Wilde had just set the Mayor up for a friendly zinger and his expression was decidedly smug. “That pratty, self-satisfied smirk, the screen is practically dripping oil. How can one creature convey such conceitedness naturally? He must practice it in the bathroom mirror every morning.”

“Foxes just do that,” Grigori sneered. “Makes it more fun to wipe it off their faces.”

Elim chuckled, as he watched the police and government giving each other a good lick, clapping themselves on the back over a case solved in record time. Won’t they be surprised! He saw Grigori’s ear twitch, his neutral expression, which was already a scowl, deepened as though he had just heard an unpleasant sound. “You can hear them, eh?”

“Eh,” Grigori affirmed. “Finn is really having fun with him.”

Elim shifted uncomfortably, Grigori had a stomach for this sort of thing and even he was getting an off vibe this time. “You know…I think Finn’s mad.”

Amazingly, Grigori smiled; the gold sheen of his fangs startling in the hard light cast by the floodlight that served as their only source of illumination. “You are just realizing this now?”

“No, no. I mean, I think he’s angry with Dick-Dick.”

Grigori waved dismissively. “I don’t think Finn’s ever done what he does out of love.”

“No, listen.” Elim turned to look at the lynx. “I think it really hurt him when he betrayed us. Like, his feelings.”

Grigori nodded thoughtfully. “People like us do not give trust easily, if at all. Finn liked Dick-Dick, we all did.”

“I did,” Elim admitted. “He did his job well and he was a hoot to be around.”
“Yeah, and then he ruins everything and runs off, like we don’t matter.” Grigori said, leveling a glare at Elim. “It’s like mixing an 18 year old port-finish scotch with coke.”

Elim threw up his hands. “One time! One time, three years ago! Haven’t I done enough to make up for it?”

Grigori nodded and gestured apologetically. “Yes, you have. I’m sorry, I’m not angry about it, but you must know I’ll never let you forget.”

Elim smirked and nodded, sipping his beer. A moment passed, a heavy pause that weighed on both of them, when Grigori spoke. “Elim…I wanted to thank you. For this job. For involving me. With that money, I can retire and support my Mama and sisters. I want you to know…I consider you my friend.”

Elim blinked in surprise, he felt uncharacteristically stymied; did he feel the same way? Just then, considering life without his burly teammate for the first time, he began to feel a tug of sadness. He’d have the money all the same, but whom would he talk to? Who could possibly understand what he had been through? And Finn, what would life be like without that chipper, demented maniac? A lot less interesting, that’s what. “Yeah, Gori. Thanks. Y’know what? Same here. You’re my buddy, yeah? You, me, and Finn, we’re like the Three Musketeers.”

“Used to be four,” Grigori grumbled, flinching at some sub-audible sound from down the hall. “But yes. Don’t ever tell him I said so, but Finn is a real droug, we spar and it’s fun, keeping each other on our toes. The three of us, we are bratva, yeah?”

“Y’know…” Elim said, tapping his fingers on his beer bottle. “When you get your money and move your family to that ‘warm place’ with the supermarkets that deliver and such, well, what would you say to us being neighbors?”

Grigori nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I would like that. Evenings, we sit on our porches with barbeques and beer, and talk about the old days and what we’re going to buy next.”

“And in the mornings we have breakfast at Finnegan’s!” Elim laughed. “Remember that breakfast he cooked up for us a while back? Best damn hashbrowns I’ve ever had!”

Grigori chuckled, an almost unprecedented occurrence. “And in the afternoon? We do whatever we want.”

“Whatsoever we want!” Elim repeated, offering his bottle in cheers.

Grigori reached over to clink his bottle with his friend’s when the door swung open and in walked Finn. The ferret was humming jauntily to himself, warm blood dripping from his mouth and down his stomach.

“Coulda been anything that we wanted ta be/with all the talent we had~” he sang as he rifled through their groceries, grabbing a pot off the floor. “With little training we mastered complaining—say, Elim, where’d we put that big box of salt I picked up?”

“It’s in the box on your right,” Elim said before reluctantly asking, “Why?”

“Oh, just mixing up a couple pints of sterile saline. See, I need a little something to keep the fun going when the chew toy runs low on juice. I’ve already jury-rigged an I.V. so all I need is the filler. He’s stable now, I just want it on hand for when I get really carried away.” Finn pulled out the big box of salt and began to pour it into the pot.
Elim spun his wheels on this for a moment, trying to understand, before giving up and loosing a hearty laugh. “Okay, whatever! Grab a beer and get over here, you crazy little shit! Gori and I were having a talk.”

Finn’s ears perked up. “About what?”

“Well, we were talking about how we wanted to be neighbors once we retire, you, me, and Gori. You with your restaurant and such, we’d be regulars!”

Finn pulled a beer from the cooler, the 12oz bottle looking comically large in the arms of the little ferret, without much effort he clambered up and onto the table between the two larger chairs, where Grigori capped his bottle for him. “Wasn’t that the plan all along?”

“Stay gold, Finn. Stay gold,” Elim smiled and offered his bottle in toast. “I propose a toast to Zootopia…” Finn and Grigori exchanged bemused expressions. “Yes, Zootopia: good fuckin’ luck.”

The three laughed sardonically, they clicked their bottles together and drank deep. It was only a matter of time, now.

Chapter End Notes

There's nothing quite like a beer with friends, is there?
Nick dragged his feet as he approached their cubicle, his ears drooped with exhaustion; the press conference must have gone on for at least an hour and he was well and truly bagged. Mayor Ketchikan turned out to be a real sport…in front of the cameras, anyway; not that it mattered, damage control had been attempted, only time would tell if it stuck. Judy sat silently in her corner of the cubicle, staring intently into a flickering screen.

“Well, thanks for throwing me to the army ants like that, Carrots. I hope it was worth it.” Nick plopped down onto his chair, desperately wanting something cold and profoundly alcoholic.

“It was,” she replied without turning around. “The techs found it to be totally inconclusive. As in, they don’t know what it is, what it does, how it was made, or what its vector is. All we know is that it’s not explosive. Needless to say, they’re on it like flies. We should have something more to go on by tomorrow.”

Nick gave an impressed whistle, across the various animals species and the advanced nature of Zootopia’s health agencies, the ZPDs library of hazardous materials was beyond extensive; anything that stumped them was sure to cause a ruckus. “Still not hearing an apology.”

“Hmm?” was the response, she still hadn’t turned from the screen. “Oh, you did fine. Better than I would have.”

Nick chuckled and nodded. “Well, I find the trick to a good press conference is to not generate tensions across racial lines.”

‘Now comes the part where she laughs and tells me to shut up, or throws a plushie at me, or something,’ he thought to himself, blinking in surprise when nothing happened.

“Hmm.” was the response.

That tore it. Nick spun around and got to his feet, walking over to her. “Whatcha reading, Carrots?”

“Everything there is,” Judy said, her voice low and flat, “about Finnegan McNulty.”

Nick sighed and shook his head; he’d given the little beast’s file a cursory glance before, and what he had seen only contributed to his need for a stiff drink. “I could suggest other, more upbeat literature. C’mon, you’re not doing yourself any favors.”

“Two years ago the police department of Desanimaux found the body of a leader of a major political movement three days after he had been reported kidnapped,” Judy summoned a grisly
picture with a click of the mouse. “Evidence suggested that he had only expired a few hours before being found. They had to use his dental records to get a positive ID. McNulty was arrested under suspicion of kidnapping, but was cleared when someone else confessed to the crime. And here, three years ago in Bygone, a notorious crime boss was found missing all his fingers and toes along with most of his face, toothmarks suggest a smaller obligate carnivore; McNulty was noted to have been in the city at the time. Five years ago, six gangsters were found dead in a warehouse in the Canary District of Hanuman, COD determined to be mastication on the back of their necks resulting in fatal trauma to the brainstem. This was the only crime he did time for, and even then he was let off when some of the evidence showed signs of tampering. Six years ago the CEO to the Emerald Islands branch of Bug Burga, a male elephant, was found dead of mysterious causes: massive internal trauma including a ruptured lung and a ‘exploded’ right coronary artery, but with no discernable external injuries. Autopsy reports mention what appear to be teeth marks on the heart, and aspirated mustelid fur—”

“Judy,” Nick said sternly. “Stop.”

“Stop what?” Judy snapped, her eyes bright and blazing. “Stop doing my job?”

Nick shook his head, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Stop doing this to yourself! It’s not your fault.”

“What’s not my fault?” Judy said flatly, shrugging his hand off, turning back to the computer. “Maybe you were right, maybe he was just leading us on and I got caught up in it because he took summer acting courses and knew how to cry! Maybe there’s nothing in that vial but koolaid!”

Nick knelt down next to her and draped a friendly arm over her shoulder. “Hey now, there’s only room for one cynical skeptic on this team, Carrots. It wasn’t your fault Richie got pinched. You can’t blame yourself. He left us some evidence and gave us the names of his buddies, that’s miles ahead of where we were and we wouldn’t have gotten any of it without you. The best we can do now is wait for the lab results; you’re not going to make any headway scaring yourself with horror stories.”

“I’m not scared!” Judy said, defiantly. “…It’s just hard to believe that there are people like that out there, you know?”

“Not really,” Nick said, knowingly, looking off into the middle distance. “Met a few. Anyway, it’s getting to be that time of day. What say we have another case review? You look like you need it.”

Judy sighed and smiled. “And by ‘case review’ you mean…”

Bucky and Pronk sat around their tiny table, cards in hand as they tried in vain to ignore the racket next door as it rattled through the thin drywall.
“Hah!”

“Uhnn-no! Ah!”

“Take it, foxy! Take it!”

“Stoppit! Uhn! That’s not fair!”

“Gitsuuum! Huhn!”

Bucky sniffed and shifted in his seat. “Got any twos?”

“Mercy, Hopps! Mercy!”

“You love it!”

“Argh! Ahn~!”

Pronk cleared his throat. “Go fish.”

“No…no! No! No!”

“Bite the pillow, Sly, I’m going in dry!”

“AAAAAHHH!!”

Bucky sipped from his glass of water. “D’you think they’re messing with us?”

Pronk scoffed and tossed a peanut into his mouth. “Please! If they actually were going at it, Judy would *wreck* that fox. He wouldn’t even be saying words.”

“Hah! He’d be ball-gagged!” Bucky laughed, scanning his cards. “Got any sixes?”

“KO~!” The dry, patchy voice of the announcer crackled through Nick’s headphones. “Spring Trap wins! Flawless beat-down! Savagery!”

Nick grunted in disgust, pulling off his headphones as he tossed his 86-X controller aside, Judy did a victory dance on the bed next to him. “A freak. You’re some kind of freak!”

“Freaky good at kicking your lily-haunch!” Judy bellowed, shooting up into a power stance. “Bunny supremacy! Fluff power! Fluff power!”

Nick smiled affectionately and flicked her tail. “Where on earth did you learn to trash-talk? It’s next-level!”

Judy giggled and sat down next to him. “Hopps Family tournaments, duh! Nearly three
hundred contestants and yours truly is the undisputed champeen eight years running! Of course I’ve mastered the psychological aspects of utter domination!”

“Careful with that kinda talk, Carrots.” Nick smirked and waggled his eyebrows. “You just might get me all hot and bothered.”

“Psssh!” Judy swatted his nose playfully. “Another one of your kinks?”

“Ohhh!” Nick said dramatically fell to his knees and bowed pathetically. “Hit me again, Mistress! Punish me, I’ve been a bad, bad foxy!”

Judy rolled her eyes and kicked him lightly on top of his head. “Up. Down for round four?”

“There’s an innuendo there,” Nick mumbled coyly, still prostrate before her. He rose up off the floor and straightened out his shirt, brimming with sarcastic dignity. “But I’m better than that.”

“I’m hearing a lot of talk,” Judy said, dangling the controller. “C’mon. I might let you hit me this time!”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’mma pass on that, Carrots.” Nick leapt onto the tiny bed and stretched out. “My pride can only take so much in one night.”

Judy huffed and folded her arms, plopping down next to him with an exaggerated pout on her face. Nick simply smirked and nudged her with his foot. “Feeling better?”

“About what? The fact that our only informant is in the clutches of a demented psychopath or that the city may or may not be in mortal peril?” Judy said disinterestedly.

“Uh,” Nick faltered, hearing it out loud all made the situation seem more than a little dire. “Both?”

She reached her arms over and behind her head, stretching her shoulders with an audible pop. “A little, actually. Once we get results back from the lab, we’ll be able to piece together just what it is they’re planning to do, and from there we can work on actually finding and stopping them.”

Nick sat up and scooted next to her, staring out at the corkboard. It had been updated with various bits of data, including mugshots of the three suspects, pictures of the locations listed by Richie in addition to the Rikko Warehouse, and those location’s corresponding places on a greater map of Zootopia. “If we can get all that stuff done before the population reaches ‘ideal saturation’, whatever that means.”

“We’ll need at least three days to get a search warrant on those other locations, now that City Hall isn’t pushing this case through. Especially the mansion in the Rainforest District.” Judy groaned and rolled her neck. “And then we have to look for something we’ve never seen before wherever they put it. Needle in a haystack.”

“Well, the explosives test turned up negative, right? My guess is that it’s aerosolized, a toxin or something, so the dispenser would be somewhere high,” Nick offered, watching as Judy tried to work the kinks out of her neck.

“But what kind of coverage could it get from those locations? Not to mention we’re dealing with a limited amount of substance, it has to be ferret-portable, remember? How could three locations so far apart be that big of a threat?” Nick reached over and grabbed her by the shoulders, kneading her tense muscles in his skilled hands; Judy only tensed for a moment before relaxing,
moaning softly as he dug into the tenser areas. “It’s frustrating, we’ve only really been given enough to get a basic idea of just how screwed we all are a week from now, but we still don’t know how or why.”

“Suppose they’s gonna poison the well?” Nick said, jokingly.

Judy chuckled. “Be serious! What could a warehouse, a mansion, and a grocery store have to do with the water?”

“Let’s jot that question down for tomorrow. For now, let’s focus on getting you in a right headspace,” Nick whispered into her ear, rubbing up and into her neck. “We’ll need you perky and bouncy tomorrow if we’re going to make any headway.”

Right!” Judy said with an eye-roll. “Please, you’ve been carrying this whole case, you and your connections and blackmail and blah blah blah. This case had been all Wilde and no Hopps.”

Nick smiled serenely, pushing his claws out just enough to prick her skin and make her start. “Enough of that. I wouldn’t have gotten boo out of Richie, Carrots, that was all you. I probably would have pissed him off or something and where would we be then?”

“Dunno,” she grunted, savoring the way his strong, warm hands seemed to chase away the tension. “Tsk! Figures the only person I can form a connection with is a world-renowned terrorist!”

Nick cleared his throat behind her. “You know what I mean, Sly. Mmmm…remind me to send your masseuse ex-girlfriend a gift basket or something, because this is a side of Nick Wilde I could get used to.”

“You and a hundred other women.” His thumbs began to move down and between her shoulder blades.

Her ears perked up as a wry smile spread across her face. “Oh-ho? A hundred? Sounds like someone’s quite the heartbreaker!”

Nick snorted, kneading a little too hard, making her flinch. “That’s a laugh coming from Ms. Fifty First Dates!”

‘Damnit…that’s pretty good,’ Judy sighed and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. “Thirty! And that’s not funny. Did you know I was seeing someone earlier this week?”

“Yes.”

Her ears shot up and she peered over her shoulder at him. “How?”

Nick tapped his nose and winked. “He wore middle-priced cologne and had a fondness for asparagus. Also, he might want to cut back on the garlic, it’s starting to show in his BO.”

“Well, you’ll have to be the one to tell him,” Judy grumbled, holding up her phone. “I got a ‘Dear Jane’ text a few days ago.”

“Carrots…” Nick said softly. “You didn’t say anything.”

“I keep my work life and my social life separate, thank you very much!” Judy said, before groaning and slouching over again. “Or, at least, that’s what I thought I did.”

“Oh?” His hands drifted back up and over her shoulders, massaging the renewed tension that settled in at the onset of the ‘boyfriend’ conversation. “What do you mean?”
“It means that On-Duty Judy and Off-Duty Judy are one and the same!” Judy said in an overdramatic superhero voice. “All my ‘exes’, if you could call a bunch of first dates exes, seem to think that I’m too career focused to be in an involved relationship. Also, that I’m scary.”

Nick found himself in a losing battle against the tension, and soon the little rabbit in his hands was a bundle of nerves and sinew. “They said that?”

Judy chuckled; it was bitter but also invested. “No. I took all twenty-three break-up texts and all seven transcripts from the face-to-face break ups and plugged them into an index, I then took all the correlating points and concepts and–boom!–at least sixty percent of the participants mentioned a ‘dedication’ and ‘perseverance’ to my job, whereas another twenty percent also implied possible intimidation.”

Nick scratched his head and chuckled, the fact that Judy was framing this embarrassing information with a joke was encouraging, albeit somewhat out of character. “A correlative data chart for break-up texts? That’s just about the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. Well, what does the other twenty percent say?”

“That I already have a boyfriend at work,” she said, turning around to meet his gaze with her large purple eyes; Nick felt a jolt race up his spine when he met those eyes. “That’s the only one I think is actually true.”

“Y-yeah?” he said, trying to play it cool despite suddenly noticing how warm her body was, how soft her fur felt in his hands; the room was becoming uncomfortably warm, despite the break in the heat wave. “Have I met him?”

“Oh, once or twice,” Judy said casually. “His name’s Badge.”

Nick blinked in confusion, had he missed a step in this conversation? “Badge? As in, badger? Do we have a badger on the force?”

Judy giggled, a soft tinkling sound that for some reason made his heart race; she reached into her pocket and pulled out her badge. “Badge! Badge! I’m dating the job! Duuuuh!”

“Oh!” Nick said, laughing to hide his embarrassment. “I knew that.”

“Derrr!” Judy continued, gently bopping him on the snout with her badge. “Derp derp derp! The Great Fox Detective!”

“Oh, okay!” Nick said swatting her hand away playfully. “I deserve that.”

“Derrrr!” Judy continued, gently bopping him on the snout with her badge. “Derp derp derp! The Great Fox Detective!”

“Okay, okay!” Nick said swatting her hand away playfully. “I deserve that!”

“And I didn’t say you could stop!” she said, rolling her shoulders in his hands. “I won at Fatal Fight, I call the shots tonight!”

“Bars,” Nick said sarcastically as he resumed the massage, not that he particularly minded, he just needed to make seem like he did, for reasons. He looked over her shoulder and saw that she was typing away on her phone, inputting something into a chart. “Okay, what are you doing now?”

“Just inputting the new data while I’m thinking about it. My ‘break-up chart’ won’t fill itself out!” Judy didn’t look up from her phone, her nimble thumbs tapping away. “New entry: Basil Stag. Age: 27. Species: Hare…”

Nick peered over her shoulder, his ears shifting back as his eyes widened in disbelief. “Oh my God, you were serious about that thing?”
Judy shrugged. “Well, yeah. I wanted to know why they kept calling it off. It was either this or get a few of the guys at the precinct to bring ‘em in.”

“No! Nope!” Nick reached over and plucked the phone out of her hands. “This is some seriously stupid science going on here and I will not abide it! Oh God, you have a Venn diagram and everything!”

“How else am I supposed to note areas of overlap?” Judy said clambering on his lap to grab at the phone. “And give it back! It’s not done!”

“And it will never be!” Nick exclaimed, holding the phone well out of reach as he held her back with his elbow. “This is for your own good, Hopps!”

“Give it back, Nick!” Judy said sternly, trying in vain to reach for the phone. “I’m serious!”

Nick swept her under his arm and pinned her against his body. “So am I! I will not let my best friend chart her break-ups with some psycho dating software! What are you trying to do, find the mathematical equation for misery?”

‘Best friend?’ Judy struggled against the much larger mammal, surprised at how easily he was holding her down. Nick had never been fat or unfit per se, but all the training and exercise as part of their shared fitness routine had surely tightened him up and even added some bulk that wasn’t there before. Judy was becoming uncomfortably aware of how solid he was underneath all that fluffy fur as he pressed her into his side. “Yes, and I just found it! It’s called ‘Nick’s paws + my stuff = total misery’ now give it back!”

“Oh, for the love of–weight, height, eye color?” Nick sighed in disgust. “What does any of that have to do with them breaking up with you?”

“Any correlation is potentially relevant! If you were a good detective, you’d know that!” Judy growled, noticing that he was accessing the file’s data. “What are you doing?! Nick, let me go, right now!”

“Aaaaand deleted,” Nick said with satisfaction. “You’re welcome CarrrrRRRAGH!”

Judy levered his arm up and behind his back, twisting at the wrist as she brought her foot up on his back. Nick shouted in surprise and pain and leaned forward. “Give it back, Wilde! I’m absolutely fucking serious, if you don’t give me back my phone I’ll twist your girlfriend clean off!”

“OW! Okay! Okayokayokay!” Nick cried, handing her the phone. “I didn’t actually delete anything, you dumb bunny!”

Judy grabbed her phone and reviewed the data, it was all still there. “You didn’t?”

“No!” Nick said, rubbing his arm. “There’s three things you just don’t do to your friends, one is mess with their phone, and another is eat their food without permission. Since you’re a weed-muncher, I’d say the chances of the latter are fairly slim.”

“What’s the third thing?” Judy said, not quite sure if she should smile just yet.

“Diddling a family member,” Nick said glibly. “Father, mother, siblings. Cousins are a grey area. The odds of that happening are…well, middling, anyway.”

“Middling?” Judy said, allowing herself to smirk. “Well, Mom was certainly interested. In
your teeth, anyway.”

“So I’m not the only one who noticed!” Nick said, smiling. “I kinda wanted to say something but, y’know, it would have been awkward.”

Judy regarded the phone for a moment, her smirk fading as her ears drooped. “Is it really that weird?”

Nick paused, gesturing noncommittally before giving up and nodding. “Yeah, it’s kinda really weird. Sorry.”

Judy sighed and buried her head in her hands. “I can’t stop looking at things like a cop! Seeing patterns, data, trying to tie the two together with whatever’s on hand; it’s all I ever really focused on as a kid.” Judy cleared her throat, embarrassment clear in her voice. “…I’ve never actually had a boyfriend.”

Nick blinked and recoiled in surprise, feeling like the biggest ass this side of the Pachyderm Prefecture. “You mean, you never…?”

Judy scoffed and leveled an incredulous look at him. “Nick. I’m a bunny. There were guys, not many but some, just no boyfriends and no actual relationships. Hah! You know, my mom would probably get a kick out of you calling me Ms. Fifty First Dates! For the longest time I think she assumed that I, uh, preferred the burrow to the carrot, if you know what I mean.”

Nick nodded and forced a chuckle, still feeling like a fool; he’d given her a hard time for not knowing how to do something she literally had no experience with. And really, was he anyone to judge? “Hey, Carrots…I’m sorry for all that crap I gave you just now.”

“It’s okay, Nick,” Judy smiled, patting his arm.

“No, it’s not!” He pulled away from her. “At least you try! And, who knows, maybe you’ll get it eventually, unlike some people. Heh! You wanna hear something really pathetic?”

“Not really,” Judy said calmly, he was getting into one of his moods again. “Nick, you don’t have to try and make me feel better. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Three months.”

Judy arched her eyebrow. “Three months?”

He nodded, a bashful smile on his face. “That’s the longest relationship I’ve ever been in. Ninety days, and it stopped being fun after twenty. We were just young and stubborn, I guess. But most of them didn’t last half that long, though, and recently they’ve all been fairly abrupt affairs. Stands of the one-night variety.”

“Yeah. No offense, but I can’t really see you getting intimate with anyone,” Judy said, she looked over and caught the decidedly nasty glare Nick was directing at her. “Emotionally! I can totally see you getting on well with the other side of things, but the smarmy, romantic, fluffy stuff…I just don’t see the Nick Wilde I know opening up to anyone like that.”

“The Nick Wilde you know, huh?” Nick turned away from her, is that how she saw him? Did Carrots of all people still think that she was dealing with Slick Nick? Part of him reveled in the fact that he’d managed to keep her under that impression without even trying, but another part of him, a part that had been growing steadily ever since he’d met her, found it unbearable.

“Remember that story I told you? You know, waaaay back, during the Nighthowlers Case and the
uh…” he brought his hand up over his snout, his fingers making a cage.

Judy nodded, her expression questioning. “The muzzle. Yes, Nick, of course I remember!”

“Yeah, well, you’re the only person I’ve ever told about that.” Nick twiddled his thumbs awkwardly. “I never spoke about what happened that night to anyone. Not even my mom.”

Judy drew back, her eyes widening. “Why?”

He sighed and shrugged. “Dunno. It was kinda the whole big thing, you know? She saved up all that money to pay dues and get me my uniform. I just didn’t want to disappoint her. Heh! I actually got into the scamming business while trying to keep her from finding out. I’d head out every week, pretending to go to ranger scouts, I learned how to tie knots and do all kinds of camping stuff from books and whatnot, to really sell the front to her. I even told her to give me the monthly checks to give to the scout masters, told her to leave the name blank so whoever was there could fill it out. I was nine, and I actually remember thinking to myself ‘she’s trying to spend all this money on me, I might as well put it towards something worthwhile instead’. So I cashed each check and put the money in a safe place until I could decide what to buy her.

“This went on for months, I had a decent chunk of money put away when I saw it; a Singer 4423, top-of-the-line heavy duty sewing machine. Mom was a seamstress by trade, and a damn good one, but even back then her arthritis was getting to her, so she couldn’t fill it out as many orders as she used to. I was about a hundred bucks short, funny how much bigger that number seems to a little kid, huh? So I figured I’d put that scout uniform to use and make some money. I knew a kid at a bakery, and I knew a kid at a grocery store, and I had some dirt on a kid with a printer. Between the three of them, I had stale throwaway cookies, old cartons from expired Oreos, and a whole mess of homemade logos; combine that with a ranger-scouts uniform and smooth-talker like yours truly and you’ve got a license to print money! So, I bought the sewing machine and paid them to deliver it and ran on home, happy as could be. Turns out ‘my’ scout troop visited my mom’s work that day, so, naturally, she asked after me and, well…she was waiting for me when I got home. She didn’t even ask about the money, not even once, she just wanted to know what had happened. She wanted to know why I lied to her. I couldn’t tell her; my mom, she’d blame herself for what those awful kids did, because that’s the kind of person she was…is. When the sewing machine showed up and she signed away for it, well, I guess she put together what I’d been doing all that time. We never spoke of it again.”

Judy stared at her feet, a hot flush building in her ears; Nick really trusted her that much, to tell her all that? “Do you still talk to your mom?”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick said, sounding convincingly casual. “Not since I became a cop, though.”

“What?!” Judy exclaimed, turning to him. “Nick, it’s been over a year! Why the hell not?!”

Nick shied away from her gaze, turning his eyes down to his badge as it peeked out of his pocket; if there was anyone he could tell, it was Carrots. “She’s always been supportive of me, always happy to see me, always…glad I was alive, to be honest; but never proud. No, she was always a little sadder each year to see what I was doing with my life. If she saw me now, actually making something of myself, I’m afraid that she’ll just be waiting for the front to fall, for the con to come out. That’d…I don’t think I could stand that, Carrots.”

“But she’s your mother,” Judy said, scooting closer to him on the bed. “Call her tonight, Nick. See her as soon as you can. You’ve done so much; you’re so much more than you were. She’ll be proud of you, I know she will!”
Nick reached out for her; she grabbed his hand up in hers, his bright green eyes locking with her violet ones. “Could you come with me, maybe? I don’t know if she’ll believe me.”

Judy smiled and nodded as a relieved expression spread across Nick’s face, their eyes lingering for a moment. Judy found herself getting lost in them; he was the only person in Zootopia that knew her, really knew her, not as On-Duty Judy or as a ‘hero cop’ or whatever, but as Judy, as Carrots, as a friend. And she was the only person in the whole world that he could trust. Whatever it was between them, whether it was friendship or something else, it was precious.

Then they blinked.

Nick’s went wide, his ears flattened against his skull, and he pulled his hand away. He scooted further down the bed and barked a laugh, mortified at his emotional deluge; once again he’d shoehorned his vast and sundry list of personal issues into Judy’s life. The whole point of tonight was to make her feel better, but he had, as usual, made everything about him! “Heh! Uh, sorry about all that. I guess did say ‘wanna hear something really pathetic’, and boy, did I deliver! All aboard the pity-party wagon! I hope you’re big into schadenfr–”

Judy leapt across the bed and looped her arms around his neck, pulling herself in and squeezing tight. Nick sat in silence for a moment, blinking in surprise when she began nuzzling the side of his face. After a moment he was able to assemble enough pride to at least attempt to sound grouchy. “Y’know, Carrots, if I wanted a hug, I would have asked.”

“Shush,” she said, her voice stern but loving. “This is for me. Hug me back, Nick.”

Nick smirked and complied, hugging her gently. “Ah yes, please permit me that faux-pas in hugging etiquette.”

“Unforgivable.” Judy pulled herself closer.

“How, exactly, is this for you?” Nick said, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable.

“It’s just nice, you know?” Judy muttered, nuzzling into his surprisingly soft, warm neck fur. “It’s nice to know you trust me that much. That you feel you can tell me anything. It means a lot to me, Nick, because I know just how hard that sort of thing is for you. It’s been a really bad day and knowing that I have you in my corner is just so–” her voice began to crack and hitch, she practically nestled into him, squeezing his neck and shoulders even tighter. “I just really needed that. Thank you.”

Nick said nothing and instead returned the favor, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. Judy shivered as his strong, sinewy arms embraced her, drawing her closer to his warmth. She inhaled sharply, catching a noseful of his scent. It was…different from that of a Prey mammal, sharper, more pronounced, as close as she was to the source it was almost tangy. Judy found herself becoming engrossed in his scent, the long-forgotten instincts of her ancestors exercised their diminished control over her as her heart began to race, a hot flush burned in her ears. The smell of a Predator was all around her, but she wasn’t afraid, far from it.

“So…” Nick said after a long while. “Not that I’m complaining, but are you going to let go at some point?”

“Mmm?” Judy mumbled, grasping a handful of his luxurious fur, letting it run through her fingers. “No. You live here. This is your home now.”

“Oh,” Nick said, sounding convincingly nonchalant were it not for the fact that she could
 Hear and feel his heart thundering away in his chest. “In that case, could I grab a beer from the fridge?”

Finnegan pored over the sheets of paper splayed out on the desk next to his new laptop; half of them marked with Burga and OmniGreen logos, the other were data sheets of his own devising. On the papers were bar graphs and chemical formulas, projected saturation rates and the corresponding official documents accounting for the sales of certain food items. Finn snorted to himself, the whole plan reeked of perfectionism; saturation-rates needed to be in the 80th percentile before they could be given the go-ahead to complete the mission, or about five days if his calculations and the provided information held true. It didn’t make sense to him, the need for such extensive coverage, because even if only two-thirds of the population were affected, which was the current estimate, the end-result would be more or less the same. But no, everyone had to get in on Boss’s party, every last mammal in Zootopia had to get up and dance when the bell tolled; it had to be perfect.

He grinned; someone must really have it in for this city, to want such total and utter devastation. A shiver raced up his spine, imagining the shock and confusion that would grip the megapolis for those first beautiful hours, then the unmitigated terror and despair that would suffuse its final days. Even if most were unaffected, they would be totally helpless before the throngs that were. It was going to be a wild show, and he was going to have front row seats.

“…Hnnnnhnn…” a groan carried from the room over, a certain special someone had just regained consciousness.

Finn casually looked over at the door adjoining his makeshift room, it led to what must have been a janitorial closet or something, because it had a handy-dandy little drain in the center and a mildly concave floor, perfect for his hobbies, easy to clean. He’d taken exceptional care not to hit any major vessels, though so cleaning up thus far wasn’t too much of a consideration. Still, he hadn’t been going easy on his old friend, far from it, but the little ungulate was still sharp and responsive despite several consecutive hours of playtime. Finn could respect that, it made him want to push harder, to hook up the saline drip and really start to have fun. But sometimes you had to let the toys season a bit, to sit and stew, to understand just what was happening to them. That way they’d appreciate every new nibble and gnaw for the life-affirming gifts that they were; the dead don’t feel pain, after all. Finn found his jaws flexing, a hot tingle in his mouth as saliva flowed. He set down his pen and hopped off the chair, skipping over to the door.

Work could wait.
Judy awoke the cry of her alarm clock. She reached over and tapped it, groaning as she sat up and stretched the sleep from her limbs. Another day on the job, another day waiting for a lead to fall into her lap like some sort of gift from above. Everything that had happened yesterday felt like a distant memory, a ‘case review’ with the irreplaceable Mr. Wilde tended to have that effect. The sting of Richie’s disappearance was dulled and far easier to accept. Of course, part of her worried that he had been abducted by his former teammates, but the irrepressible optimist that was the rest of her hoped that he had simply lost his nerve and run away. She was happier with that; even if leaving the vial behind was the true extent of his heroism, it was certainly preferable to the alternative.

She conducted her morning ritual with an almost mechanical precision; light calisthenics, a two-mile jog followed by breakfast, all rounded off with a shower and some oral hygiene. Judy sped down the highway towards the precinct, debating with herself if she should stop by a Starbucks or just grab an extra coffee off Nick as he gossiped with Clawhauser.

“Live dangerously, Carrots,” she muttered to herself, smirking. That sounded like something Nick would say. “Venti mocha latte, here I come!”

A few minutes later and she was stepping out the Starbucks with an extra large coffee in her hands. Judy fumbled with the key to the car door when a little brown goat stumbled into her, knocking her coffee to the ground in a splatter of foam.

“M’sry mam,” the goat mumbled, leaning against the hood of her car. “Ma’liddle drunk, dunno where I’m. Say, would y’know shumplace a guy could sleep?”

Judy sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Dispatch, this is Detective Hopps,” Judy said into the speaker. “Inbound with intoxicated subject, individual is a brown goat, three-eight, unwilling or unable to provide proof of identification. Open up the drunk tank, over.”

“Understood, Detective,” Clawhauser responded. “Getting an early start on the day? Over.”

“Affirmative, dispatch,” Judy said with a smile. “Detective Hopps, out.”

Judy turned back to the goat in her back seat, struggling with the dollarstore finger-traps she had put on him. “You okay back there?”

“Yes’m,” he slurred, tugging at the cardboard tubes with a perplexed expression. “These tings’re like a medafor f’life. Th’more ya pull away, th’harder they grab. Say, iss real nice a’you to gimme a lif’ to th’sleepin’ place, you a real mensch, lady.”

“Yes’m,” he slurred, tugging at the cardboard tubes with a perplexed expression. “These tings’re like a medafor f’life. Th’more ya pull away, th’harder they grab. Say, iss real nice a’you to gimme a lif’ to th’sleepin’ place, you a real mensch, lady.”

“Yeah, don’t you worry, sir,” Judy said, smiling a friendly smile. “We’ll get you where you need to be, get some food and a lot of water in you, then you can go back home.”

“Heh! Thass a deal, n’no misstake!” the goat said, before grimacing. “‘Cept th’wadder thin’, tho. Not gunna do that.”

“You don’t like water?” Judy asked, somewhat concerned.
'Nup! Dump tell no mandy, but I neffer tush th’stuff!” the goat said, proudly. “Yawanna know why?”

“Fish Eff in it?” Judy offered, chuckling.

“They do?” The goat looked astounded and disgusted. “Anudder reason, then. Nah, I dun drink wadder cause they put stuff innit.”

“They?” Judy said. “ Stuff?”

“Yeh! They come in this grade big truck. They come and they kick us outta the Bridge an’ start wheelin’ their barrels in’eir. Greggers an’ Pete tryna stan’ up to’em, but they kilt ‘em, the little guy an’ the bigger guy! Bit their nesks up and turnt their heads on backways! No’un beleef me!” the goat deflated into the seat, sniffling. “S’why I’m out here, where iss warm, ‘cause m’home got took. Up in Tundra Town…”

Judy took this with a grain of salt, but felt compelled to ask. “What’s the ‘Bridge’?”

“Th’ol’ Bridgeway wadderpump station,” he slurred, beginning to lose consciousness. “They got shut down ‘cause they was too big and ‘spensive. They use liddle-folk access tunnels now, see? I was gonna look for th’one they had here in S’vanna, but they gon’ an’ tore it down, pudda buncha stores werrit was.”

Judy’s eyes widened, a revelation seized her as her fingers dug into the soft covering of her steering wheel. “Oh…oh, my God. They’s gonna poison the well.”

“S’what I tol’ you,” The goat said, scrunching up his nose, “Do fiss ack’tully fuck innit?”

Chapter End Notes

And now the title makes a little more sense.
“So I say ‘they only add sawdust to their bug-loaf every other day!’” Nick sniggered. “A load of shit, but it got him to talk!”

“The things some people will believe,” Clawhauser said, with a laugh. “Honestly, sawdust?”

Nick shrugged. “Actually, the lie was that they cut down. They say the only crooks that come out of Hoth fatter are the beavers!” Nick gestured at his snout. “So, yeah, keep your nose clean, Claw.”

Clawhauser reached up and touched his upper lip and the white powdery substance there. “Heh-heh! It’s powdered sugar, Nick!”

Nick waved him off indifferently. “Hey, I don’t judge.”

“So,” Clawhauser said, leaning in. “I hear you and Judy had another ‘case review’. Isn’t the Rikko case closed?”

“We’ll know for sure later today, when the lab results get back.” Nick shrugged. “Carrots was feeling down about losing the informant, so I decided to hang with her a bit.”

Clawhauser donned a confused expression. “Lab results? Lab results for what? Also, an informant? What?”

Nick sighed and rolled his eyes. “Oh, that figures. The Mayor wants this case closed now that he’s gone and publically announced that it was. Anyway, without telling the biggest mouth on the force—”

“Hey!”

“–any compromising info, I’ll just tell that you we may have found a lead. Trust me, I don’t want this case to turn into a whole big kaboodle, but our informant, he knew things. Not just things about the Rikko case, but about a bunch of other things, too. So, y’know, just sit on that for a bit.” He turned around, his ears perking up. “Oh, hey! Here’s Carrots now. Wish me luck, I’m gonna have to keep her sane until the results come back.”

Judy darted up to them, practically dragging a profoundly soused goat behind her. She sat the goat down against the front desk and grabbed Nick by the wrist. “Claw! Found a drunk, do the thing. Nick! Fish fuck in it! C’mon!”

“Off to a good start, eh, Nick?” Clawhauser called after him as Judy dragged him away.
“Hey man,” the goat slurred from the floor. “Izzis th’ sleepin’ place?”

Clawhauser shook his head. “No, that’s in the back. Would you like a glass of water?”

“Dint ya hear th’ lady?” the goat said defensively. “Ent drinkin no fish swimmers!”

Nick stumbled along, trying to keep up with her as she bobbed and weaved them through their fellow officers. “Carrots? Hey! What’s all this about?”

“I took a page out of your book, Nick!” Judy said, not looking back at him. “I was talking to this drunk homeless guy and I got a flash!”

“Yeah, that’s a risk you run,” Nick said, flatly. “You seem to be taking it well, though.”

“Ha-ha. I meant that I got a hunch, like, a super hunch! It’s the water, Nick, they’s gonna poison the well!” They finally arrived at their cubicle; Judy practically jumped into her chair and logged on, anxiously waiting for the computer to boot up. “See, there used to be these big pumphouses all over the city, four in total, I think, they pumped water to the treatment plant that used to be under downtown.”

“Yeah, I remember those.” Nick thought back to his youth and the sinister-looking buildings, how he used to dare his friends to stay overnight in their dark, damp, groaning halls. “Spooky-looking places. They got rid of them when each district began purifying their own water, if I recall correctly they still use the big main pipes to get water to the Bridgeway super-pump.”

“The beating heart of the city,” Judy said, cracking her knuckles as she set in on drumming up the information. “I remember the slogan. Funny how they tried to sell ‘we don’t want to decentralize public services’ as a Zootopian ideal.”

“Politics,” Nick scoffed. “So, what are you doing?”

“Pulling up the city water map, all the pipes, pumps, access stations, sewers, you name it.” Judy’s ears drooped as the crisscross tangle of pipes and mains popped up; to call it a maze was a profound understatement, it looked almost like an avant-garde fractal of pipes. She rallied quickly and accessed the search bar. “Moment of truth…Rikko Electronics Warehouse.”

The computer paused for a single agonizing second before the address tag appeared on the screen. A zoom-in revealed that it was situated directly over top one of the four massive intake water mains that led to the Bridgeway super-pump station. Judy tapped her finger to the screen hard enough to deform it slightly, squealing excitedly. “Nick! Nick! Look!”

“I see it,” he said, leaning over her shoulder and typing into the search bar. “Now, what could a warehouse, a mansion, and a grocery store have to do with the water?” He typed in the addresses of the other two places and, sure enough, both were located directly above the water
“Oh, my God…”

“All of them were built over the old pumphouses,” Judy said, her voice hushed and horrified. “Bylaws state that those areas need to be filled in or given rudimentary access points.”

“Three guesses as to which option they took,” Nick grumbled. “And it’s not the one that involves fifty grand worth of concrete!”

“Nick,” Judy said, looking up at him, horror clear on her face. “All the water that goes through those pipes has been filtered, anything that gets introduced at those points…”

“Will go straight through the main pump and into every reservoir in the city!” Nick slammed his fist on the table and made for the hall. “Let’s tell the Chief that we need to renew the Rikko warrant.”

Judy took a screencap of the various parts of the map and sent them to her phone, shooting to her feet and racing after Nick. “I’m right behind you!”

Bogo stood up and looked out his window, looking out at where, just the day before, hundreds of various media outlets had turned out at the Mayor’s request. How the lemming had known they’d caught Manny Beetz, much less the fact that he had confessed was still a mystery. ‘Going to have to crack down on this place. Loose lips and leaky faucets…’

“Sir?” came from behind. “Are you going to call the Mayor?”

Bogo turned around and looked at the fox and bunny sitting across from him. A year and a half ago, if anyone had told him that not only would he have a bunny and a fox on the force, but that they’d be two of his best people, he’d have suspected them of some kind of profound substance abuse. And yet here they were, WildeHopps, a moniker he had reluctantly grown fond of, uncovering yet another heinous crime. Or, they would have been, were it not for the political element that so frequently barged its way into police work.

“The Rikko Case is closed. There will be no warrant renewal.” Bogo said, flatly, awaiting the deluge of indignant protests that he knew were coming.

“You’re not even going to try?!” Detective Wilde exclaimed, leaping to his feet.

“I already did,” Bogo said, sitting his massive body down. “The second the press conference was over, I approached the Mayor and told him what you had found and requested an extension on the warrant. He denied it out of hand, said that I should have brought it up before the ‘impromptu press conference’! You’ll have to wait until the lab results show something conclusive, then we can petition City Hall for a renewal.”

“But we don’t know how long that’s going to take!” Detective Hopps cried. “Forget the renewal, we’ll open a new case with what we have.”
“And what, exactly, do you have, Hopps?” Bogo rumbled. “A vial of ‘something’, the testimony of a known terrorist who, by your own admission, either went into hiding or is dead? Even with your reputation, you wouldn’t be able to get so much as a rejection letter with that. Now, unless you have something else to go on, preferably something that doesn’t require a warrant, I’d suggest you sit tight and wait for the techies to do their jobs.”

Wilde scoffed and turned to Hopps, who had a contemplative look on her face. The fox turned back to the Chief, smirking as smugly as possible. Bogo himself smiled internally, both he and Wilde knew what that face meant. Hopps snapped her fingers and grinned. “In Tundra Town! The pumpstation up there hasn’t been demolished yet, it’s city property; we wouldn’t need a warrant to investigate! And I’ll bet my ears that whatever it was they were doing at Rikko, they did it there first!”

“We’ll need probable cause, though,” Wilde said, already knowing the answer.

“I have it on good authority that several persons were forcibly removed from the premises, with at least two alleged murders,” she said proudly.

“Drunk, raving authority,” Wilde clarified. “But it’s good enough. Chief, do we have authorization to investigate a month-old public disturbance?”

Bogo snorted and leveled a glare at the pair. “You two do understand that if you find anything, anything at all, that supports your conspiracy theory, the Mayor will look like a complete fool?” Bogo’s glare gave way to a rare and decidedly malicious smile. “Well? What are you waiting for? You’d better get on the road if you’re going to beat traffic!”

With that the Detectives shot to their feet and were out the door, Bogo smirked to himself and began filling out the required paperwork. ‘Impromptu press conference, eh? Have fun explaining this one to the board, Ketchikan!’

Nick examined his sidearm as the cruiser thundered down the highway towards Tundra Town. “Hmm. These things only carry three zap-nets. You think that’ll be enough?”

Judy scoffed, twisting the steering wheel in her hands. “You say that like they’ll still be there. We get in, sniff around, inspect the water main, and if what we need is there we report back and get our warrant. Easy as pie!”

Nick thumbed three magazines into his belt, making a mental note of every pepper pellet and net canister he had on his person. “I’d still be there, Carrots; if this was my operation, I’d make this place my alpha-site. Think about it, unguarded, plenty of access hatches and maintenance tunnels to duck into, not to mention the place is built like a fortress. If they started there like you think, I’d say odds are pretty good that they stayed there.”

Judy ruminated on this and started pulling spare magazines from the storage unit in the center console. “There are times that I’m glad that you didn’t become a criminal mastermind.”
“Yeah, me too.” Nick flicked the switch on his MSIM and smirked. “If I was, I’d have you on my tail!”

The cruiser entered the tunnel the intersected the wall between downtown and Tundra Town, the massive vacuum-insulated barrier that partitioned the typically sub-zero habitat from the rest of Zootopia. Even through the great wall, the thrum of the heat-scubbers could be heard as the car streaked through the tunnel, siphoning thermal energy from the atmosphere of the frigid district and blasting it out where it was needed in Sahara Square. The scrubbers had been working overtime during the heat wave, and now that it had broken they were still in the process of winding down: it was a cold day in Tundra Town.

They pulled to a stop just outside the pumphouse. The wind howled and kicked up sand-dry wisps of snow that whirled and danced around the undeveloped fields surrounding the large, ominous concrete monolith. Judy leapt out of the cruiser and started towards it with Nick close behind. The freezing wind of the tundra cut through her uniform like a knife, but she withstood it, knowing that even though it was abandoned the pumphouse would have some sort of heating device to prevent the water pipes from freezing. The concrete would act as insulation and keep the interior bearable; not comfortable, but a sight better than outside.

Judy reached up and grabbed the knob to the rusted steel door, she turned back and looked at Nick, he pulled his sidearm out and readied it, giving her an affirmative nod when he was ready. She twisted the knob and, with a low metallic groan, the tumblers disengaged and the door swung open. Judy stepped through the door, her nose curling at the smell; it was damp, humid, and cloying in its richness, the kind of earthy mold smell that reminded her of the grain silo that had collapsed back on the farm when an burst irrigation pipe burst: the smell of disturbed earth and rotting wheat. She turned back to look at Nick, who was also no fan of the dilapidated stench. She could tell by the way his ears snapped back and the unconscious sneer exposing his fangs that his sharp fox nose was picking up something else, something worse.

“What is it?” she asked, her hand drifting down to her sidearm.

“Can’t say. There’s so much rot around here, it could be rust and water and mold…” he said, walking out in front of her, his arm outstretched as he corralled her behind him, “…or blood. Keep behind me, Carrots.”

Judy scoffed and made to walk out ahead of him. “The gallant knight to my rescue? One side, Wilde!”

He grabbed her by the shoulder and held her in place, making a show of flicking the inoperative light switch. “More like ‘let the guy with night vision lead the way’ dumb bunny!”

Judy noted the uncharacteristic tension in his voice and nodded, shuffling back behind him. Nick flicked on the red-LEDs of his flashlight, to his sensitive eyes the hallway lit up as though under a floodlight, but to Judy there was only a meager cone of murky crimson. The two proceeded at a fast, hushed pace; neither making so much as a sound as they turned the corner. At the far end of the hall was a door, a thin sliver of light shone out from under it. As they approached Nick hissed quietly, Judy noticed his shoulders tensing as he sniffed the air.

“What smell anything?” she whispered.

“Blood,” he replied, his voice hoarse. “Blood and…other stuff. Also, ferret.”
“Oh, God.” Judy reached up and opened the door, quietly as possible, and the two slipped in, closing the door behind them.

The room was sparsely appointed, with a tiny bed off in one corner, a flimsy-looking chair and a crate-and-board desk covered with papers. Judy rushed to the desk, scanning over the assembled documents. “What on earth…?”

Nick groaned and clapped his hand over his nose. “Ah! God! It stinks like musk and blood and piss in here!”

She spun around, two pieces of paper in her hands. “Nick, look at this. These are official OmniGreen and Bug Burga documents, they look like sales figures.”

Nick walked over and looked at the documents in her hands, pointing at the margins where a scrawl of letters and interconnecting dashes were. “What’s this gobbledygook in the margins?”

“Looks like chemical formulas…” Judy turned back to the desk, seeing the far more amateurishly laid-out documents. “These were done independently, there’s the same chemical formula here as in the margin. But what do these graphs mean?”

“Uh-oh.” Nick pointed at the nearest line-graph’s y-axis, or rather its label. “Population Adipose Saturation. Sounds kinda familiar, doesn’t it?”

Judy shuffled through each document, her ears drooping in horror. “Predator, Prey, nearly every major genus group…what the hell are they up to here?”

“Nothing good,” Nick said, sniffing the air. “Not that we needed legal documentation to figure that out.”

“Hhhhhhhhhhh…” a groan sounded throughout the room, both Nick and Judy spun on their heels, their weapons drawn on the source, a door in the adjacent wall.

Judy stepped forward when Nick stopped her, signing for her to look at the foot of the door; there was no light inside. He then gestured at himself, signing for his night vision followed by a questioning affirmative; Judy rolled her eyes and nodded. Nick started forward, weapon at the ready, he flattened himself against the wall and inched closer. He reached out and grasped the doorknob, slowly turning it and opening the door. He leapt from behind the wall and into the doorframe, weapon up. What struck him first was the stench, the god-awful stink of blood, fear, and other unfortunate odors that rolled out of the room and washed over him in a hot front. And then he saw him, saw the state of him, and cried out. Nick stepped back, his ears flat against his skull as his lips fleered back in a terrified grimace, a low groan of horror escaped his mouth.

“Nick?” Judy said, starting towards. “What’s in there?”

“Carrots!” he turned and rushed towards her. “Don’t! Don’t look in there! It’s–!”

Judy easily sidestepped her partner, only for him to reach out and grab her wrist. “Let go of me, Nick!”

“Judy!” Nick exclaimed. “I think…I think it’s Richie.”

Judy’s ears dropped instantly, her eyes wide. She pulled her arm free and raced over to the room, even with her less sensitive sense of smell the fetor emanating from the room made her gag.

“…Judy?” a weak, slurred voice said.
Judy gasped, a shape in the dark moved as he raised his head, his remaining amber eye catching the light. “Richie.”

She rushed over to him; he was tied to a chair, stripped naked, and he looked like… something had been at him, all over. That eye followed her, the ruins around it twisted in some familiar way, was he trying to smile? “Knew you’d come.”

“Don’t talk, Richie,” Judy said, her voice hitching as she tried to stay calm. “We’ll get you help, okay? We’ll-we’ll…oh, God…”

“I did good?” he croaked.

“Yes!” without thinking she reached out to grab what used to be his left hand, but stopped herself. “You saved the city, Richie.”

The eye fluttered and closed, his head fell forward. Judy reached out and felt for a pulse, a sigh of relief escaped her when she felt a weak, slow pulse. She pulled her hand away and looked at it, Richie’s warm, sticky blood coated her fingers.

“I just called for back up!” Nick said, carefully walking into the room. “An ambulance should be here in…is he…?”

“No,” Judy said flatly. “He’s alive, somehow.”

Nick walked over, trying his best not to look at the poor mammal’s ravaged body, instead focusing on what appeared to be a mason jar full of water strung upside down from a coat-rack, connected to Richie’s right arm via surgical tubing. “Rut me…is this what I think it is?”

“McNulty was a registered nurse way back,” Judy said, her voice in that same flat, cold tone, “Kept him alive…more fun that way.”

“Carrots?” Nick walked over to her. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Judy said, flintily. “I’m not. We’re going to get him, Nick. The others I couldn’t care less about, I want him.”

He swallowed nervously; this was a side of Judy he’d never seen before. “Well, how do you want to go about it? Wait for back-up?”

Judy shook her head, drawing her weapon. “The sirens will give us away, they might escape. I say we track them down and net them.”

Nick sighed and nodded. “I’m right behind you, Carrots.”

They turned and made for the door when it swung open suddenly, happy singing preceded a small furry rump as a ferret pushed his way through backwards. “‘No doubt about it/we fight and we tout it/we’re the very best at being baaaad guuuys~’ Honey, I’m home! Sorry, I got a bit peckish and made myself some lunch. I made you lemongrass veggie soup! It may sting a bit, but you need the electrolytes if we’re gonna play anymore. So I—” he turned around, in his hands was a tray with a sandwich, a glass of what appeared to be beer, and a bowl of soup. He stared at Nick and Judy for a moment, his expression more bemused than concerned. “Dick-Dick! Rude! You shoulda told me you were bringing friends over! I’ll go get some more refreshments…”

“Freeze! Get down on the ground!” Judy roared, her MSIM trained on the ferret. “Now, creep! Now!”
“If it’s that big a deal, you can have my sandwich,” Finn said glibly. “I’ll just make another one.”

“Unless you want a little pepper with your lunch,” Nick said, brandishing his weapon. “You’ll get down on the ground and put your hands on your head!”

Finn sighed and placed the tray down on the floor, he picked up the glass of beer and began to drink. Judy stepped forward, gritting her teeth. “What the hell are you doing?! Down on the ground! Now!”

Finnegan gestured ‘wait a second’ as he drained the glass, belching loudly when he finished. He chucked it over his shoulder where it shattered against the wall. With a decidedly casual flair he knelt down and put his hands on his head, lying down on his belly.

Judy was on him a second later, pulling his hands behind his back. “Finnegan McNulty, you are under arrest for kidnapping, torture, attempted murder, and trespassing on city property. Do you understand the charges as they are read to you?”

“Okay, I know this looks bad,” Finn said, spinning his head around completely to look at her, his dark eyes glittering like flecks of obsidian above a shiny white shark-grin. “But it’s actually much, much worse!”

Nick walked over and nudged the sandwich with his foot. “Oh, God, what’s in this thing?”

Finn rolled his eyes and sighed in exasperation. “It’s tuna. Do you think I’m some sort of savage?”

“A question for the ages,” Nick muttered, turning to look at the ferret. “Oh, and by the way; we know. About the water mains, about the poison, that nice little romp you guys set us on, we know it all!”

“You’re not wriggling out of this one, McNulty!” Judy hissed in his ear. “Not this time! Once our back-up gets here, you and your friends are going someplace cramped and dark and you’re never getting out!”

Finn smirked, there was something in his eyes that wrapped its cold fingers around her insides; it was admiration. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re beautiful when you’re angry?” Judy scowled and twisted his arm up painfully, Finn hissed and tensed, but his smile returned a moment later. “~Mooore~”

“Don’t let him get to you, Carrots,” Nick warned.

“Eh-heh! ‘Carrots’!” Finn’s smile widened, somehow. “That’s cute! You two are cute. I like you!”

“Shut up!” Judy reached into her pocket to get a zip-tie.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh!” Finn chuckled. “I’m guessing I’m your first ferret perp. Well, for future reference: we’re flexible.”

Finn’s lower body arched up like a rising snake, his feet clasped around Judy’s head. With a modicum of effort he flung her backwards, her head slamming against the concrete with tremendous force. Stars exploded behind Judy’s eyes as a hideous pain burst inside her skull, stunning her. Finn was on his feet before Nick could bring his weapon up; he coiled long body like a spring and flung himself at the fox with tremendous speed. Nick grunted as the heavy, muscular
body struck him center mass, staggering him, claws dug into his skin as Finn clambered over and onto his back. Nick screamed as long, sharp teeth dug into the flesh of his shoulder, Finn whipped his entire body up on a pivot and brought it back down with all the power he could muster, planting his feet firmly on the floor as he swung the fox backwards in an arch, slamming him into the ground, bouncing his head against the concrete. Finn bounded for the door, swinging it open and turning back to the dazed cops.

"S-stop!" Judy said unsteadily, getting to her feet as she gathered her weapon. "You're not getting away!"

Finn hopped and pranced in front of her, his body undulated and snapping about in a jovial boneless manner. His eyes were shiny black marbles, glittering with hateful amusement; Nick’s blood soaked the fur around his mouth, making him seem like some sort of grotesque clown. "Well then! Come and get me! Chase me, bunny! Chase me! Eh-heh-heh-heh!"

He darted out the door and scurried down the hallway, his laughter echoing off the walls. Judy almost took off after him when she heard a groan from behind; she turned to see Nick stirring on the ground, clutching the goose egg forming on his head. “Nick! Are you okay?”

“No…” Nick said, touching his hand to his shoulder, grimacing at the blood on his fingers. “But I’ll live. I think.”

“Good!” Judy shot to her feet. “Now, let’s go ferret-hunting!”

“Hopps, wait!” Nick stood up. “What about the others? He’s obviously leading us away from them! We should wait for back-up to get here.”

Judy took off out the door. “Wait for back-up, then! That little monster’s mine!”

“Judy!” Nick called after her, her footfalls growing ever quieter. He paused, looking around the room, before finally cursing to himself and collecting his sidearm off the floor. He set off to follow Judy but stopped when he smelled something; the food that Finnegan had brought, the scent trail led in the opposite direction, down the hallway. Nick agonized for a moment. ‘What if they set it off early? What if they’re just that crazy? But Judy…what am I saying? She doesn’t need you to protect her, Slick! She’s the strongest person you’ve ever met! Go stop the bad guys, she can take care of herself…she can take care of herself…’

Elim thumbed through various real-estate ads on his phone, making a mental note of prices and cost of upkeep; forty million was a lot of money, and he had some pretty good ideas on where to buy stocks, but he was a frugal mammal regardless.

“Mama, it was good to talk with you, now say goodbye,” Grigori spoke slowly into his phone. “No, Mama, in English. You need practice if you’re going to live here… da, da, you are. You are going to live in the New Country. It’s better… you and Anya and Kseniya, you all come live with Grisha, da? …Keep the old house and rent it out, or sell it, it’s yours… that’s right, it’s yours… Practice your English with Anya, Mama. She’s better than me! Da, Grisha loves you too.
Goodbye Mama.”

Elim snorted in amusement. “For the scariest guy I know, you’re adorable.”

Grigori only hissed and sat down in his chair. “For the smartest guy I know, that was a stupid thing to say!”

Elim opened his mouth to retort when his phone buzzed, Finn was texting him. He opened the text and read. ‘did someone order craft beer?’

Elim blinked, so much about that question didn’t make sense. ‘wat’

‘because wildehopps delivers apparently!’ was the response. ‘they’re here and they’re bringing friends! got the bunny chasing me, but the fox isn’t. do something.’

Elim felt his heart drop into his stomach; his hands began shaking so badly he nearly dropped the phone. ‘the papers?’

‘on my desk, go grab em. i’ll be in the access tunnel on the far side. take care of the fox and meet me there, I don’t think they know where we hid the truck’

“Shit,” Elim muttered hoarsely as he leapt to his feet. “Shit, shit, shit, shit! Get the spare canisters!”

“What–?” Grigori said with a start.

“Now, dammit! Now!” Elim bellowed, rushing over to the table holding his laptop and various file folders. Grigori hopped to his feet a raced out the back door, Elim began shoving the papers and files into bags and stopped to type on the computer. He hit enter and the program began to initialize, a loading bar slowly began to progress, he never took his eyes off it as he slug his backpack over his shoulder. “C’mon…c’mon…”

“Ah-bup-bup!” a voice said from behind. “Drop the bag and put your hands on your head!”

Elim complied and turned around, a serious-looking red fox leveled some kind of weapon at him, the bloody bite-wound on his shoulder and the look in his eyes suggested that he was in no mood to mess around. “Hey now…uh, officer?”

“Detective,” he corrected, tersely.

Elim stepped back from the computer, subtly changing his body language to suggest that there was something important off to his right. “Hey now, Detective! Look, my buddies and I are from out of town, we’re between jobs and shit; we just needed a place to stay, y’know? And rent is such a bummer, dude!”

“Cut the shit, Elim!” Detective Wilde growled. “I know what you’re up to! You, McNulty and Yivjennyvick.”

“Yevgenyevich,” Elim corrected. “And…okay, I’m dying to know. How’d you figure it out?”

“I didn’t,” Wilde said, walking forward, noticing Elim’s subtle use of preference for the space to his right. ‘I’m being led. He’s using a false feint, making it seem like there’s something I should notice to his right...heh, used this trick in my slight-of-hand scams all the time! Don’t hustle a hustler, buddy!’
Nick took aim and fired a net, the capsule screamed across the room and deployed, encapsulating the laptop and sending it skittering off the table. Elim cursed and spun around. The laptop seemed to be in working order, the load bar was nearing 80%, Elim sighed in relief when a crackling buzz filled their air, the computer sparked and smoked as the net electrified, obliterating its hard-drive.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the fox said as Elim turned around and glowered at him. “Did you need that?”

“Prick,” Elim spat.

“–Rhymes with Nick,” Wilde smirked, brandishing his weapon anew. “Where were we? Oh yeah, hands on head, belly on ground, now!”

Elim complied, slowly and deliberately, and Wilde hopped on his back, wrenching his arms around and fastening them with Zip-ties. “Elim Boakye, you are under arrest for suspected terrorism, kidnapping, assisted torture, attempted murder, and aiding and abetting a known felon. Do you understand the charges as they are read to you?”

“Felons,” Elim hissed as his arm was twisted.

“What?” Nick said, leaning in.

“I aided and assisted known felons.” Elim looked up at him, an unpleasant smirk spread across his face. “Plural.”

A huge, obscenely strong hand grasped the back of Nick’s neck; another streaked down and swatted the sidearm from his hand, sending it clattering on the floor. Nick felt strangely paralyzed as he was lifted clean off the ground and brought face-to-face with a huge snarling lynx, his enormous golden teeth glittering in the light.

“Hey…” Nick croaked around the massive hand collapsing his airway. “Nice teeth.”

Grigori’s snarl fell for a moment and was replaced by an amused smirk. “Thank you.”

A moment later and his giant fist slammed into Nick’s right side, just below the ribs. Nick felt an insurmountable wave of pain wash over his entire body, his breath exploded from his lungs in a quiet wheezing scream. It was as if his body had forgotten how to work, his legs wouldn’t listen and his arms sucked against his body in a feeble attempt to protect his core. Grigori snorted and hurled the agonized fox across the room and into a concrete wall, Nick couldn’t so much as brace himself and simply thudded against the wall and collapsed on the ground.

Grigori chuckled menacingly as he stomped towards the fallen cop, only to stop when Elim called out to him. “Gori! Untie me first, you idiot!”

“Ah, sorry Elim.” Grigori knelt down and snapped the zip-ties off with his teeth and helped his friend to his feet.

Elim ran over and gathered his things, turning just in time to see Grigori towering over the helpless, gasping cop, his hands flexing, ready to break bones. “Leave him! We’ve got to get out of here! Grab the canisters and go!”

Elim sped out of the room, Grigori turned to Nick, a decidedly unfriendly smile on his face. “You are lucky. If I had my way, I would have thrown at the wall until you stuck to it. Oh well, next time.”
He reached down and patted Nick on the cheek, a fond gesture that was decidedly mocking given the circumstances. Nick shuddered on the ground, still unable to do much more than tuck into himself and watch as Grigori thudded out of the room, over a dozen metal cylinders bound together was slung over his shoulder. ‘I hope Carrots is doing better than me…’

Judy tapped down the hallway, it was wide and tall, clearly meant for larger mammals, and the ceiling and walls were festooned with pipes and cables of all sizes. Even over the reek of mildew and stale water she could smell the ferret, but she just couldn’t pinpoint his location. Her eyes strained against the darkness of the unlit hallway, her flashlight only offering a tiny oval of visibility. She gritted her teeth and carried on, she had to find him, to bring him down. Nothing else mattered at that moment.

“McNulty!” she called out. “Give it up! The plan’s out, so you can kiss that thirty million goodbye!”

“Forty,” a voice in the dark hissed. “It’s forty now, because…well, you know.”

Judy felt her skin crawl as rage crept into her guts. “Is that what life is worth to you?!”

“Forty million?” he snorted, unseen. “I’ve killed people for four fish-sticks! No, what you saw in there, that was gratis, that was for me.”

“Monster!”

There was a scuttling behind her, Judy spun around shining the flashlight on nothing, a voice from all around sounded. “Pssh! Like I haven’t heard that screamed at me today! Not to say that you’re old hat, Detective. You’re not. No bunny’s ever chased me before, I have to say it’s…exciting.”

“Shut up!” Judy’s ears rotated in all directions, trying desperately to locate the ferret.

“A bit of snap to you, eh? That’s good, I like that.” Finn chuckled that infuriating chuckle. “I can see why Dick-Dick was so taken with you, Detective. You certainly are unique. I wonder how you taste…”

Judy took a deep breath, listening to the steady drip of water, the groaning of water pipes, anything but the hideous glee in his voice; Nick’s words echoed in her mind ‘never let them see that they get to you.’

There was a pause; he was waiting for her to react, waiting for her to slip up, no doubt. Judy brought her light up to scan the ceiling, an impenetrable throng of crisscrossing pipes, dripping old fetid water that made it even harder to scent him. He scurried silently amidst the tubes and down the wall; his shimmering black eyes watched her intently.

“He was waiting for you, you know. Waiting for you to save him. He told me. People do that when you’re working on them, they tell you things, anything, everything, all the things. When
they’re in the state they’re in, they grasp at straws, babbling anything that might get you to stop. He told me that you’d come, that you’d figure us out and send us running. He was half right, anyway.” Judy growled and fired a net canister into the wall, it didn’t deploy, it only shattered and exploded with a reverberating boom. The light streaked across the walls and ceiling, her scans becoming more and more frantic.

Finn only just kept out of sight, silently hopping across the hall. “Eh-heh-heh-heh! Stuck a nerve, did I? He cried and sobbed, he begged you to show up, to kick down the door like some kind of hero! And where were you? Even if he lives, he’ll be too chewed up to show his face in public! He’ll be a freak! Because of you!”

Judy spun around and fired three pepper pellets at the source of the sound, a wall just to her right, and got caught in the cloud of stinging dust herself. As Judy stepped back, coughing and retching. Finn had once again clambered up the wall and hid amongst the pipes. When her coughing subsided Judy was panting; tears of rage and frustration spilled down her cheeks.

“Allright, alright! He didn’t actually say any of that. He actually didn’t say much of anything. In fact, all he really said was…” He set down behind her and screamed horribly, shrilly, as though in unimaginable agony.

She spun around, her flashlight illuminating the ferret for a brief, terrible second. His face was a nightmare of teeth, pink and foamy with blood, his crimson lips fleered back to expose gums. His black eyes shone in the glare of the flashlight, illuminated into something infinitely more horrible. But worst of all, worse than all the teeth and blood and glinting eyes was the sheer lunatic glee, the hateful intelligence that lived within. Against all reason and logic, Judy felt as though she wasn’t seeing a person anymore, but an actual monster, a foul creature from somewhere else; her hate and rage evaporated and she froze, her eyes wide with terror. His scream shifted into shrill, mocking laughter as he swatted the weapon from her hands and leapt upon her, coiling his muscular snakelike body around her, pinning her legs as he wrestled with her arms. Judy struggled as best she could against him, but found herself overpowered, his coiling, flexible body preventing her from exploiting any leverage. Finn pressed his chest against her back, looping his arms around her and pulling her into a chokehold.

He began to squeeze, sighing contentedly into her ear. “It’s the little things in life you treasure, bunny,” he said, his tone dry and conversational. “A golden sunset on the ocean. A good beer. That face you just made. Honestly, it’s what I live for.”

Black spots flashed before her eyes, her thoughts becoming slow and sludgy, Judy knew she had between five and ten seconds before she lost consciousness. In an action that was more muscle memory than conscious thought, her hand reached down and pulled out a magazine for her sidearm. In her last moment of awareness before she slipped into the inky blackness she flicked a pill-sized pepper pellet from the feed chamber and into her hand. As her arm went slack, the pellet’s tip connected with the concrete and shattered. With a snapping pop, the pellet exploded into a large cloud of dust that enveloped them.

Finn coughed and sputtered, letting go and skittering away. “Ack! Clever cottontail!”

Judy crawled out of the dust cloud and gasped for breath, shaking her head as blood slowly began to flow back to her brain. She craned her neck, even the bare action of turning her head sent the room into a spin; the fan of light from her discarded sidearm illuminated the pinkish haze of the dissipating pepper dust, Finn strode through the cloud, his fangs bared as gummy red tears streamed down his face. Judy knew that she could barely stand, much less fight, but she pushed herself up onto her knees. She was going to try; this thing had gotten the drop on her once, but not
again. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, it was so loud and sharp it almost sounded like…

footsteps?

Both Finn and Judy looked down the hallway to see a flashlight wobbling towards them. Finn squinted and lifted his hand to his eyes. “Elim?”

“Finn!” Elim bellowed as he sprinted towards them. “We! Are! Leaving!”

“Can I just–?” Finn began to say, gesturing at Judy, before he was unceremoniously scooped up by the scruff by the larger mammal.

“No!” Elim barked, annoyed.

Judy scrambled out of the way as the gnu galloped by, Grigori stopped a moment and looked down at her, notching his finger to his brow in a mini-salute, his expression was that of respect. “Ma’am.”

With that the lynx took off after his teammates. She tried desperately to get to her feet and pursue, but the second she got on her feet her vision grew hazy, dim, and she collapsed to the floor, nauseous. Face down in a cold puddle of stale water, she closed her eyes and let herself begin to sink away. The sound of a door slamming echoed down the hall, rusty and metallic.

They’d gotten away.

She’d lost the perps.

She’d failed.

Another door slammed shut at the other end of the hall, and her eyes snapped open. Manfully, she pushed herself up off the ground and propped herself against the wall. Staggering, muted footsteps made their way towards her, she strained to see a figure as it staggered into the light given off by her sidearm, he was largish and walked with a stiff, hunched over gait. He shambled into visibility, his orange fur a splash of welcome color in the dank hallway. Nick looked up and smiled wanly, clearly in a good deal of pain.

He stumbled up beside and pressed his back against the wall, gingerly he lowered himself down, clutching his side, sitting next to her with a pained grunt. “You okay?”

Judy grabbed him by the shirt and pulled herself close, burying her face in his chest and began to sob. Nick smiled sadly and draped an arm over her shoulders, patting her back soothingly as she wept. His ears perked up as he heard approaching sirens.

“Let’s… just sit here a bit, yeah?”

Chapter End Notes

He just loves Bugsy Malone, doesn't he?
“Left, open… clear,” the bear paramedic said, flashing a penlight at Judy’s eye before moving to the next. “Right, open… clear. Pupil dilation is normal. No signs of concussion. Looks like all you’ve got is a nasty goose-egg, Detective!”

“Hmm,” Judy said, looking through the ambulance window over at the pumphouse as a dozen officers milled about outside in arctic gear, waiting for the special ops team and paramedics to clear out. The lights and sirens droned together as she stared off into the middle distance. The sky was clear and sun was out, some part of her expected it to be night when her fellow officers carried her out. There was something about horrible things happening in broad daylight that somehow made them worse. That it took so little to be so far from the warm comforting light of the sun. That such evil was potentially around every corner, behind every door.

“Tssss!” Nick hissed, off to her side. “Careful! I’ve been tenderized!”

Judy looked over to see Nick flinching away from an otter paramedic, his shirt was off and the otter was palpating his right side, his fur was raised as the skin beneath swelled. She felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth, watching him swat away the otter’s probing paws.

“Detective Wilde, how am I supposed do my job if you won’t let me feel the area?” the paramedic chided, brushing his hands out of her way, gingerly touching the bruised flesh. “Hmmm. The swelling’s bad, but I don’t think any ribs are broken. You’re going to want to take it easy, though, your liver took quite the shock.”

“I noticed!” Nick said, gesturing at the bite-marks on his shoulder. “What about this? Is it bad?”

The paramedic gently palpated the area around the worst of the holes in his flesh, her nose Curling. “We can protein-bond the smaller cuts, but we’ll need stitches for where the eyeteeth got in, maybe surgery.”

“Fuck me!” Nick clapped his hand to his face.

“If you like,” the paramedic said, winking. “But I work tonight.”

“You hear that, Carrots? …Carrots?” Nick smirked and looked over at Judy, who was staring off again. “Hey, Carrots. Earth to Carrots! You in there, bunny?”

“Hmm?” Judy turned back to him, shaking her head. “What?”

“You okay?” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve been a little spacey.”
Judy rallied, she didn’t want Nick to see her so low, she didn’t want him to think she was…
“Well, I did just get choked out. Little creep got the drop on me, is all.”

Nick laughed and clapped her on the back, she couldn’t help but smile; Nick had that effect on her. “Well, at least you have an excuse! A ferret could sneak up on just about anyone, I managed to let a huge bobcat get behind me!”

Judy smiled and shook her head, opening her mouth to say something when a large black van roared up the icy road. She hopped off the gurney and pressed her nose against the glass. The van came to a stop and not one second later did six heavily armored mammals come spilling out the back, in their arms were various cases and bags.

“Holy shit!” Nick exclaimed. “That’s the bomb squad! The boys inside must have found something!”

The bomb squad filed up the stairs and towards the door when it swung open. The heavily armored squadies did an almost comical turn around, running down the stairs to make way for the paramedics hauling a stretcher, a jackal medic ran alongside it, holding a bag of saline over his head, barking at them to get out of the way. Judy could see a pile of red-stained bandages and swung the ambulance door open to the frigid tundra air, racing out to meet the rushing medics.

“Richie!” she cried out as she approached them. “Richie, can you hear me?”

A single eye peered through the mass of bandages and gauze, glazed and unseeing. A bandaged hand reached out and pawed at the air; Judy took it in hers and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

“Ma’am” the lead medic said. “Do you know him?”

Judy paused and looked back at the ambulance, Nick was watching her as she walked alongside the stretcher; he nodded and gestured for her to go ahead. Judy turned back to the medic. “Yes. He’s my friend.”

The medic nodded and gestured at the ambulance they were heading towards. “Okay, we have him stable, but he’s drifting in and out. We’ll need you to keep him awake for as long as possible, do you understand?”

“Yes,” Judy said, looking down at the tattered remains of a man she barely knew. “I’m here now, Richie. You did good, you understand?”

The hand gave her a feeble, almost imperceptible squeeze, the eye looked over at her, now shimmering with tears. Judy smiled and clambered in the ambulance with him. “You did good.”

It was an hour before Nick was finally allowed to explore the crime scene… again. Rodent
SOCOs scurried all around, picking up even the most infinitesimal clues. There was something about their itty-bitty cameras flashing at random intervals all over a one hundred square-foot room that Nick found hilarious. Less amusing was the lonely blood splatter analyst exploring Finn’s Happy Place. Her badge announced that she was the chief scene supervisor, her own area of expertise being blood-splatter, obviously the type who didn’t trust anyone else with the job. She was a small beige jerboa; her long springy legs propelled her around the room with a quick, almost weightless elegance. Each hop was concluded with a flash from her camera, her arms making flinging motions as she mapped out the splatter patterns.

Nick stopped in the doorway and watched for a moment, one of her tall, oblong ears angled back, she spoke without turning around, her speech lightly accented. “Detective Wilde. Thank you for not spoiling the crime scene further. Those paramedics ran roughshod over a lot of the evidence.”

“Trust me, this is the last place I want to be.” Nick shuddered. Even when given the chance to air out, the room still stank of pain and fear. “Find anything interesting, Supervisor…”?

“Tafra,” she said, glibly, still focusing on the crime scene. “Sura Tafra. And maybe. There’s a lot of cast off well away from the vic, drips and drops all over the room,” she gestured at the long, thick rope-like splatters on the floor and walls. “And these. They’re thick, slow, like flicks from a brush. I can’t quite make out why that is, or what did it. There’s also not a lot of arterial spray, which is odd, considering the state of his left hand. I understand that you may know who did this, Detective. Have any theories?”

Nick swallowed thickly; blood-techs were always so weird and dry about their gruesome work; but they had to be, he supposed. “I think you’re trying to picture the kind of tool that was used here. A knife or shears or whatever, those would cause a bit of spray… all this mess all was done manually. The victim was chewed apart.”

This caused her to pause and actually turn around to face him, her dark eyes wide and shining, her expression elated rather than horrified. “Yes! That makes sense! The dripping would be off of the perp’s mouth as he walked around, the flicks would be when he…” she motioned like she was pulling something off with her mouth, jerking her head to the side; Nick could practically hear the ripping flesh and flinched. She hopped over to another set of splatters near a bucket of ruddy, murky water and a heavily stained towel; they were more violent and almost circular in their cast-off pattern. “Over here, I was pulling my whiskers out about what they were, but now I’m thinking they’re shake-offs. Like he came over and shook his head to get rid of the excess before washing himself off… he must have been covered in it for this kind of pattern. Not a very friendly guy.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nick said, flatly amused at the morbid observation. “He was pretty chatty and affable until he started biting.”

Sura shot him an incredulous look, prompting Nick to pull away his collar and reveal the bandage on his shoulder. Her ears dipped down in shock and she gasped. “You were… oh, my God. That explains the fox and rabbit prints I found. Uh, they didn’t tell us much about what had happened here, I’m sorry if I seemed–”

Nick waved it off, covering his wound once more. “Hey, I’m alive, aren’t I? What do you think, though? You have enough evidence here to convict someone?”

Sura nodded and gestured at the floor and chair. “Prints in blood, both hand and paw, all over the place. Not to mention saliva, fur, he left almost as much DNA as the victim!”
Nick nodded and gestured for her to come closer, leaning in as she did. “How good are you?”

“E-excuse me?” she said, taken aback.

Nick pressed forward, his expression serious. “I said: how good are you? Real good? Thorough? Professional? I guess what I’m asking is, can I trust you to not completely screw this up?”

“I don’t have to take this from y–” she sneered, turning back to the scene when Nick grabbed her by the upper arm and pulled her close, squeezing just hard enough to make her gasp.

“Listen, and listen closely,” he said, his voice low and even but his eyes glinted in a way that made any protest die in her throat. “These aren’t some small-time thugs, they aren’t a bunch of whack-jobs, and they’re definitely not idiots. They’re professionals, they’re connected, and they know some very good lawyers. Now, what I want from you is an assurance, no, a guarantee that we not only have all the evidence we need to charge, try, and convict these motherfuckers, but that it’s going to be tight, spotless. No room for doubt, no signs of tampering or malpractice, nothing! Because if they get anything, anything at all, they’re out, they’re free, and it’ll be on you.”

“I can’t control what lawyers do, Detective,” Sura said flintily, pulling her arm away from him. “But I can tell you with certainty that no perp has walked because of my work. I am the best.”

He smiled handsomely and clapped her on the shoulder. “That’s what I want to hear! I’ll see to it that you get the files from the other cases, so you can avoid making the same mistakes they made. I’ll see you around.”

Nick turned around a made for the door, pretending he didn’t hear what she called him under her breath. Didn’t matter what she thought of him, he’d called her competence into question, her ego would do the rest. All flies prefer honey to vinegar, but some would work harder for the sweet after a taste of the sour. He looked over his shoulder as he left the room; Sura Tafra was hopping around the room quickly, meticulously, capturing every aspect of the crime scene.

He smirked.

Nick turned the corner just in time to hear her bellow at some poor SOCO who stumbled into the room. ‘Gonna get you, you bastards. We’re gonna make it stick.’

“Detective Wilde!”

He turned around to see a member of the bomb squad jogging towards him, his respirator up and resting on his helmet. “Sergeant, your boys defuse the… whatever it is?”

“Ayuh!” the ocelot said, gesturing for him to follow him down the hallway. “Wasn’t even active, the sniffers just caught a whiff of C-4. All the electrics were deactivated. Looks to be a jury-rigged remote detonator, civilian issue short-range wireless.”

“How were they going to set these things off?” Nick said, looking around at all the concrete surrounding them. He was shocked at how much smaller and less ominous the halls seemed when illuminated by a string of quartz halogen forensics floodlights. The flat grays and rusty reds of the walls and pipes were muted and blanched by their unrelenting glare. They entered the main cavity beneath the pumphouse where the enormous hump of the water main ran through. The air down there was warm and clean smelling, pumped alongside the massive pipe all the way through Tundra Town, the warm air, concrete, and permafrost all acting as insulation, keeping the water
above freezing even in the dead of winter. Nick looked up and estimated that there was at least thirty feet of reinforced concrete between this room and their hideout, compounding the question further in his mind. ‘If Carrots was here, she’d probably figure it out in a second. Remember some otherwise pointless factoid or correlation between here and all the other locations. I’ll just have to make do until I can get the CSR to her.’

“Dunno,” the Sergeant replied, shrugging as best he could in his blast armor. “Weirder still, scans suggest there’s barely enough C-4 there to crack the outer layer of the main pipe. We’re talking two inches of steel surrounded by a foot of reinforced concrete. Even a shaped charge wouldn’t do much more than rupture the main. If that was their plan…”

“It wasn’t,” Nick said, tersely, pointing at the team of bomb technicians huddled atop the giant pipe. “Is that it?”

As they climbed the pipe Nick saw exactly why they had called in the bomb squad; it was a keg-sized metal cylinder with a larger circular rim one on end, this rim was affixed to the pipe by twenty heavy-duty anchor bolts.

“Should I even be here?” Nick said, eyeing the contraption dubiously.

“It’s safe!” one of the technicians said, muffled by his mask. “EM’s completely flat, there’s nothing lit up on this thing. Ultrasound and x-ray shows there’s no analog detonator, triggers, or fuses either. It’s dead.”

A technician exclaimed a warning; the top of the canister detached with a click as several fastening mechanisms disengaged. Slowly, carefully, the tech unscrewed the cap, gingerly pulling it free of the main body along with a bizarre looking mechanism; a long sturdy-looking metal tube with wires bristling out the upper end, up and down the tube was slanted-rings of C-4 explosive, meticulously molded and wired together. Nick didn’t have to be an explosives expert to know that these charges were meant to detonate consecutively, but why?

“I’ll be damned,” the sergeant said, gesturing at the rings. “Shaped ring charges. And I bet this bug’s nest up here at the top is a charge with a pusher plate. Must have a liquid inside the cylinder, water or something.”

“What makes you say that?” Nick said, examining the curious device.

The sergeant shrugged. “Hunch, mostly. Had something similar when I was working on the old petro-pipelines down south. We’d fix this sort of thing to a pipe that was filled with volatile gases and the like, as way to pump buffer chemicals in while also creating a pressure release. Each explosion compressed the liquid more and more, and water will only compress so much before it has to go somewhere. More often than not the path of least resistance was clean through the steel. At those speeds, not even fumes can light up. ‘Course, we were dealing with quarter-inch high tensile steel, water mains are a whole different critter.”

Nick gestured at the cylinder. “What do you suppose they could cut through with a charge that size?”

“Three, four inches at a half-inch bore. That’s about the practical limit, though. And it would have to get through the concrete first.” The sergeant sniffed, a smirk tugged at corners of his mouth. “Though I’d bet the guy who put this thing together knew that. Bet he knew a lot of things. Talonson, is there anything else in there?”

“Yessir!” Officer Talonson said briskly. “They’re homemade, but I know a linear thermite
“Well, that accounts for the concrete,” the sergeant said, smiling grimly and looking up at Nick. “What are we dealing with here?”

“Same thing we always deal with, Sergeant,” Nick said, casually, examining the cylinder in the Talonson’s hands; Talonson unscrewed the bottom and pulled a long, clear plastic container from the tube. Nick’s eyes lit up when he saw what was inside: a familiar looking light-blue liquid. “Very bad people.”

The ford sped down the highway leading out of Tundra Town, towards the tunnel leading to the Rainforest District. It was keeping pace with traffic, and as one of the most widely sold vehicles in the world it blended in more or less completely. The trio sat inside the cab, idly listening to ‘The Garden’ over the radio. Elim looked despondently out the window, watching the bleak landscape race by.

“Hmm…” Grigori muttered, tapping his scarred fingertips on the wheel. “What band is this?”

“July Bark,” Finn said from the back seat. “Why? You like it?”

“I do. It’s got a good sound,” he said, tapping in tune with the music.

“You got a problem with your head / And the doctor says you shouldn't be alone / Well, I got hips and you got lips / I plan to keep them oh oh oh oh~”

“Canidean band, y’know. Lead singer’s a snow hare, weirdly enough.” Finn idly picked something out of his teeth.

Grigori almost flinched when the male lead barked his lines. “Really! I wouldn’t have guessed, he sounds like a cement mixer that learned to talk.”

“But there’s a true poetry to their lyrics,” Finn replied. “I’m a bit of a fan.”

“He sings about as well as you,” Elim muttered, still looking out the window.

Finn and Grigori exchanged nervous glances through the rearview mirror. Finn motioned his head at Elim, his expression questioning. ‘Should I ask?’

Grigori’s brow creased in worry and he nodded curtly. Finn cleared his throat and idly scratched at the seat-cover. “So, uh, Elim… where we at?”

“What do you mean?” he said, flatly, still enthralled with the middle distance.

“Uh… how fucked is the plan?”
Elim inhaled through his nose and shrugged. “The alpha site’s gone, the injector’s in cop hands, and they’ll probably find all the others, considering their record. Our faces are about to be plastered on every screen in a city of eighty million people, with an APB for our immediate arrests, and that smug bastard fox fried the only computer with the execute program, so we can’t even set them off early to get the fuckers off our tail! The upside? The spare canisters and paperwork is all with us, and even if Richie lives, he doesn’t know enough to mess with plan B.”

“Plan B?” Grigori asked, glancing away from the road for a moment. “We have a plan B?”

Elim made a more-or-less gesture. “Probably? Boss ain’t the type to not have a contingency. I’ll have to give ‘em a call.”

“Hoo-boy!” Finn said soberly, his otherwise cheerful demeanor damped by the recent events. “They are not going to be happy.”

“It’s not like we left a trail or anything,” Grigori said, angrily. “We were careful, methodical. They even fell for the false lead like you said they would, Elim!”

“I know, I know!” Elim hissed, pulling his phone out of his pocket with a shaking hand. “That goddamned fox! How’d he even figure it out?!”

“He didn’t,” Finn said, matter-of-factly. “It was the bunny.”

“The bunny?” Elim snorted. “What the hell makes you think she had anything to do with it?”

“She solved the Nighthowler Case,” Finn held up his hand and counted, “and the drug ring, the bug plot, and she even booked the Shearer!”

Elim scowled and scoffed, waving him off dismissively. “No prey is that smart, no small prey is that smart, and sure as hell no bunny is even half that smart! I’m telling you, it was the fox, because I’ll be damned if I got sniffed out by some diversity hire!!”

“She’s not like other bunnies,” Finn said. “She chased me, Elim. She came right after me down a dark hallway. She’s a whole other animal.”

“And look where it got her!” Elim retorted. “You were about ready to gnaw the back of her head off if we hadn’t shown up, or mount her, I can never tell with you.”

Finn bristled, his lips fleering back to reveal his fangs. “You get one, because you’re my friend. I don’t do that shit. My Ma raised me better than that! You saying that she didn’t?!”

Elim blinked nervously and raised his hands. “Redacted. Sorry, Finn. It’s been a long day.”

“Finn is right, though,” Grigori chimed in. “The bunny was… different. I mean, she tried to chase after us, too. And all those cases couldn’t have been just the fox. We should let Boss know exactly what happened, maybe they can get some people on those two.”

Elim nodded and smiled. “Yeah… yeah! Get ‘em off our case for a bit and maybe into a pine box!”

Finn inhaled through his teeth. “Oh, I hope not! I wanna see her again, we have some unfinished business. She chased me, Elim! She chased me!”

“Well, this conversation got weird,” Elim said, flatly. “Changing the subject to ‘shaddup,
I’m talking to the Boss’. How’s that grab everyone?”

A round of agreement passed through the cab and Elim speed-dialed the mysterious number. It rang for what seemed like an eternity, droning into his ear. Elim almost jumped when the line clicked and the harsh, reverberating voice spoke. “Maybe I didn’t make myself clear last time, Elim. ‘You do not call me, I call you’ was the gist I believe. Now, this had better be good, I–”

“The alpha-site’s been overrun,” Elim cut in. “Injector One and the catalyst have been captured by the ZPD, and the ignition program has been lost.” Elim felt a tap on his shoulder and looked back, Finn was hopping in the back seat, his fingers making crude bunny ears as he did so. “…It was Detectives Wilde and Hopps. They found us, somehow, and fucked the whole thing up.”

There was a pause, when Boss spoke they didn’t sound the least bit surprised. “So, Judy Hopps flushed you out? Hm. From the sound of things, you got away. Tell me, did you kill them?”

“No, we couldn’t spare the second,” Elim said. “By the time they were gunning for us they had already called for backup. We got out of there just as the whole fucking fleet was rolling up the road.”

“You’re awfully calm, Elim,” Boss observed, something like pride in their flat metallic voice. “Do I hear a silver lining?”

“We have the spare catalyst canisters.” Elim cleared his throat, drumming his fingers on the dashboard. “And I managed to scoop up the paperwork. The cops have what they have, but they won’t be able to get the whole picture.”

“Good! Good boy, Elim!” Boss crooned. “Naturally, I have a contingency plan.”

“Naturally.”

“It’s a bit more direct than plan A, there’s a lot more risk to you and your teammates.” Boss paused; a distorted conversation could be heard in the background. “That’s why I’m giving you a bit of an advance; five million each. You get the rest when the job is done.”

Elim pumped his fist, much to the confusion of Finn and Grigori, and had to stop himself from laughing, simply grunting in approval. “That’s mighty kind of you, Boss.”

“And I can trust you to not take the money and run?” Boss said, though the inflection suggested that it was not a question, but a warning.

Elim snorted and shook his head. “Boss, if you can sign a check that big and put a plan like this together, you’re no one I want to fuck with.”

There was a chuckle; it made his hackles stand on end, not for the grating metallic edge of the distortion, but for the complete void of good humor behind it. “That has got to be the smartest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say, Elim. Now, what else do you need?”

“A safehouse and some breathing room.” Elim cleared his throat nervously. “Also, what, if anything, can be done about WildeHopps?”

“WildeHopps?” Boss said, mulling the name over in their head. “…Oh! Oh, that’s cute! Sounds like a health food store, the kind of place that sells organic supplements and local produce. Anyway, never mind them, I have something special planned for those two. Now, I’m going to send you an address to a safehouse in the Rainforest District; there you will find a new computer with everything you need for plan B,” his phone buzzed as text came through, “and a schedule,
follow it, I’ll be keeping tabs on your progress. Don’t call me again, Elim. For your sake.”

“Younged, Boss.” Elim said, sighing in relief when the line went dead. “Brr! Alright, Gori! Finn! We’re back in business and got an advance!”

Finn and Grigori laughed and cheered, high-fiving one another as Elim checked the address, grinning openly. ‘Back in business. I hope you’re enjoying your victory, Wilde, I hope you’re happy and have everything you ever wanted, because I’m gonna take that from you. It’s personal now, you todd sunnuvabitch! No one sniffs me out. No one.’

It was late in the afternoon and Zootopia knew a police scramble like never before. Squads of cruisers raced down the highway, cordonning off traffic and vast swaths of Sahara Square, Savannah Central, and the Rainforest District. To the surprise of no one, the huge surge of patrollers and specialists raced past a completely generic white Ford F-150 as it calmly and obsequiously pulled off to the shoulder of the road.

Armored cars and Haz-Mat trucks roared towards their intended targets, full air-support in the form of observation drones and helicopters to oversee and manage redirected traffic. All citizens within ten blocks of the suspected attack sites were evacuated.

Needless to say, the media noticed.

Mayor Ketchikan was quick to respond with a cross-media statement:

"Zootopia is truly blessed to have such a thorough and brilliant police force. While I cannot comment on the exact nature of the emergency, I implore the citizens of Zootopia to cooperate in anyway with all the ZPD and emergency response teams that this crisis may be resolved that much sooner. And I would like to personally extend my deepest thanks to Detective Judy Hopps and Detective Nicholas Wilde, for their dogged and determined efforts in keeping Zootopia the safest, greatest city in the entire world!

#WildeHoppsDoesItAgain #ZootopiaPoliceDepartment #KetchikanAdmin"

Chief Bogo could not be reached for comment.
It was late in the day and Judy sat next to the hospital bed, listening to the various monitors as they wheezed and beeped. She looked over at the body on the cot, more bandage than mammal, his sedation long since worn off but he was still unconscious. A coma, the doctor had said, likely the result of prolonged borderline shock and hypovolemia. Judy noted with bitter humor that the doctor seemed amazed that someone in his condition was even conscious for as long as he was.

‘A saline drip will do that.’ Judy thought to herself, trying in vain to wrap her mind around the thing behind Richie’s suffering.

Her mind raced back to that morning, the hallway, the dark. She shuddered; she could still smell him, hear his laughter, his almost serpentine body coiling around and immobilizing her. She had fought opponents that outmatched her in nearly every capacity. Strength, speed, endurance, and she had emerged victorious regardless. Surely she could have trounced a ferret, right? Why didn’t she? Why did she freeze?

He could have killed her. Easily. She’d read his file twice; smaller victims, which could mean anything from a mouse to a mid-size canine, were all dispatched with a bite to the back of the neck, an attack that pried apart the first and second cervical vertebrae: instant death. But he hadn’t done that; he had tried to choke her, immobilize her.

He had wanted her alive, but why?

She once again turned to Richie. Richie, who had left her that final clue even when it would have made more sense to run; Richie, who had turned from greed and apathy and found his heart; Richie, who had spent the better part of a day in horrible agony waiting for her to save him. Richie, with his missing eye, mangled feet, unsalvageable left hand, and ruined face.

Judy knew exactly why McNulty wanted her alive.

Judy knew exactly why she froze.

She had been scared.

There was no rationalizing it, no computing it, no helpful spritz of logic to make it go away. She had been terrified for what was probably the first time in her life. She had come face-to-face with someone, no, something that she didn’t understand, couldn’t understand, and it had overwhelmed her. The gleeful insanity and leering, hungry cunning that shone in McNulty’s black eyes had made her freeze up. No, it was more than that, she hadn’t just frozen up. Freezing up implies a momentary interruption of thought, that the gears in her head simply missed their rhythm, and that when they meshed once more she would return to form. But she hadn’t, he had dropped down behind her and screamed like a dying mammal, her flashlight shone on him, he was dead in front of her sidearm. She could have netted him, or peppered him, or anything! She had him dead to rights, only for him to laugh and swat the weapon from her hand like she was an unruly child with a stick. She hadn’t frozen up; it was something deeper, something instinctual. Her great grandfather had a funny old word for it: going tharn.

How many more people would die because she was scared of a crazy little ferret? How many more people would wind up like poor Richie because some stupid bunny went tharn when a
lunatic screamed at her?

Because she had been scared.

Because she had been helpless.

Because she had been weak.

Judy buried her face in her hands, trembling with rage. Rage at herself.

“Knock-knock?” came a voice from the behind.

Judy’s ears shot up in alarm and she spun around, expecting to see Finn standing in the doorway, teeth bared with blood dripping from his flexing jaws. ‘Let’s pick up where we left off, bunny!’

But no. Nick stood in the doorway, his posture radiating that naturally casual flair that just seemed to roll off him in waves. His expression was serene, self-satisfied, and utterly Nick; but she could see a fondness and relief in his eyes that made her heart flutter. He’d been worried about her. “Someone’s jumpy.”

“A rabbit joke?” Judy retorted smoothly, being around Nick made it easier to hide her turmoil for some reason. “You’re better than that.”

“Yeah, well, I did get my bell rung pretty good this morning. So did you. Are you okay?” he said, walking over and handing her a coffee.

Judy sniffed it; it was that wonderful carrot-cake latte they sold at the café near the precinct. She hated lying to Nick, but the thought of him thinking less of her, thinking that she was weak, was even worse. “I’m fine. I have a lovely goose-egg and a bit of a headache, but I checked out for any concussions or bleeding.”

“What about Dick? Is he gonna make it?” Nick said, gesturing at the silent, still body on the bed. “Is he still under?”

“Yes,” Judy turned away from him and patted Richie’s hand. “And no. The doctor say’s he’s stable, but he’s in a coma. Between stress, the blood loss, and infections, they had trouble keeping him breathing as they put him back together. They don’t know when he’s going to wake up, or if he’s going to be… sane when he does.”

Nick pulled up a chair next to her and put an arm around her shoulder, Judy had to fight the urge to cling to him like she had in the hallway. Instead she simply allowed him to pull her close. She noticed his scent again, prevailing over the sickly medicine smell of the room that overlapped with the bleach and cleaners the janitors had scoured the room with before Richie was wheeled in. It was harsh and tangy, an alarm bell for her nose, his true body odor peeking through the products and colognes he liked to wear. Moreover, it was harsh, acidic even, likely from all the adrenaline earlier today, but most of all it was heavy, rich… musky. She felt her heart begin to race, her nose twitched as she inhaled, it was altogether different from a ferret’s but her body still reacted in alarm. Her heart began to thunder in her chest, a heady rush of adrenaline surged through her veins, she felt her paws begin to tremble around her coffee.

‘No!’ she screamed internally. ‘You will get yourself under control right now, Judy! You let fear mess things up before, but you’re not going to be afraid! Not now! Not of Nick!’

She looked up at Nick, his long elegant snout, his alert pointed ears, his wary emerald eyes;
he was sleek and hard, angular and predatory, but also familiar and safe. He looked down at her, causing her to gasp, bringing in a new influx of fox scent. The feeling did not dissipate, but rather amplified as a low, knowing voice in her head purred, ‘who’s afraid?’

With that she leapt to her feet and made a show of smoothing out Richie’s blankets. She cleared her throat and peeked back at Nick, his expression was only somewhat confused, when she noticed the folder in his lap. “S-so! Is that a CSR I see?”

Nick glanced down at the report and nodded. “Yeah. There are a few things I want to go over with you.”

“Did they find anything down there?” Judy closely examined the empty corner of the room, keeping Nick firmly in her peripherals. “On the water main?”

Nick smirked, his eyebrow arching. “You haven’t been keeping up with social media, I gather. The whole city’s in lockdown because of what we found. I spent all day coordinating with emergency response and Haz-Mat teams.” He pulled a quartet of photos from the folder and handed them to her. “We found these on all four water mains. Specialists say that they’re some kind of injector mechanism. A linear thermite charge melts a hole into the concrete and then a bunch of shaped charges shunt a jet of liquid into the hole and clean through the steel pipe. In this case the liquid is a big ol’ hit of Richie’s Mysterious Blue Raspberry koolaid. Each one was located just before an emergency shut-off valve, so even if the pipe was compromised, the stuff would be on its way to the Bridge before the shutoff could close.”

Judy noted the design of the injector, while it was complex and extremely well constructed, she could tell that it was still a homemade device. “Looks like Grigori’s handiwork. And this C-4, I bet it’s home-cooked.”

Nick tapped his nose in confirmation, handing her the rest of the CSR. “McNulty’s special blend of herbs and spices. The only thing that’s got us scratching our heads is how they planned to set all of them off. They wouldn’t have been able to get a transmitter capable of beaming through all that concrete, much less to four different locations spread across Zootopia. Sarge said the closest thing to a detonator was a civilian issue wireless transmitter and what appeared to be a gutted smartphone. Thoughts?”

“Wi-Fi,” Judy said, glibly, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “The locations are an electronics warehouse, a grocery store, and a civilian residence. All have Wi-Fi, which Richie probably hacked into. The pumphouse had a Wi-Fi network jury-rigged and open to use. I mean, how else were you able to call for backup while still inside?”

Judy was too enthralled to notice Nick give himself an exacerbated self-chiding slap on the forehead. “And the detonator’s a phone. They’d set it off with a text!”

“Or call, or email,” Judy said, her brow furrowing when she saw the picture of the laptop. “Says here you ‘neutralized’ the computer. Any chance of us recovering what was on there?”

Nick gestured ‘maybe’. “That’s up to the techs. I zapped it pretty good.”

“Why?”

“Elim was trying very hard to get me to look anywhere but the computer,” Nicked said. “Also it had this great, big, sinister-looking loading bar thing going on. Call it a gut-feeling.”

Judy smiled sadly. “Probably saved the city… more than I can say.”
“What?” Nick got to his feet, walking over to her. “Carrots, if it wasn’t for your hunch, I wouldn’t have even been there! If anyone saved the city, it’s you!”

“If it wasn’t for me…” Judy reached up and touched his shoulder, feeling the prickle of stitches there, and then down over the tender swelling on his side. “I almost got you killed, Nick. I wasn’t thinking straight; I left you to take two perps on your own, all because I was… angry. I lost track of what was important. I’m sorry.”

Nick’s arms shot out and before she could pull away they had drawn her in close. His arms crossed tight behind her back, her face pressed into his firm stomach. Judy didn’t pause for a second; she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed as hard as she could, burying herself in him. Her heart hammered in her chest once more, her ears burning as she inhaled his rich and comforting scent, relishing his warm body against hers. She wanted to be closer, to nestle into him, to never let go. She’d almost lost everything that day, but just then, in that hospital room, she felt her world in her arms and she wasn’t about to let go.

“I almost followed after you,” he whispered. “When you went after him. I was scared for you. But then, I remembered something.”

“What?” she asked, muffled in his belly.

“That you’re the bravest, strongest person I’ve ever met. I never need to fear for you, or protect you, because you’ll never need it, not really.” He pulled her away from him, looking her in the eyes, a warm smile on his face. “But I’ll always be there to help you, whenever you want it. All you have to do is ask.”

Judy felt tear well up in her eyes; her voice began to hitch as she unraveled. “I-in the hallway with McNulty, I froze up. I could have bagged him, and probably the others, too. But I was so scared… he scared me. I couldn’t—he almost—he—he—”

Nick knelt down and embraced her again, letting her bury her face in his neck as she sobbed. He rubbed her back and stroked her ears soothingly. “Everyone gets scared, Carrots. That you’re alive shows just how strong you are. So you messed up. So they got away. You know what? That’s on them! They left us alive, so it’s up to us to make them regret it, yeah?”

Judy could only sniffle and nod, clutching handfuls of his shirt and rubbing her face into his soft, inviting neck fur. They stayed like this for several minutes before Nick cleared his throat awkwardly. “So, uh, guess who I called on the way over here.”

“W-who?” Judy asked, her voice still catching.

“My mom,” Nick said, an uncharacteristic edge of nervousness creeping into his voice. “Since tomorrow’s gonna be an absolute gong show, I figured that we deserved a home cooked meal. Uh, y’know, i-if you still want to come and, uh, meet her, that is.”

Judy pulled away from him, smiling smugly. “Finally found a girl you could take home to meet mother, eh?”

“Ha-ha,” Nick laughed, sarcastically. “What do you say?”

Judy dried her eyes and nodded ecstatically. “Of course I will, Nick!”

Nick sighed with relief and straightened out his shirt. “Great! I’ll tell her you’re coming. Now, what say I give you a ride to your car, huh? After today, I really need to go home and have a heart attack.”
Judy laughed and said, “Yeah, early night for me, too.” She turned around and walked over to Richie, gingerly patting him on the shoulder. “I’ll make some time for you tomorrow, Richie. You get better, huh? You’re safe now.”

Nick leaned over and grabbed his right hand, shaking it respectfully. “Yeah. You did good, Dick. I’d like to grab a beer with you sometime.”

Nick and Judy left the room, closing the door gently behind them. Soon, the only sound in the room was the slow, steady beat of the heart monitor.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, let me know what you thought of this chapter in the comments.

Next chapter's going to be a breather episode of sorts; crime procedural, politickin', FoxMom, baddie banter, etc. So, prepare for cute.
Bogo idly sorted through his papers from behind the podium, making sure he had all the salient points underlined, each relevant factoid included, and every last minute detail listed in order of relevance to the case. He looked up to see Mayor Ketchikan glowering at him from his own podium, waiting for the burly cape buffalo to commence his part of the massive, outraged press conference that had assembled on their collective doorsteps. The crowd buzzed and hummed with overlapping discussions and conversations.

Bogo felt more than a little satisfaction at the lemming’s rancor. ‘How are you enjoying this “impromptu press conference” Mr. Mayor? Fun, aren’t they?’

He shot the lemming an aside glance and leaned forward to speak, only to clear his throat, draw back, and take a long, deliberate sip of water. Ketchikan seethed and balled his tiny fists; Bogo merely arched his eyebrow in triumph and leaned forward once more.

“Excuse me,” he rumbled into the microphone. “I will now be fielding questions. Please, keep them to the point, and I will answer them to the best of my ability.”

A great clamor of overlapping voices rose up like a tidal wave, each representative trying to make their requests heard, but a single barking voice drowned the rest out as it rang clearly through the hall; a stout, punkishly dressed badger with a stylized ear-tag who was practically walking on the other reporters.

‘They gave her a press pass?!’ Bogo thought, incredulously. ‘Ah, well, she’ll probably make Ketchikan squirm a bit before we have to remove her.’

“You,” Bogo said, pointing to her. “Please quiet down, the rest of you.”

“Ahem! Honey B. of The Daily Badgering. My question is two-fold; first: just what is the nature of the emergency, and second: is there presently any danger to the public?”

‘Surprisingly cogent.’ Bogo set his papers down on the podium, the page with the relevant information facing up. “At this moment I cannot comment as to exact nature of the attack, but I can tell you what we do know. First and foremost, early yesterday morning, two of our personnel responded to a public disturbance and instead interrupted what appeared to be a terrorist cell. Further exploration revealed a device affixed to the Bridgeway water main in Tundra Town. In the ensuing investigation, three additional devices were discovered in similar positions in Savannah Central, Sahara Square, and the Rainforest District. Since the exact nature and composition of these devices was unknown at the time, the ZPD responded with all possible force and precaution in the location and neutralization of the aforementioned apparatus’. As of seventeen hundred hours last night, our experts have successfully neutralized and removed each of the implements from the pipes, effectively removing the threat entirely. Any and all persons who were relocated during precautionary evacuation will be given clearance to return to their homes as of thirteen hundred
hours today. I am happy to say that Zootopia is no longer under threat from these devices. Next question!"

A giraffe reported raised a hand and spoke. “Chester Speckle of the Zootopia Pan-Media News. Were the perpetrators apprehended? If not, have any organizations claimed responsibility for the attempted attack?”

“Unfortunately, the three primary suspects managed to escape, assaulting and injuring two of our personnel in the process.” A surprised murmur rolled through the crowd, Bogo continued. “Although they did escape, our operatives made positive IDs on each suspect. We are currently working closely with Interpol to form a more comprehensive case against them. Next question!”

Honey B, her voice once again drowning out any competition, asked: “Is this attack in any way related to the break and enter at the Rikko Warehouse a few days ago; the very same warehouse that was located directly above one of the mysterious devices? The very same warehouse that, incidentally, housed the lone access port to the water main?”

Bogo blinked in surprise, genuinely caught off guard by the sudden and distressingly accurate deduction. “I can neither confirm nor deny any connection between the two events. Next question!”

Honey B overpowered the crowd once more. “Is there any connection between the perpetrator and ‘mastermind’ of the Rikko incident, one Emmanuel Beetz, and the terrorists responsible for the attack? Was Mr. Beetz a patsy, and if so, why did the ZPD accept his confession so quickly? Why didn’t a larger portion of the ZPD conduct a more thorough investigation? Was there external pressure to close the case early?”

“At this stage of the investigation, I cannot comment on any possible connections between the two events.” Bogo shuffled through his notes, finding them all profoundly useless. “Ms. B, I would ask you to keep your questions on-point and to refrain from multiple consecutive inquiries. Next question, from someone else, preferably.”

Honey B again spoke out over the crowd. “One final question! The two ZPD personnel responsible for discovering and foiling the Bridgeway Plot, the ones that were assaulted and injured by the suspects; would they happen to be Detectives Nicholas P. Wilde and Judy Hopps as implied by Mayor Ketchikan’s message to the media?”

Bogo glowered at the obtrusive badger for a moment before locking an especially acidic aside glance on the Mayor. After a moment he relented and nodded slowly. “Yes. Detective Wilde and Detective Hopps were the responders to the complaint that, in turn, led to the cell being exposed. Next question!”

An antelope raised her hand. “Natalie Springbok, Savannah Herald. Where are Detectives Wilde and Hopps right now? Shouldn’t they be fielding questions?”

“I assure you, Wilde and Hopps are presently in the midst of some very important work regarding the investigation.”
Judy groaned and rolled her burning wrist, her pen falling from her stiff, claw-like hand; over the course of the past few days she and Nick had accumulated a tremendous amount of paperwork complete; they had been filling it out since that morning, and were only just now past the half-way mark.

“Nick!” Judy called out, reaching over to her partner with her afflicted paw. “Do you think you could do me a solid and gnaw my hand off? It’s too far gone, release me from my pain…be my angel.” Nick craned his head over and gave her hand a long, wet lick. Judy pulled her hand back with a disgusted cry, wiping it feverishly on her pants.

Nick smacked his lips and spoke in a low, creepy voice. “You use Evian fur lotion and you sometimes wear L’Air Du Temps…but not today. Thp-thp-thp-thp-thp!”

“Gross, Nick!” Judy chuckled, rolling her wrist. “Though we should be celebrating, this is our first official paperwork session! Bluh! The only thing worse than getting our asses kicked is being forced to confirm it with two-dozen forms signed in triplicate! I have to account for every net and pellet I’ve fired, and that doesn’t include the pellet I removed manually, that one gets its own pile of paperwork!”

Nick scoffed as he eyed the particularly fat booklet of paper before him, ‘affectionately’ nicknamed ‘the Doc’ by the less responsible members of the force. “Could be worse, Carrots. At least you still have your sidearm! Do you know why they call the weapon loss/reapplication form ‘The Doc’? Because filling it out feels less like paperwork and more like a prostate exam! A stern, embarrassing in-depth inquiry that ends with a fee, just like going to the doctor.”

“I thought you liked ‘knuckle-deep’.” Judy said, chuckling wryly. She stretched her arms over her head, grunting as the joints popped. “Thoughts on lunch?”

“I could go for a bug-burger,” Nick said, idly filling out his report. “A couple termite patties would hit the spot real nice.”

“Careful,” Judy chided playfully. “Don’t want you getting, fat, now do we?”

“Bitch, I do what I want!”

Rapid footsteps drew their attention to the entrance of their cubicle; an out-of-breath pig lab tech named Greg Snoutsen leaned against the frame, waving the blue folder in his hand.

“Results…from the, the…” he panted. “Ran all the way from…the results for ‘the substance’ has come in.”

“Well?” Judy said, excitedly. “What is it, Greg?”

Greg took a deep breath and shook his head, handing her the folder. “Totally inconclusive. It isn’t toxic, psychoactive, or harmful to any of the major organs. There’s no biological component, no harmful chemical chains, nothing that could remotely cause an adverse reaction once ingested. Blood serum, spinal fluid, and neurotransmitter tests all came back negative. It’s completely inert!”

“That’s impossible!” Judy said, shooting to her feet. “It has to do something!”

Greg shrugged and held his arms out in front of him. “I’m open to suggestions. All I know is that we can’t tell the Chief that he just got his ass chewed out over a couple of fancy kegs of
harmless slime!"

“Why’d you come to us, then?” Nick said, reading over the report, what he could understand suggested they’d run the gunk through just about every test known to mammal-kind. “What could we have to offer?”

The pig shrugged, wringing his hands together. “Well…you’re WildeHopps? How’d you even figure this whole thing out in the first place? Clutching at straws, I know…looks like I’m pulling the nightshift tonight.”

Judy shook her head and leaned back in her chair, glaring at the ceiling. Nick motioned for Greg to leave, mouthing ‘thank you’. With that, the tech left, his footfalls sadly tapping away down the hall.

Judy massaged her temples before thudding her face down on her desk. “If only they hadn’t taken those papers with them! It was all there!”

Nick looked at her sympathetically, to say this week had been crazy was an understatement, and his partner was both physically and mentally drained. He stood up and walked over to her, setting a hand on her shoulder. “C’mon, then. Let’s go get some lunch. I’m getting the extra-greasy termite burger just to spite you! Gotta love that trans-fat!”

“Fat…” Judy’s ears perked up for a moment, her head snapped up, her eyes wide, her brow furrowed as she exhaustedly tried to connect the dots in her mind. “Trans-fat? …No. Lost it. Yeah, fine, get your diabetes burger.”

“Live dangerously, Carrots!” Nick said, pulling on his jacket.

The safehouse was small, clearly for a mammal somewhat shorter than a gnu; tall enough that he never quite hit his head on a doorframe, but low enough that he was constantly wary of it. The floorboards were (poorly) treated wood and in terms of structural integrity were well past ‘springy’ and heading down the inexorable road to ‘spongy’. The interior was made up like a coastal townhouse from a bygone century, with faded, stained and peeling floral wallpaper and chipped, water-damaged moldings. Also, it stank. All places in the Rainforest District stank, stank of mildew, stank of stale water, and stank of damp fur; it just stank all around. Elim would content himself that any moist, cloying mold-stench was preferable to a jail cell. He was still antsy, though; he wanted to get underway and get this job over with.

He sat in his chair, a flimsy rusted part of a four-piece set of patio furniture Grigori had ‘liberated’ from their neighbor, a nosy old armadillo that recently had a fatal run-in with a flight of stairs, courtesy of a certain lynx. He rolled the stolen cop weapon over in his hands, it was light, made of composites, Kevlar, and hard plastics save for the metallic rails that made up the mass-driver. An expensive little toy, no doubt it had some kind of special features to it. He had a good idea about how it worked, he’d had enough pepper pellets tossed his way, but it was the much larger-bore underslung launcher that had piqued his curiosity; it even had its own separate magazine containing two large rounds. But what did they do?
He examined the writing on the side of the launcher. “Ah.”

“AAH!” Grigori screamed. “Watch your claws, you little shit!”

Elim looked over to the other side of the room, Grigori and Finn were practicing their routine for the big show on Friday. Finn was coiled around Grigori’s forearm like a snake, his pointy little claws digging into the lynx’s hide. With a flick, the burly bobcat flung him to the floor, Finn landed on his feet and hopped into a fighting stance.

“What’s the matter?” he hissed. “Did da meen ol’ ferret give baby a boo-boo?”

Grigori growled and lunged forward, swiping at the quick ferret. Finn ducked out of the way and scurried out of reach, dancing and flipping about as he laughed. “Eh-heh-heh-heh! You’ll have to be faster than that, Kitten!”

Elim took aim and pulled the trigger, a coughing explosion followed as the weapon kicked in his hand. The slug opened almost as soon as it left the barrel, a shrill whistling sound filled the room as it hurtled through the air. Finn only had time to turn his head before the net engulfed him, sending him skidding across the floor.

“Huh,” Elim said, mildly amused. “So that’s what it does.”

“You didn’t know what it did,” Grigori said evenly, before shouting “and you shot him?!”


“It stands for ‘Elim, get me out of this fucking thing before I hamstring you and eat your fucking liver!’” Finn bellowed from the corner of the room, “…–net.”

“Okay, hold on,” Elim looked up and down the side of the weapon. “It ought to have a release button thing. Oh, hey, maybe it’s this yellow one?”

He depressed the button and a sharp clicking filled the room, Finn gritted his teeth and gurgled, seizing on the ground. Elim took his thumb off the button and scratched his head as Finn panted in shock on the ground. He pressed button again, and once again Finn began seizing.

“Elim!” Finn roared. “What the hell?!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Elim said, chuckling. “Just making sure.”

He pressed it again; a low enraged gurgle escaped the convulsing ferret.

“Okay, that one was for me.”

Grigori snatched the gun from his hands and scowled at the gnu. “Elim! I had no idea you could be so cruel!” he turned to Finn and held the button down for ten seconds straight. “That’s more my thing.”

“Hey, it’s starting to feel kinda good!” Finn said, laughing and gurgling.

Elim took back the sidearm; he walked over and tapped the sensor at the tip of the gun against the little black hub at the center of the net. The strands immediately went slack and Finn wriggled free, dusting himself off.

“Neat toy, Elim,” he said, casually. “Where’d you get it?”
“From that fox cop,” Elim muttered, examining the net, the fibers were incredibly fine, but apparently extremely strong. “It’ll come in handy tomorrow, you think?”

“Packs a wallop, that’s for sure!” Finn said, smirking. “So, what gives? I thought the Boss wanted everyone to be good and fat with the stuff before we dump the catalyst?”

Grigori scoffed. “Boss doesn’t want to give the bunny any more time to figure this out than they have to.”

“That was Plan A,” Elim said, ignoring Grigori and opening the fridge, revealing dozens of metal canisters. “This isn’t. We up the dosage and go right to the source, it’ll be about as effective. See, in Plan A we were using less of the stuff, not to mention it would get more evenly mixed by the various turbines. That’s why saturation had to be so high. But now we have gallons of it that we’re just gonna dump straight into the primary pump. It still won’t be as effective as Plan A was going to be, but I guess it’s all relative given how this is going to go down.”

“Just a few more people are going to notice something’s wrong before the whole city tears itself apart.” Grigori said, soberly. “Poor bastards.”

“As opposed to us rich bastards, eh?” Elim clapped Grigori on his muscular, rippling shoulder. “Try not to think about it, instead, think about how you’re going to get that money to your family without setting off too many alarm bells.”

Grigori huffed and shrugged his hand off. “I already have that covered. I arranged for my second uncle twice removed to die in a mysterious accident and leave Mama all his money.”

“I didn’t know you had a second uncle twice removed, Kitten,” Finn said, fussing with the deactivated net.

Grigori shrugged. “He was a recluse, a bit of a hermit. So much so that no one even noticed the fact that he never existed in the first place. I paid a few smart guys to create a paper trail and stock market history for someone who never lived, and then I turned their heads on backwards and threw them into a swamp. As far as anyone knows, Victor Vasko is a reclusive old hermit who played the stock market and got rich. He was worth as much as forty million dollars before he died. And it all goes to his closest living relative, Mama, with the first payment of five million rolling in yesterday.”

Elim and Finn blinked in surprise and exchanged looks, Elim laughed and clapped his hands together. “And they call me the smart guy! Well, I can’t think of a lady who deserves it more than Mama Yevgenyevich.”

Finn chuckled and nodded. “Yeah! Anyone who had to raise you of all people deserves a sainthood!”

“I was, how you say, a proper little shit when I was a cub,” Grigori said, gesturing at Finn. “Unlike some, I grew out of it!”

Elim stepped between the two as they prepared to spar yet again. “Enough! We can’t afford to get sloppy, not now! Security’s gonna be tight and we’re going to have to get some killing done, so I want each of you well rested and in-character, we start early tomorrow, when the night and day shifts cycle out. Boss’ll be calling us at nine in the morning, and we’d better have that shit ready to dump by then!”

“You say that like you didn’t just juice me with fifty thousand volts!” Finn snapped.
“And you say that like you don’t have an erection.” Elim said, walking over and planting himself on his chair.

Finn looked down and cleared his throat awkwardly. “Learned new something today…”

“Degenerate,” Grigori spat, heading off to the kitchen.

“Don’t judge me,” Finn grumbled, adroitly adjusting his pants.

Nick strummed his fingers on the steering wheel nervously as he waited for Judy to come down. He was all kitted out in his nicest, most subdued out-on-the-town wear and was tastefully evocative of his favorite cologne, 1 Million by Alpaca Rabanne; he looked good and he knew it. And yet, he was a bundle of nerves. What would she see? Would she see her son finally making something of himself, finally being the mammal he could be, or would she see some slick shyster trying his best to look successful? Would he walk in that apartment, arms spread wide, and be greeted with that oh-so-familiar loving resignation he’d almost come to welcome in the passing years, with all the lowered expectations it implied? Would all his trials and hard work fall flat as one of the few people he actually loved simply shrugged it off as another scheme?

‘She’d still be happy to see you, at least,’ Slick Nick muttered in his head. ‘That unbearable, patronizing kind of happy.’

He shook that voice from his head; it was the self-serving, cynical voice that had kept him safe for most of his life. It kept people from getting close, kept their lies from clouding his judgment, made it so he could see what others wanted and therefore made them easier to con. But things were different now; his new life was more honest, more open. Or, at least, a very specific part of it was.

“Guess who’s coming to dinner, Ma,” he said aloud.

Movement caught his eye; he glanced over to see Judy dart around to the passenger side of the car. She opened the door and seated herself, turning to Nick with a happy, excited smile. His mouth hung open, she looked amazing; she wore a nice, well-fitted three-piece casual suit with a matte-black pencil-style knee-length skirt and a similarly colored notch-lapelled one-button blazer. Always the seamstress’s son, even a casual glance noticed the immaculate chevron dart-stitched details on both pieces. The simple elegance of the stitching complemented her trim and curvy figure, and the way the rich matte black enhanced the subtle dappling of her gray fur suggested a careful, patient eye and an immaculate sense of style. Simply put: there was no way that Judy picked out and bought something this tasteful. Judy, who had once bought him a tie so awful he’d assumed she’d been joking, a piano-key neck-tie if memory served, only to find her hurt that he’d never worn the tacky thing to work. He shuddered; only a person from a family large enough to open a hand-me-down department store could have such a blind spot in their fashion sense.

‘Says the guy who exclusively wears Pawaiian shirts and floral prints in primary colors,’ he reminded himself. ‘With a tie.’
‘I know what I look good in,’ he retorted. ‘Everything. Besides, no one ever bought pawsicles from someone in a three-piece.’

‘You’re staring.’

‘What?’

“Earth to Nick!” Judy said, waving her paw in his face. “You like what you see?”

Nick blinked out of his trance, pleased to find that his casual debonair smile had already slipped onto his face without any conscious effort. “Just quietly thanking Francine for her contribution to your wardrobe.”

“Right?” Judy said, examining herself. “It’s so cute! I sent a selfie to my family while wearing it and they all went nuts!”

“Well, I’m sure Mom will have some pointers on how to accessorize,” Nick said, shifting his plain, sensible car into gear and pulling away. “We’re off, partner!”

As they got closer to his old neighborhood, Nick began to recognize more and more of his surroundings; even to someone with an uncanny memory for places and locations, the associated images of his childhood were unsettlingly clear. Memories flooded in, some were good, others were bad, but all carried that sense of loss that accompanied nostalgia. He noticed how tense his shoulders were getting and tried his best to hide his anxiety, opting instead to focus on other things. A quick sniff brought in a welcome distraction; Judy’s perfume. Ever the detective, she’d lightly spritzed the air well over her head and had walked quickly through the dissipating cloud, as not to overpower her keen-nosed company with…L’air Du Temps? He’d been joking about that earlier, had she gone and bought some? He began to notice what lay beneath the perfume, the mild, enthralling scent of Prey. It was low, subtle, as though trying to escape notice, but to a sharp nose such a scent was just as fascinating as blood on the wind, and just as likely to provoke an investigation.

He allowed himself an aside glance, catching his partner full in his peripheral vision; besides her tasteful outfit and borderline distracting fragrance, he noticed that she was wearing product in her fur and had taken to combing a flow into the short fuzzy fur of her face. She’d really done herself up for tonight, and it was paying off in a big way. The revelation came to him in a quiet, almost casual manner, as though he’d just remembered some he knew all along: she was beautiful.

His eyes snapped back to the road in front of him, a crease of worry formed in his brow. ‘Oh. Oh…oh shit.’

Judy noticed a certain tension in her partner, it had been building steadily ever since they’d gotten closer to what she assumed was Nick’s old neighborhood. It was understandable; from what she’d heard, his memories of the old homestead were likely more on the sour end than the sweet. This was the place, the culture, which had pushed him into hustling after all. And while it didn’t
seem to her that his relationship with his mother was a bad one, it was clearly a major source of tension for him. He had been terrified to see her since becoming a cop, some asinine fear that his first-ever honest job would be seen as yet another scam. The things people tell themselves to avoid awkward situations!

She also pretended to not notice the increasingly frequent glances he was sending her way, each one followed by a long, slow sniff. ‘*He thinks he’s being subtle. How cute.*’

Judy herself was excited, giddy, even. The prospect of meeting the only person in the world that knew more about Nick than her was thrilling. She might even dig up some choice dirt to throw in his face from time to time, embarrassing childhood stories, adorable baby pictures and the like. Nick could walk into a room and smile, chat, and leave with the names, numbers, and longing glances of everyone with an extra X-chromosome, but ask any of the mammals he’d spoken to and you’d find yourself chasing a ghost. He knew how to talk to people, how to connect to them, and he could pluck acquaintances clean out of the air, but he had few, if any, real friends.

How many people knew *of* Nick Wilde? Just about everyone he ever talked to could recall the charming fox with the winning smile.

How many people *knew* Nick Wilde? No one.

Well, one now. This knowledge filled Judy with pride, almost a sense of power, that she’d gotten through his walls and now she was going to meet the other lady in his life. Judy paused, admitting that she could have worded that better. The way she carried on, it was almost like she thought they were together. As in, *together*-together. Which was ridiculous! So ridiculous that she found herself glancing over at him when he wasn’t doing the same to her, noticing how well his clothes fit and how the black shirt and red tie he was wearing complemented his fur and eyes, and how snugly his pants hugged his lean, muscular legs and…upper leg area; specifically, the inner part.

“We’re here!” Nick announced, pointing out the window to the small-but-homey line of apartment buildings. “Game-face on, Carrots!”

“Whuh?”

Nick was already out and circling around to her side. He opened the door and made a show of bowing and offering his hand, the look on his face screamed ‘if I may assist, m’lady?’

Judy smiled donned a posh, snooty expression, setting a dainty hand in his as she stepped out. They could only keep the façade going for so long before they both began to laugh. They crossed the street and Nick pressed the doorbell on the intercom, number one-oh-eight, and sighed. Judy reached out and grabbed his hand, smiling at him when he looked down at her.

“She’ll be glad to see you,” she reassured. “Relax. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Nick opened his mouth to respond but found himself speechless, opting to only nod and smile.

“Buzzing you in,” was the terse reply. “Come on up.”

Nick cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders and neck. They entered.
The hallways were achingly familiar; nothing had changed since he’d last walked through those doors, or even since he was a boy. The wallpaper, the stained carpet, the low dry-mold smell of the vents, all mingled with whatever the neighbors were cooking. He smelled borscht, which meant that Mrs. Bugayev was somehow still alive; he wondered if she still had that bowl full of those hideous foreign candies that she liked to give him as a kid.

He was lost in though when he felt Judy nudge him: they were there. Room 108.

“Knock,” he whispered. “Please.”

“Nick,” Judy said, with finality.

“Fine.” He reached up and rapped on the door, his arm stiffly dropped back to his side. Why was he so nervous?

There were sounds of shuffling around inside, the clatter of pots and pans, footsteps. Various locks and latches were undone for an alarmingly long time; his mom never was one to skimp on security.

The door opened and his mother’s somewhat severe, well-done-up face peered out at them. Nick noted how healthy and youthful she looked, despite being well on her way to sixty. She also had a glare that could strip the paint off the walls. Nick willed his ears to stay up and for the first time since he could remember had to force a smile on his face.

“H-hi, Mom.”

“Nicholas,” was her reply. “Come on in, then.”

Nick slumped and walked in, Judy followed after, somewhat uncomfortable. The apartment was cramped but well appointed, money had never been bountiful, but his mother wouldn’t have given that impression under threat of death. The smell of overlapping food filled the air, and he felt his heartstrings tug as he remembered all the times the smell of his mother’s cooking had comforted him during the bad times.

Off in the corner of the living room was the Singer 4423, various projects strewn around its sturdy, well-used frame.

“So, uh, Mom!” he called out. “What’s new with you?”

“Not much,” she replied from the kitchen. “I’ve been pulling odd jobs from that fancy place uptown, Clique-Chic-Boutique, they have me repairing a few of the hatchet jobs their own thread-pullers have done. I also put together a nice little ensemble for Harriet Steppenwulf. You remember her, right?”

He remembered, a great burly timberwolf with a distinctly absent sense of humor. “Isn’t she the one who swung me around by my tail?”

“You did sell her little brother ‘magic beans,’” she said, chiding.

“They were jumping beans, he just assumed they were magic!” Nick said, crossing his
arms. “I had to be in a cast for two months! People called me ‘Butt-Stick’ until eighth grade!”

“Butt…Stick,” Judy muttered, smirking as she scribbled in her notepad.

Nick shot her a nasty look; he pointed at her note pad and mouthed ‘seriously?’

Judy shrugged defensively and Nick’s mom called out. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Oh! Uh, yeah. Mom, this is Carr-uh-Judy Hopps. She’s my partner. Uh! N-not like that, she’s my partner at work! She’s a cop… and so am I! I’m a cop, too… yeah.”

Mrs. Wilde strolled out of the kitchen, drying her hands with a dishtowel. “Are you, now? Well, it’s news to me! For you see, I’ve been living on Mars for the past year and a half, in a cave, with my fingers in my ears and my eyes shut.”

Judy laughed. “Yeah, she’s your mom, alright.”

“You knew?” Nick said, somewhat disbelievingly.

“Nick,” she said, fixing him with a look that sent his heart plummeting into his guts. “You two have been making the news fairly regularly for months. Do you think I’m some kind of hermit? Of course I knew you were a cop, you’re my son! I was just waiting for you to call me up and tell me yourself! Waiting a good long while, it seems.”

Nick flinched and turned away from her, his ears dropping flat. “I just–I couldn’t…I didn’t know how you’d react. I’ve been a fuck-up for so long, I didn’t know how’d you take the news, I didn’t know if you’d be proud or just think I was up to something again. I–”

Mrs. Wilde strode across the room and looped her arms around her son, hugging him tight. He spun around in her arms and she pushed her face into his chest. “You hush. You’re here now and that’s all that matters.”

She pulled away and looked up at him, her eyes wide and sparkling. She pulled on his hand. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

She beckoned Judy to follow and led them down the hallway. They stopped at the guestroom, formerly Nick’s abode. Mrs. Wilde reached out and opened the door, stepping inside as she spoke. “I’ve followed every one of your cases, Nick. It’s all the ladies at the sewing circle talk about! They all thought you were so charming when you were a boy.”

Nick and Judy stepped inside to see a massive corkboard festooned with newspaper clippings, pictures, there were even a few printed-out blog-posts singing their praises. She’d kept track, she’d believed without ever having asked. Nick’s ears drooped as he stared at the floor, ‘she’d never doubted me. Not even for a second…God, I’m a goddamned idiot!”

“They ask me if I hear from you much, and I tell them that if I did, you wouldn’t be out there catching killers or foiling plots!” Mrs. Wilde continued. “I mean, look at all you’ve done! You and Judy, you’ve done so much. I just assumed you were too busy to drop by…”

Nick felt tears threaten and stooped forward and hugged her, resting his chin atop her head. “Well, I’m here now, huh? A-and I’ll be by more now, okay?”

“Nick?” she said, looking up, her expression concerned. “Are you okay?”
Nick flicked a tear from his eye and calmed himself down. “Yeah! Yeah, Mom, I’m fine. I’m just…I’m just really glad for, uh, some reason! Your son went and made something of himself, huh?”

She smiled and squeezed him tight. “Just like I always knew you would. With all the talent you had.”

‘–the very best at being baaaad guuuys~’ raced through his mind, sending a shiver up his spine. “So, is there anything we can do to help with dinner?”

“Keeping it down would be plenty!” Mrs. Wilde laughed, turning to the rabbit. “Judy, I hope you like kale–Judy! What’s wrong, dear?”

Judy sniffled and wiped tears from her cheeks, a happy, quivering smile on her face. “N-nothing! I’m just h-happy for you, is all!”

“Bunnies,” Nick said, his composure fully regained. “So emotional.”

The meal was more than palatable, delicious even. A tasty bug-loaf with gravy for Nick and Mrs. Wilde and a rich, hearty kale salad with baby carrots, radishes, strawberries and tart balsamic vinaigrette on top for Judy. But the star of the evening was expected to be the dessert, a wonderful blueberry carrot cake with rich creamy icing.

Nick scrubbed the dishes in the sink while Judy and his mother retreated to the living room for cake and a glass of wine. His ears twitched and angled back as he listened to them laugh and converse. ‘Hey, Slick, I’ll bet you fifty bucks she’s showing Carrots my baby photos and telling embarrassing stories.’

‘You’re on,’ he replied sarcastically.

He plopped the last plate on the drying rack and strolled into the room. Sure enough, there was his mother with the photo album cracked open on her lap, pictures of Little Nicky on proud display; most of them involved him in some state of undress.

‘Pay up, my tod,’ he sighed to himself, mentally slapping cash into his palm. “Having fun, ladies?”

“Oh, oodles!” Judy said with almost palpable smugness.

“Just telling Detective Hopps some choice information about her partner,” Mrs. Wilde said innocently. “To promote teamwork.”

“Ha-ha,” Nick said, flatly. “Hey, pour me a glass of that, will you?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the designated driver?” Judy said, a full glass of wine in her hand.

Nick poured himself a glass and took a sip, a nice light red, his mother’s favorite. “Unlike you, I’m not a lightweight, Carrots!”

Mrs. Wilde laughed and swatted Nick on the arm. “Nick! That’s hardly a proper thing to call a bunny!”
“It’s okay, Mrs. Wilde,” Judy said. “He only ever calls me ‘Judy’ when he’s being serious.”

“So, never?” she said, pithily.

Judy giggled and took a hearty pull from her wineglass; she reached over and collected her plate, handing it to Nick. “Care to get me another slice of cake, Nick? It really is delicious, Mrs. Wilde.”

“Thank you, dear!” Mrs. Wilde said, with a smile. “I made it all myself, you know, so you eat up!”

“That doesn’t make it healthier!” Nick said, handing Judy another piece. “Careful, Fluff, you’re getting a bit of a dewlap.”

Judy set a concerned hand on her neck as Mrs. Wilde reached up and gave her son a yank on the ear. Judy blinked, the nascent sparks of an idea shimmered as her brilliant mind set into motion.

“I only use butter and fresh ground flour!” Mrs. Wilde continued. “No preservatives, no trans-fats! It’s as healthy as dessert gets!”

“Butter and sugar,” Nick scoffed, eating a slice regardless. “That’s still a lot of saturated fat!”

‘Saturated fat…’ Judy thought to herself, her eyes lighting up as she inched closer to a revelation.

“Judy, don’t listen to him! You look just fine!” Mrs. Wilde said, looking over at the entranced rabbit. “Judy?”

“Oh-oh,” Nick said, flatly. “She’s doing that thing, again. Every time she makes that face, life gets a hell of a lot more complicated!”

Judy blinked and turned Nick and his mother, and smiled innocently. “Oh, it’s just something to do with work. We’ll look into it after we’re done here. Hold on, I just need to jot something down, okay?”

Nick looked confused for a moment before shrugging and nodding. “Uh, yeah? That’s fine.”

‘Saturated fat?? Fat = ??? Consult notes.’ Judy made a note to herself and snapped back to them. “Done! Now, Mrs. Wilde, I believe you were telling me about how much Nick hated pants as a child?”

“Oh my, yes!” Mrs. Wilde exclaimed, shooting her son a teasing glance. “From about two to three years old, I just couldn’t keep a stitch on him! I was ready to sew him into his clothes when he discovered button-up shirts.”

“I didn’t like how other clothes rode up is all…” Nick said, bashfully.

It was an hour later and Mrs. Wilde was walking through the foyer with her son and his partner. Nick held the door open for them, and Mrs. Wilde handed him carefully wrapped leftovers, craning up to kiss him on the cheek. “It was so good to see you two! I hope we can make
“What do you think, Judy?” Nick said, wafting the leftover cake under her nose. “Will I have to drag you back here?”

“Oh, you may have to drag me away!” Judy said, giving Mrs. Wilde a friendly nudge. “Everything was amazing, Mrs. Wilde. Thank you for the wonderful night!”

“Well, I’ll go bring the car around,” Nick said, fishing around in his pockets for the keys. “Mom, it was great seeing you tonight. How does next Friday sound?”

“Only if you can make it, lovey,” Mrs. Wilde said, hugging her son. “You keep safe, now.”

Nick hugged her back and made off for the car. Judy watched him go, once again noticing how well his pants fit.

“I wanted to thank you, Judy,” Mrs. Wilde said, a knowing smile on her face. “For being there for him.”

Judy turned to her. “I’m thankful to be there. He’s not the type to let people in, I’m glad he made the exception.”

Mrs. Wilde chuckled and patted her on the shoulder. “My son’s never been one to let people in. You know, all this time I thought he was…well, anyway, I never would have guessed that he just had a type!”

Judy’s ears flushed with color and she stepped back, laughing nervously. “Whoa! Hey! No, we’re just partners! F-friends! That’s what I meant by, uh, –”

Mrs. Wilde raised a hand to silence her. “Ah! Say no more! You two take your time, there’s no rush! Just thought I’d let you know, yours weren’t the only pair of eyes a-wanderin’ tonight.”

“Aaaand here we are, coming up on Casa de Carrots,” Nick announced as they pulled up outside Grand Pangolin Apartments. “Thank you for choosing Wilde Ride Taxi Service. That’ll be thirty dollars even, ma’am.”

Judy winked at him. “Oh, I’m sure there’s some other way I can pay you back. Do you accept payment in beer?”

Nick smirked and nodded. “Twelve bottles ought to do it. But not now, I really ought to get home.”

Judy laughed and opened the door, taking an armful of leftovers with her. “Well, walk me to the door at least.”

They entered the small foyer and waited as Judy fished her keys out of her pocket. Nick examined the long line of doorbells next to the intercom above the mailbox, all of which looked
absolutely ancient, Judy noticed from the way that Nick was eying them that he doubted that any of them actually worked. She looped the keyring around her pinkie and dangled them, producing a short, musical tinkling.

“Well, thanks for the wonderful night, Nick,” Judy said, stepping forwards and pulling him into a tight hug. “Your mom is a interesting lady!”

“Thanks for coming, Carrots,” Nick said, returning the embrace.

“Oh, you were twisting my rubber arm, Sly!” Judy laughed. “A home cooked meal and a bunch of embarrassing stories about you? Try and keep me away!”

“Judy,” Nick said, his voice low and steady as he locked his eyes with hers. “I mean it. Thank you. I really means a lot to me that you’re…there for me, when I need you to be. I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“Friend…” Judy repeated, rubbing her arm. “You know, your mom thought we were dating.”

Nick laughed and rolled his eyes. “She should join the club, I hear they’re giving out jackets now.”

“They say ‘WildeHopps–4–lyfe’ on the back!” Judy giggled, looking up at her partner. “And Clawhauser is the treasurer.”

“WildeHopps,” Nick mused, his eyes locking with hers, his voice growing low and distant. “Sounds like…a stupid shipping name you’d hear on the Internet.”

“Yeah…” Judy said, her own voice muted and strangely husky. “Real stupid.”

Judy’s heart hammered away in her chest; his eyes were so bright and green, perfectly contrasted against his orange fur, she could feel them pulling at her in some totally new, transfixing way. A thought raced through her head in that quiet, purring voice that was becoming increasingly familiar. ‘Hey Judy, let me try something, okay?’

She reached up and grabbed his tie with both her hands, dimly noticing that it was silk. She made a show of adjusting it, straightening it, before making a small contented affirming noise. “There.”

“What was th–?”

With a tug, Judy pulled Nick down by his tie and kissed him. When their lips met they felt a surge pass between them, an instant connection of warmth and sensation. Judy reached up and looped her arms behind his neck, holding him to her, Nick responded by taking her waist in his hands and pulling her close. He deepened the kiss, his long, agile tongue pushing into her mouth, making her moan. Judy’s own tongue traced the strange, alien shape of his teeth, shivering with excitement when she found his long, sharp canines. Tired of bending over, Nick effortlessly plucked her off the ground and set her down on a nearby mailbox, Judy giggled and squealed as he pressed his weight against her, pinning her against the wall as her hands swept over his back, feeling his muscular body in her arms as she explored his body far more intimately than ever before. God, he was so solid and lithe, as he tensed beneath her hands he felt more like warm, living stone than flesh.

“Oh my God,” Judy panted into his mouth. “Nick…”
“I’ve wanted this for so long,” he whispered hoarsely, breaking the kiss.

Judy gasped as he moved down and gently nipped the skin on her neck, sucking and biting just hard enough to make her squeak, her fingers digging into his back as his long tongue darted out and wrapped under her jaw. Judy planted countless tiny kisses up and down his cheek, whispering breathy encouragements into his ear. His hands drifted down, caressing her hips before cupping her firm rump, giving it a strong, wanting squeeze.

Judy reached up and grabbed a handful of the decadent orange fur on the back of his neck and pulled him away from her, gazing deeply into his emerald eyes. “Want to take this upstairs?”

Nick opened his mouth to affirm when a staticky, frustrated voice blasted from the intercom. “Hey! Whoever’s pressing all the doorbells better cut that shit out or I’m coming down there!”

Another voice chimed in, clearly the intercom had a faulty discriminator, and Judy recognized it as Mrs. Armadillo, the landlady. “If you kids are snogging on the mailbox again, I’m going to call the cops!”

“We are the cops!” Judy snapped, outraged at the interruption.

“Hey, waitaminnit,” the first voice said, with growing horror Judy recognized it as her neighbor, Pronk. “Is that Judy? Holy shit, are you getting some?”

“Uh! Whuh-” Judy stammered.

“Hey! I take it back, you guys do whatever!” Pronk said, laughing. “Hey, guy, whoever you are, you show her a good time, yeah? Judy’s been really wound up recently and needs a little bounce in her step, ya’mean?”

“Oh my, yes!” Mrs. Armadillo agreed. “I say to Agnes, I say ‘that Judy Hopps girl needs to get laid!’ Agnes agrees, says ‘Yeah, bunny-girls go a bit funny if they don’t get the D on the reg,’ See, Agnes is an arctic hare, so she knows about such things. Oh, but listen to me ramble on, you two have a wonderful night, okay?”

Pronk sounded up. “Yeah! And Jude, you don’t have to worry about me and Bucky. We’ll be quiet as church mice!”

“Quiet as church mice in a library!” Bucky added.

“Idiot! If the church mice are in a library then they aren’t church mice anymore! They’d be **library** mice!” Pronk snapped.

“Don’t call me an idiot, **idiot**!” Bucky retorted.

“Shut up!”

“**You** shut up!”

The intercom went dead.

Judy let her ears flop over her face, her expression was utterly mortified but a glint of hope shone in her eyes. “So…do you still want to…?”

“Moment’s gone,” Nick said quickly, releasing her rear and stepping back, trying and
failing to play it cool.

“Yeah, kind of a mood killer,” Judy said, sadly, before forcing a bark-like laugh and snapping her fingers. “Hey! W-we should, uh, contact the mood’s next of kin!”

Nick chuckled, it sounded just as wan and forced as hers. “Yeah! Heh! Put out an APB on the, uh, the killers…I’m gonna…” he trailed off, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder.

“Yeah…” Judy said, clearing her throat as she hopped down from the mailbox. She straightened out her blazer and pulled down her skirt, which had gotten hiked nearly all the way up her legs at some point. “Uh, see you tomorrow, partner!”

Judy faceplamed internally at that last word. ‘Shut up, Judy! For the love of God, shut up!’

Nick laughed and nodded, walking to his car. “Yeah! See you then!”

Judy kicked the door to her room open, scowling off into the middle distance as she stomped over to the fridge and carelessly stuffed the leftovers inside. That accomplished, she shambled over to her bed and collapsed on it. She glared the ceiling for a moment before she grabbed her pillow, pressed it over her face, and screamed at the top of her lungs.

After nearly two solid minutes of screaming, Judy hurled the pillow across the room. “Fuck my life.”

‘You know what you need?’ the formerly-purring voice said, now despondent and petulant sounding. ‘Cake. All the cake.’

“Aren’t I getting a dewlap?” Judy muttered aloud. “Don’t want to get fat, do I?”

A spark.

A flash.

An explosion.

“Fat,” Judy muttered, her eyes sparkling. “Oh…oh, my god…”

Chapter End Notes

Don’t really know why I added that last quarter on.

Yeah, yeah slow burn and such, but I just kind of had to get it off my chest.

I don’t regret it, I think it turned out great!

Shit gets real next chapter, so stay tuned!
Bradford sat behind his desk, casting an askance eye over the row of screens lining his desk from over his tablet: all clear, save for the odd straggler from the night shift, filing out to be replaced by bright eyes and bushy tails. It was early, early enough that even the sun seemed to be just rolling out of bed, but for a civet such as himself it was barely mid-afternoon. He loved this time of day, the way the light banded and hung in the clean summer air, the fresh smell of the night, a blend of plants, soil, and humidity, was still sharp on the wind, soon to be burned away by the heat of the sun. The sun would have little in the way of company today, the weather report was calling for a high of 110 in the non-refrigerated areas, with the heat starting early and ending late, as summer days are wont to do. And here he was, safe and sound behind his desk with the AC cranked and the newest beat by Gazelle cued up.

What a time to be alive.

The building itself was small and unassuming, but the main complex, located deep underground, was massive, occupying a significant chunk of the downtown subterranea. The enormous pumps of the station provided water pressure for the entire city, fifty billion gallons ran through there each day, from grey water, to drinking water, to the condensation collectors in the Tundra Wall, every last drop in Zootopia ran through the Bridge. Naturally, such a place needed some form of guard, and to that end it had him. He was the senior security officer; he kept a watchful eye on the well-monitored rooms of the main complex, he had the unique talent of watching multiple pictures on multiple screens simultaneously and being able to pay attention to each one. Should anyone cause any trouble he’d call up his trio of thugs in uniform to sort them out.

Speak of the devil. There was a knock at the door and he looked up to see a burly hyena smiling bashfully as she waved at him. Big Beck, as she was known, was a truly intimidating creature in appearance, two hundred pounds of muscle evenly spread over five and a half feet; she had more than enough presence to make any would-be troublemaker think twice. She was also about as punctual as a broken clock, her co-workers would probably have already had the best pick of the donuts; something he was sure to hear about later today.

“Sorry, Beck!” Bradford called out. “Cards don’t work. The system is on the blink! Here, I’ll buzz you in.” He pressed one of the buttons on his console, a buzz rang through the air as the door unlatched.

“How long has this been going on?” Beck grumbled, tromping through the door.

“Since last night,” Bradford said, sipping his coffee. “I called the Maxbell guys, I dunno when they’ll be by, though.”

“Is it all the way through?” Beck said, unshouldering her bag. “Like, all the way down?”
Bradford nodded. “Right down to level ten. Good news is retinal scans still work, they’re on a separate system.”

“Gonna be a pain in the ass, calling you up to unlatch all the doors,” Beck said, shaking her head. “Sure would be great if we, y’know, didn’t have to do that.”

“Ayuh,” Bradford said, smiling patiently. “Sure would. Alas, we live in a world where we have to obey protocol. Get used to hearing my angelic voice, Muscles!”

Beck snorted and smiled, reflexively tapping her card to the adjoining door. She paused and sighed, looking over at Bradford. “Gonna be one of those days, huh?”

Bradford shrugged. “Could be worse.”

“How?”

“…I’ll get back to you on that,” he said, buzzing her in. “Talk to you soon, Beck.”

Beck muttered her goodbye and strode through the door. Bradford smirked and adroitly watched her leave on the monitor; he noted that she had a ass you could bounce a quarter off of, ruefully contemplating the fifteen-year age difference between them. ‘Ah well, Brad. As you say, life could be worse. But, then, it could be better, too…dinner and a movie…’

He was pulled from his fantasy by a sharp rapping on the glass; standing at the door was a rangy brindled gnu and quite possibly the biggest bobcat he’d ever seen. Both wore blue uniforms and short-brimmed flat-top caps bearing the Maxbell logo on the breast.

Bradford buzzed them in and laughed sharply. “My, but you boys are here early! I must have called only five hours ago!”

“Maxbell values its customers, sir,” the gnu said, setting a suitcase down on the desk. “Can’t have anything bad happen on our watch, can we?”

“Er, I suppose not,” Bradford said as the gnu opened up his laptop and hooked it up to the mainframe. “I just wasn’t expecting you to be by so soon. So, any ideas as to what the problem is?”

“Does this complex have two operating systems?” the gnu said, disinterestedly.

Bradford noticed that the bobcat, who he now identified as a lynx, was glowering at him, his mountainous shoulders tense and ready. The suit he was using was clearly meant for a larger mammal, a big cat, maybe a bear, the pants legs and sleeves were too wide and baggy, but were hemmed to fit his shorter limbs. Not to say he didn’t fill it out, his shoulders and chest strained against the fabric, he was only a little shorter than Beck but probably had ten pounds on her despite it. Bradford’s instincts were well honed from twenty years in security, and right now they were screaming at him that something was up; worse yet, the lynx could see it in him.

“Sir?” the gnu said, sounding somewhat impatient.

“Er, ayuh.” Bradford said. “There’s a second tier of security for the main pumps. Retinal scans and the like.”

“There’s your problem,” the gnu said, disconnecting his computer. “The systems were communicating, but only one has a Maxbell program running. The other system must have seen it as a bug or something, shut it down.”
“Ayuh?” Bradford said, it all sounded like computery gobbledygook to him. “You’ll need to see the other system, I suppose?”

“That’s right.” the gnu nodded, pointing at the door. “Want to buzz us in?”

“I’m gonna get a guard up here to show you gentlemen around,” Bradford said, still eyeing the lynx. “This place is like a maze, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

“A minute,” the lynx said, his accent thick and rumbling like thunder, stepping forward and pointing at his neck. “You have a, uh, thing right here.”

“A thing?” Bradford’s hand touched his neck. “Here?”

“No,” the lynx said, reaching out with a massive hand, Bradford noted with horror the pale caps of scarred flesh at the end of each digit, this mammal had been rounded off. Bradford’s eyes snapped up and saw four glittering points in his mouth; all of his canines were gold. “Here.”

Bradford moved to press the alarm when something in the sleeve caught his eye; it was a pair of shiny black eyes and a white, pointy crescent of teeth. “Hi.”

A sable blur lunged out and Bradford felt hot breath caress his skin before a tearing sheet of agony ripped across the left side of his neck, both his left jugular and carotid were splayed open and great spurts of blood splattered the screens. He inhaled to scream when a massive hand clasped around his snout and hauled him clear into the air, well away from his console and any assistance he might have called for. With a flick of a wrist the civet was sent hurtling into the corner behind his desk, dimly aware of the impact as it drove his last breath from his lungs and he crumpled to the floor in a boneless pile.

Darkness flooded in, he could hear the sleeve-creature chuckling. “Eh-heh-heh-heh! Did I get it?”

“Yeah. You got it.”

Judy burst through the doors to the precinct and made a bee-line for the reception desk. Clawhauser sat with bowl of cereal in his arms, watching his phone with rapt attention as Gazelle detailed her wardrobe for her upcoming concert on her weekly blog.

“Oh, that’s super cute!” he muttered breathlessly. “You are magic, G!”

“Clawhauser!” Judy called, her eyes wide despite the bags under them. “I need you to buzz Greg Snoutsen right now!”

“Judy! You’re here…about an hour early!” Clawhauser said, leaning forward. “Oh, honey! You look awful!”

“That’s nice,” Judy said, absenty. “Did you call him yet?”
“Yeah…” Clawhauser called Gregory’s extension with a general summons before turning back to the distracted, agitated rabbit. “Are you okay? You look like you haven’t slept a wink.”

“Didn’t,” Judy said, taking a heavy pull from her thermos. “Been thinking about the case. Gotta talk to Greg.”

“Okay, what’s the emergency?” Greg said as he shuffled towards them. “Oh, Detective Hopps! How’re you–”

“Greg!” Judy exclaimed. “Fat!”

Greg frowned and adjusted his shirt over his protruding gut, Clawhauser scoffed, offended. “Wow. Rude!”

“What?” Judy asked, before realizing what she’d said. “No! Greg, you look great! I meant did you test the koolaid with fat?”

“Koolaid?” Clawhauser said, confused. “Is that what they were putting in the water?”

“Blood lipid tests were negative,” Greg said, blushing at the compliment. “Sorry, you seem really–”

“But what about adipose tissue?” Judy interrupted. “Did you test it against any possible contaminants present in adipose tissue that may or may not get released as part of daily metabolic processes?” She gauged their astounded reactions before glibly adding: “I’ve been up all night researching.”

“Uh?” Greg said, somewhat dumbfounded. “No, we only test with adipose tissue in cases involving heavy metal poisoning or drug tests.”

“But could it?” Judy asked, desperately. “Could you test it against the koolaid?”

“I guess?” Greg beckoned her to follow. “Come on. I’ll need your clearance to get more of the stuff.”

The two left Clawhauser behind, scratching his head. “Man, being a detective sounds stressful, what with the Koolaid and heavy metal. Good thing I scored this desk job!” He turned back to his phone and pressed play. “Now, let’s see if Gazelle got that bracelet I sent her!”

Gregory shifted in his chair as he typed the commands into the testing machine; it was a smaller, more efficient version of the ones used in Zootopia’s many hospitals. Due to the massive biological variances in the population, it became not only necessary, but also critical to design a machine that could replicate the various biological processes of every species of mammal in the megapolis, from the smallest dormouse to the largest elephant, every biological function and facet was woven into the tester’s programming. If there were a reaction to be had, this would be the machine to find it.

“Alright, we just have to wait for the computer to boot up, then we enter the sample and run the test,” Greg said, initiating the program.

“Don’t we need a fat sample for this to work?” Judy said, sitting on the headrest.

“Well, we have a stockpile of flash-frozen donations–”
“It needs to be fresh!” Judy said, suddenly, staring intently at the pig. “Donated within the last month or so.”

Greg looked over at the biopsy needle nervously. “Uh…”

A few minutes later and Greg was rubbing at the bandage on his arm. “Ow…okay, the samples are set, the programs running, three, two, one and done!”

He clicked the mouse triumphantly and the machine hummed as its mechanism set to work. Greg smiled and turned to the twitchy, stressed-looking bunny to his right. “There! We should have the results in about an hour. Anything that comes from that fat sample will be cross-referenced with the entire ZPD toxicological database and be available with the initial report. Is there anything else I can help you with, Detective? …Detective?”

Judy’s head snapped up, as though jolted from a deep sleep. “Hmm? Oh, that’s great. No, I don’t think I need anything else right now. Thanks Greg, you’re a lifesaver!”

“It’s my job!” Greg blushed and shrugged. “So, uh…you, uh, wanna grab a coffee or something?” Judy blinked and shot him a questioning look; Greg started and cleared his throat awkwardly. “I mean right now! Heh! You, uh, you just look really, uh, really tired is all…”

Judy smiled and shook her head, patting him on the knee. “Thanks, Greg, but I think I’ve had enough.”

Judy’s phone sang from her pocket, her ringtone a snippet of some song she couldn’t quite remember; she checked the number, it was unknown, and answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Detective Hopps?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

“Speaking.” Judy waved goodbye to Greg as she made for the exit.

“Ah, Detective! It’s Doctor Tsume from the Bridgeway Memorial Hospital. You told me to call you as soon as Mr. Richardson woke up? Well, he has and he’s asking for you by name.”

“Thank you Doctor, I’ll be right there!” Judy said, pocketing her phone as she took off down the hallway.

Greg sighed and shook his head. ‘She’s way outta your league, Greggers!’

Beck walked into the meeting room, grunting in annoyance at the plundered doughnut box, only her least favorite flavor remained; it was almost like they got plain doughnuts just to leave them for her.

“Big Beeeeeeek!” Toby called from his chair, the wiry white wolf waggled a cruller in his hand. “Sorry! Early bird gets the doughnut!”

Beck ignored this and thudded over to her other coworker, Solomon, and clapped him on
the shoulder. “Solomon! Another day at the Bridge! How’re the kids?”

Solomon snorted, the rippling water buffalo licked his finger and flipped the page of the doorstopper he was reading. “Belligerent and numerous. How’s life on Planet Beck?”

“Can’t complain,” she said, with a shrug.

“Stop the presses!” Toby scoffed from across the room, earning him a pen tossed at his head.

“You know, except for the massive clusterfuck that is our security system!” Beck grumbled. “Couldn’t even card in, and now we’re gonna have to bark at ‘Ford every time we have to get somewhere!”

Toby scoffed and popped the last chunk of the cruller in his mouth. “Right? Hey Beck, he’s sweet on you, you sure you couldn’t go up there and give him a show in exchange for leaving the doors open?”

“Yeah, then any psycho could just walk right in!” Beck said, hiding a small blush at the mention of Bradford’s crush.

“Nothing we can’t handle!” Toby said, waving her off dismissively.

The sound of the door unlatching drew their attention to the far end of the room; a door that was supposed to be locked swung open, revealing two unfamiliar mammals in the doorway, a gnu and a lynx, both were wearing what appeared to be technician’s uniforms. The pair marched towards them, immediately Beck realized that something was wrong. How did they get down here? Bradford wouldn’t have buzzed them in without alerting them. For that matter, the door alarm should have sounded even if Bradford had unlocked it for them; it had merely unlatched and swung open.

Beck gestured for her companions to follow her; neither of them seemed to have noticed anything strange: typical. “Sirs, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. This area of the facility is strictly off limits to non-registered personnel.”

The gnu laughed and smiled, brandishing his card. “We’re here with Maxbell Security, we need to take a look at the control console for the inner sanctum.”

“Sir, you’ll have to wait at the front desk for one of our personnel to escort you,” Beck said, tersely; something about this gnu and his bulky friend was setting her teeth on edge.

“Beck, c’mon!” Toby said from off to her right. “They’re already here! Just get me or Solomon to take ‘em where they need to go.”

Solomon tromped up on her left. “Yeah, it’d be wasting everyone’s time sending them back up just to bring them back down!”

“We follow protocol around here!” Beck snapped, pulling out her radio. “Hold on, I’m calling Bradford.”

The five of them stood in tense silence as Beck pressed the call button, only to be greeted with static. Unseen by the security guards, the gnu looked over at his lynx friend and gestured subtly at Toby, and then again at Solomon. The lynx bobbed his ears down in confirmation and stepped forward.
“Dammit!” Toby growled. “If that old codger is reading girly magazines on the shitter again, I’m going to give his fuzzies a good hard flicking!”

“Bradford reads girly magazines?” Solomon said, somewhat confounded. “Are girly magazines even a thing anymore?”

“Oh yeah,” Toby said, smirking at Beck. “He’s big into Serengeti Sweethearts Monthly. Like’s his girls spotted and packing!”

“Man, that’s not a cool thing to say…” Solomon muttered.

Beck opened her mouth to snap at the two when she saw the gnu check his watch, he scowled and gestured at the three of them, holding up two fingers before drawing them across his throat. “Hey, what–”

The lynx sprang forward towards Solomon, his speed incredible given his bulk, at the same time he swung his left arm out as though pushing something out of his way. Beck flinched and drew back, she more felt than saw the strange dark thing that whistled through air in front of her. It was only when the screams started that she stopped in her tracks and turned around. Toby was shrieking in pain as he wrestled with something wrapped around his neck, it was long and almost snakelike, wearing what appeared to be a very form-fitting black turtleneck and shorts. With a sharp, snapping motion one end of the creature pulled away, from its face and markings she immediately identified it as a ferret…and in his jaws was a long, dripping strip of skin covered in white fur. Toby’s scream rose in pitch as a huge, pulsing fan of crimson burst from his neck, spraying the walls and floor as he lurched around. Toby’s screaming dropped to a gurgle as he toppled towards her, his hand reached out and grabbed her sleeve, Beck rushed in to break his fall when a gout of hot blood splashed across her face, causing her to recoil in horror.

Beck reeled around to see the lynx clambering on Solomon’s shoulders, a horn in one hand and the buffalo’s chin in another. In a smooth, full-body yank, he wrenched Solomon’s head sideways and up, twisting and ripping the base of his skull clean away from his vertebrae with a grisly, meaty snap. Solomon grunted and went limp, his head swinging bonelessly on his shattered neck as his massive frame collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. For a brief, terrible instant their eyes met; more so than horror or fear, Solomon’s eyes conveyed confusion and disbelief. Beck herself very badly wanted to wake up from this nightmare.

Movement in her peripheral vision drew her attention; the gnu, overseeing the slaughter with something like pride, casually and collectedly produced a gun and drew a bead on her. Beck could only begin to dive out of the way when the weapon fired; a belch of white smoke followed by a feeling not unlike being hit with a heavy blanket. The fabric, which she could now see was a mass of incredibly fine fibers, came alive and wrapped itself around her entire upper body before becoming solid like steel, pinning her arms to her sides. Before she could rally against the assault, a massive, muscular arm swung out and caught her across her chest with incredible force, knocking her off her feet and back through the air. She landed painfully, her breath exploded from her lungs as she skidded across the floor. Blinking hot tears and blood out of her eyes she looked up at the three attackers, she bared her teeth and growled in fury.

“Well, I’m glad we got that all cleared up,” the gnu said, his tone dry and conversational. “Now, would you kindly show my friends and I where the main pump is?”
Nick shuffled into the precinct exactly on schedule, as usual, ever unwilling to give the precinct more than a minute of his personal time. Though, this time it was more out of habit than a dedication to selfishness, as he’d had more than his share of personal time the previous night; due to some events he preferred not to dwell on, he hadn’t slept a wink. He’d gone longer without sleep, of course, but he felt exhausted regardless; his mind had been busy chewing over last night’s events like a wad of gum, even now he felt her lips on his, her breath in his mouth, her warm taut body in his hands. She was his partner, she was a bunny, and she was much, much younger than him. All these reasons and more should have been enough for him to brush the whole business off as ridiculous, but every time he tried to distance himself from her he remembered something: he couldn’t live without her. To even contemplate backing off from their friendship galled him, but could he trust himself with her? He wanted to believe that if he could take that final step with anyone, it would be with her, but the question remained: could he do what he’d never done before, or would he simply hit that same emotional brick wall and torpedo the best relationship he’d ever had? Just thinking about it made his head hurt and stomach clench. Or maybe that was the gallon of coffee he’d drank between home and the precinct?

Nick’s ears twitched at the sound of a familiar voice. “Heeeey! Nick!”

It was Clawhauser, waving enthusiastically from behind his desk. “You’re here! Y’know, I just assumed you came in with Judy an hour ago!”

“That a fact?” Nick said, not really wanting to start the day with yet another shipping session. “Anyway, what’s new, Claw?”

“Not much!” Clawhauser chirped. “Judy’s at the hospital, your informant woke up and she got called in to talk to him. Not before she did some super-sleuth stuff with techie Greg. You should have heard her, spouting off about adipose and koolaid.”

Nick smirked and shook his head, it figured that Judy would be able to brush last night off like a stray hair and get down to work. “Yeah, she’s a bundle of energy, isn’t she? So, any word on Interpol giving us their info on our perps?”

Clawhauser shook his head and clicked his tongue. “Oh no! You should have seen her! She looked like she hadn’t slept a wink all night! This case must have really been bugging her!”

“You could say that,” Nick muttered, Clawhauser was determined to prod him with the Judy-stick. “She didn’t seem very hung up on it last night, though.”

Clawhauser blinked and turned to Nick, his eyes narrowing as he did. “Say…you’re not looking all that well-rested either. Were you two up all night?”

“No,” Nick said, glibly.

“You were!” Clawhauser leaned in and sniffed loudly. “Is that One Million by Alpaca
Rabanne? Were you two on a *date*?!”

“No,” Nick said, again trying to sound as dismissive as possible.

Clawhauser noticed Nick’s evasiveness and drew back, his hands hovering over his mouth as he gasped in shock. “Oh…em…goodness! Nick!”

“Clawhauser,” Nick said, tersely.

He leaned in, his eyes wide. “Did you two…?”

“Clawhauser, no,” Nick said, his tone foreboding.

“…Have a fight?” he whispered, his expression mortified.

Nick paused, his mouth hung open for a moment before he raised his hands in faux-surrender. “You got me.”

“Oh no!” Clawhauser squeaked. “It must have been really bad, she didn’t even mention you earlier! Was it a bad one?”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick said, sipping his coffee and avoiding eye contact. “We got right up in each other’s faces.”

“Oh, Nick, I’m sorry to hear that!” Clawhauser, his arms opening wide as he moved in for a hug. “Bring it in, buddy!”

“Clawhauser, at this point I’m legally obligated to warn you that I’m armed,” Nick said, taking a step back.

Clawhauser paused and pulled back, crossing his arms as he pouted. “Fine! Be Mr. Ain’t-Got-Time-to-Feel! But if you ever need to talk about it, you know where I’ll be.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind,” Nick muttered, waving goodbye over his shoulder as he walked away.

A voice carried over the din of the foyer; the rapid clopping of hooves preceded the willowy, shrieking pants of a portly lab-pig as he clomped across the room. “Detective Wilde! Detective Wilde!”

Nick turned to see Greg as he approached; his stooped over and rested his hands on his knees, gasping. “Duh-dut-ective! Wuh-wuh-whew! *gasp* P-please read! *gasp* nuh-no time!”

“Greg!” Nick exclaimed, snatching the folder from the hyperventilating tech. “Did you run all the way from the Meadowlands or something?”

"It’s the fat!” Greg said.

Nick sucked his teeth and shook his head. “Greg, c’mon, you look fine!”

Greg shook his head, still gasping as he reached for his inhaler. “No! It’s asthma! Nervous *gasp* asthma! Caused by struh-stress! Read the goddamned folder!”

“Okay, okay, jeez!” Nick cracked open the folder; from what he could glean they had done some tests with the koolaid against ‘adipose’ tissue under ‘standard metabolic circumstances’. Nick’s brow furrowed as he read, he didn’t have to be a biochemist to understand that when the
koolaid came into contact with the adipose tissue, several new chemicals were released from storage and into the bloodstream, each chemical bonded with the koolaid to form something else, something familiar, something horrifying. A profoundly potent psychoactive compound that set off every alarm bell to be had in the hazardous materials database.


“We’ve got to stop calling it koolaid,” Nick muttered, looking up at Greg. “The fat sample you used, could it have been contaminated in any way?”

“Yes! It was! That’s exactly the problem!” Greg exclaimed, rolling up his sleeve to show the bandage from the biopsy. “It’s saturated with the stuff and it came right from my own goddamn arm! When the body encounters non-soluble toxins it isolates them, stores them, in fat! When the kool–the stuff enters the body, it triggers a release of fat-stored chemicals that then bond to the, uh, catalyst, I guess, and become Nighthowler toxin! It’s not a toxic substance itself; it’s part of one! The other parts are somehow already present, stored in adipose tissue! I was a random donor, Detective! God knows how widespread the contamination is!”

“Oh, God!” Nick said as horror gripped him. “Imagine what would have happened if this crap got in the water! Who else knows about this?”

“I was going to tell the chief just now, I figured I should let you know so you could tell Detective Hopps.” He took another puff of his inhaler. “She left for the hospital about half an hour ago”

Nick turned around, pulling on his jacket as he made for the parking lot. “Tell the Chief I’m heading out to get Hopps, we’ll be back in an hour.”

“Detective!” Greg called after him, holding a small vial of blue liquid. “Take this sample of the catalyst with you to the hospital. They have more advanced facilities than we do, they should be able to synthesize a test from this. Be very careful, this stuff is incredibly fast acting, as fast as a histamine response! Just a few parts per billion in water is enough to catalyze the toxin in anyone contaminated. Don’t get it on your skin, don’t sniff it, and for the love of God, don’t ingest it!”

“Wasn’t planning on it!” Nick said, pulling the keys to Car 52 from his pocket. “Catch you in a bit, Greg!”

Judy raced through the hospital doors, streaking over to the receptionist, a decidedly disinterested-looking oryx. She looked down and Judy, a gum bubble expanded from her lips, popping with a low snap. “Can I help you?”

“I need a key to Room 232,” Judy said urgently. “I understand the patient is awake?”
“Lady, I just work here,” the receptionist said, flatly. “I’ll call them up. Hello? Yeah, there’s a bunny here to see the chew-toy. Says she wants a key, but you can just let her in, right?”

Judy bristled. “Chew-toy?!”

The receptionist’s eyes widened upon hearing the response and she did a double take. “Hold up! She’s Judy Hopps? You’re Judy Hopps?!”

“No,” Judy said, tersely. “I’m very busy. Excuse me.”

“Gonna go question the perp, huh?” the receptionist called after her. “I knew it! No innocent person gets put under guard like that!”

“Too early for this…” Judy grumbled as she took off down the hallway.

‘That ungrateful little bitch!’ Judy fumed silently. ‘She doesn’t even know what she owes that man in there! If he didn’t call us up I never would have guessed that they were up to something! I wouldn’t even have known a ‘something’ was up! Who knows what could have happened? ‘Chew-toy’! That’s disgusting! Richie risked his life to blow this thing open, and this is the thanks he gets?! When we catch him, I ought to introduce the simpering little idiot to a certain ferret! Nothing physical, of course, just scare her…maybe a little physical. Just a bite.’

Judy sighed and clapped her hand over her face, either not noticing or not caring about the looks of recognition she was getting. ‘Wow! A little dark there, Jude! I just need to sleep a bit. Yeah…I just need to sleep a little forever. Maybe curl up and catch infinite Zs, warm and snug until entropy claims the universe. Sounds like a plan Charlie…Bran? Ugh. I need to think about something else…’

Almost immediately, thoughts of Nick flooded her mind. His calm, collected confidence, his rare genuine smile (something she secretly hoped was reserved for her and her alone) his witty, snappy sense of humor that could always bring a smile to her face and beat to her chest. That funny, unconscious way he’d inch closer to her regardless of the situation. The unwavering certainty she felt around him that, no matter what, she could just go and talk to Nick and somehow all would be right with the world.

‘Yeah,’ she thought to herself. ‘This is much better to think about than murder.’

...

His long angular face, so alluring, so perfectly proportioned as to be almost artistic. His thick, soft, and richly scented fur saturated with his nigh-intoxicating musk. His big bright green eyes, how they pulled her in and ensnared her, those windows into his entrancing and furtive soul. The way he had looked at her the other night; the way he had wanted her.

‘Uhhh…’ Judy felt a familiar heat crest and wash over her whole body. ‘Uh-oh.’

Hungry. There was no other word for it; he’d been hungry for her. He’d wanted her, needed her, he had to have her. Those wonderful eyes drank her in and she had acted, impulsively, recklessly, and with more than a little hunger on her part. Their mouths met, their bodies connected, and it was like nothing she’d ever felt before. Well, he was different from all the bunny guys she had been with, being fox and all, but it was something more than that. It was like fitting, interlocking, like she suddenly found a missing piece to her body. Just thinking about it made part of her cry out for more, for anything and everything Nick.

‘Judy…’ Her heart began to race. “Judy, no.’
His big, strong, searching hands as they caressed her body. His expert lips, his skilled tongue, and his incredible teeth totally overpowering any response in kind she could muster. She almost gasped aloud when she recalled the sensation of those big sharp teeth scraping across the skin of her neck, how his long, flexible tongue invaded and explored her mouth. Last night in the foyer of her crappy apartment was the most incredible thirty seconds of her life, and something told her that it was a mere teaser, the amuse-bouche to something even more incredible. Something she could only guess at. Something—

‘STOP!’ she commanded herself. ‘STOP! STOPSTOPSTOPSTOP!! See, this is why we didn’t get any sleep last night! Go back to thinking about murder! At least you’re less likely to assault yourself in public to thoughts of Finnegan McNulty!’

Judy cringed and shuddered simultaneously, the mental equivalent having a bucket of ice water up-ended over one’s head. “Bluh!”

“I know, right?” said an ox with an arrow sticking out of his shoulder, distressingly cheerful about it. “I have a newfound respect for William Tell!”

Judy muttered her apologies, almost walking past Richie’s room in the process. Two burly guards, a bear and a tiger stood at the doorway, stared down at her impassively. Judy stared right back and produced her badge. “Detective Hopps, ZPD, this man is part of an ongoing investigation.”

The bear guard bent down and examined the badge, with a nod he gestured to his cohort and the two stepped aside. Judy took a deep breath and steeled herself, she had no idea what condition Richie would be in, after what he’d been through, she’d be surprised if he was even sane anymore. She entered.

Standing around the bed was Doctor Tsume, a smallish brown badger, an attending nurse, and a mammal she hadn’t met before. He was a tallish ram with close-cut wool and wore a well-fitting blue suit with had a badge looped around his neck: he was an agent of Interpol.

“Detective Hopps, I’m Agent Bales, Interpol,” he said, his accent low and rolling. “I’m glad you could make it on such short notice.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Judy shook his hand and walked over to the bed and gasped; it had been dark the last time she had seen him, and his face was a nearly indecipherable ruin, but here, under the hard clean light of the fluorescents above, his injuries tended to, she could see the true extent of the damage. His face had been shaved and cleaned before surgery and the bandages had since been removed as the protein sutures took hold. Dark lines crisscrossed his face where surgeons had closed him back up. They were hard lines, intersecting, they made it seem as though his face had somehow shattered like a dinner plate. Worst of all was his missing eye, it had been affixed with a patch, but the tissue surrounding the empty socket was a raw mass of masticated tissue. The remaining eye stared out blankly, glazed and unseeing, on occasion it blinked in a slow, drugged fashion. “How is he?”

“Better than he looks,” Doctor Tsume said. “All of his wounds are healing at optimum rates, the nerve damage in his facial region was surprisingly minimal, barring any unforeseen complications during reconstructive surgery, he should regain as much as 80% functionality of his facial musculature. All in all I’d say he’s doing quite well, considering.”

“His hand…” Judy said, examining the bandaged stump.

“There was nothing we could do for it,” the nurse said, sadly. “It was just too…chewed up.
But we’re going to get him prepped for a prosthetic, maybe even one of those new mechanical hands.”

“That’d be expensive,” Judy said, eying up Agent Bales. “How’s he going to pay for all this, exactly?”

Agent Bales stepped forward and cleared his throat. “That’s what I’m here for. Mr. Richardson is in possession of some very valuable information regarding his former employers. Naturally, Interpol is willing to make certain…offers, in exchange for services. Freedom, witness protection, medical, et al. But we need his cooperation, first.”

“And I’m assuming that’s why I’m here,” Judy said, flatly.

“Yes. Mr. Richardson refused to speak with us until you arrived.” Agent Bales shot the body in the bed a sour look. “I would greatly appreciate it if you could convince him to play ball.”

“Well, I’ll give your offer a look, make sure he’s not getting screwed over,” Judy said, taking the dossier from Agent Bales before jabbing a thumb over her shoulder at Richie. “Also, I’m gonna want to wait until he’s not doped to the gills before I consult him on anything.”

“He was suffering from a panic attack shortly before you arrived. We had to give him a mild sedative to prevent him from injuring himself,” Doctor Tsume intervened. “Post-traumatic stress is extremely common after injuries of this nature. He should be completely cogent, Detective.”

“. . . Izzat you, Judy?” Richie mumbled from behind her, pawing at the air with his good hand. “Where are you? I can’t really turn my head.”

“I’m here, Richie,” Judy said, taking his hand in hers. “How’re you holding up?”

“Been better,” he croaked. “A little tender. But this morphine is pretty great. My hand up and ran off, though, I’m not too jazzed about that.”

Judy gave a strained smile, unsure of what to say. “I hear you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah.” Richie pointed at the agent. “This sour fuck wants me to cut a deal. I wanted you here to make sure no one tried to screw me over. I’m a little out of sorts, you know?”

“Even after all that’s happened, you still trust me that much?” Judy said, sadly.

“Sure I do,” Richie said, his speech slow and slightly slurried from the morphine. “You saved me, remember?”

Judy turned away from his ruined face and looked down at his bandaged stump. “Not all of you.”

Richie frowned for a moment and looked at his left arm, bandages tightly woven around a limb that terminated far sooner than it should have. He reached up and touched the patch over his eye. He smirked and nudged Judy, holding up is stump and pointing at his face. “Hey, it’s not all bad. Suppose they get me a hook for a hand, with this eyepatch I’d have some sort of a pirate thing going on!” he bent his fingers into a hook and waved his good arm about. “Yar!”

Judy giggled and smiled, patting him on the shoulder. “I think you’ve had a bit too much morphine.”
“Excuse me,” Agent Bales said, stepping forward. “I can see that you’re in a better headspace now, Mr. Richardson. As you can see, Detective Hopps is here with us; you have nothing to be concerned about. Now. I’d like to discuss with you the terms of this agreement we have penned up for you–”

Richie slumped back in the bed, weakly beckoning the agent forward. The agent complied and leaned in, Richie muttered something and waved him in closer, and again Agent Bales complied. When he was close enough Richie leaned forward and nibbled the wool on the side of his face.

Bales grunted in alarm and pulled back, Richie made a show of spitting and sputtering. “Bleh! That’s the worst cotton candy I’ve ever had!”

Judy giggled and Agent Bales bristled, clearing his throat curtly. “Well, clearly you’re not thinking straight. I’ll come back later when you are in full control of your faculties!”

“Buh-bye fluff!” Richie croaked as Bales stormed out of the room. “…Prat.”

“Don’t burn that bridge too early, Rich,” Judy warned. “You still need him to get you into a protection program.”

“I know, I know,” Richie said. “I just wanted to have some fun with him. But I really would feel more comfortable if you’d make sure that they’re not trying to screw me over. I’ve had my share of people trying to get at my team through me, and every time they tried to toss me under the bus! I’m coming out on top this time, you know?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Judy said, patting his hand. “But I need to know, Richie. Will they try it again?”

“What?” Richie said. “To destroy the city? Oh, yeah. Count on it. They’re getting paid too much to back out now, not to mention the reputations and egos and whatnot. Nah, you’ll hear from them again, guaranteed. Also…you’ll probably hear from them soon enough, too.”

“Them?” Judy said, brow furrowing. “You mean the Boss?”

Richie nodded. “Yeah. They were paying us wads of cash to do this job, and that’s not the half of it! The stuff, the blue stuff, it’s just part of the puzzle! You can run all the tests on it that you want; they’ll all come back negative! See, it’s–”

“In the fat,” Judy interrupted. “I know. I’m waiting on results from the lab. Tell me, Richie, what is it?”

Richie blinked and shrugged. “Don’t know. It’s bad whatever it is! And it’s in everyone! Finn was given a bunch of charts and documents from OmniGreen and Bug Burga, sales figures and stuff. My guess is that whatever it is, it’s in the food, yeah? Boss got it into the food somehow and now they’re looking to set it off with the catalyst in the water. Boss spent all that time and money putting this thing together, they’re not gonna be satisfied until they have the city’s still-beating heart on a platter!”

Judy sighed and massaged her temples; this case just kept getting worse and worse. “Do you think you’d be able to tell me where your former teammates would be right now? Do you know any safehouses, any hideouts, anything like that?”

Richie shook his head. “Nothing that’d help. We had two safehouses before we set up shop in the pumphouse, but Elim wouldn’t go back to them, especially since you have me in your
pocket. Other than that, they could be anywhere. Sorry I can’t be more help, Judy.”

Judy smiled and got to her feet. “Thanks anyway Richie. I’ll be in touch; you let me know if Mr. Bales give you any trouble.”

Judy made for the door and was about to exit when Richie called out to her. “Judy! I don’t know what they’ll do next exactly, but it’ll have something to do with the water, the catalyst won’t work otherwise. I’m sorry, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“Thanks Richie, I–” Judy paused mid-sentence as a flash, a revelation, seized her once again. “The beating heart of the city…on a platter…hmmm…”

“What?”

“Don’t know,” Judy said, distantly. “Could be nothing. Could be everything. You rest up, I’ll be in touch.”

Richie blinked and nodded, noticing that she was leaving again. “Yeah, okay…Judy!”

Judy stopped and turned around. “What?”

“…Please, be careful.”

Beck grunted as she was thrown against the wall, her arms still pinned, she brought her foot up and caught the charging lynx in the gut and kicked out, sending him sprawling back with a yelp. She reeled around and took off down the hall, charging headlong at the gnu. The skinny bovid sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes, depressing a little yellow button on the side of the gun. Beck grunted as the charge raced through her body, her muscles seizing and spasming uncontrollably. She fell to the ground and grunted as she convulsed in agony.

“Metallic hydrogen power cell,” the gnu said mockingly, still holding down the button. “I can do this aaaaall day!”

He finally stopped and Beck groaned in relief, panting on the floor. The lynx stomped towards her, growling as he bent over and grabbed her. With what seemed to be no effort at all, he hoisted her two hundred pound bulk clear off the ground. “Do not do that again.”

Beck opened her mouth to retort when a massive fist plowed into her gut, driving the wind from her lungs in a single wheezing grunt. She dropped to her knees as raw agony flared inside her abdomen, making it hard to concentrate. She looked up to glower at her captor when she saw the same massive fist swing towards her face. The impact jerked her head to the side and stars exploded behind her eyes as a hideous pain burst along the side of her face. The power of the blow sprawled her out on the ground, she rolled onto her back and groaned, her thoughts jumbled and sludgy as she prayed for the world to stop spinning. A powerful hand grasped her by the foot and
dragged her down the hall.

“Careful, Grigori,” the gnu said, somewhat annoyed. “We still need her pupils to dilate.”


The minutes bled into each other as she was dragged, by the time her head had cleared, both her belly and face throbbed abominably, Beck couldn’t so much as summon the will to badmouth her captors. They stopped in front of a large, sliding steel door that sported two separate retinal scan stations: the elevator that led to the main pump access station. Beck groaned as she was lifted bodily off the ground and placed on her shaky feet in front of the scanner, the lynx roughly grabbed the back of her head.

‘What? Don’t they get it?’ Beck thought to herself. ‘There are two stations because it needs two retinal scans to get through! And the only other person here with clearance is…was…Solomon! I could use this, when the big guy goes off to drag his body, I’ll charge the skinny grazer and deactivate this net. If it’s anything like the net launchers in SWAT, the release tag should be on the front of the barrel! Yeah! I can do this!’

“Finn,” the gnu said, holding out his hand. “If you would.”

‘Finn’ stooped over and spat something small and white into the gnu’s open palm. Her eyes widened with horror when she saw what it was; an eye. The lynx shoved her face into the scanner, the green light ran up and down her eye and beeped, her identification was cleared. She looked over and saw the gnu holding the disembodied eye up to the scanner, making sure it was aligned before pressing the button. The machine beeped and the all-clear alarm sounded, from behind the door the elevator engine began to hum, hauling the large cage-lift up the three hundred foot shaft.

The gnu looked over at her and smirked, walking over with the eyeball dangling between his fingers. “Are there any more retinal scans we should know about? Our schematics seem to think that this is the only one. Is that true?”

Beck stared at the eye, it was brown and somewhat small, definitely Solomon’s. Was it just in that ferret’s mouth?!

“Hey,” the gnu said, snapping his fingers, drawing her attention by dangling the eyeball. “You want to end up like this guy? Answer the fucking question!”

“N-no,” she stammered, internally appalled at how weak she sounded. “No more.”

The gnu smiled and tossed the eyeball over his shoulder, it landed somewhere in the hall with wet splat. “Oh, good. Heh! You probably have some questions.”

‘Yeah, no shit!’ she screamed internally. ‘Who the hell are you psychos?!”

“See, the cornea has to be kept wet or else it clouds over and fucks with the scan. In fact, the only reason we’re dragging your heavy ass around is because optic juice is an acquired taste. Isn’t that right, Finn?”

Finn kissed his fingertips in a bellissimo gesture. “Mwah!”

“So…” he drawled, wiping his hands on her shirt, thin streaks of eye-gunk sticking to the fabric. “If you take nothing else from all that unpleasantness, let it be this: that whole thing, that was business…now imagine what we do when we’re angry. Keep still, keep quiet, and maybe you live to see sundown, yeah?”
Beck swallowed hard and nodded.

The door whirred and opened and the four filed inside, it was a barebones, cage-style, with not much of a view outside of the seemingly endless concrete shaft it occupied. The four filed in and, with the press of a button the engines sprang to life and the elevator began its slow, steady decent into the bowels of the complex.

“Heh!” the gnu said suddenly, nudging Finn. “What’s it say about our lives when that’s the third time you’ve spat an eyeball into my hand?”

“Fourth,’ the ferret corrected. “That was the fourth time.”

“What? No! Remember, there was the Newton heist, that military base in La Cucaracha, and that big clusterfuck down in Griffe du Tigre.” The gnu counted off each example on his fingers. “See? Three?”

“No. Remember that Gazelle concert?” said Finn. “You know, with the back-up dancer and the green antelope?”

“Yeah, yeah, Finn’s right,” Grigori chipped in. “Remember, the afterparty? And that guy just kept going on about his ponderosas?”

‘Elim’ paused for a moment, as though in deep thought, before snapping his fingers. “Oh yeah! Right! Man, that was a weird party.”

The other two assented and the elevator went quiet again, only the droning engine made any noise. Tension was thick in the air, a low rapid tapping began; Finn drummed his claws on the metal pipe hand railing as he stared off into the middle distance, unconsciously chewing his lip.

“Finn,” Elim scolded. “Stoppit.”

“Sorry, Elim,” Finn said, bashfully. “Just, uh, a little nervous.”

“You?!” Elim and Grigori exclaimed in unison.

The ferret looked defensive and crossed his arm across his chest. “What? I get nervous too, sometimes! It’s just this is it, the big job, the last big job! We’ve been through so much already, this whole thing has been a massive clusterfuck, but here we are! Ready to go! I’m just…I’m just waiting for something to go wrong, y’know?”

Elim looked over at Grigori, a strangely warm smile on his face. Grigori arched an eyebrow in confusion. Elim cleared his throat and, to Beck’s bewilderment, began to sing.

**We coulda been anything that we wanted to be**

*But don’t it make your heart glad?*

*That we decided*

*A fact we take pride in*

*We became the best at being baaaad!*

Finn turned around, shocked, when Grigori began to pitch in.

**We coulda been anything that we wanted to be**
With all the talent we had

No doubt about it

We fight and we tout it

We're the very best at being baaad guuys!

“We’re rotten to the cooore!” Elim sang.

“My congratulations, no one likes you anymooore!” Grigori crooned.

“Baaad guuys!” They sang in unison.

Finn broke in, grinning widely. “We’re the very worst! Each of us contemptible, we’re criticized and cursed!”

The three leapt into a circle around each other and sang in harmony.

We made the big time

Malicious and mad

We're the very best at being baaaad!

We coulda been anything that we wanted to be

We took the easy way out

With little training, we mastered complaining

Manners seemed unnecessary

We're so rude it's almost scary!

We coulda been anything that we wanted to be

With all the talent we had

With little practice, we made every black list

We're the very best at being baaaad!

The trio broke apart and began to laugh, jostling and high-fiving each other. Finn darted in between Grigori and Elim and hugged their shins. “I love you guys!”

“What the FUCK is going on?!” Beck thought frantically from the corner.

Chapter End Notes
Bad guys can be cute too shut up
Chapter Notes

It dawned on me that every time I write characters that I have their voices in my head. All the canon characters are, naturally, in their own voices, but the OCs...well

Richie = Steve Buscemi
Grigori = Gary Schwartz
Finn = Colin Farrell
Elim = Don Cheadle
Shakespeare = Sir Derek Jacobi

Tell me who you hear when you read their lines!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Judy raced down the highway to the Bridgeway Super Pump Station. She could see it from the overpass; the visible building was smallish, consisting of little more than a reception area and a garage containing the machinery access hatch. Judy mused on the name, Arthur Bridgeway had been one of the city’s founders, an ambitious aardvark with a deep and abiding love for all mammals, or at least that’s what his biographers insisted on telling everyone. Judy herself was inclined to believe that anyone with a hospital, a park, a school, and a water pump station named after him couldn’t have been all bad. It was one of the few sticking points she had with Nick, he’s go on at length about how Zootopia had been founded on the idea that animals should work together towards a common goal, not the ‘Anyone can be anything’ slogan that had been bandied about in recent decades. He frequently asserted that her pursuit of a career in law enforcement would have appalled the Founding Five as a violation of the ‘natural order’. Judy dismissed this out of hand, even if Nick wasn’t just being adorably difficult, she still saw no reason to not afford the founders of the city some modicum of respect. Nick, of course, disagreed, often vehemently, and usually afterward he would figure out some roundabout way to appease her presumably affronted world-view. She would often play up how offended she was, as the lengths he went to indirectly apologize were incredibly endearing.

She wished that Nick were there beside her. She’d have someone to talk to about this case! The reason that she was here instead of being back at the precinct was one of the many things she wanted to talk to him about. She recalled an earlier conversation, about how the Bridgeway Super Pump was considered the beating heart of the city, or at the very least that’s how the huge clunky thing was sold to the people of Zootopia. Elim, Grigori, and Finn would not stop now, not when that huge reward was within their grasp, and what better way to introduce a water-transmissible toxin than through the main pump?

The still-beating heart of the city on a platter.

Nick would have called her crazy and paranoid, but would invariably think better of it and offer his own input, usually something she’d never even considered. He’d say something like
‘sometimes the easiest way to get into a place is through the front door’ and detail why it was a legitimate, if gutsy, move from a criminal standpoint. At least, she hoped that’s what Nick would say. She hoped this whole thing wasn’t some wild roach chase, that she wasn’t just choosing an appealing distraction. After all, what could be so uncomfortable that hunting terrorists was a preferable alternative?

“Oh, Nick…” She wrung the steering wheel and bit her lip. Deep down she feared that she was steering the relationship, that she was taking advantage of his confidence in her. She reluctantly admitted to herself that she reveled in his trust, that someone so adept at putting up walls tore them down so willingly for her, she couldn’t help but get a little (huge) ego boost from it. But was that all it was? What if she was pushing things too far? What if she wasn’t able to follow through? What if she let him down? What if she broke his heart? What if? What if? “…I wish you were here,” she muttered to herself.

Just then, her phone rang. Judy looked over at the illuminated screen, on it was a picture of her and Nick after solving the Giant Roaches Case: he was running full bore from her, on her face was a huge laughing grin and in her outstretched arms was one of the massive mutant roach larva. The look of abject disgust and horror on Nick’s face was priceless. So priceless that she had made it his official caller ID. She reached out on impulse to turn on the hands-free phone, but stopped.

‘What does he want to talk about?’ Judy thought, her internal monologue strangely frantic. ‘What if he wants to talk about last night? What if he says he loves me and wants to move in? What if he proposes?!’

Despite not being a fan of this new ‘what if’ side of herself, (each of those scenarios were patently ridiculous) Judy couldn’t bring herself to answer the phone, a cold inexplicable dread clutched her insides and made her hesitate. The ringtone, a snippet of a song she’d since forgotten and now thoroughly regretted sampling, continued on, somehow growing more and more urgent.

“No,” she said aloud, pulling her hand back. “Gotta focus on the case. Can’t get distracted.”

The call went to her voicemail.

The muted roar of water permeated the entire room, from vibrations that could be felt through the concrete to a dull heady thunder that rattled one’s bones, the awesome power of the super-pump could not be denied by anyone in its presence. Some fifty feet below the control station almost six hundred thousand gallons of water roared through the mains every second, and even through the heavy steel and concrete pipes the turmoil of the raging water could be heard like distant thunder.

Beck huddled in the corner, her legs pulled tightly against her chest, across from her was the ferret, watching her. He’d been watching her for at least five minutes now, a small eternity for Beck. Long past his earlier case of the jitters he was now pert and perky…and bored. They were
waiting for the go ahead to do whatever it was they were here to do. Every so often she’d glance
over at him and he’d be smiling at her, a hungry leer in his eyes. Her eyes flicked over to the ferret
once more, he noticed and smirked, slowly getting to his feet as he did.

“But we put cell-jammers everywhere around the building,” Grigori said from over by the
security console. “How is Boss going to contact us?”

Elim produced a big, blocky-looking phone with a large rubberized antenna. “Satellite
phone with a signal booster. It’ll get through all the AM/FM static we’re putting out, too. No one in
here is talking to anyone out there but us, at least not until it’s way too late.”

Finn paddled over to her, careful not to alert the others, and plopped down in front of her,
sitting cross-legged. “Hi!”

Beck gaped in confusion, before tersely answering. “Hi.”

“I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced,” Finn said, holding out his hand. “My
name’s Finnegan, Finnegan McNulty! My friends call me Finn.”

“Yeah?” she said cautiously. “Uh, nice name.”

“Thank you!” Finn chirped, his smile friendly and warm. “I just wanted to let you know,
that whole business with your coworkers wasn’t personal.”

Beck cast a quick glance at his outstretched hand, making a point to jostle the net
restraining her. “Neither is me leaving you hanging, there.”

“Oh! I get it!” Finn chuckled and dropped his hand. “That’s funny. You’re funny. I like
you!”

A moment passed as she examined the creature before her. He was about standard size for a
ferret, albeit noticeably muscular, and as cute and endearing as any ferret she’d seen before, but
there was something about him, something low and wrong that filled her with dread. Unlike his
canny gnu boss or hulking lynx cohort, Finnegan capered about as though the job was of secondary
concern, as though the sheer joy of the work was an end in itself. Finnegan was having a blast, or
rather, had a blast. She could see him getting fidgety, getting bored, and knew, somehow, that he’d
be looking her way for entertainment, one way or another.

“He had children you know,” she said flintily. “Solomon, the buffalo you mutilated. Four
calves and a wife, four orphans and a widow.”

Finn rolled his eyes; the depth of indifference on his face was chilling. “Hey, I didn’t kill
him. Besides, a few hours from now and a dead dad will be the least of their worries!”

“What do you mean?” Beck said, looking over at the gnu and lynx as they fiddled with the
security console. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re a radical group of dentists,” Elim said from over his shoulder. “Zootopia will
fluoridate its tapwater or else!”

A round of mocking laughter ensued; Finn slapped his knee and turned back to her. “Eh-
heh! Nah…without getting into all the nitty gritty, we’re dumping Nighthowler into the water to
make everyone in the city go waffles! Eighty million people tearing each other apart, it’s
gonna be a meat-grinder out there!”
Beck’s mouth hung open, she instinctively strained against the unyielding coils of the net. “Why?!”

“Meh.” Finn shrugged. “The TV’s broke and we really hate scrabble!”

“Are you going to kill me?” she asked, on impulse. Terror gripped her as she irrationally scolded herself for giving them the idea, as if they had been planning to just turn her loose before. She recovered before much of the fear could show in her face; only then did she notice Finn’s total non-reaction to the sudden question.

“Oh, certainly!” Finn said, casually, as though she had merely asked him the time of day. “Wait, were you asking if you’re going to die in general, or that I personally will be killing you?”

“L-listen—” she began to say, smiling what she hoped was a friendly smile.

The ferret lunged forward, clambering up her chest and staring her in the eyes, his grin wide and pointy and suddenly a lot less friendly, his white teeth glittering in the floodlights of the main room. “Because the answer is yes.”

Beck flinched back, her ears going flat. “Please…”

“Finn!” Elim barked. “Back off! You’ll have time for that after we’re done!”

“But Elim!” Finn whined, hopping down off the trembling hyena. “We’ve been waiting forever!”

“Ten minutes,” Grigori said, unimpressed.

“I’m bored!” Finn turned back to Beck. “Just a little bite?”

Elim walked over and shooed Finn away with his foot. “No! Shoo! Git! If you get wound up now, you’ll be all distracted and weird when I need you to be focused! If you want something to do, go turn on the maintenance elevator and bring the truck down, Gori and I will get things ready over here. The more we do now, the sooner we’re done, the sooner you get to play, understand?”

Finn sighed and nodded, shooting Beck a glance and a grin before scampering out of the room. Elim shook his head and shuffled back to the security console, smiling unpleasantly. “Like herding crickets, I swear! Lady, I don’t envy you in a few hours. Finn’s a little…completely insane.”

“Doesn’t know much about hyenas, does he?” Beck said, snarling. “The little shit’s in for a surprise!”

Elim snorted and waved his hand dismissively. “Naw! Nothing like that! Even Finn has standards. No, he’s just going to chew on you for…as long as you last, I guess. And a big gal like you? Heh! Hours, at least.”

Beck slumped against the wall, looking away from the mocking sneers of her captors. She futilely tested her bindings, knowing full well that the only way she would be free of them was when the gnu tapped the sensor on the muzzle to the little black module at the center of the net. A wave of helplessness washed over her, a foreign and decidedly unwelcomed sensation. All she could do was wait for them to let the ferret at her. She turned to look at the railing, wondering if she could get on her feet and to it fast enough to dive over the side before they could—NO! She was alive, and so long as she was alive, there was a chance! The lives of millions hung in the balance and she wasn’t about to sit back and let these psychopaths destroy her home! But how to stop
Beck looked over at the two, they were still chatting amongst themselves in front of the primary intake valve, a vital apparatus for introducing carefully measured amounts of chemicals into the water. On the console table was the gun, it was too close to the gnu for her to rush them, and even if she did get free, Beck doubted if she would survive a fight with the lynx, much less win. She recalled the can of pepper-spray on her hip, held fast under the netting. Without drawing attention, she began to wriggle and jostle the can closer to her hands.

“So,” Grigori said. “You think the bunny will show up?”

Elim snorted. “I still don’t buy that she’s the one that smoked us out. If we see anyone, it’s Wilde, I guarantee!”

“That sounds like a bet,” Grigori said, smirking. “You in?”

Elim sighed and rolled his eyes. “Tell you what, if the rabbit shows up and fucks everything sideways and we get arrested, I owe you a Coke.”

“Deal.” Grigori nodded, offering his hand.

“A proper one, too,” Elim said, taking his hand in a firm grip and shaking it. “Not one of those itty-bitty cans.”

The clatter of metal drew their attention as a little black can rolled on the floor between them. Immediately it began to hiss and spin, belching clouds of orange mist in all directions, both Elim and Grigori knew pepper spray when they saw it and leapt back, their mouths covered and eyes screwed shut.

“Ack!” Elim coughed. “Dammit! It’s that hyena!”

Beck shot to her feet and lunged forward in a mad dash, ramming into the console with a grunt. By chance, the muzzle tapped against the module and the net went slack, Beck laughed aloud and shook the limp mass of fibers off, sending it tumbling to the ground. A chill up her spine caused her to spin around, the lynx was streaking towards her, his footfalls alarmingly quiet. He leapt forward, his arms outstretched. Beck reached up and grabbed his loose flapping sleeves and yanked down, swinging herself underneath him as he flew through the air. He managed to tuck and roll in time for his muscular back to crash into the console, winding him as he tumbled to the floor. Beck made a beeline for the door, Elim stood in her way, coughing as he tried to clear the air in front of him. She grinned and braced herself, swinging out and crosschecking the stunned gnu with all the force she could muster before ducking out the door. He grunted as the force of the blow sent him hurtling through the air to smash painfully into the handrail. The tall gnu cried in alarm as he began to teeter over the low bar, this whole inner security station was clearly meant for mammals much shorter than himself.

“Fuck!” Elim shouted as he felt himself losing his balance. “fuckfuckfuck!”

A powerful hand grabbed his wrist and yanked his two-hundred-and-twenty pounds forward like a bag of feathers. Grigori galloped forward, dragging the much taller gnu behind him without any discernible effort. The two skidded out the door in time to see the hyena take off down the hall. Finn came racing towards her from the other end of the hall, his teeth bared.

“I leave for two minutes and look what happens!” Finn snarled as he streaked towards the fleeing hyena.
Beck grinned and wound back her leg, her powerful muscles bunching, and loosed a fast, ferociously powerful kick at the ferret. With contemptuous ease, the sleek-bodied mammal weaved out of the way, bending down and arching his back to snag her foot. Beck let out a cry as she lurched forward, thinking quickly she let her momentum carry her through the air, diving forward and tucking into a roll. She rolled head over foot before springing to her feet once again, scrambling down an adjoining hallway.

Grigori and Finn took off after her when Elim called out. “Hold it! This is what she wants, the bitch’s distracting us from the job!”

“But–!” Grigori started to say before Elim cut him off.

“Finn!” Elim barked. “After her! Kill her! Tear her apart! Whatever! Just make sure she doesn’t leave this building!”

“Aye-aye Cap’n!” Finn chirped, scampering up the wall and into a vent.

“Gori!” Elim stormed down the hall. “With me. We’re unloading the catalyst and getting it ready. I want us to be able to dump it if we get cornered!”

“What if she pulls a fire alarm or something?” Grigori said, following.

“Let her,” Elim sneered, stopping in front of the grated metal door of the heavy machinery access elevator, letting it clatter as he flung it open. “Richie’s program has completely shut this place down, not a bit of data is getting in or out, that means no alarms, no bells, no nothing! Now, c’mom, this whole thing’s starting to give me a rash, let’s get into position. Don’t want to be caught with my pants down again…”

Nick tapped his fingers on the steering wheel impatiently; the phone rang again and again, he could practically hear Judy’s obnoxious ringtone, *Peanut Butter Jelly* by Galantis, as it droned on and on. He hissed a curse under his breath when her happy, tinkling voice chirped over the speaker in a pre-recorded message.

“Hello! You have reached the mailbox of Judy Laverne Hopps. I’m probably doing cop stuff at the moment, so please leave a name and number at the beep!”

“Dammit Carrots!” Nick said, hanging up. He gripped the steering wheel hard enough to crease the pleather. He stopped at a red light in front of the Bridgeway Memorial Hospital and dialed again, gritting his teeth. “C’mon, c’mon!”

This time there was no droning ringtone; the line clicked and went straight to voicemail. “Hello! You have reached the mailbox of Judy Laverne Hopps. I’m probably doing cop stuff at the moment, so please leave a name and number at the beep!”
“Dammit!” he said, signaling and turning into the hospital parking lot. ‘Did she turn off her phone? Does she not want to talk to me?’

‘You took it too far, Nick,’ Slick Nick said, unendingly smug. ‘You tore down the walls and let her in and guess what happened? Judy saw the wreck you really are and turned tail and ran! Just like I knew she would. I mean, you can’t really blame her, can you? What sane mammal would want your problems dumped on their lives? It’d be better to just back off a bit, put some distance between you two, maybe cool it with the nicknames and banter, that stuff only leads to trouble.’

Nick parked the car and sighed. ‘Honestly, Slick, I’m a little more concerned about the psycho-drug those lunatics were going to dump in the water! I know their type, and they’re not done yet! I need to find Carrots and to talk to Richie, maybe figure out where they are and stop them before they try again!’

‘Find Judy?’ Slick said, ‘If she didn’t want you phoning her, what makes you think she’ll want to—’

‘—Do her job?’ Nick cut himself off. ‘This is Carrots we’re talking about; if I have a lead she’ll be all ears. Also, I’m done arguing with myself! I’ve got enough on my plate without adding a split-personality to the mix!’

Nick got out of the cruiser and shook his anxiety off; it was time to get into character. He walked through the doors of the hospital and up to the reception desk, his best smile plastered on his face as he approached the receptionist.

“Angie, looking good as ever! How’s your morning going so far?” he said, charmingly.

The young oryx looked up and smiled bashfully. “Oh! Detective Wilde! It’s going fine, thank you! You’re partner was in here earlier, actually. You know, I actually didn’t connect the dots when she came in last night with the criminal. I thought she was with him, you know? Imagine my surprise this morning!”

“Hey, that’s the one and only Judy Hopps,” he replied, leaning in. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to know if she’s still here, would you?”

Angie leaned in, speaking in a low, conspiratorial voice. “Oh, no. She was only up there for a little while before she came right back out again. She was in a hurry, too, like she was following a lead. Was she?”

Nick wasn’t the least bit surprised. “Oh, probably. She didn’t say anything to you about where she was going did she?”

“No, sir! She was in and out like that!” Angie said, snapping her fingers. “She looked really serious, too! Like she just remembered something important.”

“Would it be possible for me to speak with the patient in room 232?” said Nick, hoping that his urgency wasn’t showing in his voice. “Maybe she told him something?”

Angie shook her head gravely. “I’m sorry, Detective, but that patient is currently undergoing examination. You’ll have to come back later.”

Nick thumped his fist against the desk in frustration; he shot Angie a charming smile and winked. “Hey, thanks for your help, anyway. You have a great day!”

Angie blushed and smiled back.
Nick ducked back into the cruiser with a frustrated sigh. “Dammit!”

Ever since Greg had told him what was in the water, Nick had been feeling increasingly on edge, as though despite all their efforts the danger was still present. Nothing about how these guys operated suggested that they would be seriously hampered by something as simple as a near miss. He reluctantly turned back to that other side of himself, the smooth, amoral person he used to be. He’d seen countless crooks, criminals, and killers in his time working for and around Mr. Big’s organization, enough so that he’d developed a sixth sense of sorts when it came to sniffing them out. If he could piece together their goals, their raison d’etre, he could piece together how they thought, and what he’d pieced together for those three sent shivers down his spine. What he pieced together brought back certain memories of his past.

Back in the day he’d heard tell of a quartet of international ne’er-do-wells, a team with no real name outside of their list of atrocities. Any job, be it theft, terrorism, kidnapping, assassination, hacking, or anything else under the sun, they would do it, no matter what. A few years back, while Nick had been taking measurements of Mr. Big’s living room for a certain wall rug, he had overheard him talking to one of his mountainous polar bear henchmen.

‘If Dewclaw is getting bold enough to muscle in on your territory, maybe it’s time to take him out once and for all, him and all his people,’ the polar bear rumbled in his thick Tundran accent, before adding, hesitantly ‘Sir, I know of some people who know of some other people who have a number. If this number is called it will go directly to voicemail. Exactly ten seconds after the beep, describe what you need done in ten words or less and leave a number. Then they will call you back, but only once. Explain what you need done in less than five minutes and they will tell you the cost. Then it will be done.’

‘I am aware of these mammals of which you speak, Vladislaus,’ Mr. Big had replied. ‘I am duly impressed that you know of them, too.’

Vladislaus had bowed appreciatively; impressing Mr. Big was no mean feat. ‘Sir, it would please you to know that the people who know the people who know the number also owe you a significant amount of money. In fact, they are well overdue and are marked down for a ‘payment reminder’. Say the word, and Vladislaus will bring you this number. It will in and of itself be a valuable piece of knowledge for you.’

‘Thank you, Vladislaus,’ Mr. Big had said, shaking his head. ‘That will not be necessary. I have no need of the Four Faces of Death.’

Nick recalled being shocked at the way stone-faced Vladislaus flinched at the moniker; it must have been appropriate. ‘But sir, war with Dewclaw would be devastating!’

‘Not half so much as asking them to wage our war for us,’ Mr. Big rapped his knuckles against the arm of his chair. ‘I would not burn down a kingdom to rule the ashes.’

Nick had been on the fence about it before, but it was obvious to him now, a rare breed of outlaw was in town. An especially dangerous and dedicated bunch that valued reputation, that once the price had been agreed upon and the contract finalized no force on earth could stop them from carrying out their mission. And they were loose in Zootopia and its destruction their goal.

Nick growled and punched the dashboard. His city, his friends, his whole family were all in danger and here he was, useless! He couldn’t even find his own partner, much less a cabal of terrorists! He sighed and smacked his forehead against the steering wheel. ‘I wish Carrots was
here, she’d figure this out...she’d have one of her flashes and get this thing sorted out in no time. God, I’m worthless without her!

‘Ha!’ Slick said, bitter and triumphant. ‘Imagine her surprise when she found out just how insecure you really are! It was probably like cracking a safe only to find a busted screen door in the back!’

A spark.

“Wait,” Nick muttered to himself, his eyes growing wide. “An insecure...backdoor.”

A flash.

“Oh my God! Maxbell Security!” Nick exclaimed, opening the door and rushing out, streaking across the parking lot and back into the hospital. “Richie!”

“Oh! Detective Wilde!” Angie said, surprised. “Did you forget–?”

“The patient!” Nick interrupted. “Where is he right now?”

“I’m afraid I can’t divulge that infor–” Angie began to say before Nick’s glare caused the words to die in her mouth. “Uh...room 123. May I ask what’s going on?”

“Why not?” Nick muttered as he took off down the hall.

Doctor Tsume shined a light in Richie’s remaining eye, noting the pupillary dilation. “Well, the one eye is completely healthy, Mr. Richardson.”

“You don’t say?” Richie said, snidely. “I guess that’s why they pay you the big doctor bucks, huh?”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit,” Doctor Tsume muttered, annoyed, as he put the light away and prepped the nerve testers.

“But the highest form of intelligence,” Richie retorted. “See? I can dubiously quote Oscar Wilde, too!”

Nick burst into the room, flashing his badge. “Detective Nicholas Wilde ZPD!”

Doctor Tsume languidly looked up, exchanged a curious look with his patient, and said. “Yes, Detective, I know who you are. We met yesterday, if you–”

“Out,” Nick barked. “I need to talk with the witness.”

Doctor Tsume smirked and walked over to Nick. “I’m afraid you’re in no position to make demands. I am this mammal’s doctor and if I say he’s in the middle of a post-surgical examination and cannot be disturbed, then I’m afraid that you’ll have to wait.”

“Yeah?” Nick said, pulling back his jacket, his badge glinting gold in the fluorescent light. “Well, this little number here says ‘get the hell out of the room’.”

Tsume crossed his arms and chuckled. “If you think that badge of yours authorizes you to circumvent my authority on hospital grounds, then you’re sorely mistaken, Detective!”
“Eyes south, Doc,” Nick sneered, gesturing at the gun holstered under his arm.

Doctor Tsume’s eyes widened in shock as he warily crept towards the door. “I-I’m going to call security!”

“Yeah, you do that,” Nick grumbled, handing his phone to Richie. “This won’t take long, will it?”

Richie looked down at the phone and smiled despite the pain it caused his face; on the smartphone was the coded itinerary of Maxbell Security Incorporated, his prior access code had long since been rescinded. “Two shakes of a lambs tail, Detective. What’s the matter, your warrant expire?”

Nick nodded curtly. “Play your ‘world-renowned hacker’ shtick and see if the Bridgeway Super Pump Station uses a Maxbell system for its security.”

Richie smiled and set to work with the phone, the basic coding of the security company’s website was child’s play to his skilled fingers, even one-handed on a smartphone. “Is that all? One…two…three! Bam, there it is! Oh, yeah, hey! I remember seeing the Bridge on the same list as the other places we hit up. If anything, I figured that plan B would probably involve the place in some way. The beating heart of the city, eh?”

Nick blinked at the familiar phrase. “What?”

Richie shrugged. “Just something that Judy said…what?”

Nick spun on his heels and bolted out the door. “Dammit Carrots!”

Beck panted noisily as she ducked into another of the complexes endless hallways. She ducked around a corner and leaned against the wall, holding her breath to listen for following footsteps. Beck looked around, scanning the hallway for any clues as to where she was. She saw some signage indicating an emergency staircase. When she was certain she heard no footsteps following her, she let out her breath in a joyous sigh of relief as she deflated and sagged against the wall. The adrenaline rush was wearing off; she knew that if she didn’t keep moving she’d start getting the shakes. She quietly made her way down the hall, her mind buzzing.

‘Okay! Okay! You got away and they’re not following you…for some reason. Whatever! You gotta contact someone, you gotta tell the cops! The army! Hell, anyone! But how?’ Beck looked over at the opposite wall, seeing a small red panel with a covered latch: a fire alarm. She rolled her eyes and slapped her forehead. “Heh! Durr!”

She pulled the lever and braced herself for the shrill cry of the siren.

Nothing.
She reset the level and pulled it again, and again nothing happened.

“No!” Beck ran her hands through her fur and breathed deep. “Keep calm…the alarms in the upper levels are on a different system…maybe they’ll work?”

She ducked into the emergency staircase and galloped up the steps, paying no heed to the burning in her legs. Half way up the stairs she paused for a moment and thanked herself for not skipping leg day. Several agonizing minutes later and she shouldered her way through the door, knocking it off its hinges. Panting, she looked around desperately, searching for a fire alarm. She found one on the far wall beneath a ventilation shaft and pulled it.

Again, silence.

“Shit!” Beck snarled, slamming her fist against the wall. “Gimme a break!”

A bright flash drew her attention, above the silent siren was a single high-powered alarm light, blinking rapidly in accordance with an absent siren.


Beck looked around to get her bearings; she noted the familiar looking pipes and the placement of the fire extinguisher and deduced that she was a short run away from an emergency exit. She set off down the hall when something in the ventilation shaft caught her eye; two shiny little surfaces glinted as the alarm light flashed.

Eyes.

“Hi,” said a familiar, chipper voice.

Judy pulled up to the Bridgeway building and stepped out of her car, already she was feeling the hot day’s sun prickling on her back, heating up her jacket and fur. Today was going to be a long, hot day and no mistake. She walked up to the front door and gave the handle a tug; it was locked. She peered in through the tall windows that stretched from the ground to the ceiling, unable to see anyone behind the security desk. She gave the glass door a few curt knocks. Judy waited what she felt was an appropriate amount of time before cupping her eye to the glass once more to check if anyone had noticed. No one had.

‘Nope…this is no good. Either the security for our water supply is totally incompetent or something is up!’ Judy peered in once more, unease tensing in her belly like a coiling spring. ‘I just need to tell security who to keep an eye out for. If my hunch is right, then they’re coming here next!’

Judy rattled the door again, knocking impatiently when a light began to flash in the upper corner of the room. Judy’s ears perked up, even if the glass was soundproofed, her sensitive ears would pick up the distinctive cry of the alarm, but she heard nothing. Judy waited another minute for someone, anyone, to show up, but no one came.
‘That’s it, I’m calling for back up.’ Judy pulled out her radio and pressed the call button. “Dispatch, this is Detective Hops, requesting a squad car at the Bridgeway Super Pump Station, we have suspicious activity here. Over.” She waited for the lilting, cheerful response. None came. “Dispatch? Dispatch, do you read? Over. …Clawhauser?”

Judy pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911, only to realize that she had no bars. She swallowed thickly, looking over at the deserted foyer, the flash of the fire alarm cast the features of the room in a harsh aspect for moments at a time, adding to the surreal feel of the situation.

Judy looked over at the security desk and gasped in horror. There, weakly crawling on the floor was a blood-drenched civet, one dripping hand clasped to his throat as he slowly dragged himself across the floor with the other, he looked up at her, shakily raising his hand to point at the open door before collapsing. Judy looked back down at her phone, still no bars, and her radio was worthless. She looked up, the civet was now still. Judy reached into her jacket pocket, pulled out a broken piece of sparkplug and hurled it through the tempered glass window. With a popping crack, countless shining fissures spidered across the glass, an instant later and it crumbled into a glittering pile of tiny square shards. Nick had taught her that trick.

She rushed over to the prone body and called out. "Sir? Sir? Stay with me! Can you tell me what happened to you?"

When there was no response Judy leaned in a checked his vitals, sighing in despair when she found none; he had used his last ounce of strength to get her attention. "Thank you...

She examined his wounds and came across a very familiar set of bite marks; no doubt about it, they were here and they weren't playing around.

‘Get in your car, Judy,’ she told herself. ‘Get in your car and get to a payphone, commandeer a cell phone, go get back up at the precinct if you have to. Don’t go in by yourself.’

“But if they're in there...” she whispered, clenching her fist. “By the time backup gets here…”

‘Maybe,’ she replied. ‘But maybe not. They might take hours! Go get help!’

‘Or they might be dumping the stuff in the water right now!’ On-Duty Judy snapped at the hesitant voice. ‘I have to go. If I go now, I might be able to stop them! I can’t risk all of Zootopia for my own safety!’

‘You can’t go!’ the other Judy said, screaming and panicked. ‘HE’S in there!!’

Judy paused, her heart thundering in her chest as her nose twitched rapidly. She looked at her hand, clenching and unclenching her fist, and was shocked to see that it was shaking. She was scared. No, she was terrified. How long would she wander those dark halls before he would pounce on her from some dark corner with glinting eyes and flashing, tearing fangs? Could she fight him off? Could he be fought off? He was so fast, faster than her, and stronger too, like a long coil of solid muscle with teeth. Worse yet, he was skilled, a trained and practiced killer; someone who fought and killed the same way normal people pursued hobbies.

‘And he won’t just kill you!’ the scared little bunny mewled. ‘He’ll hold you down and-and do things to you! Run, Judy! Run away and get help! Run before he gets you run run run run run run run run run run’

“Let. Him. Try!” Judy growled, pulling out her MSIM. No one else dies because of my
cowardice! If Finn thinks he can scare me, then let him think that right up until I grind him into the dirt! If I'm all there is, then that's more than enough to deal with these savages!

‘I’m going to die,’ the scared bunny moaned pitifully.

“No…” Judy told herself. “Nick’s on his way. I know he is.”

She strode towards the open door and curled her nose at the smell wafting out of it, it was thick and cloying, metallic; it was the stench of blood. Judy propped herself up against the wall and let out a shuddering sigh, neatly and determinedly folding the horror up like a parcel and filing it away for a later conniption. Now was not the time. She quickly and quietly entered the adjoining hall, the blood-stink was even worse in the enclosed space. Her mind ran smoothly like a clock, noting that they likely disabled the security system much like they had at all the other break-ins, and that by that logic the building must use a Maxbell system. Judy noted with sour amusement that Maxbell Security had lost her as a potential customer.

She approached another half-open door and slowed her pace, readying her sidearm as her ears flicked back and forth in search of danger. She pressed her back against the wall and jumped into the doorway. Once again, she was assaulted by the stench of blood and sure enough a new pile of fresh bodies awaited her on the floor. Judy noted the grotesque angle at which the buffalo’s eyeless head was set and deduced that Grigori was no-one she wanted to tangle with, not that there was any shortage of evidence supporting that opinion. What struck her about the room was the harsh chemical smell in the air, it was acrid and familiar: the pusher charge of a zap-net canister.

A hostage?

A chew-toy?

Both?

Judy paid her respects to the dead and hurried out the room and down the hall. She soon came upon another hallway, she sniffed the air for any scent trail, noticing the low earthy smell of bovid and a dry, hay-like scent that she assumed was lynx. She turned her head down the other and sniffed, her brow creasing as she detected an unmistakable musky odor: ferret, and it was fresh. She followed the scent down the hall, her heart thundering in her chest, when she came upon a door knocked nearly off its hinges, the sign above it indicated an emergency stairway.

“Alright,” Judy said, steeling herself. “Down we go.”

Elim poured another canister of catalyst into the intake valve, carefully watching the capacity meter rise; he didn’t want to spill any of this stuff. He looked up at the larger expanse of the room, the four tremendous main pipes leading into the primary pump, six fusion-powered, carbon nanotube strengthened screws spun eternally, shunting the water to where it needed to be. The facility was entirely automated, its power source inexhaustible, and the primary mechanisms were nigh-unassailable; no matter what happened, the people of Zootopia would always have running water. Elim smirked, tickled by the irony that the disaster-proof system the Zootopians
had set up would ultimately be their downfall. Long after every throat was ripped out and every last drop of blood was spilled, the pump would still carry on, the fountains would still carry on their ornate displays, as would the sprinklers and mist-machines in the Rainforest District; a thousand years later people would find the ruins of the city complete with running water!

Elim turned around as he heard the door open. “Got the last of the stuff Gori?”

“No,” a female voice replied. “But I have something even better!”

“Awwww…” Elim hissed as he turned around slowly to see a bunny standing in the doorway, a familiar looking gun in her paws. “…Shiiiiit! You just cost me a Coke, lady!”

“Down on the ground!” she commanded. “Now, creep!”

Elim did not move to lie down, smiling mockingly. “On what charges, officer?”

“What charges?!” Her eyes blazed, Elim saw with dawning realization that she wasn’t going to back down. “Breaking and entering! Murder! Terrorism! Attempted mass-murder! And aiding and abetting a known felon! That’s just to name a few!”

Elim blinked in surprise, hearing it all laid out like that he was beginning to see why Richie might have had a problem with this job. He rallied and chuckled. “Oh man…I literally can’t believe I get to use this line again!”

“What?!” Judy exclaimed. “What are you–?!”

“Aiding and abetting known felons,” Elim said triumphantly, looking up and over her shoulder. “Plural.”

Judy blinked and ducked and rolled away from the door and the implied sneaking assailant. Her eyes darted over to the doorway for a split second, and saw that it was completely empty. She cursed under her breath and trained her sights on Elim once more; he had taken the split second to draw his stolen weapon and take aim.

“A bit of a bandito standoff, eh?” Elim said, lining up the sights of the gun.

“Not really,” she said, flatly. “You’re out.”

Elim hoped he looked as confident as he sounded. “How do you figure?”

“That’s Detective Wilde’s sidearm. He used one net to destroy your computer, and you used one to take your hostage.”

“That’s–” Elim began to say before she cut him off.

“And you wouldn’t trust a big part of your plan to a weapon you weren’t familiar with. You practiced, squeezed off a round to see what it does. The nets are pretty cool, huh? What will they think of next?”

“That’s…” Elim said, willing himself to not panic. “…A neat theory. Care to test it?”

“Sure I do,” Judy said, smirking humorlessly. “I’m the one with a full clip, remember?”

Elim swallowed nervously, eying up the switch on the side of the gun, if he could flick it without her noticing, maybe he could distract her with a pepper pellet. His train of thought was derailed when she spoke again. “Don’t try it. The pellet launcher takes a second or so to charge up,
I’ll have you netted and zapped before you can pull the trigger. Now, put it down on the ground and get your hands in the air.”

Elim sighed in disgust and complied, placing the gun on the ground and raising his hands.

“Kick it away,” she commanded. “And get down on the ground!”

Again, he complied, scowling at her as he knelt down, his belly on the ground. The rabbit smiled and darted over, pulling his over and behind his back. “Elim Boakye, you are under arrest! You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law.”

“A naked Gazelle,” Elim quipped.

“Funny guy, huh?” Judy sneered.

“Oh, I’m hilarious.” Elim craned his head back and smiled unpleasantly. “Aren’t I, Gori?”

Judy scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You think I’d fall for that again?”

Her ear twitched as a low whistling sounded off to her right. “Oh, shi–”

Judy braced and rolled off the gnu as a massive paw swiped down at her. She managed to duck her head out of the way, but his huge fingers connected with her shoulders and ribs, knocking the air from her lungs, sending her hurtling across the room and her gun clattering on the concrete. Judy grunted in pain as she bounced off the hand railing and crumpled on the ground.

“You owe me a Coke,” Grigori grumbled, lifting his friend off the floor.

“Kill the rabbit, dammit!” Elim said, impatiently.

Judy groaned and got to her feet, she’d managed to roll with the impact as much as possible, but her ribs still screamed at her with every breath: severe bruising, if not a hairline fracture. She looked up to see the huge lynx walking towards her, his footfalls eerily silent. Judy cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders, shaking out her hands; she’d taken down bigger mammals than him. She darted forward, hopping with both feet to build up momentum, after three fast, powerful jumps she launched herself at him, rolling in midair and kicking out with her powerful legs. With a satisfying impact she drove her feet into his abdomen, the sensation was not unlike kicking a concrete pillar, but the result was a pained grunt as the burly lynx staggered back. Judy pushed off and sailed through the air, jumping from hand railing to wall to ceiling, building up speed for another kick. With both feet planted firmly on the ceiling, she propelled herself down at her winded target, feet outstretched for another devastating kick. Moments before she made contact, Grigori arched his head back and out of the way. As Judy sped past him she saw his neck tense as a grin spread across his face. His hard skull swung forward, catching her in the midsection, swatting her down to the ground; Judy bounced off the concrete and into the air where Grigori dealt her a lightning fast swat that sent her skidding along the floor. Judy coughed painfully and shook her head, looking up at the advancing lynx.


Judy rolled her eyes and streaked towards him. Grigori growled and swung at her, she sidestepped the powerful strike and grabbed onto his loose, flapping sleeve. She swung her legs
forward and planted a hard, two-footed kick on the pink triangle of his nose. He grunted and reeled, eyes watering from the blow to his sensitive snout; Judy used the momentum from her kick to swing up and over his arm, twisting the fabric tightly around his forearm for better leverage. With another, stronger swing she came down and kicked the sweet spot on his right side, shocking his liver with a powerful impact. Grigori grunted and dropped to one knee, wheezing. Judy swung his limp arm up and behind his back, kicking the nape of his neck as hard as she could, the mighty lynx toppled forward and onto the ground.

A moment later and Judy stood atop his back, barring his arm and smiling triumphantly. “That’s real sweet of you, Mr. Yevgenyevich, but the ZPD has a really fat retirement plan, so I’m gonna have to pass on that whole ‘dying’ thing.”

There was a sound like a thunderclap behind her and a moment later a huge mass of clinging fabric enveloped her body like a blanket. Judy grunted as she was thrown off Grigori’s back, she struggled uselessly as the fibers coiled all around her, setting and becoming like steel cable. Judy stared up, wide-eyed, as the two murderers towered over her.

Elim smiled widely and laughed, waving her sidearm about in his hand. “I think you dropped this.”

Grigori growled, his lips fleering back to reveal his glittering fangs. He reached down and grabbed her by the feet, hauling her into the air at arms length, like she was a hooked, dangerous fish that might still bite. “Snap?”

Elim paused and thought for a moment, a revelation seized him and he smiled at her venomously. “Sleep.”

Judy struggled in vain, thrashing around and pushing against the nigh-unbreakable fibers. She reared up to bite the hand holding her feet when the other closed around the back of her neck and pulled her straight. With the slightest pressure of his thumb and forefinger, Grigori compressed her tiny neck in a kind of one-handed sleeper hold.

Judy gasped in horror as blackness edged in at the corners of her vision and rapidly consumed her sight; the irresistible falling sensation of unconsciousness overtook her.

“Hey, Elim,” Grigori’s voice sounded in the blackness. “About that fight just now?”

Elim spoke from somewhere far away. “Yeah, Gori?”

“Don’t tell Finn.”

Judy’s mind swam in inky blackness, her head hung forward limply, her ears draped over her face. She slowly became aware of a strange tightness about her elbows, wrists, and ankles. Judy struggled to wade through the murky sludge of her thoughts, trying to rally against the fog of confusion that addled her mind. There was a sound to her right, were they footsteps?
Something brushed past her drooping ears and something else was waved in front of her nose. Instinctively, she sniffed it; the perfumed ammonia hit her like a kick to the snout and Judy gasped reflexively, pulling away from the smell, her eyes wide and her heart thundering in her chest. She whipped her head around wildly; the room was stark and empty save for a few tables and a counter with a sink. Judy looked down at herself; she was fastened to a chair, her arms secured to the armrests with police-issue zap-straps at the wrists and elbows, her legs were bound together in a similar fashion. A humming behind her drew her attention; it was jaunty and cheerful in a way that chilled her blood. When whoever it was began to sing, his voice was smooth, melodic, and entirely pleasant, somewhat high-toned but definitely masculine.

“It’s time to wake up, but you don’t need no make-up / ‘cause you look stinking foxy with nothing but my old Led Zeppelin T-shirt on…” he sang as he walked up behind her.

Judy almost screamed in shock when he abruptly set a small table down in front of her with a sharp clattering bang. She watched her host walk around the table, a chair in his hands. He set it down gently and sat in it, scooting it forward and making the chair legs scrape on the floor. He made a point of shifting on the cushioned seat for a few agonizing seconds. Comfortable, he leaned forward and set his elbows on the surface, weaving his fingers together and resting his chin on them as he stared at her from across the table. Judy did not turn away from his gaze, meeting his inky, glinting eyes with her own violet ones.

Finn smiled wide and white and glittering, his voice thick with glee. “Hi.”

Chapter End Notes

...Maybe he just wants to play Go Fish?
Heartbreaker

Chapter Notes

The penultimate chapter ladies and gents!

Also, MUHFUGGIN’ TITLE CAAAAAAAARD
http://mistermead.tumblr.com/image/146072077631

I am freaking out! So, SO jazzed about that

I collaborated with the Mead amongst men, Mister Mead on this particular title card and it is FULL of story-related goodies and visual puns.
His tumblr: http://mistermead.tumblr.com/

Give him all your love and belly-rubs and obsequious prostrations

Anyway, THE CLIMAX

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nick tapped his fingers on the wheel as he approached the Bridgeway building, Judy had surely come upon the same revelation he had. ‘If I drummed it up after that ordeal, Carrots probably figured it out walking in the door off the top of her head!”

He felt the light of the sun on his arm; even through the closed window and with the AC cranked, the incipient summer heat was making its presence known. His mind drifted to the bug-days of summer when he was a kid, in the ‘lower bracket neighborhoods’ as he had heard it called by people such as the Mayor. The sweltering days of high summer were exacerbated by the frequent easterlies that blew in off Sahara Square, a sensation not unlike a city-sized blow-drier.

Today the wind was blowing in from the west.

Today was going to be hot.

Nick would frequently prove himself the hero of his schoolfellows whenever he could palm a pipe wrench and crack a fire hydrant. They would frolic and dance in the spray, gloriously cool against the cooking heat of sun-bleached pavement and brick.

There would be kids out doing that today. Thousands, tens of thousands, and even more families in better-off parts of town would loose their children on water parks and pools and other such establishments.

A lot of water.

A lot of kids.

It would start off as a whole mess of isolated incidents as men, women, and children went completely insane, tearing each other and everyone around them to pieces. Sometimes solo,
sometimes in groups, predators, prey, from the biggest elephant right down to the tiniest vole; everyone would get in on the fun. No one would suspect that it was the water, not at first, anyway, and the cases would just keep popping up, overwhelming any sort of law enforcement. Then it would hit the Rainforest District and all hell would break loose as a fifth of the city collectively lost its mind. Downtown, the Meadowlands, Nocturnal Town and Savannah Central would become bloodbaths as a surge of murderous lunatics poured out of the saturated district, killing everyone and everything that doesn’t run or hide very well. Next would likely be Sahara Central, they could barricade the tunnels well enough, bomb the bridges, and rely on the Lion’s Tail to keep the savages out; but the poison still surged through the water mains beneath their feet, the poisoned oases would spawn murderers within their fortress walls. By then, of course, someone would figure out that it was the water, but by then nine out of ten people would either have their throats torn out or would be the ones doing it.

Nick shuddered, he could not help but imagine the carnage, the confusion; how blood would run thick in the poisoned water.

There was some hope. Tundra Town was lightly populated enough to survive on food stores long enough to put something together, not to mention there was enough untainted water in the accumulated ice to last a million people a hundred years. All on top of all that, it had a climate that was lethal to most if precautions weren’t taken, precautions that a slavering beast was not likely to take. If the right people, a certain shrew chief amongst them, reacted fast enough, there might be something left for the rest of the world to find.

Oh, yes. Today was going to be a scorcher.

Today was going to be Hell.

Nick was jolted out of his morbid fantasy by a blast of grating static; he had turned the radio on full blast in a futile effort to ward off anxiety, he didn’t even know what song had been playing. He reached over and changed the channel, only to be greeted with more static. He switched out twice more before, more on impulse than consciously, he turned off the radio and depressed the button on his police scanner and was once again met with grating white noise.

“He muttered, pulling into the parking lot and next to Judy’s empty car. “Red flag.”

He stepped out of the cruiser and made his way towards the building, stopping dead in his tracks when he saw the shattered door window. “Big red flag!”

Nick approached the door window, his nose curling at the stench of blood pouring out of the building. “Oh no…no, no, no…”

He peered in and sighed with relief when he saw that the body wasn’t Judy. “Oh! Thank God! …Oh no…no, no, no Carrots you didn’t!”

‘Did she try to take those three on by herself?!” Nick paced back and forth in front of the building, his ears flat as his tail swished nervously. ‘Why didn’t she call for backup?! C’mon, Rabbit, you’re smarter than this!’

Nick remembered the radio and how it abruptly cut out just as he approached Bridgeway, as though all AM/FM traffic was being overridden.

“If I was a gambling man…” He fished his phone out of his pocket, it displayed ‘no service’ in the upper left corner of the screen; he wasn’t even getting so much as a Wi-Fi signal. “I’d be a lot richer…dammit!”
‘Well, I’m going in after her, of course,’ he thought to himself with finality, not even considering the possibility of running for help. ‘Those three are in there getting ready to dump that crap into the water, it’s do or die time!’

‘Mostly likely die,’ Slick Nick added, dismayed.

“Shut up,” he muttered aloud. “Gotta get back-up here somehow…” Nick looked over at his cruiser, Car 52, and smirked. “First rule of living in the bad part of town: don’t call for help because no one will care, but scream ‘FIRE’ and everyone comes running!”

A minute later Nick dived behind a concrete divider, a heavy duffel bag in his arms. Car 52 was flung into the air by a huge thudding explosion that echoed deafeningly through the surrounding cityscape. The wreck sailed through the air before crashing back down with a bone-jarring crunch; a writhing mass of orange flames enveloped the shattered shell, sending a huge plume of greasy black smoke crawling into the air.

“Sorry, old girl!” Nick said with a salute. “That should just about do it…eh, whatever, I’m a thorough guy.”

He pulled two signal guns and a road flare out of the duffel bag and ran across the parking lot, firing the flares into the air and tossing the road flare into the recycling dumpster, setting it ablaze and adding to the smoke signal. Nick paused in front of the door, his ears rotating atop his head as he pulled out and put on a flak jacket, affixed a heavy stun baton to his belt and slipped his hands into a pair of sap-gloves. A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth when his sensitive ears detected the distant-but-reassuring peal of sirens.

“Well, that’s that,” Nick said, checking the extra ammunition clips on his belt. “I hope you left some of them for me, Carrots! Otherwise I just did all this for nothing!”

‘She’s alright,’ he thought to himself frantically as he ducked in through the broken window. ‘She’s alright. She can take care of herself. She’s alright.’

Elim stood in front of the vending machine, counting his coins. “Three bucks for a Coke… and people call me a criminal!”

The machine groaned and belched and the bottle tumbled into the receptacle. Elim took it and set off down the hall, nervously passing by the room where Finn was ‘entertaining’ their guest. He quickened his pace, tensely anticipating some manner of bloodcurdling scream to echo through the halls as the ferret’s sharp teeth sank into flesh. He sighed with relief when no such scream occurred, hurrying down the hall to the pump room.

Elim strode into the main room and tossed the bottle at Grigori, who plucked it from the air without even turning around. He examined the glass bottle, perplexed. “Glass bottle? Fancy.”
“Either Zootopia’s shifting from plastic bottles to cut down on waste, or that vending machine is older than I am!” Elim scoffed, sitting down on a creaky chair. “I’d accept either explanation, considering the state of this place.”

“Whatever,” Grigori said, hissing as he pressed the cold bottle against his sore side. “It does the job just fine.”

“Did that bunny leave you a little sore, Gori?” said Elim.

“Ya.” Grigori capped the bottle and began to drink. “Last time a bunny fought me, he did not do nearly so well.”


“I still threw him through a plate glass window, not to mention all the walls and furniture I threw him at before that. Still, he got a few good kicks in, not bad for a little guy; but Hopps…she blows him out of the water. I like her, it’s a shame she got tossed to Finn. That’s a bad way to die.”

“You saw how happy he was when we showed her all trussed up for him!” Elim smiled warmly and set his feet up. “Like a little kid on Christmas. Besides, this is the second time she got in our way. She needs to know that we don’t appreciate her dedication. Besides, bitch cost me a Coke. Fuck her.”

“You’re not petty at all.” Grigori smirked and took a pull from his Coke, when suddenly his ears shot up and he leapt to his feet. “Did you hear that?”

Elim looked around nervously. “Is Finn finally playing with the rabbit? I mean, I’m kinda glad I don’t have to hear her screaming all the time, but the silence is somehow worse, you know?”

“Not that!” Grigori snapped. “There was a noise, like a big thud or something. It sounded like it came from outside.”

“Outside,” Elim repeated, unconvinced. “Outside is three hundred feet up through God knows how much concrete!”

“Then you can see why it has my back up, yeah?” said Grigori, walking over to the security console. “Can we get the cameras working on this thing?”

“No, the bug takes all the cameras down, the secondary system only deals with the inner locks and shit.”

Grigori hissed and slammed his fist on the counter-top. “Can you, I don’t know, un-bug the system?”

Elim drew back defensively. “I’m just using what Richie left us! This computer stuff was his shtick! If he was here, yeah, maybe, but I wouldn’t even know where to start!”

“Well, what can we do?” Grigori said, gesturing at the console.

Elim stepped forward and pressed a big red button and a series of clunking sounds echoed throughout the complex. “There, I just locked off every door in the inner layer. All the elevators are shut down and the doors are locked. An army couldn’t get to us now!”

Grigori sighed and nodded. “But we are trapped, now, yeah?”
“The maintenance elevator works on an analog system, its non-computerized,” Elim explained. “Punch in the code and up it goes, and the only person who knows that besides us had a run-in with Finn. So, we’re sitting pretty until Boss calls.”

“Any idea as to when that will be?” Grigori said, pacing about the room. “All this waiting around is making me uncomfortable.”

“Boss calls us, not the other way around.” Elim shuddered. “They really didn’t like it when we hit them up either time, I’m in no hurry to see if the third call’s the charm!”

“Boss really gets to you, huh?” Grigori said, amazed; above all else Elim was something of an arrogant bastard, for him to respect anyone enough to fear them was equal parts impressive and terrifying.

Elim grimaced and shook his head. “If you ever talked to them, you’d know why. We’re a bunch of stone cold bastards, true enough, but we’re doing this for the money! A shit-load of money! What do they get out of this? What could anyone get out of this? So, yeah, they freak me the fuck out and I’m in no hurry to get on their bad side!”

Elim thought back to when they had first heard from Boss, ‘destroy all of Zootopia’ was their preliminary statement. He’d thought it was a joke at first and was about to get Richie to trace the call so he could get Finn and Grigori to peel the prankster’s skin off. But something about it stuck in his teeth, the tone, the glibness, there was the remote possibility that they were serious. He called them back and gave them their five minutes and they outlined a frighteningly detailed and thought-out plot for them to execute. When asked to name a price Elim found himself at something of a loss, the most they’d made on a single job before then was three million each, and that was a theft with a middling body-count. This job was something else, something else entirely. When he named his price, thirty million each, Boss didn’t even hesitate before agreeing and just like that a hit was placed on nearly a hundred million people. Elim shivered: damn right he was scared of the Boss.

Grigori and Elim both jumped when the satellite phone trilled, the sound was stark and metallic, echoing ominously off the concrete walls. Elim sighed and shook out his shoulders. “Game time.”

He answered the phone. “Everything’s in position, Boss. Just give the word!”

“You sound chipper, Elim!” Boss chirped, or what Elim figured was chirp through the distorter. “Who died?”

“No one yet,” Elim said flatly. “Well, a few people. Four going on five.”

There was a pause; a chill worked its way up his spine as Boss processed this innocuous-sounding information. “Elim, there should be only four people in the building besides the three of you. Explain.”

“Heh!” Elim laughed bitterly. “Take a wild guess!”

“Those two,” Boss hissed, angry but not surprised. “They showed up again?”

“Well, one of them. Don’t worry, we’re still in business and she’s–”

“Alive?” Boss interrupted. “She’s alive?”

Elim paused, his tongue tripping over itself as he tried to shave an inquiry down to
something less likely to offend. “Yes? She’s in the other room with–”

“Good~” Boss crooned thickly, the sheer satisfaction in their voice oozing through the distortion. “Elim, listen to me. She’s not to be killed, not yet. I want her alive and compos mentis, you understand? I want her to see Zootopia fall! To see the scope of her failure! Do you understand me, Elim? I want you to make her watch!”

Elim successfully kept the panic out of his voice, hoping to cover his tail for whatever gruesome injuries the rabbit had sustained so far by feigning ignorance. “Finn’ll want her. It won’t be easy to keep him away.”

“And he can have her,” Boss relented. “But after. She needs to be in a clear, healthy mindset to fully appreciate the city’s demise. So, none of your little savage’s games, do you understand? She must be whole in body before her spirit is crushed!”

“Yes, Boss. Whatever you say.” Elim cast a harrowed look at Grigori, who pointed at the pipe filled with the catalyst. “When do we dump the stuff?”

“Well, I have it set up so you get paid at ten, so nine forty-five?” Boss said glibly. “It’s already a hundred degrees in the shade, by then everyone will be wading in pools or making lemonade or some such. I want this to start with a bang, everything must be perfect!”

Elim mouthed ‘forty-five minutes’ to Grigori, who threw his hands up in disgust and marched off to the handrails to glare at the main pipes. “I understand, Boss. Anything else?”

“No, nothing. Just tend to our guest, see that she’s comfy, and destroy the city. You can handle that, can’t you, Elim?”

“Yes sir,” Elim said, distantly. “She’ll be comfy alright.”

Elim panted in terror as he sprinted down the hallway. ‘Oh shit oh fuck oh shit oh fuck!!’

He practically knocked the door off its hinges, skidding into the room with wide, wild eyes. “Finn!! Stop! You can’t…hurt her…whuh?”

Finn glanced over his shoulder, a look of confusion on his face and a fan of playing cards in his hands. On the table was a pile of cards and a stanced book acting as a divider. Opposite Finn was the cop, bound, helpless, and utterly unharmed, her expression flat and somewhat unimpressed.

“Hey, Elim!” Finn said, smiling boyishly. “Judy and I were just playing Go-Fish, wanna join?”

Elim blinked, utterly dumbfounded. “Uh…no, thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” Finn shrugged, turned back to the rabbit. “Got any black fours?”

The rabbit blinked once, her expression unchanging.

“Shoot!” Finn reached down and picked up a card from the pile. “Your turn.”

The rabbit said nothing, blinking twice in a slow, deliberate manner.

“No twos, red or black,” Finn responded to the unasked question. “Go fish.”
There was an agonizing pause as the two stared at each other from across the table, Finn chuckled bashfully, as though reminded, and pulled a card from the pile and placed on her side of the table, behind the divider where he couldn’t see.

Elim watched the farce with barely concealed horror; this was, somehow, immeasurably worse than anything he’d been expecting. “S-so, uh, you’re not…y’know…?”

“Right off the bat?” Finn scoffed and gestured at the cop, smiling with admiration. “Naw! A lady this fine you gotta romance first!”

That got through to her, the neutral, dismissive mien giving way to barely concealed disgust and disbelief. She looked over at Elim, her expression questioning; Elim threw up his hands and shook his head. “Don’t look at me, lady, I just work here! Look, Finn, Boss called, they want us to dump the stuff in forty-five.”

“Some time to kill, then,” Finn said, turning to the bound bunny. “Maybe you could tell me about how you caught the Shearer?”

“Finn,” Elim said, sternly. “Boss wants her alive and unharmed for when it goes down. They want her in her right mind, so no bites, no claws, no…” Elim gestured at the cards on the table before turning back to Finn, “whatever godforsaken thing *this* is. Just watch her, talk to her if you have to, but none of your psycho stuff! Boss wants her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for the big show.”

“Why?” Finn said, dejectedly, as he scooped up the playing cards. “Why’s it so important?”

“Who cares?” Elim shrugged. “Revenge, from the sound of it. Boss wants her to watch the city tear itself apart, and wants her in her right mind so she, I dunno, loses hope or something.”

“Jeez…” Finn muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “That’s messed up.”

Elim laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “Yeah…I’m just gonna let that speak for itself. Anyway, Finn, do you think you can control yourself?”

“Elim,” Finn said, crossing his arms in offense. “I’m a grown mammal! Give me a bit of credit!”

“Okay, okay!” said Elim, backing out the door. “You guys, uh, have fun?”

“Okie dokie!” Finn chirped, turning back to the rabbit. “Judy! Wanna hear about the time I killed an elephant?”

Elim left the room, desperately wishing for this day to be over and done with.
Bogo, had his neck shattered so violently that his head practically rolled on the ground. It did not bode well to say the least.

‘At least Judy wasn’t with them…” Nick thought as he turned the corner.

He followed the scents of the gnu and lynx down the hall when a groan from behind caught his attention. Nick spun around, his weapon at the ready; at the other end of the hallway was a shape slumped against the wall, another groan, closer to a gurgle, sounded as he drew near. Nick saw the security uniform and ran the last little bit, stopping and kneeling in front of her; she was a hyena, well built and strong-looking. She also had a chewed up ankle and what appeared to be a serious neck-wound.

“You hold on, you hear me? Help’s on its way!” Nick reached into the back compartment of his flak jacket and produced a thick, flexible packet. He opened it at the top and peeled the plastic film off, revealing a layer of thick gel. He reached down and pulled her hand away, noting that she had managed to pinch off her own jugular vein well enough to last this long. He slapped the gel-pad onto the gushing wound and held it there, the pad hissed and tensed as the medical gel sealed off the wound and bonded with the blood and fur.

The hyena hissed and tensed, Nick stroked her forehead and nodded. “I know, I know. It hurts, but it’ll keep your tank full until the paramedics arrive. What’s your name? Can you talk?”

“Yes,” she croaked, the anti-shock chemicals in the bandage were beginning to take hold. “Rebecca. Beck.”

“Okay, Beck, I need you to tell me what happened here.” Nick said, looking over at the emergency stairway up the hall. “Did you come out of there?”

“They just showed up and killed everybody,” Beck rasped. “They took me with them but I got away, up those stairs. A ferret…”

“Where is he now?” said Nick.

Beck shook her head. “Gone. He smelt something and took off…I think he said ‘bunny’. I played dead…sorry…”

Nick cursed under his breath and got to his feet, heading for the stairway when Beck called out, panting. “Wait! Lock-down’s been activated; it’s a dead end down there!”

Nick remained calm, knowing full well that even in the event of a total lockdown there was going to be a way in, these kinds of places always did. “So, they’re down in the lower levels?”

“Yes,” Beck said, sluggishly. “I can…ah…I can tell you how to get down there. Help me up.”

The emergency exit on the side of the building swung open with a kick. Nick grunted in exertion as he hauled the 200lb hyena out the door and onto the steps, positioned under her armpit like a crutch.

She gingerly set herself down on the steps, her injured leg lay out as she propped herself against the handrails.

“Thank you,” Beck panted, smiling weakly as she gazed up at the sun as it beat down mercilessly. "Thank you so much. I’d rather die in the sun.”
“None of that,” Nick grunted, his ears swiveling around, catching the still-distant cry of sirens. “The fire department is on its way, maybe five minutes. The cops'll be by soon after. You just got to hang on until then. You can do that, can't you, Beck? Big tough Pred like you, you're not gonna get offed by a ferret, are you?”

Beck wheezed a shuddering sob. “N-not a ferret…not a m-mammal! He's a monster! Eyes in the dark…”

Nick reached over and snapped his fingers in front of her face, rallying her waning consciousness. “Hey! Enough of that! Wake up! You have to hold on, Beck, you have to stay awake! Do you hear me? Beck!”

Beck reached up and grabbed Nick, pulling him down to her face. "You have to stop them! Take the maintenance elevator shaft down to the pump level, the crawl-way next to the door will take you right to the control room, you can ambush them there. You have to stop them!"

Nick looked over at the garage on the other side of the dry, sunbaked lot. He turned back to Beck and nodded, handing her a flare-gun. “When you hear the sirens in the parking lot, you pop this off and tell them what's going on. Don't go dying on me, Beck! Don't give Finn another notch on his belt!”

Beck smiled wanly and nodded, feebly brandishing the flare gun. Nick took off across the lot, his feet kicking up dust as he skidded to a halt in front of the door. He bolted in, his nose twitching as he entered the main room, the air in the room was cold, musty, and humid from the complex below. The elevator had already descended, leaving only the hole where the platform had been and the massive hoists on either side. Nick kicked a bolt into the chasm, his ears drooping as each second passed before a gut-wrenchingly distant and insignificant clatter announced the bolt's impact with the ground.

Nick gulped and sighed, shaking his head. ‘Huh, no console up here, it can only be controlled from the bottom. I have to be quiet about this. Gotta maintain the element of surprise.’

“The element of surprise…” he muttered aloud, manfully resisting the urge to spit down the hole. “This is a bad idea, this is a really, really bad idea!”

Without further hesitation he leapt over the side and grabbed onto the steel cable, sliding down the side a little too quickly for comfort. ‘They say the only difference between a good idea and a bad idea is options. When you're outta options, all that's left is good ideas!’

Slick Nick scoffed as he slid down the dark pit. ‘Whoever said that never had to jump down a three hundred foot pit to fight a bunch of mass murderers!’

The chair creaked as she shifted; it was old, wooden, and rickety. Judy tested her bonds; her forearms were inexorably fastened to the armrests but her legs were mostly free save for the
bindings around her ankles. It would be a simple matter for her to snap the zap-strap were the chair not slightly too big, preventing her from getting the necessary leverage. If she could topple the chair forward she would be able to use the momentum to snap the bindings with no problem. But for that, she would have to neutralize her chatty ‘companion’ long enough to do so.

She looked over at him, despising the fresh jolt of terror that followed. He looked just like any other ferret, perhaps a little taller than most and visibly muscular; he had a trim, neat look about him that suggested fastidiousness. His face was pleasant in a broad, small-mammal sort of way. His features were symmetrical and well proportioned, and his eyes were a shade of brown so dark as to appear black compared the pure white of his sclera. Judy reluctantly admitted that he would be almost handsome in the right light, and the endearing Emerald Island brogue didn’t hurt. All in all, Finneghan McNulty looked the part of a ferret to a tee: a larger, taller, better-proportioned weasel with a naturally affable charm.

And then he would smile.

Not the friendly smirk that was practically his default expression, but a grin. Broad and sharp, a shocking slash of white teeth that would crawl across that pleasant face and up to his eyes, squeezing them into little black pits that glinted coldly like shards of broken glass. She could see now that there was no insanity there, nothing out of control or broken. Whatever he was, he was whole and fully functional, just horribly and dangerously wrong; a mind that had no business being in a mammal, a square peg that had somehow fit into a round hole.

It dawned on her, with no small measure of horror, that perhaps hadn’t been joking earlier; that he was presently treating her to some sort of deranged courting ritual and that the friendly façade the was putting on was his own psychotic attempt at a date.

She felt ill. Why was he so interested in her? What was he going to do with her? She felt the incipient pangs panic begin to jolt through her, as though something deep inside was unraveling. She had to get out, she had to break free, she had to get away from that thing! ‘Gotta get out! Gotta get out! Gotta get out gotta get out gotta get out’

‘Enough!’ On-Duty Judy commanded, silencing the gibbering panic. ‘Keep calm, don’t panic, don’t speak, don’t do anything! The only way I’m getting out of here is if he slips up, and the only way he’s going to slip up is if I make him. He’s used to people talking back, hearing them try to bargain with him, get on his good side, seduce him, whatever! He’s trying to get under my skin, trying to get a response. Well, he’s not going to, and it’s going to drive him crazy! He’ll get angry, he’ll get careless, and then I’ll make my move! Until then, don’t let him see that he gets to you.’

“So yeah,” Finn was saying from across the table. “We learn that this big ol’ bull elephant has a thing for ferret ladies, ‘cause they have flexible bodies and can wrap around…you know, things and stuff and…anyway, it was fortunate because otherwise we were at a loss as to how we were going to actually get him. So, do you know what we did?”

Judy stared back neutrally, unspeaking.

Finn reacted as though she had said responded. “That’s right! They kitted me out in this real pert cherry-red number with a matching scarf and handbag. You wouldn’t guess it to look at him, but Grigori has a real eye for fashion, he picked that dress out of a line and said,” his voice dropping an octave and donning a thick east-Tundran accent, “‘This will accentuate your figure and hug your curves, Dick-Dick will take care of the rest.’ And boy, did he ever! Man, I still don’t know how he did it, but Dick-Dick made me look like a proper lady! There were times I wanted to
hit him up for another make-up sesh, so I could look at myself in the mirror, it was that good! But, y’know, that’d be weird…”

Judy stared back, deigning to blink.

“Right? So, I enter the penthouse and there he is, fifteen feet tall and fat as the world…also, not terribly romantic, as it turns out. Just *zip* *plop* ‘get to work!’ And talk about a busy trunk! Jeez! So, he sussed out real quick that this particular cherry was high in vitamin-D, so I figured that I’m pretty much screwed, right?”

A flat stare and silence.

“Wrong!” Finn announced with a laugh. “Ha-ha! Turns out the big fella just liked ferrets in general! Jill, hob, made no difference to him! So, he wants to get down to business right away, but my mum didn’t raise no hussy, so I insist on a kiss first. It was real romantic! He lay down and lifted his trunk, pursing his lips together…so I crawled down his throat, into his lungs, and tore his heart apart with my teeth. Needless to say, the dress was ruined."

Judy adjusted herself in the seat and resumed staring at him, her face a stony mask.

“Are you uncomfortable?” Finn asked, the concern in his voice seemingly genuine. “Sorry about that. I think Elim was the one who trussed you up, he’s not very good at it; I can see a bunch of pressure points from here. Now, if I bound you up, you’d only ever know when you tried to move, otherwise you’d be comfy as all get out!”

More stares, more silence.

Finn eyed her for a moment, a tiny downward curve tugged at the corners of his mouth for a second before the smile returned. “So, I make it back, just covered in blood, and I tell ‘em what happened. And do you know what Dick-Dick says without missing a beat?” he paused and gestured at her to ask, after a moment of silence he gestured again, more frantically this time, before relenting and smacking the table-top. “He says ‘Jeez, Finn! I never knew you were such a heartbreaker!’ Get it?”

Finn clapped his hand over his face and cackled wildly, pounding his fist on the table as he jittered about in his chair. Judy’s face scrunched slightly while he was giggling, the mad urge to take up his infectious laugh was almost unbearable. ‘Stop it! Stop it! It wasn’t that funny! …Okay, it was pretty funny, but keep it together! The silent treatment is getting to him, just stay strong!’

Finn’s raucous laughter died down into a series of panting giggles, his eyes watering as he turned back to her. “Man! That Richie! I miss how we used to shoot the shit, just him and me. Elim’s so controlling and Grigori won’t smile unless he’s breaking bones! Usually, it was just the two of us, joking around…” Finn’s smile vanished and he looked at his hands, his voice low and flat. “How is he, by the way? I mean, I got pretty carried away, I admit. I messed him up pretty good. It’s just that…I was angry, you know? I mean, we were a team! It was just us against the world, just like always, and then he up and sells us out? And for what? A bunch of ‘civilized’ folk sitting in their fancy, sterile houses, eating their state-issued slop and watching their pointless, inane, fat-headed indoctrotainment?! That’s what hurts the most! He betrayed us, his friends, his true boon companions for this place, for these people?! For you?! I’m not sorry! I’d do it again! I would have seen him off this godforsaken mortal coil with a grin on my face, but you just couldn’t let me have that, could you?! He was my friend!! Mine!!”

Finn shot to his feet and flung the table across the room with a single swipe, he lunged forward, clasping his hands over her wrists as he snapped his jaws in the air just front of her face.
Judy felt a swish of air on her nose as a fang gnashed a hair’s breadth away. It took all her self-control to keep herself from flinching away and crying out. Instead, Judy maintained her stoic expression, staring out at him as he glowered back at her. His face was horrible, his muzzle bunched as his lips fleered back from his huge, shiny teeth; his brow furrowed with rage and his eyes were those familiar pits of glittering black.

He drew away from her, panting his hot, heavy breath in her face. “None of that for you, love. Not yet. You have to be able to watch your city tear out its throat and choke on its own blood. Then, we play.”

Judy stared back at him, just barely keeping herself from trembling in sheer terror. ‘Oh God…oh God oh God oh God…Nick, please hurry…’

Nick set down on the floor without so much as a sound. He walked over to the door and looked at the wall beside it, noticing a panel with a notched indentation in it. With a claw, he hooked it and unlatched it, silently pulling the panel down and onto the floor, the inside surface of which had a tiny set of stairs leading up to a small-persons access hatch. Nick smirked; this would lead to just about every room, including the control room. He ducked into the access hatch, which was only just large enough for him to crawl through, adroitly hooking onto the stairs on the inside of the panel with his toeclaw and closing it behind him.

Nick shuffled through the tiny hallway on his hands and knees, sniffing the air and listening for voices. As he drew closer he could hear the tail ends of a conversation.

“He was doing what?!” Grigori exclaimed.

“Playing cards!” Elim replied. “Go Fish! Like, he was playing for her, too. I think she was too scared to do or say anything.”

“That’s…” said Grigori, leaning on a handrail. “I don’t know, worse, somehow? I’d almost prefer to walk in on him chewing than…that.”

“Right? On some level I can understand the chewing, almost. But what is he even up to?” Elim sighed and sat on the console, his hand next to a MSIM resting on the countertop. “To top it all off, you know what he said when I asked him about it?”

“What?” Grigori said, amused.

“He said ‘a lady this fine you gotta romance first’!” Elim said in a poor imitation of an Emerald Island brogue.

Grigori bellowed with laughter and slapped his knee. “Seriously?! Okay, that does it! When
we retire, you and I are finding him a girlfriend.”

Elim rubbed his chin thoughtfully, smiling. “Ha! We might go through a few before one takes.”

“Eh.” Grigori shrugged. “She’d be smallish, so we wouldn’t have to dig a big hole–ELIM LOOK OUT!!”

“Wh–” Elim began to say when Grigori lunged forward and sent him flying across the room with a powerful swipe. Not a millisecond later and a net cartridge burst open, enveloping the lynx’s arm and fastening it to a handrail, constricting and pinning his arm to the metal. Elim thudded painfully on the ground, a clattering noise to his left drew his attention; in the confusion he had swept the sidearm off the console. He sprung for it, his arm outstretched to grab the bouncing weapon. In a moment of uncharacteristic grace, he grabbed the stock and brought it around, his finger on the trigger. He leveled the weapon at the intruder when another net canister burst in front of him, encasing his weapon and hands in a mass of unbreakable fibers.

“Holy shit!” Elim cursed, glowering up at the advancing assailant; an armored red fox. Wilde.

“Hey!” Nick said, smirking. “Long time no see, Big E! How’re you doing, how’s life?”

“You bastard!” Elim spat. “How did you even get in here?!”

“Fox magic!” Nick said, looking over at Grigori. “Nice reflexes, by the way!”

“I’ll kill you!” Grigori roared. “I’ll rip your head off and shit down your neck!”

“Tch!” Nick scoffed, turning back to Elim. “Not a very friendly guy! Sorry you two, no genocide today, but perhaps I could interest you nice long stay at the Zootopia Maximum Security Prison!”

A whistling sound drew his attention and Nick ducked just in time to avoid an empty steel canister hurled at his head. He spun around and leveled his weapon at Grigori, who was now fresh out of throwable objects but was smiling regardless. Nick turned back to see Elim level his own sidearm at him, the barrels were unfortunately unobstructed by the net.

“Don’t–” Nick tried to say as his thumb depressed the yellow button on the side of the stock with a nervy, instinctive quickness. The net electrified and Elim went stiff, gurgling as he jittered in place. A heavier, bass thrum drowned out the clicking of Nick’s MSIM as the energized fibers shorted the metallic hydrogen battery of Elim’s weapon. An enormous, hissing arc of electricity danced up from the weapon and into Elim’s convulsing body. There was final hissing crack as massive amounts of electricity pulsed out of the weapon, encasing the gnu’s body in a cascade of popping sparks and smoke. With a final twitch, the smoldering body collapsed to the ground in a heap.

“Oh God!” Nick retched, the stink of burning fur and cooked meat washed over him in a repulsive wave.

“ELIM!!” Grigori cried, thrashing against the fibers. “No!! Elim!!”

Nick stared at the steaming, charred corpse, horrified. “I–I didn’t mean…I…oh, God…”

“You,” Grigori growled, tears streaming down his face.
His massive muscles bunched as he pulled against the netting but was unable to budge it. Grigori roared and braced his feet against the handrail, straining with all his might. The steel groaned and warped, but the fibers held fast. Grigori looked down at the net and saw the little black hub holding the mass together, with a growl he leaned down and took the hub between his new tungsten teeth and bit as hard as he could. With a crunch and a pop, the composite materials succumbed to the hard tungsten and shattered. The net went slack and he was free.

Nick tore his eyes away from the body just in time to see the massive lynx lunging towards him and ducked out of the way, rolling and turned to draw a bead on his attacker. Nick was fast, but not nearly fast enough, just as he turned to bring his weapon up, a huge paw swung in and swatted the weapon painfully out of his hands, sending it flying over the handrail to clatter on the concrete fifty feet below. Another fist smashed into his stomach, lifting him clean off his feet and hurling him backwards through the air. Nick grunted as he tumbled back onto his rear, winded but mostly unharmed, the flak jacket had withstood the brunt of the impact. He got to his feet and donned a fighting stance only to see Grigori kneeling over the body of his teammate.

“My friend…” he muttered, closing Elim’s open unseeing eyes with a gentle sweep of his hand. “Finn and I will set a spot for you every day in his restaurant. Every night, we will crack a beer for you. My first son will be named Elim and he will live rich and happy thanks to you. I must go now, there’s killing to be done.” Grigori rose to his feet and glared at Nick. “You. You will not merely die; you will be erased. I will break you. I will crush you. You will know pain. You will know suffering. You will know me. And when nothing remains of the mammal you were, I will snuff the gibbering meat that is left.”

Grigori seemed to take note of the loose fabric of his sleeves and smirked at Nick, mindful of how they had hindered him before. He grabbed the collar of the suit and ripped the fabric away in a single motion, revealing his impressive physique. He grinned a glittering golden grin at Nick, his eyes bloodshot and enraged.

“Oh, fuck me…” Nick muttered, drawing his stun baton in a shaking hand.

Grigori roared and lunged, bridging the gap between them with frightening speed. Nick leapt out of the way and swung his baton, only to hit open air as his target ducked mid-lunge and followed through with a solid kick to Nick’s chest. Nick wheezed and flew through the air, skidding on the ground before pulling into a somersault and rolling to his feet. Nick growled and charged, swinging his baton at the surprisingly agile lynx. Grigori ducked and weaved, flinching away when the baton struck the metal counter and sparked with 50,000 volts. Nick aimed a series of jabs and swings, each one missing by less and less as the well-trained fox hit his stride.

“Enough,” Grigori rumbled, catching Nick by the wrist and twisting the baton out of his hand, letting it clatter harmlessly on the ground.

He pulled him into a crush-hug and began to squeeze. Nick groaned as he felt his bones grind together under the relentless pressure. Thinking quickly, he reached up and undid the collar on his flak jacket and, in a single smooth motion, slid out the bottom of the protective garment. Nick doubled back and swung a sap-gloved fist into Grigori’s jaw as he clutched the empty jacket. His fist connected with a satisfying impact, the powdered metal over his knuckles and fingers adding weight to his blows while also protecting them from injury. Nick loosed a blurry volley of punches when Grigori, quite unfazed, caught his fist mid-swing. Nick cursed and swung with his right, which Grigori also caught. Grigori grinned and nodded approvingly at Nick before swinging his head forward, smashing it into the bridge of Nick’s snout. The fox went limp as his knees buckled, his larger opponent holding him up by his hands. Grigori chuckled and whirled his dazed opponent around, throwing him at the opposite wall like a bag of flour. At the last second, the fox
rallied and braced himself, bouncing off the concrete and landing on his hands and knees.

“You fight well,” Grigori said, walking over in a slow casual manner. “I think I’ll kill you as painfully as possible.”

Nick smirked and got to his feet. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

Grigori growled and lunged forward, but Nick leapt down and between his legs at the last second, pulling into a somersault and rolling towards his dropped baton. In a single fluid movement, he scooped up the baton, leapt to his feet, and rebounded off the security console. Grigori turned around just in time to have Nick jab the electrified baton into his belly; he tensed and grunted, dropping to one knee as he gasped for air. Nick rushed forward and jammed the baton in between his shoulder blades, holding it in place as it unleashed jolt after jolt of into the mountainous lynx.

“Go! Down! Stay! Down!” Nick bellowed, stabbing down with the electrode-studded baton.

A hand flew up with lightning speed and grabbed his wrist in a crushing grip. Grigori roared and leapt to his feet, partially hauling Nick into the air. Nick balled up his left fist and began to punch the enraged lynx in the face to no discernable effect. Grigori looped his arm over Nick’s and barred it against his bare body. Slowly, deliberately, he reached over and grabbed his opponent’s right just below the elbow and began to bend; the bones in the arm creaked audibly.

“I will…” Grigori growled over Nick’s terrified protests, twisting and binding the fox’s arm, “…break you!”

With a twisting, wrenching motion Grigori snapped Nick’s forearm completely in half. The fox screamed as a bright tearing sheet of agony raced up his arm, now bent at a hideous angle. The baton tumbled out of his useless hand and clattered on the floor, where Grigori promptly kicked it over the edge. He threw the screaming fox to the ground and snarled, walking after him as he crawled away.

“Pathetic,” Grigori sneered, bending down over the crippled cop. “Your bunny friend put up a much better fight, much more satisfying.” He knelt down and grinned sadistically. “For killing Elim, you get to watch your city die screaming before you die screaming. But first, you get to see what Finn is doing to your bunny friend.”

Nick growled and swung out at Grigori’s face, his claws drawn and sharp. Three bloody slashes burst across Grigori’s muzzle, causing him to flinch back with a grunt. Grigori touched a hand to his face and roared in fury, he swatted Nick back to the ground as though he were a mosquito and knelt on his chest. He raised a mighty fist a brought it down with terrible power, Nick’s head snapped to one side, bouncing off the concrete as stars exploded behind his eyes, the terrible crunch of bone echoed inside his head. The fist went up and plummeted down again, and again, and again, and again. Grigori panted and got to his feet, loosening his shoulders. The prone body on the floor twitched and groaned thickly, the left side of his face split and bloody.

“Now, before any more fun is had, I have a job to finish,” Grigori said as he made off for the valve. “Do not worry, I will be back.”

Nick groaned, his face was somehow numb and one fire at the same time, memories of pain were washing in from all over his body, overwhelming any sort of rational thought he might have had.
'Just go to sleep,' Slick Nick mumbled, his thoughts sludgy. 'It hurts too much to be awake right now, go to sleep.'

He glanced dazedly at the lynx as he walked away, his left eye already swollen shut. “Wuh…”

‘Have to…stop him…’ He raised his hand in front of him, trying to gain enough leverage to sit up. But it was too much; he collapsed back on the ground, his arm falling over his chest.

Something hard.

‘What’s that?’

In his breast pocket.

He fished it out and looked at it: it was a little glass vial of blue liquid.

‘Koolaid. From Greg…I forgot all about that!’ he thought, the inner workings of his head felt like clock gears in soup. ‘Bad idea…no options…Judy, I’m sorry.’

He popped the glass vial into his mouth and bit down hard, feeling the glass shards cut into his cheek. The catalyst hit like a shot of bad moonshine, practically evaporating before it hit his tongue, spreading through his mouth like liquid fire, leaving a burning numb sensation in its wake. He gasped instinctively, drawing the vaporized catalyst down his throat and into his lungs, spreading the burning sensation to his very core. Nick sputtered and coughed as it hit his bloodstream, the pain from his arm, face, and many contusions surged and crested, amplified beyond pain, beyond agony. He writhed on the floor, screaming silently as the fire in his veins washed over him, clawing away at his mind like a terrified beast. Unfathomable panic seized him as he spasmed on the floor, grunting, choking, his last thought as Nick was ‘It’s like drowning!’

The Beast opened its single eye, the pupil a pinprick of black against a backdrop of savage green. It was under attack, pain was everywhere, its heart thudded like a piston as its muscles twitched and spasmed. It had to fight, it had to kill the things attacking it, everything was attacking, everything was hurting it. Everything had to die, only then would it be safe.

There was a thing over there. Unyielding terror washed over the beast as it got to its feet, the thing was huge and horrible, grunting awful hideous sounds that it could not understand.

It had to die.

Grigori heard the coughing and sputtering from behind him as he prepared to turn the valve. He thought nothing of it, sometimes people aspirated blood after he gave them a good thrashing. “Be calm, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

A frenzied growl caught his attention and he began to turn around, his hand still on the release valve holding the catalyst.

Grigori didn’t feel the impact on his back, nor the claws that dug into his shoulder. In fact, he didn’t feel much of anything as fangs crushed and severed his cervical vertebrae. But he did hear something; hard heavy breathing, as though someone was having a panic attack, and a rich, meaty crunch like ripping the legs of a freshly cooked king crab. The kind he had eaten at holiday dinners when he was at home, surrounded by Anya and Cseniya and Mama. They would be getting the rest of their money right about now, he desperately wanted to see their faces when they got it.
Finn sat across from his prey; it had been several agonizing minutes of silence since he snapped at her, and he was contemplating his next move. She had proven to be a tough nut to crack and no mistake, but he would make her talk. Her silent treatment had put him in a foul mood, and he was looking to blow off some steam, Boss be damned!

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been to Zootopia, you know.”

Judy didn’t respond, he continued. “Nope. I dropped by about two years ago, me and the boys, back when all that Bellwether stuff was going down. I’d heard there were mammals here, Predators, who were going savage and tearing folk apart. I thought, maybe, there were people like me here, people who knew the truth.”

‘Truth?’ Judy didn’t say, but he could see it in her eyes.

“The truth,” Finn affirmed, nodding. “The truth that there’s nothing better in life for a Predator, no purer pleasure, than the taste of hot blood on the tongue. Imagine my disappointment when they turned out to be a bunch of druggies! Tch!”

Judy’s mask fell for an instant, her confusion evident on her face. Finn grinned wildly at the reaction; finally, a crack! “I don’t expect you to understand, but it’s like…lightning. It’s warm, thick, the taste is salty and metallic, and when it hits my tongue I see stars! Pump pump pump! Pulsing, hot, alive! It’s like their life is pouring into me, and I become them!” He looked off into the middle distance for a moment before turning back to her. “Not actually, of course. I’m not crazy! I don’t believe in magic or faeries or such, but I know for a fact that it’s…intimate. I talk to people, I chew them up, and talk some more; they tell me things, anything I want to know, and a lot of stuff I don’t. It’s no use asking them directly, they’ll just say what they think you want to hear. No, I just make conversation and let them fill in the rest. By the end I know more about my toys than their own mothers!”

She simply stared back at him, her calm, cool demeanor and still nose trying desperately to conceal the terror-scent pouring off of her in waves.

“You’re afraid,” he said, evenly and calmly. “You hide it better than others. In fact, you don’t seem to let it effect you at all. If you didn’t reek of fear, I don’t think I’d be able to tell. You should be proud of that. I’ve had a go at all kinds of animals, lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Not one of them has kept it together as well as you have. Not to say I’ve been working on you the same as anyone else. Usually I just talk to them about this and that and they snap all by themselves, and then the fun begins. You? I wanted to see how much shit you’d put up with before you started talking, and you didn’t disappoint. Here you are, cool as a cucumber, quiet and stoic. But what are you trying to accomplish? Are you trying to get under my skin? Are you buying time? For who, the fox?”
A long, shrill, agonized scream cut through the air, reverberating off the walls. Judy’s ears shot up, her eyes wide with shock and horror: the voice was familiar.

“Oh,” Finn said, smirking. “Sounds like someone had a run-in with Grigori. Get used to that screaming by the way, he likes to break arms and legs, it’s therapeutic for him.”

He turned back to Judy, her ears were down and her face had once again become a stone mask. Finn bristled; equal parts frustrated and impressed with his quarry. “Speaking of therapy…”

Without warning, he reached over and dragged his index claw down the right side of her face, carving a long deep gash down her cheek. To her credit she bit back a scream, only losing a squeak and a gasp as she drew away from him.

Finn smirked and licked the blood off his claw, his eyes sparkling. “In case you forgot what you’re here for. Now, Boss wants you relatively intact so you can watch the show and, I dunno, die inside or something. Boss is a little twisted, huh?”

Her stoic expression returned with a vengeance, she had somehow managed to make it dismissive despite the bleeding gash on her face; Finn bristled in frustration. “So I guess I can’t really chew out your eyes! But…”

He knelt down to her hand, grabbing it and holding it flat before she could ball it into a fist; he grabbed her pinky and bent it back, looking up at her as he did. “You won’t miss this, right? Kind of a useless little limb, isn’t it?”

He took her finger into his mouth, running his tongue along it, biting lightly. She looked down at him, her expression impassive, before turning away and staring at the wall ahead.

“Well!” Finn hissed, grabbing her middle finger. “How about this one? Gonna have trouble flipping folk off without this little guy!”

Judy sniffed disinterestedly and continued to stare at the wall. Finn huffed and examined her hand, isolating her thumb and grinned. “I love chewing off thumbs. A big heavy bone, big bundles of connective tissue, it’s like chewing off a toe!”

A flinch. Followed by a quick return to stoicism.

Finn’s eyes lit up, his grin widened. “Ohhh…that’s your weak spot, is it?”

That same neutral expression, but her brows held a hint of worry; Fin chuckled joyously, running his hand down her legs, pricking with his claws. “There it is! Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh! I should have known! Bunny feet are so sensitive! Be a shame if something happened to them!”

He walked out in front of her, feeling her legs twitch as she tried to pull away. He looked up to see her face, the fear, the desperation, the–

Smile?

She was smiling?

“Whuh?” He looked down, her legs were only bound together and not to the chair. ‘Elim, you newb son of a–!’

Her powerful legs kicked up, catching him full up and under the ribs. Finn grunted as the breath was driven from his lungs in an instant. He wheezed and bent forward; looking up just in
time to see her wind her legs back and unleash their full fury on his upturned face. Finn was propelled backward through the air by the sheer force of the two-footed kick, stopping only when he hit the wall on the opposite side of room, some twenty feet away.

“Uuugh…” Finn groaned and he collected himself off the floor, there was a familiar metallic taste in his mouth, but something else, too. Finn sucked into his cheek and spat his mouthful onto the ground. He gasped in outrage as lying on the ground in a puddle of blood before him was one of his eyeteeth. A quick probe of the tongue revealed it to be his top right. He looked over at Judy, who was busy toppling her chair forward. “You…BITCH!”

Judy gave one final push and the chair teetered forward. She landed on her feet and bent her knees; the force of her body and the chair pushing her legs apart snapped the zap-strap. With her legs already bent, Judy leapt straight up into the air as hard as she could. She flipped onto her back just before she hit the ceiling and pushed off the concrete roof with all of her strength towards the floor. The rickety chair shattered on impact with the ground, freeing her arms as both armrests came loose. She turned around just as Finn launched himself into the air, streaking down at her with his jaws open. She brought up the armrest and jammed it between his jaws; his teeth sank into the wood with a gruesome, bone-like crunch.

“Ull gill ‘oo!!” he roared around the wood, swiping at her with his claws.

Judy growled in return and swung in with her right, smashing the solid end of the armrest into his ribs, again and again and again. Finn released his grip and began to back off when she rushed forward and kicked him square in the chest, knocking him on his back. Before Finn could regain his footing, Judy was on top of him, pummeling his face with the wooden clubs on her arms.

“You like the taste?!?” she screamed, striking furiously. “Huh?! You seeing stars yet?!” Judy paused and panted; she looked down at the bloody, beaten ferret and hissed. “Are you still having fun?”

He looked back up at her, smiling with pink bloody teeth. “I take the good with the bad.”

Judy roared and delivered a final blow with her right, Finn’s head snapped to the side and his body went limp. She got to her feet, panting and exhausted; she moved to flip Finn over and restrain him when the door flew open with a bang. Judy spun around, her eyes wide; standing in the doorway was a familiar shape, a fox slumped over, leaning against the frame and breathing heavily.

“Nick?” Judy said, a smile spread across her face. “Nick, are you–”

Then she noticed the blood splattered across his shirt, dripping from his muzzle and pooling on the ground. The she noticed his eyes, snapped open wide, his visible pupil a tiny dot in a sea of savage green. A low, purring growl escaped his throat.

“…Nick.” Judy whispered, stepping back as he advanced on her.

Finn reared up behind with a roar, the backrest of the chair in his paws. He swung it down with terrible force, shattering it over Judy’s head and back. Judy fell to the ground in a heap, the world spun as a terrible splitting pain exploded inside her head and up her back.

“So!” Finn said, stepping over the felled rabbit, grinning bloodily. “You finally showed up! As you can see, your girlfriend and I were having ourselves a nice, civilized discussion regarding
international politics and labor disputes."

Nick’s lips peeled back to reveal bloody teeth as he stepped into view, his face a swollen horror of tousled blood-matted fur.

“Holy…you’ve been exposed!” Finn’s eyes went wide, his gapped grin vanished, “W-wait…whose blood is that?”

Nick snarled and moved to circle around the smaller mammal. Finn chuckled nervously, shaking his head. “No…no, that’s…Elim! Elim! Elim!! Elim, you there? The fox is here! We got ourselves a WildeHopps playset! Ha! …Elim? Hey, guys, c’mon! This isn’t funny! Elim! Grigori! …Kitten?”

Finn glared at the wounded, blood-coated fox, his own fangs bared as tears streamed down his cheeks. “Y-you killed my friends! You…bastard!”

Finn coiled his muscular body and launched himself at the larger Predator, bellowing a battle cry.

Judy groaned and stirred. The world was spinning both above her head and below her feet, pain wracked her body and the inside of her head felt like there were pieces loose and rolling around. She could hear a terrible din over the ringing in her ears. She looked up and saw a fox with a bad arm and swollen eye fighting a ferret.

The ferret clambered all over the gnashing, snapping fox, dodging every bite and slash of his much larger opponent. Nick was larger, stronger, and arguably more savage, but he was also visibly exhausted and severely injured. Finn on the other hand was faster, more lucid, and immeasurably more skilled. Finn leapt up onto Nick’s back and sunk his fangs into the meat of his shoulder, yanking his head back and forth as Nick howled in agony.

“Nick!” she called out, but he didn’t seem to hear her, he didn’t seem to be doing much of anything besides snarl and swipe at the impossibly fast ferret. ‘Oh, God! He’s been exposed! He’s savage!’

Finn scurried up his good arm and delivered a devastating kick to the face. The fox recoiled and snapped at empty air, Finn having climbed down his body and onto his ankle.

“Down you go!” Finn hissed, his jaws snapping shut over Nick’s Achilles tendon.

Nick howled in agony and toppled over, yelping as he landed on his bad arm. Finn clambered up his writhing prey, biting at random as he went, ripping and tearing flesh and fur. Blood flicked from Finn’s jaws in long, ropey drops.

‘I have to help him!’ Judy thought frantically as she looked around for something to throw.

Finn stood over a panting, exhausted Nick, his jaws dripping with blood. “Farewell, foxy–Ack!”

A chair leg bounced off Finn’s skull and nearly threw him off balance. Nick took this opportunity to snap up at his attacker, catching the ferret around the midsection between his powerful jaws. Nick clenched his jaws, Finn’s ribs cracked audibly and a gout of blood spurted from his mouth. Nick growled and jumped onto all fours, thrashing the ferret around violently, snaps and crunches could be heard throughout as Finn’s body bent and snapped at odd angles.
Nick let go of his prey mid-thrash, sending the limp body cartwheeling through the air before hitting a wall and collapsing in a crooked, bloody heap.

    Nick panted heavily, too winded to snarl or growl. He turned to Judy, who was shakily getting to her feet. He bared his teeth and hobbled towards her for a few moments before collapsing on the ground, unconscious.

    Judy wasted no time fastening zap-straps around Nick’s limbs. Judy made her way over to Finn, staring down at his grotesque, bloody body. He was bent and contorted to an almost hideous degree, his spine almost certainly shattered. Blood oozed from the countless puncture wounds that dotted his body, his insides must have been shredded.

    Satisfied that neither was going anywhere, Judy set off out the door and down the hall. Her footsteps echoed in the eerie quiet of the hallway, the steady lowing of the massive pump became louder and louder as she approached the maintenance room. Slowly, tentatively, she pushed open the door and glanced inside. She immediately regretted it, the stink of blood and gunsmoke mingled with the horrid stench of burning fur and cooked meat. Two bodies lay on the ground, one a charred mass of carbonized flesh and the other a ravaged tatters. Judy swallowed hard and walked over to the security console, she noticed a large red button flashing in the center of the panel with a label that read ‘emergency lock-down’. Judy hit the button and jumped at the sound of all the unlocking doors as they clunked throughout the facility.

    Judy gave the bodies around her one final examination; she should have felt jubilant, exultant, victorious, but she didn’t. All she felt was smothering tired regret. Regret that any of this had happened in the first place, that anyone, even these three, had to die because of it. Judy sighed sadly and exited the room, unable to stomach looking at them any longer.

    She shuffled back into the waiting room, looking over at Nick to make sure he was still where she had left him. He lay on the ground, his arms bound together at the elbow as not to exacerbate his gruesome broken arm, his side rose and fell in great billowing huffs, as though he was still panicking despite his unconsciousness. Judy knelt next to her fallen partner and ran a hand through his soft, warm fur.

    There was a grunt from the far side of the room and Judy shot to her feet. She warily approached the corpse in the corner of the room, her heart thundering. She stood over his ravaged body and nudged him with her foot, leaping back when he uttered a sputtering, clotted cough as blood sprayed from his mouth. He looked up at her and grinned, there was a hitching coughing sound she assumed was supposed to be laughter. Judy shuddered at the high, merry smile on his face.

    “Good game, Detective,” Finn gurgled. “You two really…showed us.”

    “I didn’t want this,” Judy muttered, kneeling next to him. “Not for any of you.”

    Finn blinked, grinning wider. “Even after all that? I thought for sure I made a little killer out of you. Guess I’ll have to try harder next time.”

    Judy leaned in, on her face was that practiced stoic mien. “I’m game when you are. Now, who hired you? You were given the documents to look over, the catalyst. You must know something.”

    Finn gurgled something that was supposed to be a chuckle. “You’ll find Boss soon enough, or they’ll find you. Ha! You’ll find out more than you ever wanted! You think you’ve won?! Eh-heh! It’s everywhere! In everyone! Boss’ll find some other bastards to do the job and this city will

Finn laughed loudly and shrilly, gasping between cackles as he did. Suddenly, the laughter broke off into a series of gurgles and sputters, he jittered and convulsed on the ground as something inside him gave way or ruptured. The ferret loosed a croak, his eyes wide and terrible, and seemed to deflate; a low clicking gurgle escaped his toothy, rictus-grinning mouth. He was still.

Unfazed, Judy walked back over to Nick and sat down at his side, stroking his fur as his flank heaved. “Let’s just sit here a bit, yeah?”

Chapter End Notes

Holy SHIT was this exhausting to write.

There'll be a 13th and final chapter later in the week/month, where all the questions are answered!

I really cranked this one out so as not to leave y'all hanging on that cliff for too long. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go have a heart attack.

Remember, critique/reviews = faster updates so you guys let me know if you liked or didn't like it ESPECIALLY if you didn't like it (explain why)

Peace!
Well, here we are. The final chapter.

What's gonna happen?

Who can say?

(I can, but I won't because I'm feeling sassy)

“Detective Hopps,” said Doctor Gato, sitting across from the despondent rabbit. “You have to talk to me if we're going to make progress.”

“I've answered all your questions, Doctor,” Judy said, the protein-bond sealing the slash on her face itched fiercely. “What more is there to say?”

“I've read your report about what happened,” Doctor Gato said, smiling warmly. “In my professional opinion, there's plenty to talk about.”

“Seems to be the popular opinion,” Judy scoffed, a sour smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “Book deals, exclusive interviews, I even heard Marten Scorsese is working on commissioning a screenplay. 'Water Under the Bridge', he's calling it.”

“That's a bit on the nose,” said Doctor Gato.

“It's a working title.”

Gato tapped her pen on her notepad, drawing Judy's attention to her. “We're not here to talk about that, we're here to talk about you.”

‘In case you forgot what you're here for!’ Judy shuddered, the healing slash on her face burned.

“Judy?”

“I'm fine!” Judy snapped, unconsciously rubbing her throbbing cheek. “I answered all your questions! I'm sleeping all right, I'm eating, and I'm healthy! Nothing's wrong!”

Gato shook her head, her tone gentle. “No one's saying there's anything wrong. This isn't about you answering questions or diagnosing mental health, Judy, it's about how you feel.”

“I feel fine,” Judy said, looking out the window; children played in the park across the street, in their hands were plastic water guns with which they sprayed each other into a giggling frenzy.

“About everything?” Gato said, pointedly; Judy knew exactly what she omitted from the query.
Detective Wilde's bloodwork has come back clean, he's completely clear of any Nighthowler contamination.” Judy felt anger welling up in her with uncharacteristic speed, threatening to bubble over. “He'll be fine.”

Doctor Gato sensed this and nodded. “Then I suppose we're done for today.”

“Same time tomorrow?” Judy said wanly, knowing the answer.

“That's right, Detective,” Doctor Gato said with a nod, getting up and opening the door. “I would like for you to reconsider your petition to return to work.”

“Professional opinion?” Judy said, flintily.

“Personal observation,” Gato clarified. “You just went through a terrible trauma and someone dear to you is in a coma. To me, you are showing atypical signs of repressed anxiety and posttraumatic stress. But, as you say, you are eating, sleeping, and appear fully functional and stable. I stress 'appear'; the fact that we have not found your trigger does not preclude the possibility of future incidents. I will submit my findings to the board.”

“Are shrinks supposed to tell their patients stuff like that?” Judy said, grinding her teeth.

“No, but I want you to consider my opinion from a professional point of view. Would you support someone who's been through what you have to return to any job, much less one as stressful as law enforcement, after just one week? You've no doubt seen the results of PTSD in your time on the force.”

“Are you implying I'd hurt someone?” Judy said, outraged.

“Youself, more likely,” said Gato.

Judy shook her head and left the room. “I'll think about it.”

Judy stormed down the hall, giving the receptionist a terse goodbye as she left.

She nearly broke into a sprint getting to be car, it was early in the afternoon and the sun had yet to reach its zenith, but it was already too hot, too late; Nick had been open to visitors for nearly two hours, and time was ticking. Nick was waiting.

It had been an eternity since the paramedics, under heavy guard from the ZPDs largest, loaded Nick into the ambulance to be shipped off to quarantine. Since then, every request for a visit was rebuffed as the unusual nature of the poisoning meant that the antidote merely broke the cycle between catalyst and stored agents. Each day there was less and less of the catalyst in his system until, late the other night, the tests finally came back negative. He was safe to visit.

Except...

In five days of constant surveillance Nick never regained consciousness. While the toxin was no longer active in his system, the injuries he sustained in his gruesome fight with Grigori had put titanic strain on his body.

When questioned, his doctor simply shrugged and said: "I'm not used to seeing injuries like this outside of industrial or vehicular accidents. For someone who's sustained wounds of this nature, a small period of unresponsiveness is not altogether uncommon."
That was three days ago.

The angry bitterness in the pit of her stomach roiled and percolated, her hands gripped and twisted the cover of the steering wheel. She grit her teeth and coiled her fist back like a spring and loosed it, denting the hard plastic of her dashboard.

A jolt of pain shot up her arm followed by a radiating throb. Judy huffed and flexed her hand; in a way, it was liberating, there was some measure of catharsis was to be had in the pain. It cleared her mind, damped the coiled acid-thing in her gut. She felt like she could be around people again.

She pulled up to the hospital and her improved mood was obliterated instantly; waiting for her outside the hospital was a throng of press. The scavengers caught her scent (or saw her car) and began to whip themselves into a frenzy, clamoring around her vehicle as it parked.

"Detective! Detective!" A bovine reporter lowed. "It is true that the terrorists were hired by the Reptiles?"

"Is Detective Wilde still savage?" said another.

A particularly shrill rabbit clambered over the other reporters. "Can you comment on the exact nature of your relationship with Detective Wilde?"

'You're about to thank your lucky stars that we're so close to a hospital!' Judy fumed, preparing to swing her door open and make her way through the crowd one way or another.

A knocking from above her head drew her attention; a familiar trunk waved at her through the sunroof.

Judy sighed in relief. "Francine?"

The trunk nodded and signed, 'need a lift?'

Judy flashed a thumbs-up out the driver's side window and opened the sunroof. The trunk wasted little time and plucked her from her car. Judy was hoisted up above the clamoring throng and placed gingerly on Francine's gigantic shoulder.

"Thanks, Franky," Judy said, patting her shoulder as the huge elephant strode through the crowd.

"It's nothing," Francine replied. "After what you've been through, you don't need to take shit from anyone, especially the press."

Francine set Judy down on the hospital steps and bellowed at the reporters attempting to follow. Judy looked over at the receptionist, the same young oryx from before, and approached the desk.

"Room 055," she said quietly. "They've been waiting for you."

Without a word, Judy set off down the hallway. She immediately saw the clot of blue uniforms at the other end, half of precinct one must have turned out. Officer McHorn was comforting a blubbering Clawhauser as Fangmeyer and Delgato exchanged hushed words, words that were as clear and sharp as cloister bells to Judy's ears.

"I'd heard he was in bad shape, but I had no idea!" Delgato whispered. "A bobcat did that to
"Lynx," Fangmeyer corrected. "And you should have seen the guy, I wouldn't want to fight him without back-up. He broke a buffalo's neck, for God's sake!"

"And Wilde killed him?" Delgato said, astonished.

"Chewed off the back of his goddamn head!" Fangmeyer smirked. "Remind me to keep on his good side once he wakes up."

"If he wakes up," Delgato said, somberly.

"Shh! Shut up! Here she comes!"

A hush fell over the assorted officers as Judy approached. Clawhauser sniffled and opened the door for her. "The Chief's in there with Nick's Mom. How're you holding up?"

"As well as can be expected." Judy turned and walked through the door. "Excuse me."

The hospital room was festooned with flowers and drawings that ranged from crayon doodles scrawled by children, to tasteful and impressive portraits. Mayor Ketchikan had made a point to play up the 'heroic' deeds of Zootopia's star officers, and the public had responded in kind. Judy suspected that the impressive floral display and outpouring of gifts in the room was only a fraction of what the hospital received.

It should have warmed her heart.

Judy looked over at Chief Bogo, towering over a distraught Mrs. Wilde as she sat at her son's side. The look on the enormous, surly buffalo's face was soft and gentle; his hand on her shoulder was comforting and sincere. They both looked over and saw her.

"Judy!" Mrs Wilde cried, she got to her feet and pulled her into a tight hug. "I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Nothing could keep me away," Judy said, softly, looking over in Nick's general direction, unable to actually look at her stricken partner. "Nothing."

"Nick, honey," Mrs. Wilde said, gently patting his still hand. "Judy's here. We're all here for you, Nicky."

"Mrs. Wilde," Bogo said gingerly. "We'll just be a moment. Hopps, with me."

Judy looked back at Nick and his mother before turning and heading out the door. Bogo made sure the door was shut before he addressed the assembled officers in his characteristic commanding tone. "Well? Wilde's here, you've all had a gawk, now get your blubbering asses back to P-1 before this city eats itself alive! On the double, we can't expect those lily-hides at P-2 to pick up our slack! Move it, people, move it!"

She stood off to the side as Zootopia's finest filed out, each of them muttering quick, sincere well wishes as they did. The last was Clawhauser, his eyes were red and the fur beneath them was damp and matted, he extended his hand to her. Judy smiled wanly and took it, patting the top of his hand. Bogo strode in and shooed the cheetah away with a curt snort.

Once alone, Bogo turned to Judy, a scowl on his face. "I haven't had the chance to say this yet, but that was an incredibly stupid thing you did."
"I know," Judy said quietly.

"It was reckless, dangerous, foolhardy, and, I repeat, just incredibly stupid!" Bogo leaned against the wall and sighed. "And, it just so happens that it was the right decision."

"So, I'm not fired?" Judy said, a wan smile on her face.

"That was never even on the table, Hopps," Bogo said with a smirk. "I just wanted to let you know that you don't get points for heroism, only scars or worse."

Judy rubbed her face and sighed. "No offense, sir, but think I figured that one out all by myself."

There was a pause between them; the ambient sounds of the hospital filled the air, the beeps of machines, the taps of feet, the squeak of a gurney as it rolled by.

It was Bogo who broke the silence. "Your petition to return to active duty has been denied."

"What?!" Judy said, snapping around to face him. "But I'm fine! I don't care what Gato says-"

"Neither do I," Bogo interrupted. "I haven't even read her report. I don't care what the shrink says, that doesn't enter into it. You're taking a one week paid vacation."

"But-!"

Bogo fixed her with a glare that killed the words in her throat, when he spoke his words were measured and calm. "I've been doing this for thirty years, Hopps. How many times do you think I've seen hard-nosed, tough cops like you get knocked down a peg?" Judy opened her mouth to respond, Bogo continued. "More than I care to remember. It happens all the time, Hopps, and it never changes. People like you get hurt, see others get hurt, or see people they love get hurt, and they all think that the best thing for it is to bury themselves and their feelings in work. Well, it's not. It never works. You need time and you need honesty, with others and with yourself. That's the only thing that will do you any good. So, a week of paid vacation, if you give me any more lip, I'll make it a month. Do you understand?"

Judy scowled at the floor and nodded. She turned to re-enter the room when she felt a huge, heavy hand settle on her shoulder. "It's not your fault, Hopps. Hindsight is 20/20, and you could have waited for back up or gone for help. But you didn't know that, you couldn't have known that. You did a stupid, foolhardy thing, but you had good reason to. That's more than most people in your position have. The fact that any of us are alive at all is thanks to you and Wilde. You're both damn good cops."

Judy paused, staring at the door her hand was resting on. Without warning, she spun around and hugged Bogo's leg, her eyes wet with tears. "Thanks, Chief."

"Hopps," Bogo grumbled, a very faint blush warming his ears. "You have five seconds."

"Hush," she said, squeezing harder. "I'm not on duty and this is part of my therapy."

Bogo sighed and relented, patting her on the back. "When he wakes up." Judy looked up at Bogo, her face must have betrayed something because Bogo set his hand on her shoulder, his expression stern. "When he wakes up."

Judy felt fresh tears well up in her eyes, she saluted and nodded.
Judy entered the room; Mrs. Wilde sat next to her son, a letter in her hands. "...‘Mr. Wilde, when I saw on the news that you were hurt I wanted to write you and wish you well. You stopped the bad guys from doing whatever it was they were doing. I think you are 'sooooo' cool, and when I grow up I want to be a police officer like you. I hope you get better soon and get back on the streets. Zootopia is safer with you around. Thank you for saving me, my mom and dad, my pet scorpion Prong, and my sister I guess. From: Gavin Cederchuck.’” Mrs. Wilde sighed happily and laughed. "Sounds like you have a fan, lovey."

"Hey, Mrs. Wilde," Judy said quietly, walking over to the bed. "Reading letters?"

"Please, Judy, call me Betty. They say that even in a coma, people can hear what's being said around them," Mrs. Wilde said, passing a handful of letters to Judy. "I think it's important that Nick knows how much people appreciate him."

Judy looked over at Nick for the first time in a week; the swelling was still noticeable and his rich, luxurious fur had been shaved away a week prior, not even covering up the black protein bonds from where the surgeons had reassembled his shattered face. Judy felt a pang of guilt, if she had waited for him they could have taken the trio together, he might not have been put through so much suffering; he'd be awake right now.

Judy felt a hand grasp hers; she looked up to see Betty’s smiling face. Judy picked up an envelope and opened it, reading the blocky, childish scrawl inside. "Dear Detective Wilde. It's Jimmy Bandedson from the Junior Ranger Scouts. Remember when you broke Scoutleader Chip's arm for teaching us to steal and the bone stuck out and it sounded like breaking celery? I was the zebra who threw up mini-bites on your back."

Judy stopped reading and snickered, remembering when Nick had stormed into the precinct one day reeking of vomit; his only explanation was 'it's mini-bites' before storming off to the showers. Judy began to laugh, clapping a hand over her mouth to stop it from becoming hearty guffaws. She failed. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she laughed hysterically, all the guilt and sadness and fear that had plagued her for that long, painful week was washed away by the mental image of Nick being painted by regurgitated Chef Boy-Ar-Degus. Betty reached over and patted her on the back, beginning to giggle herself.

Judy calmed down and grabbed his hand, smiling genuinely for the first time in days. "Sorry about that, Nick. Just remembering how well you wore that pasta."

She regarded him again, his face was swollen and bruised, but less than it had been. His fur was essentially peach fuzz over the black surgical scars, but it was growing in just as thick as it was before. She probably wouldn't even see them by tomorrow.

It may have been her imagination, but Judy felt his fingers clench around her hand.

Things were looking up.
It was the next day and City Hall was bustling, visible even from afar. Aside from the seemingly inescapable press mobs there was also a lively picket marching back and forth in front of the main administrative building. Predator, Prey, large and small, all could be seen toting signs and chanting a slogan of some kind. Judy swished her carrot juice around in the glass, the ice cubes clacking together dully, and looked out the tinted window of the limo as she took a sip. One of the Mayor’s secret service goons, a tallish wolf in a nice suit, had been kind enough to drop by with a summons and a smile that never quite reached his eyes, eyes that now sized her up from across the cab. She wasn’t overly fond of the looks; they spoke of someone on guard, someone plotting out a plan of attack. She wasn’t nervous, though, she had a close relationship with the owner of the limo company (as well a few other fascinating enterprises), so any funny business on behalf of the ZIA spook was likely to end poorly.

“Is it true?” he said, still sizing her up with wary eyes. “You killed Finnegan McNulty?”

Judy blinked in surprise; she rallied quickly and cleared her throat, shaking her head. “That would be my partner. Grigori and Elim, too. I didn’t kill any of them.”

“Ah,” he said, not looking at all surprised. “Rumors and such, you understand.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Judy muttered, looking out the window again, the protests must have been holding up traffic, because the gridlock was unreal.

“Hardly!” the wolf said, laughing. “You just don’t seem the type.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well,” the wolf said, scooting down the seat until he was sitting opposite from her. “My line of work, you see a lot of tough guys and hard-asses. Real ‘drink fire and shit ice’ folk. Not a one of them could have stone-faced Shark like you did. Hell, no one I’ve met could have gotten the Mangler in an arm-bar, either! So, when I say you don’t seem the type, it’s a compliment, because those that do couldn’t do what you did.”

Judy rolled her eyes and tapped her healing cheek. “I’ve got a keepsake for my trouble, not to mention a bruise the size of my head on my ribs. Maybe those tough guys and hard-asses have something I don’t, like an ounce of common sense.”

“You’re better off than most people who went toe-to-toe with those monsters. Your partner, too, seeing as how you’re both still breathing.” The wolf smiled and shook his head. “I’m impressed, is what I’m trying to say. You’re pretty tough for a bunny.”

‘For a bunny,’ Judy thought, looking back out the window. “Thanks. That means a lot, Mr…?”

“Quinlan Barker, ZIA,” Quinlan said, offering his hand.

“Charmed.” Judy took his hand and shook it. “Now, how did you know about my ‘impressive’ accomplishments? I was under the impression that the security systems were down.”

"Normally, I'd say that's classified," Quinlan said, leaning back and crossing his arms. "But since you're technically part of this investigation, I'll tell you. The Cipher, you know him as Richard, never liked to shut down a system completely, as it was easy to notice afterwards during
an investigation. Nah, he just hooks it all up so that the system doesn't recognize the incoming data, making the cameras seem busted. All the video still gets recorded, it's just that no-one sees it as it happens, and it gets erased once the program is removed, i.e. when the job is done. See, there's a reason these guys have a reputation."

Judy nodded and sighed, part of her wanted to see how Nick managed to save the city while she was playing straight-face with a lunatic. Also, "What do you mean 'technically' a part of this investigation?"

Quinlan smirked and shook his head. "I'm not that brave. You'll have to take that up with the committee. Besides, we're here."

Judy looked out the window again; the limo had pulled up to the very steps of City Hall, the parking lot and much of the sidewalks taken up by picket lines and protesters.

"Funny, isn't it?" Quinlan said. "The way these folk carry on, you'd think a little Nighthowler got out. I've yet to see a terrorist cell that was stopped by catchy chants and cardboard signs!"

"They're just scared," Judy said, her ears drooping. "Someone almost killed them, their families, and they couldn't do anything about it. No one wants to feel helpless, and this eases that, I suppose."

"Just a bunch of shouting and bluster," Quinlan said, snidely. "Well? Better get out there, Detective. You're just about the only person in the world they want to see walking into City Hall. Go sedate the masses."

Judy rolled her eyes and opened the door, stepping out into the unforgiving sun. "Pleasure speaking with you, Agent Barker."

"Pleasure's all mine, Detective." He reached over and beat his fist on the driver's window. "Hey! I'm a little peckish, how about taking me to a drive-thru? Heh! Always wanted to take a limo through a drive-thru."

Quinlan shut the door with a slam. The driver, a burly tiger, leaned towards the passenger window where Judy could see him. He drew his clawed finger across his throat and shot her a questioning look. Judy shook her head and waved him on, the driver shrugged and pulled away. Judy turned around and ascended the steps to City Hall, trying to ignore the roar of the crowd behind her.

"Detective Hopps," Mayor Ketchikan said, beckoning her. "Do come in."

Judy nodded and entered the meeting room. In attendance around the large, glossy polished wood table were several important looking figures. A few she recognized, like much of Ketchikan's inner circle, the district attorney, and Agent Bales of Interpol, but there were more than a few new faces. ZIA, no doubt.

"I trust you noticed the smattering of concerned citizens outside," Ketchikan drawled. "Let's cut the shit and get right down to brass tacks: I need your guarantee that this is the last we'll hear of this Nighthowler business."

"Sir?" Judy said, a confused smile on her face.
Ketchikan did not smile back. "I need you, Judy Hopps, to come out and put this matter to rest. We need it on record from a source people trust that this is the last we'll hear of this god forsaken plot."

Judy paused, trying to formulate a response that involved as few curse words as possible. "I'm sorry, Sir. I can't do that."

The committee sat in silence, all eyes on her. Judy took this as a tacit 'explain yourself' and continued. "You see, there's still the issue of the contamination, not to mention the people who put it there. Our first course of action should be the immediate apprehension of all OmniGreen and Bug Burga's upper management for questioning. Food recalls are a must, as well as-"

"Detective Hopps," Mayor Ketchikan said, sternly. "There will be no investigation of either Bug Burga or OmniGreen."

Judy's eyes went wide. "What?!"

The District Attorney, a puma named James Leon, spoke next. "The legal battle would cost the city immensely, and any and all evidence of criminal wrongdoing has long since been destroyed or covered up. At present, finding and convicting those responsible is almost nil. Our energy would be better spent on damage control."

"I can't believe this!" Judy exclaimed. "Someone out there tried to exterminate this city and none of you are even going to try and catch them?!!"

"Of course we are, Detective," one of the ZIA reps broke in. "We've already put together a list of potential suspects, we just can't break the case publicly, or even let it be known that half the poison was in the food. As far as anyone will know, the terrorists acted of their own volition, motivated by a fanatical hatred for Zootopia, and were going to dump a Nighthowler ultra-concentrate into the water. Meanwhile our operatives will work on finding out the exact nature of the poisoning and weed it out of the produce."

"Why?!" Judy cried, her heartbeat thudding in her ear. "Why all the cloak and dagger runaround? Those people out there and everyone in this room has been getting poisoned by the food company for the past God knows how long, and you're just going to cover it up?!"

"Calm down, Detective," said the ZIA agent. "Those responsible will be held accountable and the threat will be removed. Does the public really need to know more than it does now?"

"Was that a legitimate question?" Judy inquired, her tone flat and her gaze withering. "The people have a right to know how they're being attacked! If you brush this off as a bunch of extremists acting unilaterally, no one's going to be looking where they should be the next time it happens!"

"Next time?" Ketchikan said, nervously. "What makes you so sure they'll try again? Surely they know we'll have taken measures to protect the water supply?"

"They might not even go after the water next time, and there will be a next time! Elim, Grigori and Finn were just tools, pawns doing the dirty work; that goes for everyone on your fancy list, too. The mastermind is still at large, and they have the connections, capital, and the will to try again! We need to tell the people what's out there, for their own safety!"

"Their safety' !" Ketchikan scoffed. "This is for their safety! Imagine what would happen if people found out that the very food they depend on to survive has been compromised? Bug
Burga-OmniGreen and their subsidiaries account for 95% of all food items grown and sold in all of Mammalia! Ten million jobs in Zootopia alone! Can you even begin to fathom the fallout if it were known that both were not only compromised, but semi-complicit in the largest attempted terrorist attack in recorded history? There would be massive unemployment! Riots! Panic! Farms would be razed to the ground! Vigilantes! Lynch mobs!

'Mammal sacrifices! Foxes and bunnies living together! Mass hysteria!' Judy thought in Nick's voice. "We can't just lie! The truth will get out sooner or later!"

"It's not a lie, Hopps," the ZIA agent cooed, as though speaking to a child. "A dangerous bunch with a nasty past came together and tried to trigger a massive Nighthowler epidemic. That is what happened, isn't it? There's already enough fear and paranoia out there, do you really want to make it worse?"

Judy clenched her fists and sighed. "Give me some time to...prepare. Two days."

"Granted!" Mayor Ketchikan said happily. "I'll announce it later today. Full press coverage! Trust me, Hopps, you're doing far more for the city this way!"

"Hm," Judy grunted. "Is there anything else you wanted to discuss, Mr. Mayor?"

"Yes, there is." Ketchikan notched his spectacles down his snout. "Emmet, if you would?"

One of the Mayor's bodyguards stepped forward and presented Judy with a largish wooden box; it was a lacquered hardwood of some kind that had been sanded and polished to an impeccable finish. He opened it to reveal a very regal and expensive-looking decanter of scotch resting on a Tyrian purple velvet cushion, affixed to the lid of the box in velvet-lined alcoves were two ornate crystal glasses. "Loch Glenriach sixty year old single malt port finish. Only one hundred gallons were ever distilled, half of which was lost in the Great Emerald Islands Fire of '25. Said to have the most sublimely intricate and delicate flavor in high society scotch drinking circles, all inside a Lalique crystal decanter. For Detective Wilde, when he wakes up."

Judy gaped at the gift, she had learned enough from being around Nick on his infrequent scotch benders to know she could very well be looking at something literally priceless. "Sir...I don't know what to say."

"Your gift, of course, is forthcoming. You're a difficult person to shop for," Ketchikan tapped the table for a moment, his eyes distant. "I may be a loud, officious, vainglorious podium-thumper, but don't think for a second that I don't appreciate what you and Detective Wilde did for all of us. Heh! Not even I would want the distinction of being Zootopia's last mayor! Also...my little girl was at a water park that day...thank you, Detective. If you ever need anything, anything at all, you need only ask."

"Sir, I-"

Ketchikan smiled warmly. "Please, call me Karl."

"Karl..." Judy said, smirking. "Give your little girl my regards."
Judy down the hospital hallway, her face grim and determined, 'I have two days to track Boss down and dismantle a massive, genocidal organization. As Nick would say, 'must be Tuesday'!

Her ears perked as she approached his room, there was laughter emanating from the slightly ajar door, a man's laughter. Judy hurried over and swung open the door. Sitting around Nick was his mother, a wheelchair-bound Richie, and a large, muscular hyena woman.

Richie grinned and waved his hook at her. "Judy! Come on in! The Hulk and I were just getting to know Slick's sister, here!"

Mrs Wilde giggled at the compliment, waving him off. "Richie! Honestly, you are incorrigible!"

"Tell me about it!" the hyena said, with a snort. "Guy rolls into my room, waves his stump around and says 'gonna go out on a limb here, but I think we know a guy'! You have to laugh to stop yourself from crying!"

Judy giggled and patted Richie on the shoulder. "Well, our mutual acquaintance won't be bothering anyone else."

"Yeah," Richie said, his smile fading. "They got what was coming to them, sure enough. But even after everything, I still wish that, I dunno, I coulda talked them out of it, out of the life. Maybe things could have been different? They were bad people, evil people, but they were all I had, my only friends."

Judy nodded and set a hand on his shoulder. "Not anymore."

The hyena hobbled over on crutches, her left foot was bandaged and splinted. "Hey there! My name's Rebecca, people just call me Beck. I met Dick over there a few days ago, he helped me, uh, handle the whole…ferret thing."

Judy reached out and patted her hand, noticing the bandage on her neck. "You were one of the security guards…I'm so sorry about your coworkers."

Beck smiled wanly and nodded. "Thanks. It helps, you know, to talk about it with someone who's been through it."

"We call ourselves Chew Toys Anonymous." Richie snickered. "We meet in the cafeteria and complain about the food every night at 8."

Beck reached over and swatted the chuckling dik-dik atop his head, Judy laughed and turned to Betty. "I have an amazing gift for Nick from Mayor Ketchikan, you may have to hold onto it for him, though."

Betty smiled and nodded, patting Judy on the shoulder. "A gift from the Mayor f-for my boy…" Betty’s voice hitched as tears began to spill down her face, propping herself up on Nick’s bed. "My baby boy…he was lost for long. But he’d found himself, he was getting better…"
Judy set her hand on Betty’s arm. “He’ll wake up. You have to stay strong, we all do.”

Beck limped over, towerng over the two, her massive hand on Betty’s shoulder. “Mrs. Wilde, I came here to thank your son for saving me. I was bleeding out on the floor, crippled and scared…he patched me up and carried me out by himself, all two hundred pounds! W-what I’m trying to say is…thank you, ma’am. Your son is a hero, and you should be proud. If there’s anything I can do to help you through this, you just ask!”

“Yeah!” Richie said, rolling over. “I can fix you up so you never have to pay for your cell phone, Wi-Fi, nothing! I can even get you a inside bid on some pretty juicy stocks!”

Judy rolled her eyes and shooed him away. “Richie! Nothing illegal! Hacking cell phones and…” A flash. “…Stocks. Richie!”

“Uh, yeah, Judy?” Richie said as he exchanged confused looks with the others. “What is it?”

“Did you guys have any way of contacting Boss?” Judy said, smiling frantically. “How did they contact you?”

Richie smiled. “We get all our job calls through Elim’s cell. I tried tracing them the first time they called, but they had a whole bunch of proxies.”

Judy’s face fell. “You couldn’t do it?”

“Not from a civvie set-up while trying to lay low,” Richie smirked, his one eye glittering. “But if I had, say, cop hardware and no overhead? Well…that’s a whole other story.”

Judy laughed and hugged him, dashing around behind him and grabbing the handles of his chair. “Beck, Betty! We’ll see you later, there’s something I have to do!”

“Okay then, dear,” Betty said. “We’ll just…”

The door slammed shut, the sound of rapidly retreating footfalls and squeaking wheels echoed down the halls.

“…Stay here.” Betty turned to Beck. “So, Rebecca! Do you know how to sew? Knit? Do needlepoint?”

“Naw! My mother wouldn’t hear of it! As a girl I was always passed around from hockey, rugby, football, to bare-knuckle boxing! She’d say ‘Beck, if’n you wanna do somethin’ soft, you do it on your own time!’ So, uh…” Beck looked around, making sure no one was listening in, “…yeah, I do. Y’know, as a hobby.”

Betty smiled, producing knitting needles and yarn from her bag. “Show me what you got!”

Bogo stood outside the police station, his biggest and baddest at his side. He’d been
expecting Hopps to call him up with some ridiculous lead to follow or some asinine theory that would most likely turn out to be right. Sure enough, she hadn’t kept him waiting long and before he knew it he had a world-renowned criminal heading his way. Richardson was the least deadly quarter of the team, but he was far and away its most alive member, and if a tenth of what Bogo had heard about them was true, then the least deadly mammal was still deadly enough. Bogo bristled at the thought of aiding a known terrorist, but Hopps trusted him, and there was a point in every chief’s life where a little faith was the only option. Besides, without Richardson helping Hopps, the whole ZPD would likely be backed into a corner by a savage mob or joining them in their frenzy. He smirked inwardly, he’d heard the little guy had quite the mouth on him, anyone with enough sand to back-sass after literally being chewed apart was worth a second look. The black sedan rolled up the parking lot, flanked by cruisers, their signals flashing red and blue.


“We have eyes, Delgato,” Bogo said, quietly. “And stop trembling, it’s bad for morale.”

“Yeah!” Fangmeyer snickered. “He’s just a dik-dik! He’s their computer guy, that’s all.”

“What’s a dik-dik?” Trunkaby asked.

“Like an antelope, but smaller, and with a weird nose.” Fangmeyer said, smacking Delgato chidingly. “You’re afraid of an itty-bitty antelope.”

“Does it matter?” Delgato said, defensively. “One of these guys was a fucking ferret and he killed a bull elephant!”


“Shut.” Bogo growled, turning around to glare at the officers. “Up.”

The car pulled up and the door swung open. After a moment of silence the wheelchair access ramp whirred and set down on the sidewalk. The assembled cops stood in awkward silence as the agent in the front seat, someone who no doubt considered himself overqualified for such a job, scuttled out and over to the ramp to assist the tiny wheelchair onto the sidewalk, all while under an unrelenting barrage of venom from the diminutive figure in the chair.

“…City’s in danger and all you’re doing is checking your Muzzlebook page on your phone!” the tiny figure bellowed at his tiger handler. “And don’t think I didn’t see you checking out that puma chick! She’s dating someone, you’re married, and trust me, when a lady so much as thinks you’re cheating, they can pull shit that would impress even me! And this is from the guy who got his customer a penny on every stock traded over the course of a year, that’s more money than your wage-slave government allowance could put together in a century! Go get your girl a bouquet, you shmuck!”

The ZIA agent grumbled something foul as he pushed the invalid towards the cops. Chief Bogo stepped forward, acknowledging the ZIA agent with only as much respect and regard as was customary, quickly turning to his new associate. “Mr. Richardson. I’m Chief Bogo, I speak on behalf of the ZPD when I say that we are grateful for any assistance you can offer.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the dik-dik scoffed. “I have terms, so listen up.”

Bogo leaned over, slowly, deliberately, to let the little antelope know how small he was; the smile on his face was neither comforting nor friendly as he snorted in his face. “Do tell.”

The Cipher responded by puffing a hard breath of air directly into Bogo’s nostril, causing
the burly buffalo to recoil as though bitten, sputtering and blinking at the sudden intrusion. Unimpressed, the dik-dik scratched his cheek with his hook hand. “One: my buddy Wilde had to go and threaten a doctor in order to save the city. Make that go away.”

“We can’t—” Bogo began, before the clicking of the hook in the armrest silenced him.

“Two: I wanna be hired on as one of your cyber-warfare desk-jockeys. Full benefits, everything. My chauffeur will give you all my witness-protection info, so you know who you’re hiring for a change.” The tiger standing behind the acerbic grazer stepped forward with a folder and handed it to Bogo.

“And third,” Richie said, gesturing at the ZIA agent. “Could you please get this spook outta here? He’s giving me a rash.”

Bogo tucked the folder under his arm and gestured for the agent to leave, and not without a measure of satisfaction, either. When the tiger began to protest, the assembled officers rumbled their support for their chief and stepped in. The agent, not terribly invested in the wellbeing of his ward, shrugged and stepped back into the Sedan and drove off.

“Now,” Richie said, smirking. “We’re after the person who tried to murder you all and everyone you’ve ever known. All I need is a certain phone and a computer. The rest is up to me.”

Bogo scowled at the little, crippled antelope, who returned the favor with his remaining eye. It dawned on him just how badly the dik-dik had been mutilated; his face was a mass of hard, intersecting lines of scarred flesh and sewn-up bite marks peppered his arms, to say nothing of his prostheses and the ruin that lay beneath his eye patch. Even his feet were braced and bandaged, as though they had been reassembled. He was a wheelchair-bound ungulate the size of a rabbit, and he was staring down a buffalo backed by a wolf, a tiger, and an elephant. Bogo smirked; this one had sand all right. “Right. Come along, then.”

Judy pulled into the parking lot, a cold pit growing in her stomach; she pulled out her phone and texted Richie.

‘Are you sure?’ she typed. ‘Like, 100% actually factually?’

‘SIGH’ was the response. ‘yes judy i’m sure. sparing you the techy-techy-blah-blah this is the place because it’s the place. the call came from here and went through, like, a whole bunch of different thingies to confuse idiots about where the call came from. am i an idiot, judy?’

Judy rolled her eyes and sighed. ‘No, Richie. You’re not an idiot.’

‘no, no i am not,’ Richie replied. ‘time to get into character. you got this, judy, you got this by the ass!’

‘Thanks, Richie,’ Judy took a deep breath and got out of her car.
Her phone buzzed again. ‘be careful, judy. good luck.’

“I’ll need it,” she said, aloud as she walked towards the main entrance of Zootopia Maximum Security Penitentiary.

The barred doors rolled shut with a clank, the mechanized magnetic locks buzzed as they clamped together with tens of tons of force. Judy raised her arms and spun around as the scanner hummed, her phone and recorder had long since been confiscated along with anything that could be fashioned into a weapon. She walked past the guards, a lion and a bear, flanking the door, returning their salute as she slipped past them. The room was empty save for a single table with two chairs on opposite sides, a small figure in an orange jumpsuit sat in the furthest chair, intently examining something in her hooves, which were cuffed and chained to the table, she looked up as the bunny approached.

Judy walked over and seated herself, locking a dispassionate stare on the figure opposite her. “Former Mayor Bellwether.”

Bellwether smiled warmly. “Oh, Judy! Call me Dawn, please.”

“Alright, Dawn,” said Judy, gesturing at the close-cropped, stylized wool atop her head. “A new hairstyle? It’s nice, looks good on you.”

Dawn laughed squeakily and leaned forward, getting a better look at Judy. “And you! You’re looking well. Healthy and trim as always, maybe a little tired, but that’s to be expected. Word has it you went through something of an ordeal.”

Judy smiled and turned her cheek to reveal the slash of black that stretched from her cheekbone down to her jaw. “You could say that.”

“Oh, dear!” Dawn exclaimed, sounding genuinely mortified. “Oh, but don’t you worry, hon! When that heals up, it’ll look distinguished as all get out!”

“Thanks, Dawn,” Judy said, turning her gaze back to the little ewe.

“Oh!” Dawn said, excitedly, and reached into her pockets. “I have a few letters for you! You see; a lot of the people you’ve apprehended have wound up in here. So much so that we’ve formed a sort of ‘I Was Put Away By Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde’ fanclub! Okay…maybe it’s not quite a ‘fanclub’ per se, but I’m not sure what to call it if not that. All right, first letter is from Doctor Eduardo Blatto! You remember him, right? Male pangolin, about yea tall, likes bugs?”

“Dr. Blatto,” Judy said, flatly, “the mammal who genetically engineered giant bugs in order to eat the CEO who fired him, along with all of Little Rodentia? The same Dr. Blatto who tried to feed me to a 200lb red-kneed tarantula?”

Dawn smiled and nodded. “…Yep!”

“Rings a bell,” Judy said, gesturing at the stack of paper in her hands. “What’s he got to say?”

Dawn cleared her throat and began to read: “Ahem! Dear Detective Hopps. Congratulations on the promotion! Isn’t that nice? ‘As I languish here in my urine-redolent cell, the only thing that keeps me warm is contemplating the bloody vengeance that I will reap upon you and all in your bloodline. I will unleash a keratinous plague upon all of Bunny Burrow, insects will
hollow its corpse! Eggs in innocent blood! Eggs in innocent blood! Eggs in--' Oh dear…” Dawn shuffled the many pages in her hands, her brow furrowing. “… Goes on like this for pages…ah! Here we go, last page! ‘…I will replace your life with spiders. Scream forever in a hell of scorpions. Dr. Eduardo Blatto P.H.D. P.S. I heard about Detective Wilde’s condition. I hope he fucking dies.’ Oh, my! Eddy sure knows how to hold a grudge, doesn’t he? Anyway, I have a letter here from the Shearer…”

Judy slammed her fist down on the table; she’d played this game long enough. “Cut the shit, Boss.”

Dawn’s smile vanished, she looked over at Judy, all the good humor and affability vanished like so much smoke; it always chilled Judy to see how quickly Bellwether could drop so convincing an act. “Oh, come on now. We were having fun, weren’t we? Business is business, I suppose.”

“I have questions,” Judy said, bluntly. “You have answers. Let’s start there, hmm?”

“Shoot,” Bellwether said, tossing the letters over her shoulders as best she could for the chains. “Neither of us is going anywhere.”

“How?” Judy said, rapping her fingers against the table. “How did you contaminate the food?”

“I didn’t,” Bellwether said, glibly. “Nothing was added to the food before, during, or after. Contaminating every piece of food in Zootopia manually would not only be incredibly obvious, but impractical. Use your head, Hopps. How did I do it?”

Judy leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling, the dim little bulbs in their sockets shone down with off-white light colored by the old, tinted plastic. “It would have been a while ago, before you set your main plan into motion. A trial run?”

“Works a bit well for a trial run, don’t you think?” Bellwether smirked and leaned forward. “Think like a politician, Judy! Did you honestly think my masterstroke was something so crass as schlepping around, darting random Preds? Ha! That was Phase One: generate fear and acquire power. Phase Two is: perpetuate fear, and secure power. What better way to keep the population under control than to have everyone be a potential savage? Say I took the Pred thing to its logical conclusion, what then? No more common enemy! The people get restless, complacent, actual voting and politickin’ and democracy resumes! But what if, hey, it turns out certain Prey can go savage, too? Do you have any idea how easy it would be to dose specific people or large swaths with this method? About as easy as getting a plumber to affix a catalyst capsule to a pipe!”

Judy scowled and leaned forward, glaring directly into Bellwether’s eyes. “I believe I asked ‘how’, not ‘why’. I came in here knowing that you were a monster, Dawn, nothing you just said was really all that surprising.”

Bellwether smiled hatefully, sneering as she spoke. “Fine. How? First, the money. I was the Assistant Mayor of the largest mammalian city on the planet; even skimming that pot is a preposterous amount of money! After that, I got a few brainy types to put together a high-frequency trading ring on the Zootopia Stock Exchange, a tiny percentage for every stock traded for a year. A bit of dosh, wouldn’t you say?”

“Right,” Judy said, rolling her eyes. “Money, money, money. I figured you’d stolen it–”

“And used it to buy a huge number of shares in both Bug Burga and OmniGreen under two
different names.” Bellwether cut in. “Not enough to, say, control the companies outright, but enough to be listened to very carefully by those that do. Enough for them to consider purchasing a certain patented plant genome. A plant genome that makes any plant containing it highly repellant to pest insects. A plant genome that was researched, funded, and brought into existence by people in my organization. People who, coincidentally, also did extensive research on a certain purple flower used as bug repellent by hick farmers in the boonies! ‘But how would this plant genome affect Preds’ you ask?’

Judy’s eyes widened. “The merger…”

Bellwether smirked. “That’s right. Naturally, the altered genes in the produce only supply part of the Nighthowler toxin, but that part is also wonderfully transmissible. The plant matter from OmniGreen is used as feed for Bug Burga bugs, which then stored the chemical in their bodies which are soon devoured by Preds. A wonderful symbiosis that results in every mammal in Zootopia being totally lousy with the stuff, a ticking timebomb that needs only the tiniest chemical push to send them cascading into utter savagery! Granted, it took time for the saturation to reach adequate levels, but Phase Two was the long-term plan after all.”

“But…” Judy said, her ears dropping flat against her head. “You’ve been eating the same food! Drinking the same water! When the catalyst was released, you’d go savage just like anyone else!”

“Specially designed filters were affixed the to prison water pipes after a suitably important person wrote a letter and a check to the warden. As for the food…occupational hazard.” To Judy’s horror, Bellwether lazily unclipped the handcuffs from her wrists and let them clatter on the table. “Remember when I said ‘fear always works’? Well, I guess I should have said ‘fear and money always works’. I bet you were planning on using the recording devices all over this hellhole to capture my confession or something. Fool me twice, I don’t think!”

“But–” Judy spun around as the door swung open and the guards stomped into the room and grabbed her, pinning her to the chair.

Bellwether leapt up onto the table and laughed as the guards held her down. “Well, gee, Judy! I guess coming here wasn’t such a great idea, was it? What do you think, Gertrude? A prison riot broke out?”

“There was nothing we could do, ma’am,” ‘Gertrude’ said flatly, avoiding Judy’s eyes. “They were on us in a second, we lost track of Detective Hopps.”

Bellwether smiled viciously and turned back to Judy. “And a few of her old friends on the inside got a hold of her. Oh my! And they were not happy to see her, were they, Naga?”

“No ma’am,” ‘Naga’ mumbled, looking away from the struggling rabbit. “Not happy at all.”

Bellwether sat down on the table and kicked her legs over the edge. “Now, Bunny Bumpkin, any more questions?”

Judy struggled futilely against her enormous captors; she looked up helplessly at Bellwether. “…Why?”

“Why?” Bellwether hissed, reaching down and grabbing Judy’s chin. “Why?! Well, I could spin you a yarn about how easily a prison-break would go unnoticed during a massive outbreak like that. I could tell you that certain drug runners you’ve put away know how to get out of this city
more or less unnoticed. Or how about how once Zootopia is a great big bloodstain and the world assumes Dawn Bellwether fell to the jaws of some slavering beast, that the newly christened Mary Woolstonecraft, wealthy industrialist from the city over, would swoop in and build a new city atop its ruins? A better city. *My* city.” Bellwether shrugged and scoffed. “I *could* tell you all that, but it wouldn’t be the whole story. See, I just...*hate* this city. I *hate* everything about it and everyone in it. I came here, like you, thinking I could make a difference and change the world! But I couldn’t, it was a lie, this city *lied* to me! So, better to wipe away the flawed and rotting edifice and start anew, a lot more cathartic, too!”

“That’s why…” Judy muttered numbly. “That’s why you wanted me to watch. To…feel how you felt. To know that no matter what I do, there was never any hope for Zootopia to begin with.”

Bellwether’s eyes lit up, she hopped off the table and leaned over Judy, grinning. “That’s right! Exactly right! I may not have destroyed the city this time, but at least I get to see that you understand before I…heh…throw you to the army ants.”

Judy nodded fervently, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I do! I do! I now know that no matter where I went or what I did, Zootopia would never be safe! That you’d find some way to destroy everything I built for myself…that everything I ever held dear was doomed. I mean, nowhere is safe!” Bellwether laughed and clapped her hands, opening her mouth to speak but Judy interrupted. “I mean, where could I hide? What could I do? Lock the doors? Bar the windows? Cameras? Sensors? Nowhere is safe! Not an uptown grocery store! Not a warehouse! Not a mansion! Hell! Not even a government building like a super pump station is safe!”

“Uh…” Bellwether recoiled as a smile pulled at the sides of Judy’s mouth. “W–what are you–?”

“Nowhere is safe! Because even a maximum security prison, like *this one*…” Judy continued, grinning now. “…uses a Maxbell Security System.”

Bellwether’s ears dropped like they were made of lead, her expression mortified, Judy looked up at the camera in the corner. “You get all that, Richie?”

“Every word, Detective! In surround sound, from multiple angles!” a voice said over the intercom, Bellwether spun around, her eyes wide as dinner plates. “Hey Boss! I quit!”

“No…” Bellwether whimpered, turning back to Judy, only to find an empty chair and her two guards groaning on the ground. “No!”

A small grey hand tapped her shoulder; Bellwether whirled around and swung her fist, roaring in rage. Judy easily dodged the sloppy, amateurish strike and loosed a fast, powerful punch to the enraged sheep’s gut. Bellwether grunted and dropped to her knees, fighting to keep her lunch where it was. Judy stood over the gasping ewe and shook out her fist, a smirk on her face.

“Well, that was fun,” Judy said, pithily. “Richie, care to send some blueberries over?”

“Oh, they sent the TUSK boys running the second the cuffs came off.” Richie laughed. “The whole force is coming your way, I hope those guards have good lawyers.”

“Y-you think you’ve won?!” Bellwether sputtered, curled over in pain. “Y-you’ve only set me back! I’ll try again! I’ll tear this city apart brick by brick and I’ll make you watch! You hear me?!”
Judy walked over and knelt down next to her, a hard, unfriendly smile on her face. “Go ahead. Try again. You rise up; I’ll put you down. You get out; I’ll throw you back in. It doesn’t matter what you do, I’ll always be here to put you right back where you belong, Dawn. Because, you? You believe in nothing, so that’s what you’ll get: nothing.” Judy rose up straight and walked out the newly unlocked door. “‘Til next time, Smellwether. Don’t be a stranger.”

Judy walked down the hallway of the prison, the overlapping screams of sirens drew closer and closer as a massive police force roared into the parking lot. She smirked to herself as she courteously opened the door for a platoon of heavily armed TUSK operatives, one of whom escorted her out to the parking lot.

“Are you alright, Detective?” he asked. “Do you require a medic?”

“No, no, I’m fine. Thank you, Sergeant,” Judy said, smiling. “Bellwether and her guards are in meeting room 771, they are your first priority. You’re going to want to switch your radios over to frequency 155.91, one of ours has hacked the security system, he’ll walk you and your men through the building.”

“Understood. Good job, Detective!” the Sergeant nodded and took off back towards the building.

She skipped towards her cruiser, grunting as she stretched her arms over her head, hearing the joints pop. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and a brisk breeze was blowing in from over the Trundra Wall: this was a good day.

Her phone buzzed and her heart skipped a beat, the caller I.D. was a picture of her chasing Nick with a massive larva, his face a rictus of disgust and horror.

The text read: ‘Sup’

Judy broke into a sprint, practically leaping into her car. The tires squealed as she tore out of the parking lot and set down the highway at what felt like a respectable fraction of the speed of sound.

Judy sped down the hallway in the hospital, ducking and leaping around obstacles, doctors, and patients. She skidded to a stop outside Nick’s room, panting heavily; she set a shaking hand on the door and pushed it open. Beck, Betty, and Nick’s Doctor all stood around his bed; Nick was sitting up in his bed, looking around and smiling. His beautiful green eyes flicked around as he
chatted and laughed; they turned to her and went wide, his smile fell from his face. Beck and Betty
turned around and saw Judy, after a quick wordless exchange they both stood up and approached
the Doctor.

“Err, Doctor Rickard, Rebecca and I were going to go get some coffee. Would you like to
come with?” Betty said, arching her eyebrow at Judy.

Doctor Rickard shrugged and shook his head. “No, I’m fine. I’d like to discuss bedsore
protocol with Nick for a–”

“Pssh!” Beck said, smiling a little too widely as she towered over the badger. “Nonsense!
C’mon, let’s go grab a cup!”

Doctor Rickard opened his mouth to say something when Betty cleared her throat and
darted her eyes over at Judy, to Nick, and back to Rickard. Rickard blinked in confusion before the
subtext dawned on him. “Ah, yes. Well, coffee with two beautiful women? Who am I to refuse?”

The three of them quietly exited the room, leaving Judy alone to shuffle over to the bed.

“Nick…” Judy said, distantly. “You’re, uh, awake.”

Nick nodded and cleared his throat. “Yeah. Just woke up all of a sudden. Heh! You should
have seen it; Mom had Beck knitting a scarf! When she saw I was awake, Beck’s first move was to
try and hide it!”

Judy chuckled and shook her head. “She sure doesn’t seem the type! I mean, have you seen
the shoulders on that woman?”

“I’ll admit, I was looking a little lower,” Nick said, before hurriedly changing the subject.
“So, uh, what have you been up to?”

Judy smirked and shrugged. “Oh, you know, just solving the case. Turns out it was
Bellwether.”

“Huh,” Nick said, watching her pace around the room. “That right?”

“Yeah,” Judy walked over to the bouquet on the bedside table, suddenly unable to bring
herself to look at him. “Turns out she had the whole thing planned out in advance. She, uh,
genetically engineered the food to have Nighthowler genes and…wait, first she had the money. She
scammed a bunch of it off the stock market.”

“Carrots,” Nick said, his face set and hard.

Judy continued, as though she hadn’t heard, fiddling with the rose petals. “Right, so, she got
the money and bought a bunch of shares in Bug Burga and OmniGreen and sold them the altered
food, so both Predators and Prey were contaminated. Then she started Phase One, the darting and
stuff, and that’s when we stopped her.”

“Hopps,” Nick said, his voice strained and tight.

“So, this whole thing was all about revenge!” Judy laughed, it sounded more like bark, and
her back was still turned. “She felt cheated and wanted to destroy the city! Can you believe that? I
mean, talk about cliché! Well, she had a bunch of other plans and—”

“Judy…” Nick whimpered, tears spilling down his cheeks. “Shut up and give me a hug!”
She rushed over in a second, leaping onto the bed and wrapping her arms around his shoulders, squeezing with all her might. Nick reached up and pulled her close, sobbing silently into her shoulder. They held each other for what seemed like an eternity, Judy rubbed her cheek against the top of his head, taking in his rich familiar scent, feeling her heart begin to race. She ran her fingers through his fur, reveling in its softness, its warmth. Nick took notice of her attention and traced her neck with his muzzle, sniffing and nuzzling as he did.

“No...” Judy said, reluctantly pushing him away.

Nick paused and drew back, his ears drooping. “Sorry. I’m sorry, I thought--you know what, you’re right. That night was just a...fluke! A slip-up, some wires got crossed and we both, uh, got caught up in the moment. It didn’t mean anything, we should just forget it ever happened!”

Judy shook her head sadly. “Nick...no.”

He looked into her eyes and sighed, setting his hand on her shoulder. “I know. It’s just...we can’t, can we?”

Judy sat on her knees and threw up her hands. “Well, we’re coworkers! Partners! Fraternization is strictly forbidden, and for good reason!”

“A really good reason,” Nick agreed, nodding. “I mean, it’s unprofessional! And what if it doesn’t work out? What then? Tension on the job, loss of morale, the whole team would break down!”

Judy nodded rapidly. “Right! If we can’t work together and it affects how we act and how our coworkers act, that could be a disaster! Crimes would go unsolved! Evidence could be compromised! Murderers could walk! I mean, we’ve both heard stories about this kind of thing, horror stories!”

“Chills the blood,” Nick said, soberly. “Not to mention, if my Mom heard you right, we’re about to be publicly putting this case to rest. Not to toot our own horns, but we’re heroes! Role models! If we go through with this and mess it up, what kind of example would we be setting?”

“A bad one!” Judy said inching closer to him, her ears burning as she became lost in his bright green eyes. “A really, really bad one! It’d be all...irresponsible and...bad.”

“Terrible,” Nick said, leaning towards her, his eyes half-lidded. “Just downright…”

“Inappropriate,” Judy muttered, reaching up and taking his head in her hands as she drew herself closer. At the last moment, she pulled his head down and her forehead thumped against his snout. She heaved a husky, needful sigh as her brow furrowed. “I’m sorry...I never should have kissed you.”

“Hm,” Nick chuckled quietly. “I never should have kissed you back.”

“Well, I should have stopped myself," Judy retorted.

“I should have let you stop.” Nick notched his finger under her chin and gazed deeply into her eyes. “It takes two to tango, Carrots. I’m not letting you cop the blame on this one.”

Judy giggled, a faint smile on her face. “So you...?”

“Love you,” Nick said, with a nod. “And you?”
“Yes. Yes, I do.” Judy sighed and pulled away. “Funny. Some people would have taken forever to just up and admit it.”

Nick shrugged. “What can I say? Classic WildeHopps efficiency, it’s why we’re such a great team.”

“And a team we must stay,” Judy said, with finality, crossing her arms across her chest.

“For the children,” Nick agreed, smirking. “And the city. I mean, if we’re not on our A-game, who’s going to stop the next terrorist attack or giant bug infestation? Precinct 2?”

Judy laughed and punched him lightly on his good shoulder. “Right? We just have to… restrain ourselves, is all.”

Nick set his hand over his heart and donned a saintly expression. “A vow of righteous abstinence! For the children! For the city!”

“Right,” Judy said, distantly. “All that jazz.”

They sat across from one another, his shining emerald eyes pouring deep into her violet eyes, a stern, resolute expression on both their faces. For a moment, all that could be heard was the general hum of the hospital outside.

“Oh, fuck it!” Judy said breathlessly before she leapt forward and pressed her lips into his.

“Only mammals,” Nick mumbled around her mouth.

Nick hooked his rough, casted arm around her waist and pulled her close, his tongue delving deep into her as she opened herself to him. She moaned into his mouth as his hand slipped under her waistband and underwear and gave her a firm squeeze. She pushed her hand under the collar of his hospital gown and over his naked shoulder, grabbing a handful of his decadent orange fur.

“Oh, God,” Judy squeaked as he nibbled her shoulder. “I love you, Nick!”

“I love you, Judy,” Nick panted, gazing into her eyes. “I always have!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeee!” a familiar voice squealed over the intercom.

Nick and Judy’s eyes went wide in horror. Nick cleared his throat, his voice calm and measured, “Clawhauser?”

“Hi.”

“How?”

“Richie,” Judy growled.

“Guess who else uses a Maxbell Security.” Richie said, the shit-eating grin clear in his voice. “Go on, guess.”

“Clawhauser.” Nick said, once again completely calm. “Is, uh, is everyone listening?”

Dozens of other voices crackled over the speaker and Judy buried her face in her hands as the words began overlapping and merging into each other. Francine could be heard clearly above the others. “And I~ will always love you~ ooooh ooooh oh~!”
“So, now that it’s official, top or bottom: Hopps or Wilde?”

“Hell, man! Hopps tops all the way!”

Clawhauser cleared his throat and spoke up. “Well…not ‘everyone’.”

Chief Bogo’s voice sounded over the din of the other officers. “All right, All right! … What’d I miss?”

“Okay, yes, everyone’s here,” Clawhauser said.

“Richie,” Judy said, miserably. “This is cruel.”

“Sorry,” he said, laughing. “We were actually setting up a ‘Nick Wilde Cam’ so we could keep an eye on him. Happy accidents and such. I’ll leave you two kids alone now.”

The camera in the corner of the room whirred as it turned away from the bed. The room was once again completely silent. Judy looked over at the window and sighed. “Do you think if I jumped from this floor that the fall would kill me?”

Nick reached over and gave her a pat on the head. “Oh jeez! You bunnies, so dramatic! Step back from the bedside and don’t you worry, we’re going to straighten our backs, hold our heads high, and share a great big bottle of bleach.”

“Yes,” Judy said, pointing at Nick, a morbid smile on her face. “Poison. Something slow. Painful.”

“I’ve got just the thing.”

Judy examined the boiled carrot on her plate, tentatively taking a bite out of it and grimacing. “My poison is very mushy…and bland.”

Nick took a bite out of his Sloppy Joe and nodded. “Hospital food is a special kind of poison designed to incentivize the body to heal and leave.”

Judy giggled and put down the carrot. “Ah, well…just as well you woke up, I have a press conference in a few days and I could really use your help.”

“So, what, I’m a speech writer now?” Nick grumbled playfully. “Just answer your own questions again, just, you know, don’t start a racewar this time.”

Judy laughed sarcastically and flicked a pea at him, which he effortlessly snatched out of the air. She sighed and leaned forward, looking over at Nick. “We did it, didn’t we? Finally.”

Nick nodded, a relieved smile on his face. “We did. The city’s safe again.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Nick said, reaching over the table. “We’ll make it work, I know we will.”

Judy reached out and took his hand in hers. “I know. I mean, we’re WildeHopps, we can do anything!”

“Anything!” Nick cheered, grinning. “So, when are you going to tell your parents?”
“Uh…”

The sun was high in the sky over the great city of Zootopia; the summer heatwave was in full swing. Fire hydrants sprayed as happy children played and hundreds of water parks teemed with citizens looking to beat the heat. The city carried on as usual while the long days of summer came and went. The sun set late, as it was wont to do, but the city shone with its own glow, a crowd of people gathered around a single performer in one of the many parks, his strong theatrical voice carried on the night air. Outside City Hall, a badger led a protest group as the Mayor, a somewhat rotund lemming, attempted to appease the crowd.

Life went on.

Chapter End Notes

Well that's it.
It's done.

I think I'm having a heart attack.

+90k words in ~3 months, I think that's a one of the listed symptoms of bugfuck insanity, right?

Seriously, I feel drained in the most gloriously cathartic way. I need a fucking hug!

Well, now that it's over, y'all let me know what you thought of this ordeal of a fic!

Send your love to Mead (http://mistermead.tumblr.com/) for being a glorious human being

And Byron Howard and Rich Moore for their glorious contribution to all our lives, this whole thing was basically a verbose, self-indulgent love letter to those geniuses!

And to all you readers! I love you! I love you all!
THE END!
WriteAnon here to tell you that production of the sequel to Water Under the Bridge is finally over! Yes, a direct continuation of the story is underway

IN COMIC FORMAT

Now, the wonderful and talented Mister Mead has lent me a sizable portion of his valuable time to bring this bad boy about, so why don't y'all head on over to his Tumblr page


And give hims some notes, reblogs, and why not also buy him a cup of coffee (ko-fi) while you're at it?
Calm down.

I am calm! Why wouldn't I be calm!?! I was tripping on snakes. I went walking in the garden.
More where that came from on Mead's Tumblr! Go check it out!
Hey all!

Just thought I’d let you know, the very talented ComicAnon has taken it upon himself to adapt *Water Under the Bridge* into an audiobook!

The poor, poor man...

Anyway, support this masochistic fellow however you can! Follow, like, share, and peruse his VAST library of Zootfic read-throughs!

Thanks guys!

This list will update as new chapters are posted

Chapter 1: The Sun Sets
https://soundcloud.com/comicanon/sets/audiobook-water-under-the

Chapter 2: The Formality

Chapter 3: Still There
https://soundcloud.com/comicanon/water-under-the-bridge-chapter-3

Chapter 4: Build a Chair
https://soundcloud.com/comicanon/water-under-the-bridge-chapter-4

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!