Lone Diggers

by The_Qing

Summary

Deep in the neon bowels of the Lone Digger nightclub, Judy & Nick must once again confront the savage heart of their beloved metropolis. (Inspired by Caravan Palace's Lone Digger music video.)

Notes

A link to Caravan Palace's Lone Digger music video to those that haven't seen it yet:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbQgXeY_zi4

See the end of the work for more notes
Hey, brother, what you thinking?

Leave that old record spinning

You feel the rhythm, going

(They call it lonely digging)

It's the first part of the song that he can make out.

Nick had passed this club numerous times during his hustling days, but he had never actually entered it. His reasons were few but sound. Chief among them was how he found the big iron entrance of the "Lone Digger" to be incredibly intimidating.

The big iron entrance that was now wide open.

Garbled music poured out from it, filled with menace rather than invitation, obliterating the possibility that the call they had received had been a false one. It was moments like this that made Nick wish he had never become a cop.
Judy took point, making measured and quiet bounds towards the door, slipping soundlessly against its side. Nick scampered after her, not as silently as he would have liked; away from the safety of the car, around one of the street lights that flanked the Lone Digger like spindly bug-eyed columns, and propped himself on the opposite side of the frame.

The fox cast a brief, but critical glance into the hazy darkness within. As the larger and more pointed of the pair, it really should've fallen to the much harder-to-hit Judy to perform this bit of a recon. Most of the time, it did. Unfortunately, bunnies weren't born with particularly good night vision.

"All clear," he whispered after seeing that nothing was amiss. "But," he sniffed. There it was. That unmistakable raw bouquet of metal and meat; an odor his sojourns on both sides of the law had made him depressingly accustomed to. "It smells really bad in there, Hopps."

Judy nodded and quietly radioed Krash and Lupa, who confirmed that they had made their way to the rear of the building without any trouble. She let out a small breath of relief, but the way her long ears were laid down betrayed the anxiousness she felt towards what would happen next.

Nick's amusement at watching a rabbit ordering a rhino and a wolf around kept his paws from shaking too much as he readied his stun gun. Deciding to hedge his bets, he opted to put it on the highest setting. For safety. his and Judy's, to be exact. At this intensity, the weapon wasn't very non-lethal against animals below a certain weight class.

With the last of her commands relayed, Judy upholstered and prepped her own firearm, then motioned for Nick to join her as she stepped through the gaping, concrete threshold. Seeing her right index finger resting on the slide of the weapon's cylinder encouraged Nick to do the same even as his own digits itched to embrace the empowering curvature of the trigger.

The path was narrow, the air was cool, the way dark save for strips of blue neon tubing plugged into the ceiling. During these first few careful steps, Nick was able to understand the husky, fast paced lyrics that echoed in the passage.

\[
\text{Let's end your time to lay low} \\
\text{Your knees a-bending, so} \\
\text{It's time to get up and let go} \\
\text{(You're gonna come undone)}
\]

"No, Mr. Mayor. Sorry. Mayor Mousawitz. We got some leads, potential witnesses. I can't really-I can't answer that question right now."

Nick looked at his watch. 1:45 AM. Swell.

"It's a mess down here, Vince. You'd be much more understanding if you saw it for yourself. Hang on. I'll have Hardy send you some pics. HARDY! Send the mayor some pics of the crime scene! Take some from Sue's digital."

Definitely not one his finer wrist clocks, but if he wore anything too nice-looking to work, people would start to ask how he could afford such a gizmo when his salary and tax liabilities were so low.

"Mayor Mousawitz, you still there? They're sending you a few jpgs right now. Bit of warning; they're pictures of pictures. Hardy's fancy new bargain bin laptop doesn't have a memory card reader, so he took photos of Sue's polaroids with his webcam. Resolution's going to be kinda garbage, but the content will probably speak for itself."
Inheritance? Maybe he could say he had inherited it. A family heirloom. Fabricating a backstory could be fun.

"Yeesh. No need to scream. Yes, it looks bad. But the point is, it isn't quite as bad as it looks. Everything is under control."

As she made to leave, mumbling about having to pick up her kid from soccer practice, Sue offered Nick a small unopened bottle of mineral water from her pouch. He nodded, accepting the lukewarm container and enviously watched the marsupial hop through the now fully lit entryway to freedom. "Better you than me," her long tail seemed to wag. He broke the sealed cap with a practiced twist and took a swig. Then another. He hadn't realized just how thirsty he had been until now.

"Where was I? I was halfway across town busting that…Yes, the press got some good pics of us carting away the ones that could still walk. Yes, we got all of it. So just let the papers run with that story. Trust me, these stiffs? They ain't worth the ink you'd need for a two-sentence obit. And I mean that collectively. Uh-huh. Look, it's late; you're tired. Call me back, let's say, late afternoon. Fine. Mid-morning. All right. Get some rest. Tell Price I said, hi."

Nick screwed the bottlecap back on as he watched the bat press the 'End Call' button on its phone before jamming it into its mouth.

"RRRRRRRRRRRRRGH!"

The bat bit down hard on the cellular device, no doubt imagining the pint-sized politician in its place. Judging by the other indentations that peppered the phone's protective casing, Nick surmised that this was a habit of his.

"What's the matter, Buckles? Bad reception?" he asked as smoothly as he could without laughing.

Buckles tried to yell back, but found his mouth too full to allow it. He bent his head down and released the phone into one of his old riot vest's supply flaps. "On behalf of everyone here he press ganged into this wretched, little clique," he began, smoothing the slightly greying brown-and-gold hairs on his head down from their bristled state. "Thank you for getting that vicious twerp elected into office, Officer Milde"

Despite being an expert in the insincere, Nick still found the sarcasm of others to be terribly annoying. His poker face persisted though. If he showed even the slightest reaction to Buckles' latest insulting nickname, the pernicious airborne nuisance would never stop calling him that and he would join the ranks alongside the likes of Benjamin In-Houser and Chief Bozo. At least his various attempts kept things fresh.

"Nothing? You asleep behind those sunglasses, Nicky? What's up with those? We're indoors, man." Buckles tried to peer through the reflective, opaque lenses with his large brown eyes. "A little bashfulness is all I'm asking for, a bit of shame. If it wasn't for Mayor Ratawitz and Assistant Mayor Lice, I'd be slumming it easy far, far away from this charnel discotech."

The bespectacled fox shrugged with practiced disinterest. "Hey, I didn't vote for them," he confessed. "And besides," he brought up the half-empty water bottle and shook it playfully for Buckles to see. "He's done a few of you a good turn, and gave you all steady, honest jobs to boot."

"That none of us asked for." Truth be told, no one had. Not Nick, not Judy, not the public, not the ZPD, and certainly not the would-be members of the Nocturnal Zootopia Police Division themselves.
3 weeks into his term, Mayor Vince Mousawitz had founded the NZPD under the pretense of expanding the city's law enforcement presence without expending too much money. Specifically in the nighttime sector, so that the more diurnal-inclined officers could focus their energies more efficiently. Chief Bogo had briefly supported the idea, but quickly changed his tune once he learned that, apart from being nocturnal (or crepuscular), the overarching commonality shared among the proposed NZPD officers was that most of them were ex-convicts and ne'er-do-wells that Assistant Mayor Price Tendle had crossed paths with during his time as the DA. Leaving little doubt that they wouldn't be joining out of the goodness of their hearts or for the ZPD benefits package. A particularly sore point that stuck out amongst this thorny proposal was how City Hall wanted Buckles Doherty to lead the unit.

Buckles was a golden-capped and, in Nick's opinion, distressingly large megabat, long in face and body. From his fur that bunched out of his starched collar to the thin, bony claws that that twitched against his pant legs, he embodied the irritation that each member of the NZPD felt at having to be a police officer despite being the only one who had actually worked in law enforcement before. He had once been a promising ZPD profiler until he had been dishonorably discharged for insubordination and drunken misconduct. He had spent the last decade as an on-and-off again confidence man and fulltime lush before he was dragged back into relative sobriety by the rat-and-cat duo. Rumor was that his last words as an unemployed mammal were, "I didn't do it." Regardless of his and Bogo's protests, Mousawitz and Price got their way. After making sure to pin a badge on his chest as painfully as possible, Bogo gave Buckles the rank of Captain and washed his hooves of the matter.

The other precincts didn't really know what it was the NZPD did or if there was much they could do besides leave messes for their more legitimate counterparts to clean up. They had a shoestring budget, were barely more than a dozen in number, possessed a single cruiser along with one van, and the parameters of their jurisdiction were frustratingly vague. Certainly not a substantial enough force to patrol the entire city, no matter how late it was. But paltry as it seemed, the NZPD took their orders directly from the Mayor himself most of the time. Again, this didn't really shed much light on what they got up to after dark, but Nick could now tell the guys at the bullpen that attending to nightclub massacres was one of them.

"You have my pity then, Captain. I'm sorry you had to get up before dawn today."

Buckles snorted. "I should be so lucky. Been awake since sundown to prep the menagerie for a Spice raid over at the Rainforest District. Can you believe that? Grab a bushel of the right veggies, grind them down, spruce them up, and BAM, Easy-Bake Au Natural Narcotics. Opium's evil-aggro twin."

"Huh, I thought that was being grown somewhere in Sahara Square," Nick lied. He had heard rumor of the Rainforest District lab from his underworld contacts days before, but keeping your cards close to your chest was a must around advantageous folk like Buckles. "How'd it go?"

"Half of us came out of there smelling like napalm curry, but otherwise, pretty good. I even considered going Dutch with the team on some shakes or cakes, let them clock out early, but then we got that call," He looked back at the unpleasantness that occupied the club floor. "Inconsiderate, that's what this is. Selfish. And a total waste of NZPD time and resources."

Nick adjusted his shades to mask an errant twitch that played across his brow. "That's a little cold of you, Buckles," he said, his brain calculating the most efficient way to shake him off his pedestal. "And I thought you would've appreciated the view."

The membrane under the bat's right shoulder tensed. "Fruit bat, Witty Nicky." He spat, flashing teeth
that could rend hard fruit skins to get at the flesh and juices within. "And I'm not the only victim here. I'll have you know this club had a bit of class before these jokers spilled themselves all over it."

"So you've been here before."

"Couple times. It's one of the few places in town that served decent Marula Cream. How about you?"

"Elephant Moonshine isn't my thing."

"Not the giggle milk, Top Gun. I'm asking if you ever visited the Lone Digger back when you were, how did you describe it? Legally adjacent?"

"Nope. Not really a night club guy either."

"Seriously? Thought it would've been your beat, in a manner of speaking."

"I woke up early to work early so I could sleep early." Nick explained, choosing his words carefully. His third meeting with Judy had taught him the dangers of casually implicating oneself. "I might've missed some lucrative opportunities, but at the same time, I avoided situations like this,-" he brought a palm up, as if to serve the entire disquieting scene to Buckles on a phantom platter. "-entirely."

"Fair enough. Animals tend to make bad decisions when the stars are out. Or maybe it's the moon. All the same, I appreciate you breaking your adorable curfew to help us out."

"You said that I couldn't leave until I answered some questions."

"Did I?" Buckles chuckled. "Must've slipped my mind. Had some calls to make. But, no time like the present, right?" he brought his hooked thumbs together and tilted them towards Nick. "First question, since you'd never been, how was your first visit to the Lone Digger, Nicky?"

Hey, mama, how's it going?

Can't see your body moving

Don't leave the party dying

(They call it lonely digging)

The bulbs that adorned the final barrier to the Lone Digger's seedy heart were arranged to form a blocky, simplified face. This abstract profile was split down the middle with its features tilted inward into the divide. A set of push doors. Quite the fire hazard.

Through the crevice, the fox could see bits and pieces of the next room; part of the stage, a bit of the floor, and some of the opposing wall. Nothing that meaningfully hinted at what awaited other than the backhanded assurance that the bad guys weren't right in front of them.

Upon reaching the end of the hall, they put their backs to the doors. Here, the cool, caustic fragrance they had been pushing against for the last minute was now a warm gust leaking from the gap, as if exhaled from the face's thin line of a mouth. They felt the wood and plaster pulse with music; loud enough to drown out whispers and tempered conversation. No big surprise there. The Lone Digger, this night and all the others before, had never been a place for talk.

Set under one of the door's glass donut eyes, Judy raised a paw from her pistol grip and opened it towards Nick. She folded her thumb across her palm, then her pinky, followed by her ring finger.
Before her last digit joined the rest and their shoulders crashed through the door, her partner's last thoughts were of concern. The volume must've been playing havoc on Judy's ears.

Nick had believed that the smell and his years of experience skulking around Zootopia's shadier districts would've prepared him for what lay beyond. Clandestine pit fights, back-alley medical procedures, arsons gone awry, territorial brawls. The scent had always been there to greet him wherever skin broke and civility expired, and he had never taken to it. He did his best not to be squeamish though. He didn't see the point in feeling sick whenever he scrapped his knee or cut himself on a chainlink fence.

That might change after tonight. Because before entering the room, Nick had attributed the intensity of the scent to proximity. Now he saw that amount was a far greater factor than closeness.

Bathed in artificial twilight, everything seemed so terribly blue.

The broken chairs.

The abandoned tables.

The open cage.

The dead alligator.

Two gold chains, one thick and one thin, hung loosely from its scaly neck. Clothing was casual for a club like this, but of a popular designer brand, and near the bottom of the shirt, Nick saw what had killed it: a broken brandy glass shoved into its soft underbelly. From what he knew of gators, the first cut wouldn't have been enough to kill it.

The rookie officer tore his eyes away from the lethal wound, then from the slack open jaw full of stern powerful teeth that looked just as menacing as any he'd seen on a living alligator. He hastily scanned the chamber, on the lookout for the staff, other customers, and maybe even the culprit. The perpetrator still being here was unlikely, but an unlikely threat was still a threat.

And yet, wherever Nick looked for signs of life, the deceased was all he found. A black wolf with its throat slashed open, the warm stuff of its existence running down its expensive suit like a scarlet necktie. A cougar in a red and black varsity jacket was missing one of its ears and part of its face. And there was more. Six. Eight. Maybe even ten. Felines, Lupines, and Reptiles. Mortally inert. Ghastly trauma on every body with bits of flesh and fur hanging from more than a few claws and mouths.

Carnage exuded from every aspect of the room. Shards of broken bottles glinted in the neon haze, pristine crystal islands on oceans of gore. Silhouettes cast by the dim illumination forced attention on contorted limbs and vacant eyes, hinting at further agony hidden in the shadows. Alcohol, nicotine, warm and cold blood crowded the air with their emissions. And the music, some upbeat electronic-swing cacophony bursting with ghostly crooning, just wouldn't stop. Someone had died while listening to this. Someone had killed to this tremulous, hostile rhythm.

All of it curdled and merged into a heady potpourri that flooded his senses, forcing its way into his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes. Needles of heat scraped at his skin and crawled down his gut, making their way closer and closer to his stomach. There was nowhere to go, nothing he could do. He was right in the middle of it. And it was in him now. Dredging bleak concepts up from the mind's primordial murk. Obscene sensations. Primal appetites and fears.

"NICK!"
With a shudder, the fox looked right, the mention of his name having snapped him out of his trance. Panic and disgust were swept away by raw humiliation when Nick realized that while Judy had made her way to center of the room several meters ahead, he hadn't actually moved from the doorway. He had just stood there. Like some kind of moron.

Head low and eyes on the ground to make sure he didn't step or trip on anything sharp or dead, Nick scrambled to her side.

She was standing in front of a downed, well-muscled black bull. There was blood on his vest and face, but he looked otherwise unharmed. Judy pressed two fingers across his throat. She shook her head. No pulse. Spotting something strange, Nick took a closer look at the bull's neck. He pointed at a spot below where Judy's fingers had been, encouraging his partner to examine it. There were two puncture wounds to greet her when she did. Jointly, they looked down the bison's body to see a cobra crushed in his grip, a jaunty red bowtie peeking out from clenched hooves.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick caught a glimpse of something from the direction of the bar. It weaved its way from the further reaches of the club - horned, tall, svelte, and very much alive – before making itself comfortable on one of the stools surrounding the bar.

He felt a tap on his arm and turned. Judy motioned in the direction of the newcomer. The sound must have tipped her off. Nick nodded. Wordlessly, the two began to approach the animal, keeping their distance, making to flank it on both sides, shock pistols at the ready. Like they had planned for such situations, Nick gingerly neared their target as they made their sweep. His superior night vision would allow for a quick assessment of the suspect as well as a swifter response if they tried anything. Anything usually meant pulling out a concealed weapon and taking a shot at handsome cops.

The suspect brought up its right hand; something long glinted in its hold. Judy raised her weapon, but didn't fire, awaiting Nick's signal. He lowered his, having recognized the object. A bottle. It tilted downward, pouring its contents over a series of thumb-sized glasses and the gaps between in preparation for a very different kind of shot.

Upon even closer inspection, Nick decided that he didn't need to fear a concealed weapon being pulled on him either. In fact, he doubted that the barfly before him could hide anything in that outfit of hers. She was a gazelle: lean, well proportioned, and shimmering with what looked like sweat. Not THE Gazelle of course. The different markings aside, the length of her horns and the softness of her face implied that she was considerably younger. Much younger. And to his distaste, Nick remembered that Gazelle wasn't all that old either.

Her body was, for lack of a better term, clothed in a racy, hot pink number that was hardly there. Thin straps looped around her bottom from a latex thong that held her tail through a slight opening, inviting one's gaze to appreciate the slender prominence of her croup and the curvature of her flanks. From this pithy triangle of concealment, a long strip ran up the girl's back to connect with a thick collar on her neck. The front of the costume mirrored the back perfectly save for two star-shaped pasties positioned on her chest. Elbow-length gloves made of the same material decorated her arms. The pair of black faux-Preyda high heels on her hind hooves would have made walking difficult, but with how she was seated, they ceased to be a concern.

"Ma'am?" Nick began, hoping she could hear him over the speakers. She set the bottle on the table, but didn't look his way; instead making to grab the first of her sloppily filled shot glasses. Nick tried again, a little louder this time. "Ma'am?"

The gazelle perked up and with painfully sloth-like slowness turned to face him. "Ah. Hi." she greeted, downing the contents of the glass before continuing. "Are you a cop?"
"Y-yes," Nick admitted. The airy quality of her voice set him on edge. Free of alarm or relief, it stood in stark disparity to the bedlam that was just a few inches from where they stood. "Officer Nick Wilde. ZPD."

"Cool," the girl said, before turning back towards the bar to pick up another glass.

"Are you-?" Nick cringed and rubbed his nose. The stench was getting to him again. "Did you make the call? Are you Macy?"

"What's the matter?" she asked, gingerly teasing the strip that ran down her barrel with one hoof while taking her shot with the other. "Can't you read my nametag?" she chuckled. "Usually, I'd be Celeste at this hour, but, ah, I think I'm off the clock right now."

"Yeah, I kind of, eugh, figured." Nick coughed. Why was it getting so bad now? "What happened here?"

"I dunno really," Macy muttered, raising her third drink to her lips. "I think it was about an hour, maybe more or less ago. I dunno. I took a little something to help me get through my shift. Been dancing since 9. Over in that cage over there," she pointed to the center of the room with her empty glass. "I was dancing for a while, but then this song just kept repeating. It was weird. Donner ought've changed the track. When I looked into the crowd to see why he hadn't, everyone was dead."

Nick chanced a glance at Judy who looked as confused as he felt. "That's it?" he asked, both syllables dripping with incredulity. "What about-? You didn't see any of this happen?"

Macy's slim shoulders rose and fell in answer. "Thought it was just another bar fight. Those happen here from time to time. I've learned to kind of tune it out. This time was different though. Donner usually sticks around to clean up the mess."

"You keep mentioning a Donner," Nick reminded, patience waning. "Who's Donner?"

"The bartender," Macy replied. "Possum. Little fella. I think he ran off. Good riddance," she spat. "Always gave me the cheap stuff whenever I asked for a drink. I ask for a water, and it's 'mineral or bust. Just throw one of those singles my way, dearie.' Feh," she leaned over the bar to get at a different bottle. "With him gone, I've been trying out some of the pricier brands."

"Macy, listen."

"They're pretty okay," Macy stated, coming back with a single malt scotch whisky, "But I don't really get the hype, y'know? Can't find the nuances everyone harps on about."

"Is there anybody else here?" Nick asked. "Anyone still…alive?"

"And in the end," she continued as she removed the cap. "Don't they all do the same thing? Why all the drama?"

"Macy!" Nick stomped forward and grabbed her arm to prevent the gazelle from gulping down the liquid - she was barely making sense as it was - but recoiled the moment his paw wrapped around her glove. It had been slick and sticky with some viscous liquid. "What the-?" he brought his right hand up to his muzzle for closer inspection but resisted the urge to smell it. Instead, hesitantly, he looked back at Macy and received grim confirmation that the fluid covering her body wasn't sweat, lotion, or exotic oils. "H-how?"

"I told you, Officer Fox." Macy reminded, the blood on her chest shining cruelly by the azure neon.
How had he not noticed it sooner? "Everyone's dead."

Nick gagged, backing away from Macy, but unable to escape the carrion scent. Those fevered, forbidden thoughts were coming back, muddying up his head. He wanted this stuff gone, but wiping it off on his uniform wouldn't make it go away. Where else though? Didn't this dive have paper towels, napkins, or a dirty restroom? Maybe he could just lick it off? That would fix things. No, that would be unsanitary. But beyond sense and logic, a part of him was deathly curious as to what it would taste like.

Pale softness draped over the tainted hand, tenderly pressed there by a familiar gray paw. For the first time since they had entered the Lone Digger, a smile crept up Nick's lips. "Aw, Carrots. You really are prepared for anything."

"It's only a handkerchief, Nick." Judy gently reproached. "Just wipe your hands off and I'll call this in."

"Yeah. Sounds good."

"Okay," Judy thumbed her radio as she holstered her gun. "Lupa, Krash, we made it to the main area of the club. Found a potential witness. Try to get to us and keep your eyes peeled. I'm going to radio dispatch; see if we can get some help cleaning this place up. Word of warning, it's a bit of a mess back here."

Way to sugarcoat it, Hopps. Nick thought. This was a mess the same way a car crash was technically a fender-bender.

"Suede. Come in, Suede."

A satin-smooth reply, unimpeded by the blubber, whiskers, and tusks that framed the NZPD dispatch officer's face drifted from her radio's speakers with all the grace the walrus' former life as an underground DJ afforded him. Personally, Nick preferred Clawhauser to Suede; his responses, while subject to tactless tangents, weren't nearly as canned.

"The four of us checked out the Lone Digger like you asked. Multiple 10-55s. Mostly mammalian with a few reptiles in the mix. Staff's missing, but the caller's still here. She's unhurt, but she's going to need some major detox and several baths before we can get anything out of her. Tell your boss to get here as soon as possible. We'll try to tidy what we can for when he-whuh?" Judy's ears perked up. "Wait," she leaned them into the empty, noisome air. "Oh no."

Judy spun on her heel and dashed towards the slaughter. She leapt onto the top of a discarded stool and from there, swiftly hopped onto another. Nick wanted to call out, ask her what was going on, but held his tongue for fear of breaking her concentration. One slip and she'd fall headlong into that crimson turmoil.

When she ran out of chairs, she jumped towards the open flap of the cage, grabbing the bars. The force of her latching onto it caused the door to swing back towards the left. Before the cage shut closed, Judy sprang from it, sailing over the remaining corpses and diving into a nimble roll, clear of the horror and onto the other side of the club.

Nick tossed the now bloody handkerchief behind him and followed albeit taking a longer route around the cadavers.

She was darting around the debris when he got to her, squinting and sniffing near the outer rim of the disaster.
"What was that all about?" he huffed.

"I heard something," her right ear twitched. "There!" she cried, and rushed right past him to an upturned table next to a dingo who had a knife sticking out of his skull. The fox followed and could just make out the vague outline of a hoof peaking out from under it.

They grabbed the rim of the table and heaved, flipping it off of the body. It was a zebra. Black tank top, teal microskirt, fishnet stockings, early-to-mid twenties by Nick's estimation. A waitress? She had been curled up beneath the table, hiding her from his initial view of the room. There was a raw wound on her forehead. She wasn't moving.

"Hopps, I don't think-." 

"Shhh!" the rabbit laid an ear along the zebra's girth and listened. An entire second passed before she pulled back and started screaming into her radio. "LUPA! KRASH! GET IN HERE NOW!

"What are you doing?!!"

"There was a heartbeat. It was faint, but she's still alive," Judy quickly explained before returning to her transmission. "We've got a zebra in serious need of CPR and she's too heavy for me or Wilde to lift!"

The backdoor behind the raised dais that cradled the cage burst open.

"Hopps, we're here! Where's-?!" Lupa began to cough. "Sweet cheese n' crackers, what is this?"

"Ohhh," Krash whined from his side. "I think I'm gonna hurl."

"FOCUS!" Judy barked. "Krash, turn her over! Lupa, start giving her chest compressions once he does! I'm going to call up Suede and tell him we've got a 10-52 Code 3! Nick, find a light switch! MACY!"

"Yeah?

"Make yourself useful and kill that stupid music!"

Your booty shaking, you know

Your head has no right to say no

Tonight it's "ready, set, go"

"It was an experience," Nick replied.

"Safe answer, I like that." Buckles preened. He took off from the chair he had been using to stay eye-level with the fox, gliding past him to land in front of the bar where its selection of libations had been bundled together on the floor, each bottle carefully wrapped in a plastic evidence bag. "Didn't get any prints on these, did you? That could make this investigation more confusing."

Nick rubbed his palms together, making the latex gloves covering them audibly crinkle. "Nope. It's all clean."

"Good." Buckles browsed through the collection. "Where're you hiding, you lovely scoundrel, ah!" he grabbed the neck of the bottle with his claws and with a beat of his wings, pulled it free from the pile. "And here I was, fearful over nothing," he said, rubbing a cheek against his prize.
Nick spied a stylized elephant logo decorating the label. "Isn't that evidence?"

"Pffft, evidence is just facts or knickknacks that prove something. This has got nothing to do with the case at hand," he chastised, thumbs all ready ripping through the bag.

"It was still on the crime scene."

"Ick-Nick, if the bartender put something in the refreshments, it's either down the drain or he took it with him," he started to twist the cap loose by rolling the bottle around with his thumbs while keeping his mouth around the cap.

Nick frowned, not at the nickname, but at how terribly specific that statement had been. "Put something in the refreshments? Why do you think that?"

Buckles paused. "B-ahem-Because he's nowhere to be found and the stripper had to call us in. That's pretty suspicious, ain't it?"

"This club isn't exactly on the up-and-up, Buckles. The DANCER barely looked like she was out of high school, if that. Not to mention the clientele."

"So big wigs come down here for a private drink and lowlifes stroll in to try and feel classy while everyone oogles some dame who made bad life choices," agitation was starting to creep back into the bat's voice. He hugged the Marula Crème a little tighter. "I'm just saying that if you think the drinks were spiked then there's no use looking at the bottles because it's doubtful everyone here was having the same beverage. It's basic logic."

"I never said or implied that they'd been spiked." Nick reminded. "I just said that you might be tampering with evidence."

Buckles grimaced, eyes darting to Hardy, perhaps hoping the tech-savvy NZPD officer would back him up in some undefined way, but the aardwolf was hard at work writing up the report his captain didn't want to do later. "You sly, smarmy putz."

"You just had me spend the last hour finding and bagging bottles you admit are functionally useless to this investigation and you've been rather mum with the questions you've been keeping me here to ask," Nick pointed out, taking measured purposeful steps towards Buckles. Steps whose impacts were awkwardly stymied by the paper shoes that were on his feet. "You owe me an explanation. What is it you think happened here?" The conscripted captain kept his mouth shut and glared at Nick. "You don't answer my question, then I don't answer yours, and I walk out of this slaughterhouse."

"I still outrank you, Wilde-Child!"

"Then you can tell Bogo on me in the morning."

"No, no, no, no! No need for that!" Buckles hastily assured. "Throw me a bone here, Nick. It's been a crazy night for both of us. Stress and all that."

"Uh-huh. So are you going to tell me or what?"

"Mmph. Okay, but could you let me cash in my 30-night chip? I'm feeling really antsy at the moment and like they say, looser lips tend to slip."

"Then what am I supposed to do while you gulp that down?"
"I don't care. Um, why don't you try and guess what went down? How these late nighters became late-late nighters?" Nick tried to protest, but Buckles had already started guzzling the cream. The needy adulation on the captain's face looked disturbingly infantile.

Nick groaned and took stock of the crime scene, now resplendent in regular lighting. He fought to keep himself steady. Being forced to stay here an hour had done little to diminish the club's morbidity. Turning on the lights and silencing the sound system had made it a less frightening ruin, but at the same time, it became all the more real. No ambiguities or theatrics remained. This had all actually happened. Clear as day at 2AM.

"I see three Frat Cats," Nick observed, taking note of their jackets' designs. "Two Crazy G8s from the Rainforest District. Based on where we are, I'd say the sharply dressed canines are Schwarzhowl enforcers, and those cobras are part of the Boa-Tie gang that operates out of Sahara Square. Put on the spot, I'd think this was a gang hit gone wrong."

"Good catch with the snakes. They're pretty new to the game." Buckles set the Marula down and shook with pleasure, allowing the dizzying warmth to course through his entire wingspan. "But by MY estimate, it's just a bar brawl that went out of control."

Nick wasn't sure that either of their theories, while apt, did this massacre justice. "How so?"

"If it was a hit, one of these guys would've brought more firepower or snuck through the backdoor. Instead, they tore each other to pieces with whatever they had handy. You could argue that the venom those poisonous hood-heads pack would've made them great assassins, but they got the worst of it, and hitmen usually prefer to walk away from heir jobs. Or in this case, slither."

"By all means, sketch it out, Mr. Ex-Profiler." Nick offered.

"Oh you can just die in a fire. But I digress. Bouncer's dead, but he's not banged up and most of the time, you could count on him to have things under control. With how he kicked it, I think the Boa-Ties were being rowdy, maybe tried to coil themselves all over the stripper or waitress – can't really blame them – while he was about to throw them out, some of the other gangsters started fighting. He got distracted, cobra bit him – I'm assuming it's the one whose trachea is showing – he killed the others, but the toxin took him out of the game, and the rest took themselves out."

Nick played the scenario out in his head and had to admit—not out loud - that it made a lot of sense. "Sounds like you've figured it all out, Buckles," he stated more than praised.

"I think so, but that brings me to what I wanted to ask you," his long tongue went across his lips, perhaps to steel himself with whatever cream remained on them before he asked. "Do you think Night Howlers had anything to do with this?"

Night Howlers.

Largely against Nick's will, the statement brought several unpleasant memories to the fore. Back to the two most eventful weeks of his life so far. Those days had had it all: blackmail, political intrigue, unjust imprisonment, a city gripped with fear, b-list acting, and of course, his own gradual, and near lethal, transition back into the realm of the legitimate. He tried to fixate on how everything worked out in the end, but some nights he'd lay awake and remember how he stood at the edge of that gondola platform. That moment when all his charm, all his money, and every single one of his wits were absolutely worthless in the presence of a drugged-up limo driver who wasn't just going to kill him, but eat him as well.

"No."
"That was quick. Why not? Seems violent enough."

"Violent, yes, but not entirely mindless," Nick gestured towards one of the deceased. "Weapons factored in to a few deaths. Like the knife sticking out of that dingo's head. If Night Howlers were to blame, it would be tooth and claw all the way."

The bat's head bobbed in understanding. "Old School."


They both heard a cheerful snort coming from Hardy's table.

"Heh. True." It might have been the Marula at work, but a small grin was tugging along Buckles' muzzle. "Thanks. I was otherwise…indisposed during that case," he said, though Nick was of the mind that Buckles had simply slept through it all. "And given how intimate a lot of these kills were, bloodwork would've taken a week at best to give me a yes or no. But with your, ah, testimony should put Mayor Ratawitz at ease. You are one of his BFFs after all."

Another slip-up, Nick thought. This one was different though. The tone was all wrong. Not clipped enough for backtracking and too pointed for a tipsy confessional. Buckles had said too much, but then he had gone out of his way to say more. He was baiting him. He wanted him to say, "Mousawitz?" Nick asked, figuring that if the captain was offering, he might as well take as much information as he could. You never knew when intel like that would be useful. "Why would he be interested in Night Howlers?"

The bat cackled. "Ah, I really shouldn't say. I don't think I'm allowed."

"I'm not going to beg, Buckles."

"And you won't have to, Slick. Because before the rest of the meat wagons get here, I want you to know exactly who it is you helped elect." Buckles explained. "To clarify, Ratawitz isn't interested in Night Howlers. The little geek's TERRIFIED of them."

"So?" Nick prodded.

"No, officer. You don't get it. He's absolutely terrified of the stuff. When you're frightened of something, you avoid it; you try not to think about it. Terror, ahehehe, terror makes you obsess," he said. "During the…orientation period of the NZPD, the Mayor called us into his office and made his pitch. In addition to all the rote law enforcement crud, we were to keep our eyes, ears, noses, and even tongues out for any mischief that looked even remotely Night Howler related." Buckles shook his head. "We thought he was having us on. It was old news. Case closed. A waste of time. Then he got mad. Then he started talking. The following 60 minutes consisted of him laying out doomsday scenario after doomsday scenario. What would happen if somebody put a few gallons of that stuff in the Rainforest Misters? Vented it through the Tundra Town cooling units? Diced it, took it to a packaging plant, and swapped out the regular spices in your favorite snack bags," his thumbs jabbed the air with each telling. "And he just kept going. My least favorite concept involved the subway. He showed us choice images from that 90s Tokyo gas attack and asked us to imagine ourselves in a train car when a parcel full of Night Howler gas went off," he whipped out his wings. "BOOM! No escape."

"Quite an imagination. You take any of it seriously?"

"How could I not? Night Howlers ain't rare. They ain't hard to grow. And thanks to the news, everyone knows what they're capable of. There are like 80 bogus 'Bellwether Blue' recipes online."
That was news to Nick. "Any of them the real deal?"

"They don't have to be, man. Wouldn't put it past those nerds though. If a flock of dumb sheep could fabricate the stuff, any animal could crack the code eventually," he huffed. "So if you ever call us for back-up and no one responds, we're likely chasing whatever horror movie pitch the mayor's dreamt up that night."

"That all you do for him on the side?"

"No, but it's the biggest bother, I'll tell you that much. Any case of foul play that looks even slightly suspicious," he cocked his head at the cage. "We have to tell him, then find out whether or not those flowers factored in lest we miss patient zero of a nationwide pandemic. Sucks to be you guys if that comes to pass."

"And for you."

"Nah. Given that I can just," he swung his arms down and flew a quick circle around Nick before landing on the bar. "Do that the moment Zootopia becomes Zoomalia Dos."

"If that day ever comes, Buckles, I'll be sure to aim up."

"And if it does," Buckles smirked. "I hope Hoppskotch eats you first." Then his ear shook. As did Nick's. "Hallelujah, meat wagon's here and-," he sniffed the air. "-so's my tracker. Az! Glad you could make it!"

In came a dark brown coyote, heralded by a stench that Nick had picked up, but thought too odd to acknowledge. He was a little more than 5 feet in height and his wiry limbs and gangly torso gave him an eerie, stretched-out appearance. With his hunched shoulders, course fur, and entrenched frown, he looked out of sorts in his light blue police uniform. Almost as if he were an imposter. And right at that moment, he smelt like chitin tandoori basted in battery acid, marking him as one of the less fortunate NZPD members involved in the Spice raid.

"Rrrmph," the former bounty hunter grunted.

Following behind him were two paramedic bears, a Kodiak and a Tibetan Blue, who brought with them a pair of stretchers and a ventilator.

The three deeply inhaled once they were inside, as if the smell of blood was an infinitely more preferable odor to the eye-watering stench that hung over Az.

"Vern, Stein-!" Buckles greeted.

"Stane," the Kodiak corrected.

"Sorry, sorry, it's been a long night," he eyed the ventilator appreciatively. "I'm happy to see you two aren't as forgetful as I am though. Rest assured, that's the only thing I forgot." he tapped one of his belt pouches then turned to Az. "What's the situation on the outside?"

"Perimeter is all set up. Patricia scared away the gawkers. A couple of reporters are left, but they looked very bored when I came in. Ah, and your coffee arrived."

Az's empty paws did not escape the bat's notice. "Well where is it?"

"Outside with rhino, wolf, and rabbit."
"Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Not in job description." Az answered. Though Nick didn't believe he would have even if it was.

Buckles took another sip of Marula. "I'm not going to get mad. I'm just going to get this done. If there's still press out there… Vern, Stei-Stane, set it up."

"Which one?" Vern asked. "Every one of these guys looks horrible."

"The-the-Mateo, the bouncer, the bull guy back there. He's still sorta pretty. If you can't get the snake loose, just hide it." Buckles shivered; that last dose had gone down too fast. "Az, Officer Wilde's got something for you. And it does in fact pertain to your job description. Get to it."

Soundlessly, the coyote approached the fox, and as he drew closer, Nick saw his visage undergo a disquieting metamorphosis. Stoic annoyance made way for an indulgent expression Nick had once profited from and disciplined himself to hide. Az was trying to play it cool, act professional, but his forced casualness couldn't mask the mania of anticipation that shone from his eyes.

"You have a lead for me." It wasn't a question.

"Two actually," Nick revealed with a salesman's flourish. The only thing missing was an 'it's your lucky day' to act as the cherry on top. "Here they are," he tilted his paw towards a nearby table, one of the few that were still upright.

Az studied the two evidence bags that lay atop it, taking one of them into his hands and peering at the massacre through the plastic. "Such small clues in such a big mugrero." he observed, briefly dipping back into his native tongue. "Who found these? You or wolf?"

"Hey, brother, nice and steady
Put down your drink, you ready
It's hard when things get messy
(They call it lonely digging)

"Are you kidding me right now, Krash Zone?!" Buckles roared, pulling at front of Krash's uniform with his thumbs. The rhino hadn't been ready for such sudden and hateful rhetoric. None of them had.

A moment earlier, the NZPD captain had been gently consoling the witnesses as he escorted them to the ambulance, assuring them that everything was going to be fine. Though given how dazed (and in the waitresses' case, unconscious) the two ladies were, his words were likely for his own benefit.

Even when he told them to line up and update him on the situation, he had appeared more tired than peeved, rolling his neck with a murmur and loosening the belt on his grey khakis a notch when he thought no one would notice.

Then Krash had sniffed. Maybe he had done it too loudly or perhaps he shouldn't have done it at all, but the act got him Buckles' attention. Followed shortly after by the rest of Buckles.

"I am hip-deep in the most violent speakeasy slaying since the Wallaby Court Killings back in the Prohibition Era! Of the witnesses I've got, one is blazed out of her skull, the other has a massive concussion, and these dead hoods over here probably ATE the rest! And you're the one that's about to get lachrymose all over the crime scene?! How does that even begin to make sense?!"
From the side of his shades, Nick chanced a look at Krash and saw that his tiny eyes were indeed moist.

With a hiss, the bat pushed himself off of Krash, but instead of gliding back down to the ground, he flapped his way up and perched himself atop his horn, forcing the rhino to look up at him as he snarled, "I don't get it. Lucky Lupa over there ain't crying. Hopps & Robbers over there ain't crying. What are you getting all weepy for!"

Lupa's muzzle tensed, briefly showing a smidgen of fang, but he stayed quiet. Nick had to admire that. If Buckles got his spindly, hand-like feet on his partner's head, he doubted he'd be able to keep his cool like his lupine comrade.

"What's the issue, Krash Dummy? There was zero resistance. Nobody shot at you or punched you through a wall or tried to smother you with tree sap. Help me understand where this is coming from so I can tell you how stupid it is!"

What Nick couldn't admire was this macho, honor code department malarkey that would've made standing up for Krash and telling Buckles to crawl back into his coffin an insult to the rhino's 'pride.' Wasn't the point of the ZPD was that you didn't have to go against the forces of malice and lawlessness alone? Yes, Krash should have been given the opportunity to fight his own battles, but the trembling lip that Buckles couldn't see from his new vantage point and Lupa's clenched fists rattling at his side practically yelled that this case had deeply affected the rhino and he was barely keeping it together.

Nick sought out the other NZPD officers that came in with Buckles, wondering if either of them was going to take notice of this tantrum and pull back the bat. But sorting out her many scopes and lenses to best capture the majesty of disemboweled bar brawlers was keeping Sue busy, and her aardwolf cohort would've been too meek and small to wrench Buckles away even if he wasn't desperately looking for an electrical outlet.

"Why are you wasting tears on this crowd? Do they look like nuns and orphans to you? Were you cousins with any of them?"

This couldn't last. One of them needed to act. Posturing could take a hike. He just couldn't tackle this directly, Buckles was too conniving for that and would simply lay into Krash further. Nick needed to break the bat's vile focus. An insult would be too obvious; chiding him about being on the job was out too. Bogo was the only animal on the force that could genuinely threaten him into submission. How else could he catch this petulant pile of patagium off guard and put him back on task?

"Did you stub your toe before I got here?! Did you step and slip on something squishy and expired? I swear if I find a big, fat footprint on any of these bodies, I'll really give you something to weep about. You lumpy, grey siss-!"

"Captain Buckles, sir."

Buckles nearly slipped off of the horn, flailing his wings to keep himself balanced and from getting gored by the protrusion. "Wh-whuh? What was-? Who said-?"

"I did, sir." Judy replied, briefly saluting him as she did so. "Officer Judy Hopps, Precinct 1."

Buckles blinked and not knowing why, mimicked the gesture. "Uh, yeah, I know. Err, what is it?"

"It's about the witnesses, sir. I believe there might have been more surviving patrons than the two we extracted."
The bat squinted at Judy and reviewed what she had said, but couldn't find what had tripped him up. Proper posture, formal diction, succinct statements; she was as professional and straightforward as it got. And that was really bugging Buckles for some reason. "You mean besides the bartender?"

"Yes."

"How do you figure?"

"Both the rear and front exits of the club were wide open when Officers Wilde, Krash, Lupa and I arrived. Presumably, they were used to flee the scene when the fighting intensified," she motioned towards a small, orange object capped with a tuft of green that lay inexplicably untouched next to a shattered tabletop. "We found this partially eaten carrot after we got the lights back on. I only had a moment to examine it, but I can safely say that none of the species involved in the melee could have made the bite marks on its lateral root."

"The waitress or bouncer might have had a snack."

"While on the job, sir?"

Another flare of disquiet lit up in Buckles' brain. "I suppose not. Anything else?"

She raised her paw to outermost section of the club. "We also found a half-finished dinner for two featuring some of the pricier items from the menu. As well as an item of particular interest, a feather."

"A feather?"

"Yes, sir."

"You sure it didn't fall off of someone's clothes or purse?"

"From what I could make out, the quill was unaltered, free of adhesives. Based on its size and shape, it could belong to either a swan or a goose. I'm not much of an expert in that department."

"A swan or a goose," the captain chuckled. "Only in Zootopia. Throw in an amphibian, and the whole animal kingdom would've been here to play," with a chortle squeezing its way out his lips, he shook his head. "I'll have a guy look into it. White bird, dark night, it'll be a cinch."

"I'm pleased to hear that, sir." Judy said though Nick could hear a note of tension in her claim. "If you'd like, I could establish a perimeter around the Lone Digger for security and transportation purposes. Although, I may need some assistance."

"I would like that very much, Officer Hopps. Patrocious is outside with her meanmobile, but we're still in the Savannah Central district, so this dive's likely to get some trainspotters in the coming minutes. With that in mind, I guess you could take Lupa and Krash out with you to put on a brave, but disarming front. That said..." his gaze, though thankfully not his ire, turned back to the rhino's calmer, but still moist crossed eyes. "One of the Top 10 things that can send the good people of any town into a tizzy is crying law enforcement caught on camera. So as long as there's a single snoop in your much less visually handicapped partner's sights, IN," he ordered. "Okay? Okay. Good," he patted one of Krash's cheeks with mock affection, and then flew himself back to the floor. "Oscar, that means you, Wilde, stick around. I need to ask you a few more questions about the incident after I make a few calls. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes. Until then, grab some collective clothing from Sue and start bagging some evidence. You can start with the well liquor."

*Your booty shaking, you know*
"Neither. Jud-er-Officer Hopps did."

"The farmgirl? Ha. Impressive," Az opened the bag, the one containing the leftover carrot and took a deep sniff. "Burro," he gagged. "And polyester!"

"Yikes."

Az coughed, slamming the bag back onto the table before picking up the other. "Swan," he took his time with this one. "Female. Wearing nylons and…fox," he glared at the one that was next to him. "Red fox."

Nick stuck a paw out and stepped back. "Whoah, hey. I'd never been here before tonight."


"Well I'll be darned. You'll make detective in no time, Asar." This was hollow approval as it was a rank the vulpine officer didn't covet in the slightest due to how it would facilitate a very specific insulting nickname. "By any chance, is he also taller than me?"

"Don't be stupid, Wilde." Az scolded. "How could I possible tell from some dander and imported wool threads?"

Nick wondered if the language barrier between him and the coyote was so thick that sarcasm couldn't pass through. "You're right. That was dumb of me." he leaned his head back and looked to Buckles, who was watching Vern and Stane load the bouncer onto a stretcher. "Did you get all that, Buckles?"

"Yeah, yeah." Buckles acknowledged from across the room. "I think I know who the donkey is. Huge drunk, and that's coming from me, but if he had enough sense to skedaddle, he ought to be clearheaded enough for questioning. I'll ring up hotels in the area, see if a swan's checked into them recently," he chucked his tongue, pondering how he'd be able to find her if she had decided to flee Zootopia via the sky. The job would be significantly easier if she had broken a wing during the skirmish, but Buckles doubted he'd be that fortunate. "Can you trace any of them, Az?"

"Scent is still strong," Nick gave Az some room as he got into a primal stance, sniffing the ground on all fours. "Their trail leads out the front," his thin, but muscled frame tensed, ready to give chase.

Buckles whistled. "Hold up there, hunter. Leave through the rear and circle back to follow them from there. Last thing anyone needs to see is you bursting out of here on your hands and toes like you forgot how legs work. Maybe pick up the bartender's scent if you can."

Az seethed at the restriction, but kept his resentment to a low growl. "Rrrmph." And with that, he was off. Pouncing past and over the fallen before vanishing through the staff entrance. Although Az had left them in a dour mood, Nick thought he could hear faint deep laughter coming out of his exit.

"Why didn't he have to wear any gloves?" Nick asked.

"Because he's efficient and he really, really scares me. That's why." Buckles answered though his eyes were squarely fixed on the paramedics as they fiddled with the ventilator. "Come on. Come on," the machine's gauges started to shake and its lights flickered to life. "Haha! Yes! You two had me worried there for a second!"
With his fellow - and distractingly tall - canidae out on the prowl, Nick took the opportunity to take a
closer look at the device Vern and Stane had wheeled in with them. It was an older model than the
ventilators he usually saw first aid personnel use. A miniature bellow pump was bolted to its side in a
clear glass cylinder, the flexible bag stretching and contracting in a steady rhythm. Chipped dials
rested on its face. Set against the glow of the miniature bulbs, Nick saw that the labels above them
were faded. It was an awfully shabby piece of equipment, but in all appearances, functional.

However, it begged the question, "What is that doing here?" due to the fact that everyone that could
still breath in the building was breathing just fine.

"Costing me $40." Buckles answered.

"Each." Vern piped in as he placed the cobra corpse he had freed from the bouncer's deathgrip onto
the ground in a rotting spool.

"Don't get greedy, bear." Buckles snapped, but smiled as he saw Stane place the oxygen mask over
Mateo's snout. "Perfect."

"Buckles," Nick winced. He had an inkling of what was transpiring before him, but he needed to be
sure. With any luck, his hunch would be wrong. "Why are you pumping oxygen into a dead bull's
lungs?"

"I'm doing nothing of the kind. The mask's just for show. Vern and Stane here are just making Mateo
look more presentable," he said blithely. "Soft pillows, clean blanket, sweet wheels, what more could
he want?"

"A pulse."

"All right, you got me there. But look at it from his perspective. In life, he tried to keep the peace in
this club. Didn't work out. But now, he's going to keep the peace for the whole city! Who doesn't
love a redemption story?"

"No one's going to fall for this!"

"That's because you're really looking at it, Nickyback." Buckles retorted. "Just imagine catching a
glimpse of him as he passed you by or from faraway through a shaky viewfinder. Would you think
he was dead with how dolled up he is?"

Reluctantly, Nick put himself into the mind of a passive or distant observer and to his disgust,
couldn't find a reason why he'd assume the worst. Mateo hadn't been rolled out with the other
members of the staff, but with his collar hiked up to hide his wound, he didn't look outright hurt.
Besides, why would a pair of paramedics bother using a ventilator on a corpse? A ventilator, he just
realized, that flaunted its bright lights and antiquated pump to assure onlookers that it was indeed
working and was, by extension, stabilizing a patient in critical, albeit not catastrophic, condition. He
could just see himself watching them roll the bull into an ambulance from across the street. Maybe
he'd be on his way to have dinner with Judy or play some dice with Finnick. In any case, he'd catch
a brief glance, feel a short pang of pity for the creature, uselessly hope for the best, and then move
along to do whatever he was going to do. Anyone else would be similarly deceived if Vern and
Stane were fast and subtle enough when they took Mateo away. Nick understood that now. That
didn't mean he had to like it. "Are you going to cover up all these other deaths as well? Because if
that's what you're going for, you're going to need a lot more ventilators and a small army of plastic
surgeons."

"An army? I'm not even covering up this guy. He's still going to be on the list of stiffness come
"morning."

"Then why bother?!"

"To ward off the stragglers who are still out there." Buckles flexed a thumb Stane's way. The Kodiak nodded and started to cart Mateo out of the room while Vern attended to the ventilator. "You have to be delicate when it comes to small horror shows like this. If you're not careful, snoops will take what few scraps of information they can spy or bribe out of us and blow the whole thing out of proportion for a headline. Sole survivors are giant red PRINT ME flags. Two remaining will have them writing 'only two.' Three or more and they lose interest. It's a numbers game."

"And you're stacking the deck."

Buckles responded to the accusation with a worrying smirk. "Technically, there are three or more survivors. Swan, Donkey, Possum, other Fox guy. The bull's just going to…symbolize…those three or more. Assuage the concerns of the popo-razzi so they'll leave us alone and free us up to work without any hassle."

"And what would happen if I went out there and told them all about this? What if I told Bogo about your impromptu undertaker act?"

In spite of his success to keep his features and voice composed, Nick's hold on the water bottle Sue had given him tightened, the crumpling of its plastic betraying his discontent. The bat's smirk widened into a punchable leer. "You could, but I don't see how that would help. No one's getting hurt. I thought out of everyone on the force, you'd be able to appreciate a little hustle. A little Weekend at Boarnie's would be the point of spoiling it?"

"I don't know, Buckles. Truth? Justice?" Nick listed, his conviction masking how those words were still uncomfortable on his tongue. "Your job basically."

"My job is to stop the city from descending into anarchy. Same as yours. And that over there," he unfolded his left wing for the gesture, a flag of bone and flesh aimed at the opposite wall. "Is a jaguar who has had his tail ripped off which was then used to strangle him. This is not a pretty picture. Not everyone can handle it like you, me, and Hoppsichord. Most people are like Krash. Big, sentimental wimps."

"They're civilians, not savages. A bar brawl turned deadly isn't that hard to understand."

"It's not about the concept, fox. It's in the presentation. They are not going to look at this through an impartial, professional lens. They'll start pointing hooves, claws, wingtips, whatever. 'Oh gee, all of these guys were predators. Do you think they might be going feral for real?' or 'Wow, look at these deadly snakes and crocs. Was the mayor's new reptile housing incentive program a bad idea after all?' Speculating like they've got the right while they haven't got a clue."

"Then we can tell them what happened. We know the truth had nothing to do with being a predator or reptile."

"They wouldn't believe us. Not right away. Not fast enough. Why would they? We got nothing to show them. Our preliminary reports aren't even printed yet. Cold hard facts and reliable statements will take days to produce. If this leaks out before we're good and ready, the ensuing journalism will be more yellow than a canary dressed in mango skins."

"Buckles."

"Unless you want the ZPD to be responsible for instigating ANOTHER race war this decade?"
There it was. The bat's magic bullet. Nick suspected he kept it chambered whenever he had to deal with normal ZPD officers. Perhaps Mousawitz had handed it to Buckles after coercing him into service. As the missile picked up speed, the fox didn't even try to dodge.

It pierced through his first layer of defense, the knowledge that what had happened hadn't been a war per say tainted with the grim understanding that it could have become one. From there, it burrowed further into the psyche with flashes of panic in the streets, blame running rampant, and citizens turning on one another through either poison or fright. Finally, the slug finished tunneling past repressed memories and found its mark, exploding upon contact with a specific concrete moment that cut a cruel epiphany across the consciousness like shrapnel dipped in cyanide.

That short, but fateful press conference when the ZPD's most promising young officer gave a mob of reporters all the wrong answers after catching the wrong mammal while the true mastermind was standing right next to her with no one the wiser.

While he'd rather be anywhere else but there, Nick was thankful that Buckles had asked him to stay behind instead of Judy. "Nope. That is certainly not a thing I would want," he looked at his watch again.

2:15 AM.

"If you don't mind me asking, what happens if all this works out and the big, mean journalists go away?"

"We do all the normal cop protocol, this gets treated like any other everyday crime, and hopefully the next time something like this happens won't be during my shift." The last statement came out fast; wryly delivered, but strangely pleading. "Now I'm no vamp, but it sounds to me that the bears did what they were paid to do. You can, eh, go now, Nickeo. Tell Judiet that she did good tonight and tell Kandy-Krash that he can cry as much as he wants."

"Will do." Nick said as he started to leave.

"Wait, almost forgot. While you're out there, would you mind fetching me my coffee? Thanks. You're a peach." Buckles yelled at Nick's retreating form.

The fox tore the protective gear off of his hands and feet, plopping them into the same plastic bin Sue had dropped hers in before leaving himself. That should've been easy. He had wanted to exit the Lone Digger since the moment he had stepped into this hallway. But the club wasn't done with him yet. Every footfall seemed to trigger a landmine in his head. Not so much planted by all that he had seen and learned that night as they had been excavated. Dank possibilities he had buried by distracting himself with his police training or how captivating the color purple was to him as of late.

It would be child's play to hide a few quarts of Night Howler extract on one's person then spray them over a crowded Little Rodentia intersection with an innocuous super soaker or a flung water balloon. Dozens, maybe even hundreds, of victims all at once begetting more victims.

But why stop at the practical and lo-fi? Throw enough unscrupulous or kidnapped scientists at the plant and they'd find a way to piggyback the stuff onto fleas or lice. A Blue Plague across the nation.

And while Nick had a high opinion as far as his survival instinct was concerned, he never lasted long in any of these tortuous fantasies. At his most optimistic, he didn't imagine himself dying alone. Keep in mind, having someone at your side while you perish and being killed by a rabid lunatic are two similar, but very different eventualities.
They only converged in very special cases. Like the one where he's driving the police cruiser and realizes too late that someone had injected Judy's carrots with the toxin. He wouldn't be able to get at the antidote vials in the first aid kit – now standard issue for every ZPD officer – she'd be too fast, too vicious; her frenzied screams drowning out his futile pleas. And as she sank her incisors into his throat, he would finally lose control of the vehicle, and they'd crash into the river. Maybe on a warm night so nobody else would get hurt. The water wouldn't be cold like it was in Tundra Town; it would be perfect. He wouldn't be burning or crushed to death like he'd be if they had driven into a wall. And it would give his friend - what was left of her anyway – a fighting chance to swim her way to safety. She would leave him behind, as alone as he had been before he had met her.

He trudged through his personal quagmire. The further he got, the deeper he went. Spiritual tar of his own making pooled around his neck and tried to sneak down his snout. Drowning in the pain of wounds yet to come.

At last, he got through the door and came up for air. It was dusty, dry, and blemished by exhaust and rubbish. The scent of a city. Alive, frayed around the edges, but nonetheless intact. No fires, no riots.

He removed his shades, letting his reddened exhausted eyes see the towering Kudzu Condos to the West and the massive refrigeration walls to the East. Side-by-side with the skyscraper canyon of Savannah Central and just a taxi drive away to a sprawling golden desert.

It was a blusterous construction; standing in defiance of the natural order. An impossibility set in stone, snow, and sand that attracted folk as diverse and contradictory as it was: the most heinous criminals and the bravest cops, honest crooks and corrupt guardians.

Nick unclipped his badge and read the ZPD creed printed on its back:

"WE ARE PROTECTORS OF THE HERD.
WE ARE GUARDIANS OF THE FLOCK.
WE ARE THE ZDP.
AND WE WILL DEFEND THE GREATER GOOD AGAINST ALL WHO THREATEN IT.
DIVIDED WE WERE ANIMALS.
TOGETHER WE ARE ZOOTOPIA."

No pressure, Nick thought as he pocketed the shield.

He scanned the area, noting that it was a lot darker than when he and Judy had first arrived. Looking back, he saw that the azure neon sign had been shut off, rendering it an indecipherable glass scrawl. Paradoxically, this made finding his fellow officers much easier as they had positioned themselves next to the nearby streetlamps. Krash was propping himself against the shutters of a closed store. Free from scrutiny at last, he was openly crying into his right arm as his much smaller lupine partner patted him on the back and showered him with 'There there's and 'Let it all out's.

Judy was sitting on the hood of their shared squad car, ears down and staring out into the night with eyes ill-fit for doing so.

"Captain Buckles, SIR." Nick repeated with a jovial lilt. "The rarest combination of those three words in the English language."
Without turning around, Judy chuckled. "Did I lay it on too thick?"

"No, the SALUTE was you laying it on too thick." Nick explained, hoisting himself onto the hood and sliding over to Judy's side. "I think that's the first time anyone's ever saluted Lieutenant Leatherwings. Also, probably the last."

"It worked though, didn't it?" Judy asked with an expression that all but said that she knew that it had. "Last thing a grump like him is prepared for is a bit of respect."

"Yeah, it almost worked too well. I thought he was going to explode with happiness, and was immediately disappointed when he didn't," Nick crossed his arms and gazed down at his partner with phony disillusionment, who appeared much smaller than normal due to them being seated and how she was, in his own words, 'mostly leg.'

Her resulting bashfulness was mostly sincere. "Sorry about leaving you behind back there."

"No need to apologize, Carrots. I had a lovely time with our dear NZPD captain. Wonderful listener, that guy. Such a delight. And it was an absolute blast collecting evidence as a laminated vulpine."

"Is that why your tail is still covered?" Judy asked, pointing at Nick's rear.

"What?" Nick reached behind him and felt cheap, sanitized plastic where ruggedly soft fur should have been. "Dang it."

"Here, let me get that for you," she said.

"Whoah, hey, careful around the base. It's, um, sensitive." Nick warned. As she untied the plastic knot that kept the sleeve in place, her partner caught a whiff of caffeine on the wind and saw there was a set of six coffee cups in a cardboard takeout box placed on top of their car. "Are those all for Buckles?"

"The delivery guy said some were for drinking and some were for throwing." Judy answered. 
"There," she pinched the mouth of the plastic and pulled it inside out, freeing Nick. She then rolled it up into a small, transparent cylinder and set it aside. "We'll just leave this with them before we go."

"Having to wear those every other case is such a pain."

"Really?" Judy coyly wondered. "I wouldn't know."

"True, you aren't burdened with such a prodigious and likely vestigial extremity," He glanced at the tuft of compact, but well groomed fur that stuck out of her trousers. "Then again, that also means you can't do stuff like this," Nick said, puckishly smacking her in the back with a concerted twitch of his tail.

Judy giggled at the touch. "I'll manage."

Feeling a bit parched; she fished out a small mineral water bottle from one of her belt's pouches and had herself a drink.

"Did Sue give you that?" Seeing Judy nod, Nick showed her the bottle he had been given a half hour ago. "Same here."

"That was nice of her," she observed.

"Depends on how you look at it. It might just be her way of showing gratitude for how we saved
"Outback Island."

"That's a bit extreme. I don't think we outright saved Outback Island."

"Maybe not, but we did rescue it from marginalization, obscurity, and poverty. That qualifies as 'saving' something doesn't it?"

"Technically Mousawitz did all that once he became mayor."

"And just who helped him get all those untapped marsupial votes, eh?" Nick asked. "Side note, if he's the real hero here, do you think Sue sends cold beverages his way? Because mine was distractingly lukewarm. Was yours distractingly lukewarm?"

"It could've been colder."

"And because it wasn't, it sort of made the water taste and feel slimy as it was going down, didn't it? Wasn't very refreshing either. Just made the ol' gullet kind of moist. And not the good kind of moist."

"Nick, be nice."

"Fine. I suppose it's the thought that counts. Though a big check or a medal wouldn't have hurt," he raised his bottle to Judy. "A toast. To making a difference in the world."

"To making a difference," Judy echoed.

They bumped their hard-earned rewards together and finished what little was left in each.

Judy regarded hers for a moment then chucked it into a far-off trash can with a sigh.

"Nick, um, you like jokes, right?"

"Only if they aren't better than mine," Nick answered, wanting to hear the rabbit out, even though her tone suggested she really didn't feel like sharing one.

"You don't have to worry about that. It's more of a funny story than a joke. I was watching Patricia escort an ambulance away from here with that tusked monster truck of hers when it just popped into my head." Judy clarified. Again, her words were tinged with reluctance.

"Hopps, you don't have to share it right now," the fox assured, offering her an out. "Neither of us are at our best at the moment."

"I want to talk about it, Nick. I just need a moment to gather my thoughts."

"If it would help things along, I could sit in your lap while you tell it."

"With all ALLEGED eighty pounds of you?" she snickered. "Not gonna happen."


"Thank you." Judy cleared her throat. "Anyway, back when I was twelve, I signed myself up for this after-school Forensics Club. Now, because I was young, earnest, and had cops on the brain, I didn't bother finding out what a Forensics Club actually did. I just read the name and immediately assumed it had everything to do with crime scene investigation."

"Like those ZSI TV shows."
"EXACTLY! Exactly like that. Las Haygas, Meowami, I used to watch them all the time. Which is why I was really looking forward to Forensics Club. It was going to be the coolest extracurricular activity of all time," Judy smiled. "I even brought my own magnifying glass."

Nick failed to keep a straight face when he asked. "Was it to scale or were you dragging it around the entire day?"

"It was to scale. I wanted to impress my fellow Forensics enthusiasts and show them I meant business," she opened and closed her paws. Even now, she could still recall the weight and feel of that long lost present she had received on her 9th birthday. "Eventually, the first day of clubs started. I was punctual. The teacher arrived. We all introduced ourselves to one another. Then we talked about topics. Split into teams to discuss the opposing sides of those topics. Then we talked to the other teams about what they thought about it. Mind you, none of it had to do with crime solving in the slightest. It was a Forensics Club in the sense that it was about speechmaking and debate. Which, apparently, is a valid alternate definition for the word 'Forensics,' as I was loathe to learn that afternoon."

"Heh. That is a pretty funny story." Nick praised

"It is, but there's more, Wilde."

"Oh my god."

"You see, I didn't get it right away." Judy confessed. "I think I would have picked up what was wrong if I had listened to what they were all talking about, but because it wasn't what I was interested in, everything went in one ear," she tugged on her left. "And out the other," she tugged on her right.

"Geez, you really wanted to draw some chalk outlines."

"And to dust for pawprints, and to cordon off the area. I was sitting there for an entire hour, bored and confused, waiting for them to get to the good stuff. But they never did," Judy paused. "When it was time to go home, I stayed behind to ask the teacher why there seemed to be so little actual Forensics in the Forensics Club. Where were the microscopes and the police tape? Were we going to stage any fake robberies or murders to solve in the future?"

"How'd she answer all that?"

"Very well actually. Not surprising, what with her running the club. She told me what it was actually all about, but what I remember most is what she asked me before she explained. She asked, 'Don't you think that examining dead bodies is a little morbid for a middle-schooler?' And I had no way of answering that without looking bad. If I said yes, then I was a dummy for wanting it in the first place. If I said no, I'd be a 'troubled' kit; more likely to become a criminal than stop one," she ran a paw down her embarrassed face. "It was kind of neat. I felt like I was being hypnotized. So I stuck around, mostly to become more articulate. Also, I had a lot of free time on Wednesdays."

"Hmmmm. I think it worked out in the end. That speech you made during my Police Academy graduation was fantastic." Nick said, careful not to mention her first attempt at public speaking in Zootopia.

"Yeah. I learned a lot. Though I think if it had been the club I thought it was at first, I could've learned a lot from that too. It might've been really intense for a twelve-year old bunny, but if I had been exposed to shocking imagery of that nature then maybe…" she sucked in her lower lip, briefly exposing her buckteeth. "…maybe I wouldn't have felt so…inadequate tonight," her words came
out low and raspy, afflicted with a shame far more fresh than what she had expressed during her story. "There was just so much…and they were all…I didn't...."

Nick watched as her eyes widened, alert and haunted. So unlike how stern and analytical they had been while she had been among the slain. "Hey, Judy, it's, er, I think you did good today. Better than the rest of us."

"Don't get me wrong, Nick." She tried to crack a reassuring smile, but it came out crooked and false. "The academy didn't pull that many punches. You know that. I got the ear crimps to prove it. It's just that, maybe, if I had started from an earlier age, I would've been more prepare for..." she hugged herself tightly. "For..." A choked gasp slipped out from her throat as she shuddered violently. "For..."

With a sound that was more a hiccup than a sob, Judy trailed off. Nick expected tears to follow. They never came. He wished that she'd afford herself the luxury though. Because while crying about a problem rarely fixed it, the act was cathartic to a degree. Lacking that, all you'd have left was the weight. A weight that lingered and loomed like a mountain, a burden you willingly clung to because surrendering it would somehow be worse, an abyss whose pull was just enough to keep you sitting on its edge for months on end. It was a weight she had borne admirably while she had been in the thick of the crisis, scouring the wreckage for leads while the rest of them had been trying not to get their paws dirty. It had been there as she had set up traffic cones and pacified the press. It would diminish over time, but the memory of it would be just as heavy.

The fox, ever clever, mulled over her anecdote, attempting to uncover what had prompted it. To that end, his attentions shifted to Sue's water bottle, a ridged cylindrical symbol of gratitude, and saw what Judy had. The many lights of Zootopia stretched and warped in the assembly line plastic, rendered as abstract and vague as its promises. A city that, for all her goodwill and candor, had let her down once again.

He now knew why, but the questions of what he had to do and how he could help her remained.

Cautiously, he let a paw hover over her shoulder. In that instant, she seemed both fragile and dangerous. Like a porcelain handgrenade that would shatter or explode if he touched it wrong. And there was the possibility that she didn't want his pity or comfort. She only looked shaken, not pained or needy.

Never let them see that they get to you.

He had said that and had felt oh so smart when he had come up with it. Only it wasn't his idea. It was just a way of coping that everyone picked up eventually when they had to grow up. Whether you were twelve or twenty-four, you'd come to understand the necessity of faking composure. All he had done was put it into words. Words he couldn't even trademark.

Well, he decided. He was a lot of things, but he certainly wasn't a 'them.' Not anymore.

Nick grasped her shoulder lightly and pulled her close. She didn't resist, murmuring pleasantly as he did this. He craned his head down so that it rested atop hers, intimately, protectively, and without judgment.

"I got it, Judy. I got it."

They stayed like this for only a moment. 3AM was creeping closer and on its heels would be the professional crime scene analysts and more ambulances, all with their sirens turned off like the response vehicles before them so as not to attract too much attention. Code 2 rather than the Code 3
Judy had demanded. When they were more rested and awake, Nick would have to tell his partner about what he now knew about Mousawitz, the NZPD, and how everything had changed without them noticing. What they'd do about it all, he had no idea, but what he did know was what he wanted to do next. And for that, he'd need his partner, his friend.

"Hey, Judy."

"Yes?" she stirred.

"You wanna spit in Bucky's coffee?"

The underside of his chin tickled as she laughed.

"Sure."

\[
\text{All up in the club, all up in the gutter...} \\
\text{Just imagine, wonderful land} \\
\text{Why do all these things never happen} \\
\text{I'm just a random girl with gentle manners} \\
\text{If my dreams aren't rocked and I rule the wonderland...} \\
\text{All up in the club, all up in the gutter.}
\]

\text{The End}
Like Zootopia itself, Lone Diggers went through a surprising amount of development in spite of its modest length. Here are some insights (read: excuses) as to why it took so long to make.

The Premise
This fic has been in the works for a while. I had been casually following the development of the film a few weeks before its premiere, checking on the forums for speculation and choice bits of fanart. One particular picture that caught my eye was “…not all Hopps and robbers” by iPoke that featured a shell-shocked Judy sitting in front of the Lone Digger nightclub from the Caravan Palace’s music video of the same name. Having seen that surprisingly catastrophic animation previously, I was inspired to write a story centered around this haunting crossover concept. To make things easier for myself, I quickly sketched out a broad outline that I would further develop once I had actually watched the movie. Judy would describe what she had seen inside of the club and feel invasively digested by the experience.

After I did, however, I felt that the Judy in my story was too much of a passive figure compared to the flawed, but largely competent flatfoot protagonist of the movie. Certainly not like the bunny in my original draft who froze up the moment she burst into the club. Nick becoming her partner at the end of the story was a major boon though as I could foist the role of beleaguered observer to him. Their climactic reunion allowed transformed the initially conceived downer ending to a more bittersweet one.

Given that the level of brutal violence that occurs within the music video could be mistaken for a Night Howler attack, the story allowed me to incorporate a number of ideas as to what Zootopia would be like after it had survived Bellwether’s manipulations.

Oh yeah, and since domesticated animals aren’t a thing in Zootopia, I had to significantly tweak the species of several gangsters to ensure that they could give one another a decent fight without anyone coming out on top.

The various biological quirks of the animals who were still alive and the nuances of proper police protocol were likewise troublesome and rewarding.

Mayor Vince Mousawitz
So “…not all Hopps and robbers” rolled with the darkly humorous idea that someone’s going to have to investigate and clean up that bar, but it got me thinking as to how the Mayor would explain such a violent incident to the press. Then I remembered that Lionheart was still in jail for illegally detaining all those feral citizens. There was no mayor.

Or so I thought. When I mentioned this on an online forum, I was informed that Zootopia did get a new mayor in the Stinky Cheese Caper novel, a book whose events take place after those of the movie. I bought myself a copy and used several concepts from it like the Bridge to Everywhere controversy and Outback island to enrich the fic you just read.

It was rather scant on the details of just who Vince Mousawitz was, but then it got me thinking on who this rat would have to be following the likes of Lionheart and Bellwether. Everyone expecting him to screw up, people less trusting of City Hall, and a critical eye examining his every move, the little guy would’ve been stressed out of his mind after
inheriting such a damaged administration. Not to mention all the grim applications Night Howlers could be used for. Desperate times…

The NZPD and Assistant Mayor Price
Though their overall ‘mission’ remained largely the same, the NZPD was originally envisioned as a more generic shadowy organization founded by Mousawitz and would’ve been nigh indistinguishable from the paramilitary wolf goons that Lionheart had hired in the film. They’d be bland, but serviceable in showing how the city had gotten much darker since Judy and Nick’s triumph against Bellwether. Then I realized that, given how his predecessors used taxpayer money to fund a secret clinic and a domestic terrorist cell respectively, everyone would be watching Mousawitz’s spending like hawks so he’d have to find a cheaper, but nonetheless, just as effective means of recruitment. Like Blackmail. This is where Price came in; the former DA turned Assistant Mayor who had all the information necessary to make such an initiative possible. I made him an ocelot to form a predator/prey pairing between him and Mousawitz like Lionheart/Bellwether and Nick/Judy before them. His name came from my love of celebrity puns.

I think the NZPD largely benefited from this shift as they went from being a pack of unremarkable spoofs to a kind of Dirty Dozen posse, a twisted twilight reflection of the regular ZPD. Undermanned, underfunded, and given shoddy equipment, all these shortcomings just encourage them to be even more conniving and pragmatic because they really don’t want to wind up in prison.

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