Zootopia: Death Becomes You
by Darkflamewolf

Summary

Its been over a year since Bellwether's plot to turn prey against predator. Judy and Nick are now detectives at the ZPD and a budding relationship is forming. However, all turns sour as a new crime wave sweeps the city that threatens to tear the very fabric of society apart. Rated M for extreme violence & strong sexual themes.
Chapter 01: Reality Ensues

Chapter Notes

Welcome everyone to yet another dark story of mine that I actually got inspiration from by current world events. I figured the racial/stereotype/political/ideological conflict happening in the world today would be a perfect backdrop for a similar story to be told in Zootopia; a world perfectly ripe for these kinds of stories. If anyone has read my first fanfic, Zelda's Honor and my continuing story of Fate Deceived, you'll know to expect the same quality and dark style of writing here. Zootopia was never originally intended to be another fanfic project for me, with Fate Deceived being my primary focus, but watching the movie sparked so many ideas and concepts that I had to take the strongest one and run with it. May you enjoy the ride with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Judy stopped in front of the locker mounted mirror, analyzing herself before the honest visage staring back. She rubbed her paw down along the three slender lines that were slightly visible if one looked for them beneath the fur that had sprung up around the wounds. A permanent testament to the idiocy of hate that had once claimed Gideon Grey, a fox back from the Burrows where she was born. She shook her head at the memory of it, what a long way they had come from childhood.

Resituating the spandex pants along her waist, she plunked the blue, bulky head guard around her ears, ensuring they slipped through the appropriate holes so as to not get squished under the weight of the thing. She strapped on the form fitting gloves, fastening the final strap around her wrist with her teeth before slapping them together in preparation for the training ahead. She took one last glance in the mirror; she truly did look like a formidable boxing opponent, regardless of her size.

She bounded out of the locker room amid tumultuous roars and animalistic cries. A variety of friends, fellow off-duty police officers, local citizens and a small entourage of Mr. Big’s henchmen were in attendance. Her challenger was already in the ring and boosting up the crowd to fever pitch with his boasting. She barely had time to stop and wonder how this all happened, it seemed to have escalated so quickly.

The underground crime lord, Mr. Big, was a shrew of great importance in Tundra Town. Although he did some questionable dealings and operations, he never stopped giving his earnings and benefits of his profession back to the citizens of Zootopia, a city built with the premise of integration and cooperation of all mammals to live together as one in harmony. As much as Chief Bogo, her boss at the Zootopia Police Department (ZPD), wanted to put the little shrew behind bars, there was simply not enough direct evidence to link him to any of the white collar crimes throughout the city; not to mention instigating the ire of the local populace who loved Mr. Big for the good he had done within the community. He was untouchable.

Judy had just popped in for a visit to check on her good friend Fru Fru, Mr. Big’s daughter, to see how her third litter of shrewlets was coming along. It seemed that poor woman didn’t get a break from shooting out babies. Her first litter had already grown into adults and was inducted into the family business quite quickly and those who weren’t interested were given glowing recommendations and free passes into whatever job tickled their fancy within Zootopia. It was a glorious time for the family.
At the time of her visit, one of his polar bear guards was watching a rather riveting internet video of one of his buddies beating the crap out of a brown bear cousin. He was sniggering and spouting knowledgeable tips on how he could do better than his friend when Judy poked her head up over his raised phone and began watching the clip.

“Well, I can see why.” She commented, trying to remain blasé about the whole thing. “His stance is completely wrong and he’s opening up his right flank for a side swipe. It’s a good thing that brown bear can’t fight well or your friend would be nurturing a really bad scratch!”

Her nonchalant words set off a firestorm of machismo and bluster from the indignant polar bear, “Just because you a cop and friends with the boss doesn’t mean you are all that in a scrap!”

His fellow comrade chuckled before nudging him roughly in the ribs, “You tell him Ramon!”

Knowing full well she shouldn’t get into it with him, she puffed out her chest anyway and fired back, “I did graduate top of my class. Aced all my tests and won every fight. I’m pretty sure a simple sparring match with you wouldn’t make me break a sweat!”

Ramon slapped the phone into his buddie’s chest as he reared downward to come face to face with the indomitable hare. Judy scrunched her nose, trying in vain to hold back the bile from smelling the rank, fishy odor wafting out of the bear’s maw. “It is on little bunny! Just say when!” He bellowed.

Against her better judgment and from the adrenaline pumping through her veins, she gladly accepted and would have initiated the match right then and there had Mr. Big not entered the room, hand carried by his personal polar bear attendant, Tyron. His soft, gravelly voice could be heard quite clearly in the din permeating the room. All voices went silent as Mr. Big went to speak from his diminutive chair engulfed within the palm of white fur.

“You two will not be disrespecting grandma-ma here in the home she lived in!” Ramon stepped back resolutely, crossing himself as he took position up against the wall, willing himself to disappear within its garish aqua stripped wallpaper. Satisfied that all was calm, Mr. Big continued at a decibel that to outsiders seemed to be about the same volume. “However, this does present an opportunity most timely my coney friend. How about we do a little wager, say…some innocent gambling on sports?”

So here Judy was in the local boxing gym just a few blocks down the road from her high-rise apartment overlooking her suburb, getting ready to face off against the towering polar bear Ramon. To legitimize the whole affair and to prevent Judy from getting in trouble with the law and her boss, it was declared as a friendly boxing match with standardized rules for combatants. Mr. Big even brought in his bookie, a rather brusque porcupine by the name of Quill, to legalize the gambling proceedings from the event; even to the point it was advertised that a portion of the winning pot would go to charities. Judy couldn’t really find much to object there.

“You know Carrots,” Nick Wilde whispered, sidling up to her, swiftly walking beside her as she tromped through the crowd to the ring in the middle of the gym floor, “you really don’t have to do this to impress me of your fighting prowess. I know full well you got the skills to take criminals down.”

She gave him a sidelong glance before smirking, “Relax Nick, nobody is going to get seriously hurt. We did this sort of police training in the academy before didn’t we? Ramon isn’t going to be any different. Just think of it as additional training.”

Nick Wilde was one of her best friends on the force and one of the newest recruits to the ZPD, the very fox she pinned an officer badge on. He wasn’t always a cop like her or even had dreams of
being in law enforcement; rather he was a con artist who played up to his sly fox stereotype with flying colors. She had found him during her first investigation on the force dealing with several cases of missing animals that were later to have been found going savage due to a rather elaborate plot to pit prey against predator. The unlikely duo worked together, unwillingly at first, to solve the case and bring a peace back to Zootopia and since then have become partners, sharing the same patrols.

Judy couldn’t help but notice Nick’s fur was a nice sheen of ginger today, she almost wanted to ask if he had taken her advice and used that fur treatment she had designed from carrots grown on her family’s farm but that would have to wait until after the match. He was wearing a maroon shirt with a striped fuchsia tie that would look hideous on almost anyone else except Nick who managed to pull off the look with pizazz. Sometimes when she wasn’t thinking about it, she’d catch herself just staring at him without really knowing why.

“That’s not the point Carrots!” Nick dropped the grin and grew serious. “We’re set for a train over to your parent’s farm tonight and I’d rather not bring a battered and bruised Judy back to them as my first impression. It’d really look bad on me.”

She turned to him, that smirk still present on her face and placed a paw on his shoulder, “Nick, I don’t reckon they’ll think that badly of you. After all, I’ve talked about you quite a lot to them over these past few months. Don’t worry. They have a real good impression of you already.” Without another word, she bounced off, slipping through the bars of the ring in a single bound.

“Carrots!” Nick called out after her before being pushed back by the crowd of battle-hungry onlookers. “What did you tell them?!” His voice masked in the cacophony of cheers. She was getting quite savvy at evading his smooth discourses, something he was so good at with her when they first met.

Beside him, Mr. Big was lowered down by Tyron, close enough for Nick to realize he was there by the volume of his voice. “I wouldn’t be too alarmed Mr. Wilde.” Mr. Big chortled as he revealed his eavesdropping. “I’m actually betting on Ms. Hopps tonight!”

Before Nick could respond, the announcer, a rather boisterous fruit bat by the name of Tony Fledermaus, flew up to the mic and grasped it with his feet. Taking position suspended upside down on the ceiling pipes, he brought the mic to his snout, “Ladies and gentlemen! We have a very special bout for you tonight, one I’m sure you’ve been waiting for all evening! The previous battles are nothing compared to the amazing miracle you are about to see here tonight!”

Judy rolled her eyes at the narration. This really wasn’t all that big of a deal to her. Promptly ignoring the remaining polemic drivel, she punched her gloves together a few times to get a feel for their weight and balance before placing in a mouth guard to protect her teeth from any brutal punches. The world seemed to drown out as the adrenaline-like flow of blood began to rush to her head, pulsing with the beat of her heart. Her entire focus was on the fight looming and pre-visualizing ahead of time each counter to every possible move of her opponent.

She almost didn’t recognize the sound of the bell when her senses perked up to the lumbering polar bear lurching toward her from across the ring. As expected, Ramon made a clumsy swing at her as she vaulted into the air to try and land a punch on his muzzle. The whistle of air slamming past Judy as her feet barely cleared the furred fist warned her that although this was billed as a friendly match, Ramon was clearly out for blood. The crowd cheered at the initial swing, thoroughly expecting a good fight. Only Nick, lost amongst the crowd saw the clear intent in the polar bear’s movements.

“Carrots!” He called out with his hands by his mouth, trying to funnel the sound of his voice to her. “He’s in it for real! Take him down quickly! Don’t try to show off!”
It was nebulous if Judy had heard Nick at all as she skittered between the stomping feet of the massive Ramon. She leaped to the side as he slammed a foot down onto the mat, rumbling the entire structure beneath his weight. Sensing the visual cues of his body language, she bounded towards the elastic ropes bordering the ring, allowing it to slingshot her back at him with incredible speed and force. As expected, she caught his punch in full swipe with her powerful hind legs. She kicked hard off of them, forcing the gloved fist back into his face, cleanly wiping him to the floor with the might of his own strength.

Tony blared out over the crowd with unabashed enthusiasm, “What an amazing turnaround folks! The meek, cute, little bunny has outclassed the rough and dangerous polar bear!”

“Don’t call me cute!” Judy thundered into the air. Her request was unfortunately lost amidst the din.

“But what’s this?!” Tony cried out in mock surprise, bringing his wings in tight against his body. “It appears the mighty polar bear is getting up for another round! What amazing resolve!”

“Mr. Big, it’s over! She won. Can we call it off now?” Nick pleaded as he pushed and shoved his way over to where the kingpin shrew was being held.

Mr. Big raised a bushy eyebrow as he looked down on Nick. “Ramon is still standing and is able to continue the fight. Even I know better than to end the match before it is over. We’d have a riot on our hands that even I couldn’t control. No, Ms. Hopps will have to finish this on her own.”

Ramon staggered across the ring, making a huge grab for Judy, intent to grip her in a hug that would squeeze the life out of her. After a running start, she slid between his legs and sprung up behind him, delivering a swift kick to the rump. It didn’t do much, as expected, but it did cause the brute to fumble forward a few paces, allowing her to set up another knock-out punch, delivered by his own fist.

As she anticipated, he spun around with a crushing punch rapidly heading her way. Utilizing the bars yet again, she sailed toward the impending glove of pain, her legs outstretched. She could hear a shout from the sidelines as Nick saw the feint but it was too late. She was hurtling through the air unable to stop her momentum as Ramon pulled back the false punch and crouched down to deliver a horrible uppercut to her ribs. The impact slammed up into her spine as she spiraled upwards into the air before slamming down hard onto the mat.

Judy’s ears were yanked backwards hard as her face came up from the boiling vat of heated water. Gasping for air, her eyes darted around the dank room filled with musty pipes and disgusting filth. Before she could gather her bearings, her face was plunged into a second vat of icy water. She tried to rear back and put all her paws on the container in front of her, utilizing all her strength to push away from the torment but her assailant was too powerful.

She cried out in pain as the fluid forced its way down into her lungs and seared her chest with a fire that was unbearable. She was wrenched backwards, sputtering as she hacked up the water from her innards. She barely had any time to think before her head was plunged back into the boiling water, assaulting her senses as the heat stung her face like a thousand knives. The pain of breathing in the water was even worse the second time around.

At long last, jerked upwards and tossed into a shabby, lop-sided chair of questionable craftsmanship, a lone spotlight shone down on her trembling form. Taking a few seconds to assess her situation, she noticed she was almost naked, her police uniform having been ripped to shreds and hung in tatters about her bruised and battered frame. The room was dark save for the blinding light but she could make out several bulky silhouettes, shifting and flapping through the inky blackness.
A rather booming voice from beyond the spotlight made her jump in the chair, “Who else was with you?”

Still dazed from the water torture, she struggled to regain control of her senses. “I…don’t know. What’s going on?”

“Do not lie to me little bunny! Who else was helping you?!” The voice bellowed louder, causing her to wince at the volume of it.

Judy began shivering now, the chill of the room finally settling into her bones. All she knew is that she just wanted this to stop. Exhausted, she admitted, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Please let me-”

Before she could finish her sentence, a small clawed hand smacked her across the cheek drawing blood, knocking her to the floor. She became to scramble away but was picked up by a hind leg and lifted into the air. All sense of equilibrium was thrown out the window as she was swung in an arcing circle before being smashed into a nearby pipe, the bones in her back seemingly screaming out in terror as she felt several pops. She landed with a heavy thud as her head hit the cold, concrete floor; a few moments of lucidity and then blackness.

“Judy! Judy! Get up!” A voice was trilling in her brain as she fumbled to figure out the source of it. Her eyes lazily began to open as she gazed up into the concerned face of Nick, still wearing his audacious maroon shirt and fuchsia tie. “You only have three more seconds to get up or you’ve lost the match! Are you able to stand?”

Her eyes flashed open as she realized where she was and what had happened. “Yes!” She exclaimed as she bounced to her feet, much to the cheers of all the onlookers in attendance. She cursed herself for not seeing Ramon’s feint earlier. She figured he was just some dumb polar bear grunt that didn’t learn from his mistakes. Of course he’d figure out she would nail him again with his own fist. She would have to call him out on his feint with one of her own then!

“What? Seriously?” Ramon stammered uncomprehendingly as he saw Judy stepping back up to the plate, gingerly limping to favor the side she was punched on but still standing tall. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you little bunny?!” He bent low at the knees and splayed his arms wide and roared at her. If his boxing gloves weren’t on, she was sure his claws would have been out and primed for the kill.

“You’re darn right!” She laughed, determination burning in her eyes. The challenge was set and she was keen to meet it!

After cracking her neck to the right to de-kink a few stiff muscles, she side hopped around the gargantuan beast as he slammed a fist into the floor just inches from where she was previously. She skittered up his arm and aimed a few well timed hits to his nose, causing them to bleed from their impact. She back-flipped off his head as he swung his other paw upwards in order to capture her; he growled as she alighted softly onto the mat a few meters away, steadying herself with a glove.

Stomping across the ring he anticipated her leaping backwards towards the elastic bars in order to propel herself back at his face again. Hiding the sneer creeping onto his maw, he performed his frontal punch feint once again in hopes to catch her in another uppercut. He dropped his hauteur the moment he perceived Judy’s angle of attack was not head on but rather skewed to the side. What was she doing?

As projected, Ramon’s initial feint zoomed past her as his swinging uppercut came rampaging from
underneath. This time she was prepared for it and in mid-air twirled ninety degrees, rolling up into a tight ball before exploding her limbs outward, catching the upward swing from the side and staggering the awkward polar bear laterally from the potency of the blow. Before he could recover, she used her thrust to aim for the nearest ring rope to launch herself again at Ramon.

His upper arm was still high above his collapsing bulk the moment she crashed into its gloved covering, causing the enormous paw to ram into the bear’s face with enough vigor to push him the rest of the way down onto the floor. Several teeth splattered out of his jaw as his snout hit the hard fabric, blood pooling beneath his open mouth. Tony Fledermaus boomed the countdown until it was no more. Judy was declared the victor and wads of money was tossed around as bets were claimed and lost. Mr. Big made out rather well that night, nodding to himself as if he knew the outcome all along. Ramon would be working toilet duty for months to come at the homestead.

It was well after the event had ended and the majority of the semi-sober attendants had filed out into the night for a drunken filled round of the bars that Judy began to relax in the locker room of the gym. Her boxing gloves and helmet having long since been hung up in the cabinet labeled as hers, she took off her tank top and examined her ribs. She tentatively spread out the fur to get a good look at the bare skin beneath and cringed at the rather nasty, black bruise slowly spreading across her abdomen. It was going to be a good, long while before that one went away; best to not let it show too much to her parents tonight.

“Carrots? You still in here?” Nick hollered into the room. Rounding the bend of the row, he saw a rather exposed Judy scrutinizing what looked to be her chest. “Ayyyyia!” He exclaimed, swinging around to avert his eyes and maintain some sense of propriety. “I thought you would have been dressed and ready to leave by now.”

Thinking it rather fascinating that he got so flustered at her in these situations, she egged the situation on as she wrapped a towel around her bosom. “You know you came in wanting a peep.”

He gazed off towards the far end of the rather musty smelling room, tapping his muzzle in mock thought. “Do I think you have a strong presence? Yes, yes I do.”

“Nice avoidance.” She snickered as she headed off to the open showers.

“You’ve grown quite bold there my fuzzy friend.” Nick remarked as he crossed his legs and leaned up against the nearby locker row, his ears flitting up at the sound of the water sprinkling down onto the tiled flooring beyond the wall.

The comment gave Judy pause as she reached for the bar of lather to rub into her fur. She did have to admit she was way more comfortable around Nick these days than when she first met him. She chuckled a little at remembering her first visit to the Mystic Springs Oasis, a naturalist club where patrons who frequented there did so because it was a way to release their inner animals and become free from society’s burdens…one of which being clothes and any sense of modesty. Nick had taken her there not just on a profitable lead on her first case but also to get her uncomfortable to the point of quitting altogether.

“Yeah, I guess I have.” She admitted as she rubbed the lather into her fur, lightly dabbing it through the part where her bruise was forming. “And you’ve grown rather shy in this regard.” She added, prompted a chuckle from Nick.

She couldn’t deny that she was way more comfortable with herself as not just a cop but a bunny as well. They never did go back to the Oasis again but Nick had helped her crawl out of her shell. She was still diffident when it came to her body and revealing it to others but for some reason she was rather relaxed around Nick. She shrugged her shoulders as she rubbed the soap through her long
ears, taking care to not get it into her eyes; she figured being partners on the police force for almost a year did that to you.

After a few minutes, Nick asked, “So Carrots, it still boggles me why you agreed to this whole fiasco in the first place. It wasn’t because of the money involved because you made none off of it.”

“You’re right.” She smiled as she felt the warm flow of water down her body, washing the soap through her pelt. “I’m just happy Mr. Big won and will make good on his promise to help local charities. Some good will come out of this and I’m content with that.”

Nick waved his hand in the air to ward off her answer, even though he knew very well she couldn’t see the gesture. “That’s not what I meant. I understand that part. I’m talking more along the lines of before that became ingratiated into this whole mess. You took the challenge without a thought to your own safety or your own job position in the force.”

“Yeah, so?” She quipped, scrubbing down the rest of her legs with the suds.

Crossing his arms, he supposed, “So here’s what I’m thinking: You were growing up in your bunny colony of probably about two-hundred-fifty plus brothers and sisters with little in the way of standing out amongst your peers. You wanted to become something more than a simple carrot farmer and set your sights on the seemingly impossible job of being the first bunny cop in the greatest and largest ‘utopia’ in the nearby provinces. As a result you had a few bullies in your hometown that pushed you down and beat you up, which further cemented your dream of becoming that first bunny cop to the point that you now stand up to any challenge or any bully that crosses your path. Ramon included. Am I close?”

She scrunched her nose in annoyance at how well Nick wheedled out the truth of things just by hypothetical stories. “Yeah, so?” She repeated with a bit of aggravation laced in her voice. She tapped her foot irritated as she heard a small snigger emerge from beyond the shower wall as he reveled in his small victory.

Their gaiety died down the moment Nick’s radio crackled to life at his hip. Even though he was off duty, he still carried it around in case something came up that sparked the need for their involvement.

“All units, we have a code 261 in the prairie district of downtown central. We need all available units with kits and...uh...previous experience in these matters to report to the scene at 428 Humphrey Lane.”

“What was that?” Judy called out as she turned off the water to get a better listen to the radio chatter.

“Nothing.” Nick called back, turning down the volume of the radio. It was Officer Benjamin Clawhauser, both receptionist and radio dispatcher of the ZPD. A rather friendly cheetah of considerable girth caused primarily from his love of donuts and all things fried. He was loved by all in the ZPD because of his amusing personality and his general enthusiasm for all things Gazelle, Zootopia’s resident celebrity singer.

“Can you please turn around?” Judy called out from around the corner.

“I can do you one better Carrots.” Nick smiled as he strolled to the end of the row and set up camp on the other side, allowing Judy plenty of privacy to get dressed up for their visit to her parents tonight.

After some shuffling of clothes and swishing of fabric, she called him back out into the open. A small breath caught in his throat as he beheld the diminutive bunny. She was sporting a full length red dress with orange-yellow floral print that crossed over her midriff from her chest down to her
right thigh, splitting open to reveal the bottom half of her leg. It had several cotton buttons that gave it an oriental flare spaced at intervals down its front.

Nick visibly gulped as he suddenly considered himself underdressed for the occasion. “Um… Carrots? We are just going as friends to see your parents right?”

She cocked her waist to one side as she embraced her hip with a paw, “What? Is this too formal? Tonight is my little sister’s birthday.”

“Yeah, one sister of many,” Nick pointed out.

Judy looked down at the dusty floor, “Yeah, I guess when you’re the middle child of two-hundred and eighty-three, it is kind of hard to have your birthday stand out.”

Nick’s grin returned as he took a few steps toward her, “I understand. You want to make her feel special by dressing up and showing how much she means to you.”

Judy snapped her fingers at him, “Yep, that’s the reason.” They both laughed at that. After their mirth died down, she pointed at his radio. “So what was the call?”

He stood up straight, almost uncomfortable that she still remembered that a call came in. He didn’t want to alarm her about the rape crime on Humphrey Lane. While Judy may be a relatively new resident to Zootopia, Nick had been living here most of his life. These sorts of things occurred almost weekly when he was growing up. At the onset of Leodore Lionheart’s reign as mayor, one didn’t see these sorts of crimes committed much. His financial backing of the ZPD to bolster its authority helped quell the onslaught of these horrible atrocities within a few short months. After years of no rape cases, the fact this one popped up out of the blue with the threat of such heavy penalties for it was rather shocking.

“The call?” Nick stalled, trying to think of something routine. “Just a 187 in downtown square.” He blenched the moment the words left his lips. A murder was just as bad and just as rare. Why did he even blurt that out?

Judy’s ears stood up like a shot, her eyes wide, “Seriously? We need to get over there immediately and see what’s going on!”

“There are other cops to handle this who would be just as capable as we would be. Let them do their job. We have a train to catch tonight.” He reasoned.

She smiled at him like he was completely missing the point. “And we’ll catch it. We’re not going to take the case. We’re just going to pop on over there and see if they need any help and then be on our way. It’s not a big deal. Besides, we bunnies have a great sense of hearing and smell. I might uncover something they may not.” She pattered along gaily with Nick trudging behind.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” He mumbled.

“Dang Hopps!” Officer Swinton snorted as she observed her stylish getup. “Aren’t you off duty right now?”

“Oh shush!” She silenced the swine born colleague. “I just heard the call and came to see if there was any need for assistance.”

Swinton glared over at Nick for explanation but got nothing more than a shrug. Pivoting around to Judy, Swinton jabbed a finger in her direction, “Well, we have it all covered here Hopps. So you can
move along now. Officer Pennington is in there with the victim now and is handling the crime scene just fine.”

Before Judy could move to object, the portly pachyderm pitched forward out of the small doorway, barely big enough for her frame. Her eyes lighted up at the sight of Judy. “Oh Officer Hopps! Great timing! I need you in here. I could use a second pair of eyes on this. Something doesn’t sit right with me.”

“This is highly irregular Francine!” Swinton grumbled at her partner as Judy smirked at her displeasure before drifting past him, leaving Nick out in the rotating red and blue lights of the squad car, thinking desperately of something in common to talk about with the piggish cop to while away the time. Francine led Judy into the apartment complex and up a flight of steps before squeezing herself through the tiny door into the dim lit flat that seemed to belong to a female bongo resident.

Judy brought her paws to her mouth as she looked on in horror at the half naked form of the fleet footed mammal, spread eagle on the floor, eyes shut and seemingly beaten to death. “Is she dead?” Judy probed hesitantly.

Francine scratched an itch under her arm with her trunk before answering, “Nah, she’s just out cold. We initially called it a rape case,” An intake of breath from Judy. The very thought seemed outlandish to her but the elephant charged onward. “because of the excrement coming from her… womanhood.” She pointed with her nose at the nether regions between the bongo’s legs where indeed it looked like a small pool of fluid had gathered just beneath the victim.

“So it isn’t a murder?” Judy clarified, looking up at Francine, her ears fully flat on her back. The elephant sniffed loudly, “Who gave you that idea? No, in fact, I’m not sure what it is.” She pounded over to the open kit on the table, freshly opened and used with samples taken. “After my examination, there seems to be no sign of forced penetration or residual semen. In all honesty, it actually smells like her than anyone else.”

That got Judy to wiggle her nose as she knelt down beside the comatose bongo, taking in deep whiffs of the potent odor. It did indeed smell like one animal’s scent and not two. “What is her name?” She asked.

“Olivia Stipe.” Francine clarified flatly.

“Any witnesses?” Judy grilled, her gaze wandering up the woman’s body, scanning for any other clues outside of the visible scratches and bruising.

“None. Her neighbor one floor down heard some loud scuffling about an hour ago along with some muffled cries and called it in. We came to the scene to discover her like this.” She motioned again to the body.

Judy nodded her head as she continued the inspection. What was odd was that although the claw marks coincided with the torn ribbons of her clothing, which indicated a scuffle before being knocked unconscious, the ripping open of the female’s undergarments seemed deliberate; almost like an afterthought…or a cover-up to make it look like a rape had occurred. Her scrutiny landed on two pinpricks of red at the base of the jawline, just along the primary jugular vein.

She indicated the markings to Francine. “Did you see these puncture holes yet?”

The pachyderm squinted in the darkness. Several of the lamps that had adorned the small coffee tables flanking the plush, brown couch were apparently knocked over; two of which were broken
and one flickered intermittently. “No, I guess I missed those entirely. I was more concerned with the rape aspect of the crime. Do you think the killer wanted her for the blood?”

Judy began looking around the apartment, “Possibly.” She murmured.

Unbuckling a flashlight from inside her dress, secured in a sheath bound to a strap around her leg, Judy clicked it on and began roving its luminescence around the room. It appeared that Ms. Stipe was making dinner at the time given the fresh batch of uncut leaves unfurled on the kitchen island. Several of the finely stained cabinets had been left open. One was partially ajar, hanging on one hinge. Olivia was dragged into the living room knocking over several vases and lamps before coming to a rest at the center of her den.

Flicking the light upwards, she saw several scratch marks along the ceiling. She tracked them back into the kitchen, Francine following her with a quizzical look. The scuffs ended abruptly in a shadowy corner of the scullery just off the primary cooking area. There she found ten deep holes pierced into the wooden boards of the ceiling, separated into two groupings of five. She began to move closer for a better look when her ears detected a small flutter from the floor above.

“Did you hear that?” Judy hissed; her ears standing up on high alert.

“I’m not sure.” Francine confessed, looking up to the balcony overlooking the living space. “I thought I heard something.”

She followed Francine’s eye line. “Is there a second floor to this place?”

“Yeah” She grunted, pointing up to the loft. “This is a deluxe studio compartment but I’m not walking up those stairs.”

Judy realized the reason as she saw the small width of them. “Can I have a gun?” She opened her palm, deftly snatching Francine’s thrown gun before climbing up the steps.

“Should I call in Nick and Swinton?” Francine offered.

After a moment of consideration, Judy bowed her head in the affirmative. Bringing the barrel of the gun up to her eyes, she advanced up to the loft; her window of view angled down the center bore sight with her flashlight held tightly to the barrel to illuminate the darkness. She could hear Francine radioing Nick and Swinton in as she swept the light across the sleeping area. She noticed the ivory appareled bed spread was untouched and the entire garret looked pristine. It was clear Olivia never made it up here before being assaulted.

She heard Nick enter the apartment as a soft flapping of leather alerted her to a rather bulky shape hovering over the bed. She tried to make a sound to cry out for help but the shadow was upon her in an instant. A gunshot went off. Claws dug into her expensive dress, penetrating through into her skin. She yelped in pain as the figure dragged her across the floor, smashing her through the oaken railing sending splinters of wooden shrapnel and debris to rain on the officers below. It let her go in mid-air as it sliced through the glass window above and flew out into the night.

“Judy!” Nick yelled, trying in vain to run beneath to catch her fall. It was too little too late. She smacked her head on one of the coffee tables before crumpling to the floor, the gun flinging off into the dining nook. Darkness enveloped her.

A rhythmic beeping roused Judy from her lethargic stupor. She tried to move her limbs but found that she could not. Laboriously blinking her eyes open, she flinched at the startlingly whitewash walls of a sterile hospital room, lit by unfeeling fluorescent bulbs. An IV was beside her bed slowly
dripping fluids into her body through her arm. A heart and brain wave monitor was beside it measuring her vital signs. On the other side of the bed was another IV but it was slowly siphoning her blood into a rather large pouch. There were no wall adornments and it appeared the paint was cracking and peeling off from the walls, as if the place was in dire need of refurbishment.

Her eyes were brought down to the length of her body where she was shocked to discover that she was chained to the bed in heavy steel-link cuffs attached to the bed supports. She tried to raise herself up but nearly gagged as the throat collar cut the air from her throat, forcing her to slap her head back against the pillow. The jostle woke a rather disheveled Nick Wilde, previously sound asleep atop her lap, hunched over her while sitting in a roller chair.

“Nick?” She croaked; her throat parched.

He looked up at her with a rather nasty swelling on his left eye, dried blood matting his fur down his cheek. Tufts of his pelt were mottled and there were patches of bare skin where it had been completely ripped out. He sported a collar with wires dangling along its length, its entire purpose unknown but ultimately dangerous. He had iron cuffs around his wrists with links intertwined to meet up with those encircling his ankles. He was a sorry sight and it nearly broke her heart to see him like this.

“Oh Judy…” He moaned despairingly. “Why did you have to wake up?”

“Nick…who…did this to you? What’s…going on?” She crackled, her voice breaking up.

“The same savages who did this to you.” He gestured to her condition. “You were too dangerous to be left alone, being the leader of the rebellion and all. Our friends don’t even know you’re alive.”

“Rebellion? What are you talking about?” With each new sentence Nick uttered, a rising sense of alarm began to infiltrate her being.

Nick folded his hands back over his ears as he buried his snout into the sheets. “Oh Judy…” She flicked her ears at the sound of her name. He rarely called her that unless he was overly concerned for her well-being and he had said her name twice now. “They’ll know you’re awake now and will come for you.” With a loud racket in that obtrusively quiet room, he jangled the chains bound to his wrists to pull something out from the pocket of his muddied pants. In his paw was a diamond encrusted filing knife. “I brought this in to every visit in hopes that I could get you out of here should you awake.” He stared longingly at it before closing his eyes in defeat. “Now I feel you’d be worse off if I released you.”

Judy’s heart began beating fast in her chest, she was close to panicking. This wasn’t her Nick. He would never admit defeat in the presence of others. It wasn’t like him to give up this easily; he was too sly for that. “I don’t understand.” She whispered, craning her neck to get a better look at him. The effort nearly made her swoon, the second IV had drained a lot of her blood and she felt quite weak. “Why would it be worse for me?”

He draped a loving paw over her thigh, gently covered by the white sheet. “As long as you were in here, you couldn’t do anymore harm to them or their agenda. They left you alone with only daily supervision and blood drain. Now that you’re awake, I don’t think they’ll let you off with anything less than torture and death.”

“They? Who are they?” Her mind was a maelstrom of thoughts, jumbled remembrances and images flashed through her brain, trying to coalesce into some semblance of memory.

Nick simply stared at her. “You don’t remember anything at all do you?” Judy shook her head
slightly at his dumbfounded look. He took her atrophied paw in his own as he looked directly into her eyes. “Judy…you’ve been in a coma for over five years.”

Chapter End Notes

I knew that the best way to hook the reader into the story was to dive head first into action while interspersing exposition at key points as needed to understand character relationships and backgrounds. The idea of utilizing a Memento Mori style of approach for the story telling came quite early in its conception and was the key defining point to reveal the big twist at the end of chapter one and hook readers into the story that I'm going to tell. I'm not sure if everyone is ready for the type of dark, gritty story I'm going to unveil over the course of the fanfic, especially when its juxtaposed with the normally kid-friendly budding franchise that is Zootopia, but I write my stories for adults or at least older teens with a respect to the source material yet expanding it into territories that the original designers had not intended it to go. My only hope through all this is that I can consistently nail down Judy and Nick’s personalities and relationship as I build them up as partners and possibly more. Enjoy the chapter and many more to follow!
Chapter 02 : White Sheep

Chapter Notes

Judy's mind reeled from the revelation. Had she really been out that long? Where was she? What had happened? So many questions cropped up that she didn't have the time to fully comprehend each one before it was washed away with a sea of more. She wasn't so much concerned for her well-being but for Nick's. Seeing him beaten and defeated was more than she could handle. She raised a paw in his direction, its miniscule outline trembling with the sheer effort of it.

Nick tilted his head at the movement and took her paw in his own, trying his best to crack a smile. "I'm glad you are back with us Judy."

With that, he leaned forward and graced the top of her forehead with a delicate kiss, a mere wisp of a lick that felt like a sensual caress. Her entire body went rigid from the shock. She couldn't remember him ever doing that in the scant few years they've known each other. What else happened during the time she was out? She squeezed her eyes tight trying to remember but for the life of her, she couldn't remember anything.

"Nick?" She whimpered, trying to keep her composure as the reality of their situation began to sink in. "What's going to happen to us?"

Firm resolve etched itself into his face as he drew his mouth taut. "Nothing, Judy. At least…nothing to you."

Decision made, he took the diamond file and began the slow, laborious process of cleaving through the steel-links of each chain that attached her to the bed. It made a horrific scraping sound like nails on a chalkboard but within a few minutes, he was through one set, allowing her right arm to be free from its prison. The cuff was still bound to her wrist, weighing it down, but being able to move her arm was liberating.

"A mutual friend of ours secured me this file," A great pause, followed by a sudden intake of air, seemingly in an attempt to stop from crying himself. "…at great cost." He finished with finality.

Her expression wilted at his despair as another chain was sliced. "Who was it?"

Nick didn't say anything for several minutes until he had carved through yet another link, this one attached to her left leg. She brought it up as close to her chest as possible, feeling every satisfying pop and crack on its journey. Without looking at her, Nick started in on the next chain. In a flat voice, he uttered one word, "Finnick."

She brought her paws to her lips, "He did this…for me?"

Nick gave one curt nod. "You helped him when he was in dire need. He felt it only right to repay the favor." He renewed his cutting with vigor, memories of his old friend burning hot in his mind. He stopped sawing for a moment to shake out his arm before resuming, "Geez, this really burns after a while, you know that?"

After staring listlessly at his work, her ears perked up at a distinct clicking sound. It was very feint but it could be heard from several floors below them. "What is that sound?"

Nick jerked forward, nearly slicing her leg in half at her question. He recovered quickly, relieved that
he had missed her limb by centimeters. His eyes were round and expressive; a look of abject terror was evident in them. "What does it sound like Judy?" A freaked sense of urgency could be felt in his query.

"Like a sort of clicking or clapping." She commented, hearing it elevate one floor.

"No! I thought I'd have more time than this!" He rammed through the final chain binding her other leg to the bed. He rose up above her head and gently drew her neck forward. "Please be still and don't move for this." He began sawing the chain keeping her head to the bed; its incessant grinding right by her ears made her toes curl with its grating sound.

"Who are they?" She asked nervously, her eyes flicking to the one door leading into the hospital room.

"Savages who took over Zootopia and claimed it as their own. The worst part about it," He grit his teeth forcefully, "we let them in."

"My mother always said that was a rather harsh word." Judy reminisced.

"Well, it applies to them." Nick growled.

With a grunt, Nick carved through the final chain. He began threading out the IV shunts stuck in her arms. She cried out a little at their painful exit but remained calm. "Easy does it." He soothed, lifting her up to a sitting position. She nearly fainted and would have fallen off the bed had Nick not been quick enough to catch her. "You've been drained of most of your blood. You'll feel weak and lightheaded but you must focus Judy!"

She blinked her eyes lazily, trying to remain conscious under the great strain of moving. "I'm here Nick…I'm here." She wrapped one arm around his neck as he hoisted her up into his arms, cradling her like a child.

He paced over to the window with one arm supporting her. He used the other to open it up. "I sure hope she's watching right now."

"Who?" Judy probed, fatigue threatening to overwhelm her.

He burrowed around in his pockets until he found what he was searching for. Raising what looked to be a flare gun out the open window, he calmly regarded her. "The less you know Judy the better, should you get caught again."

Shutting his eyes tight, he fired off a squealing shot into the air. The bright, crimson flare soared high into the sky before bursting into a cavalcade of falling embers. The explosion was most likely heard for several miles and no doubt alerted both friendly and hostile eyes to their location. Judy watched in awe at the remaining cinders raining down like small fairies, promising happiness and good wishes.

"You set this up in hopes I'd one day wake up?" She smiled; it felt good that she had some friends left in this hideous nightmare.

Nick stared off to the distant horizon, buildings crumbling and laid prone to decay dotted the early morning sky. "We all did. The city needs you Judy. You were its heart."

She turned back towards the door, "Nick, they're coming down the hall."

"Dang it!" He looked down out the window to the rooftop below. He frowned, "It doesn't look that
far." Another look of consternation. "There is one window ledge below this one to grab onto to stall your fall. Think you can make it?"

The concept of what he was about to do penetrated her haze of delirium. Her eyes flashed, "You're going to drop me?"

His expression was grim, this was no joke. "I don't have any other choice. Your chances of surviving this fall would be better than you getting caught again by them. May she find you before they do."

"Who?" She stammered bewildered, tensing up against his warm body as he began positioning her over the windowsill.

"You'll know her when you see her." He reassured her.

"Nick…" She tried to clamber up his body, trying in vain to latch onto his neck and never let go. Within seconds, she could feel her strength failing. She was simply too weak. "I'm scared."

"I know Judy. We all are." He paused. "We'll see each other again, count on it." Breathing in a ragged sigh, he licked her forehead again. "Just know that I love you Judy."

"Nick…?" She stared into his eyes quizzically. What did he just say?

Before she could make sense of what was happening, he had dropped her. She flailed around, her limbs shooting out like ragdolls. Her front paws caught the tip of the first ledge one floor below. She held on for a few precious milliseconds and then slipped, continuing her downward plummet to the roof below. She caught the second projection better but it did little to stop her descent.

She landed with a thump onto the cement roofing of the lower section of the hospital. She wailed in pain as her entire body was wracked with spasms from the impact. The dangling chains left attached to her cuffs jangled atrociously as her limbs shuddered and twitched. Feeling completely bereft of life, she could do little but look up as she heard a gagged cry. She saw the fleeting ginger fur of Nick being wrapped viciously inside claws and leather. A short, muffled shout later and it was silent up there.

She shivered uncontrollably in the chill, morning air. Without warning Judy wretched up the empty contents of her stomach. The effort depleted all her energy and darkness enveloped her in its sweet embrace. Time seemed to be an illusion.

"Nick, please stop adjusting that already. You look fine!" Judy admonished, batting his paws away from his unsightly fuchsia striped tie.

"I'm more worried about you Carrots. Are you even fine?" He gestured to her new get up which consisted of nothing more than a pair of jeans and a button up shirt with carrot plaid print. Her fancy dress she had donned earlier was ruined from her encounter with…whatever it was in that bongo's apartment. The holes plus the blood from her wounds saw to that.

"I said I was okay, all right? It was just some scratches. I've certainly had a few of those before in my life. It's no big deal." She shrugged her shoulders, clearly unconcerned with her current welfare.

It had been a rocky last few hours but they managed to secure the crime scene and cart the cataleptic Ms. Stipe to Mercy hospital for recovery. Officer Pennington was beside herself with guilt, trumpeting that it should have been her going up to the loft and not Judy; she could have clearly handled that beast. After many attempts to dissuade Judy from calling the night off, she thwarted their efforts of concern by insisting she was well enough to travel home. She just needed a change of
"You know Chief Bogo is going to be furious with you for butting your nose in on yet another crime scene when you're off duty." Nick grinned, smoothing down his tie one last time before redirecting his attention back out the bullet train's windows.

Raising her hands in mock innocence, she chirped, "Chief Bogo doesn't scare me. He's just a big softie at heart."

Crossing his arms over the railing, he watched the trees zip by. "Need I remind you he nearly fired you on your first case on the force."

She bumped him with her hips, joining him to appreciate the view. "Well he didn't know how loveable I could be and what a great help I am to the ZPD."

Nick ruffled the fur between her ears, "Well, just remember that you'll have a mountain of paperwork to do when we get back since you decided to butt in."

Her ears dropped instantly, "Yeah, don't remind me."

He shook his head at her indomitable spirit. "Just… take it easy Carrots. There is a limit to what anyone can do. Just make sure you know where yours are."

She turned her head slowly as a wide grin grew on her face, "Is that… concern Nick?"

He snorted jovially, "Don't flatter yourself too much."

"I dare say I've grown on you my sly friend." She accused.

He stood up straight, blank stare in his eyes, as if reciting from rote, "Do apples grow on trees? Yes, yes they do." He broke out into a smirk as she delivered a swift kick to his hind quarters. Their mirth bubbling down, they resumed their vigil at the front of the train, looking out the upper floor compartment windows. Several farms, hay bales and silos whisked by. "Wow." Nick commented suddenly. "I'm really going to hick-ville."

Judy giggled, "You ain't seen nothing yet city boy!" She craned her neck to get a good view of the small landing at the terminal. "There's the platform for the Burrows. I can see my parents!"

A small, nervous chuckle from Nick. "Straight out of the gate… wonderful."

She elbowed him playfully, "You'll be fine! Stop worrying! You're my work partner, they know who you are. They'll love you."

Nick didn't know why he was so nervous. It wasn't like they were dating or anything. They were just partners together in the ZPD, going out on the same patrols, being tasked to handle the same cases. He thought about it a moment, they even went to lunch and dinner together all the time too. On reflection, he figured they did spend as much time together as a couple would… yet they weren't. He shook off his ruminations as the train pulled into the station. Maybe it was just the fact this was his first time truly outside the city in any other capacity but an officer. Yeah, that was probably all it was.

She had no idea how long she had been asleep on the rooftop but she knew she needed water and fast. Feeling slightly better with rest and definitely without an IV constantly extracting out her blood, she wobbled up onto all fours. Standing seemed impossible right now, so instead she crawled to the very edge of the roof. Heaving herself unceremoniously onto the ledge, she took a quick gander at
the ground below. It was easily three stories down and she was in no condition to make the attempt.

Trudging back on all fours to the window she fell near, she sighed in relief that it was slightly ajar. Struggling her way up onto the sill, she lost her grip and tumbled into the room. The chains rattled harshly in the stillness of the patient bedroom. A snorting, shadowy figure rose up from the bed, making a clicking nose as it searched the room for any discrepancies. Judy was thankfully behind an end table with a vase filled with flowers drooping down its sides, long since dead.

Sensing nothing was amiss, the shape rolled over atop an inert, spotted deer body Judy didn't even realize was there. She quivered with revulsion as she heard several, sloppy sucking sounds. Nausea threatened to engulf her the moment she realized it was feeding on the comatose deer. Had she been violated like that when she was out these past five years? She chanced the sound of her cuffs to reach up and feel the fur around her neck. Her blood ran cold as she felt what seemed like hundreds of puncture wounds all across her skin. She and everyone in this building was nothing but food to them.

After what seemed like eternity, the beast was finally satiated and collapsed beside its meal in blissful slumber, to be awoken later on for another slothful feeding. Feeling stronger with each passing moment, Judy crawled low to the door and reached up to its handle. The clinking of steel prompted an alerted snort from behind causing her to freeze in place. A tense few minutes passed before she could hear the snoring again. She quickly turned the handle and slipped out into the hallway.

Judy could hear howls and moans from behind several of the doors lining the corridor. Several fluorescent lights buzzed and flickered up and down the hall. There were a few discarded corpses flanking a few of the rooms, completely drained of blood. She scrunched her nose at the very idea that they'd so casually toss out the bodies once they were done with them. She wiggled her nose to try and smell a way out but she could sense nothing but blood, death and rot. Trying her best to slink down to the far end where she spied a blazing exit sign still miraculously lighting up the corner, she could feel her heart beating furiously within her chest, threatening to rupture through at any moment.

Scrabbling over to the door, she stretched out to grasp the door knob when it busted outward towards her. Judy nearly shrieked in surprise before being shushed by a furry paw. In front of her was another female bunny clothed in nothing but black fabric tied together at her waist by a grey sash. Buckled diagonally across her torso was a red, leather strap with what looked like a sword affixed to her back. She had a long, deep gouge running from the bridge of her nose down her left cheek and into the curve of her neck where no hair grew.

"Quiet!" The unknown bunny hissed. "You do not want to attract their ire. They may not see well but their sense of hearing is quite acute."

After she had removed the paw from Judy's mouth, she whispered, "Who are you?"

The bunny's face broke into a mix of sadness and pity. "You don't remember me?" She embraced Judy suddenly. She could do nothing but accept the heartfelt gesture of greeting. "It's okay Judy. I remember you. You used to be my role model growing up. Just call me Mai."

"Are you with Nick?" Judy asked tentatively.

Mai nodded, "I saw the flare he launched. We're all part of a secret resistance movement to reclaim our beloved Zootopia."

Sweet release flooded Judy's being, knowing that she was in safe hands, the very ones Nick had told her about. Without even being with Mai for even a few minutes, she could discern that she could trust her implicitly. "Where is everyone? What happened here?"
Mai put a paw up. "All will be revealed in time. For now, we must move you to a safer location. Once they realize that Zootopia's beloved jewel has returned from the dead, they'll be coming after you tooth and claw. We can't stay here."

"Where are all the cops? The ZPD?" Judy offered. Surely they could help in this situation. It was their duty to serve and protect all citizens of Zootopia.

Mai looked morosely at the ground a few moments, "Either all dead, being fed upon, in hiding or turned."

"Turned?" Judy prodded, fearing the answer.

"Turned savage, by a more condensed formula of the Night Howler poison. They can't be recovered. They now do the bidding of their masters." Her features grew firm as she glanced down the stairwell. "Come on, enough talk. We need to hurry."

They surreptitiously made their way down the filthy steps, caked with muddy paw prints and littered with refuse. Judy reared back as she spotted several spots of white defecation lining the sides of several steps. Faltering several times, Mai returned to Judy and assisted her down the rest of the steps. Although able to move since her liberation from her hospital bed, Judy was still in no condition to do strenuous exertion. Progress was sluggish down the three flights of stairs. A bang from a door above them caused them to freeze but it was a fluke as the beast wandered back onto the floor it came from.

"What is this place?" Judy asked softly, looking around the front foyer as they stepped from the stairwell into the lobby of the hospital. Furniture was overturned and chair cushions slashed open. Numerous bodies were strewn about the floor. She wasn't sure if any were alive.

Mai didn't look back but continued to direct Judy to the opposite end of the rather large vestibule, her ears flicking this way and that, her eyes a flurry of movement. Taking Judy by the paw, she ducked them both into a dark corner beside the elevator leading to the upper levels. Sniffing the air, she observed the front entrance. "This was once Mercy Hospital just outside Little Rodentia. It is now nothing more than a food bank for them." She inclined her head to a shattered window leading out to the side garden bordering the eastern side of the hospital. "We need to make our way to that window and escape."

Once there, Judy flopped over the shelf overlooking the untrimmed hedges below, the shrubbery cushioning her fall. Untangling herself with the help of Mai from the welter of cobwebs and unseemly crawlies that went with them, she looked around her in devastation. Funeral pyres dotted the skyline with their plumes of noxious smoke. Multitudes of buildings were defaced with excrement and blood; several roofs had jagged holes in them as if they caved in on themselves. The streets were littered with trash, refuse, cadavers and dead vegetation. Even the fountains were no longer running anymore.

Her breath caught in her throat. "What happened here?" Tears streamed unbidden down her cheeks at the sight of her city in ruins.

"The same thing that has happened at several other metropolises like this: desolation." A bitter note entered Mai's voice as she recalled how it went down. "They are like parasites, feeding off one community until it collapses onto itself and once they are fat and slaked, they move onto the next and do the same thing all over again. They are cunning and unrelenting."

Sniffing the air, Mai took Judy by the hand and dragged her across the primary road bordering the hospital now void of traffic or signs of life. The clanking of her chains echoed harshly through the
alleyways. "Shouldn't we remove these cuffs from me? Aren't they going to find us?"

Mai gave a curt bow of her head, "Yes, but first we need to get you to a safe haven where we'll have to the tools to do so. Until then-"

She was cut off midsentence as a horrible screech rampaged through the alley. Mai was lifted off the ground and slammed into the brick wall of the opposing building. She twisted upside down against the surface and kicked off; throwing her attacker into a corkscrew that landed it in the dumpster. Deftly landing on all fours, she cried out, "Judy, get out of here now! Run north to the central plaza! There should be someone waiting for you there!"

An anguished chattering emanated from the trash bin, flurries of garbage plummed into the air as a dark, winged shape erupted out of the trash. The last sight Judy saw of Mai as she stumbled around the nearest corner was that horrific creature swooping down onto her. Heart pounding, Judy sprinted and collapsed just meters down the paved street, her strength left her as she weakly attempted to get up onto all fours.

Her ears funneled in on a low growl from several paces away. Feebly turning her head, she beheld an emaciated cheetah, its eyes feral and jaws snapping. Its tail flicked to and fro as it crouched low in a stance that could only be interpreted as hostile. Slipping back onto her rump, she scrambled backwards until she missed the ground with her paw. It had dropped off to a lower alley level leading to a rather seedy district. She had completely missed the stairs leading down.

With a screech, she fell head over heels to the ground below. She hit the pavement hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. Her vision grew dim as she gasped for air. The last thing she saw was the dark silhouette of the cheetah on the level above her, its eyes glinting with the victory of the chase. She struggled to maintain consciousness. She could hear the heavy padding of feet from the cheetah which had jumped down over her, landing nearby her head.

_Nick, she thought, I love you too._ Oblivion.

The assault happened almost immediately as the train doors shuttled open and they stepped out onto the platform. In an instant, they were surrounded by hordes of bunnies, some just born while others ranging from children to mid-teens to a few adults. There were two, however, that stood out from the rest. One was sporting a green ball cap with a carrot image in front, a rather portly hare with jean suspenders over a salmon plaid shirt and a comely looking rabbit decked out in what looked to be her Sunday's finest, a carrot-lined summer dress.

"Wow mom." Judy remarked surprised. "You look better than I do right now."

She flapped a paw at her. "Oh stop. Your dad picked this delightful dress at the last county fair we had this year. I told him I didn't need this silly, old thing but he insisted."

"But it sure does look good on ya!" He nudged Judy knowingly. "Doesn't she though?"

"It's good to see you guys again." She hugged them tightly. "It has been too long."

"It certainly has!" Her father agreed. Initial greetings finished, their rapt eyes turned to Nick. "And this must be the esteemed Mr. Wilde, defender of the peace, hero crime fighter of Zootopia!" He moved forward to shake Nick's hand furiously, causing the fox to sway at the sudden nature of it.

"The pleasure is all mine Mr. Hopps." Nick let loose a toothy grin that he had hoped didn't come off too menacing.
If it worried Judy's parents any, they didn't show it. "Please, call me Stu!" He waved a paw through the air to dismiss the formalities. He stepped over to his wife, wrapping a loving arm around her waist. "And this here's my beautiful homemaker, Bonnie!"

She bowed slightly. "Good to finally meet you. It is certainly nice to see another fox around these parts."

"Your mom's right." Stu nodded vigorously, capturing Judy's attention. "That business deal with Gideon Grey is really taking off. You wouldn't believe the demand for carrot cakes these days!"

Bonnie put a paw on his shoulder, "His cakes are delicious. I thought my mom could bake a mean carrot cake but," She sighed at the memory, "looks like I was wrong!"

"Well we can all catch up at home. So...'Jude the Dude'," A knowing fatherly chortle. "ready to head back to the 'ol homestead?" Stu asked cheerfully, picking up Judy's bag and lugging it over his shoulder.

"Do you think we can all fit in the truck dad?" Judy asked, remembering the old beat-up piece of metal.

"No, of course not." He laughed. He tossed a set of keys to Judy, who caught them in the air. Seeing the confused look on her face, he continued. "With the profits of our produce and Gideon's baking, we were able to buy a new pick-up. We figured you would want to take it for a spin!"

"Would I?" She exclaimed happily.

"Come on kids, time to hustle into the car!" Bonnie commanded softly. As one, the multitude of rabbits disentangled themselves from Nick, who seemed visibly relieved to be free from their little, prying hands and penetrating questions about his city life. Bonnie and Stu hopped into the front seat with two of their more adult looking children while one half of their brood tumbled into the back of their truck while the other half toppled into Judy and Nick's ride.

"Seriously Carrots," Nick murmured as they got into the shiny, cobalt, flatbed truck, "what did you tell your family?"

She hummed merrily to herself, turning the key and listening to the sweet purr of the engine. "Nothing you need to be worried about."

He rolled his eyes as they kicked up dirt heading down the road following her parents. "So are they always like that? I felt you had to fight your way to even get a word in."

"Uh-huh." She affirmed. "You'll get used to it though."

After a few minutes of watching the passing corn and carrot fields, he turned to her. "So...'Jude the Dude'? What's that all about?"

An indecipherable look crossed her face but she remained composed. "Oh, it's nothing. Just a silly nickname my dad gave me when I was young."

The sliding back window to the driving compartment slammed open, jolting both of them half out of their seats. One of the little kits popped into the cabin and plopped herself down between them both. "Dad says it's because Judy peed in the boy's bathroom at the county fair." She piped in her squeaky voice.

"She what?" Nick's mouth fell open, his eyes locked onto Judy.
"Shut it Ami!" Judy said through gritted teeth.

"Oh ho ho!" Nick jibbed, settling into his seat better. "Is this a sore spot for you Carrots?"

"No!" She snapped before checking herself and continuing at a lower decibel. "It is like calling a rabbit 'cute,' except in this case, only my dad can call me that."

"She made a mess of everything." Ami gleefully chirped, completely ignorant to the chaos she was causing.

Seeing a viable opening in Judy's armor, he egged the little kit on. "So Ami…"

"Don't you dare Nick!" Judy warned, trying hard to focus on the road and the truck ahead of her.

Flouting Judy's plea, he pressed, "What exactly happened with your older sister in the boy's bathroom?"

"Ami, don't even think about it!" Judy try to place a paw over the little hare's mouth.

"Keep your eyes on the road Carrots." Nick reminded; much to her chagrin.

Sensing it was okay to blab this Ami cheerfully blurted the whole story. "There was this little boy bunny Judy took a fancy to and she was all over him day in and day out! One day at the county fair, she confessed her love for him and he rejected her and slapped a pie in her face!"

"That's enough now Ami!" Judy ordered, resuming her attempts at covering her sister's big mouth.

"Watch it!" Nick shouted, pushing the steering wheel hard to the left, forcing the truck to swerve from the ditch on the side of the road.

"Well, make her stop!" Judy beseeched.

He wrapped a tender arm around the trusting little bunny, "She's your little sister. Wouldn't you have the authority to?" Judy shot him a glare before returning to the road. "And shouldn't we be encouraging her independence and have her speak her mind?" He crooned.

"Whatever." Judy relented, seeing as Nick wouldn't stop pestering Ami until the entire train wreck was revealed. Ears drooped behind her and mouth firmly set, she kept her gaze to the horizon.

Ami gave Judy a sidelong squint before rebounding quickly back into it. "Judy was so furious with him that she took his science project that year, a volcano, into the boy's bathroom and peed all into it, like a boy bunny would!" The little tyke cackled with laughter at her older sister's embarrassment.

Nick's muzzle opened in genuine shock. "Star-studded jewel of Zootopia, Officer Judy Hopps."

"Don't go there Nick." He had to fight hard not to contain his laughter, she had never sounded this menacing before in all the time he'd known her.

"You rebel, you…" He howled unable to control his humor, albeit drawing a rather seething scowl from Judy. "That must have stunk to high heaven when he started the chemical reaction."

"I heard it made everyone clear out the fair!" Ami added gleefully.

"I made some mistakes when I was younger, okay?" Judy explained harshly, slapping a paw onto the wheel. "Haven't we all?" She sniffed once, drawing in the fresh scent of manure and grass. "We're almost to the house anyway."
"So why 'Jude the Dude?'" He grilled, still unsure of that particular connection.

"Jaden was a jerk." She retorted.

Nick gawked at Ami for further clarification. "Yeah, he was a big jerk. He'd pull pranks and get people in trouble. Dad gave her a stern talking to about how what she did was bad but he agreed all the same that Jaden deserved something like that. Because of that, he called her 'Jude the Dude' because she put him in his place when no other bunny would."

To explain further, Judy informed, "In our community, it is the father's role to discipline his kits. No one would reel Jaden in from his antics. Someone had to do it, so that someone had to be me."

"He took a dude's role!" Ami teetered, holding onto her stomach, trying her best not to choke on her own laughter.

"You know…" Nick exhaled, reclining back into the new, cushy seat. "I'm not worried at all anymore about this visit. I'm sure there are plenty more juicy stories to hear."

"Why did I ask you to come with me again?" Judy groaned, her head sinking lower behind the wheel.

Nick coolly replied, "You tell me, you're the one that invited me."

It was Judy's turn to roll her eyes. "Yeah, what was I thinking?"

He leaned over Ami before whispering, "You know you love me Carrots."

She deigned a glance in his direction, "Do I know this? I'm not sure right now."

He crowed at her response as they pulled into the roundabout driveway to their modest home. The multitude of siblings jumbled out of their respective trucks and began bounding into a house that seemed too small to contain that much fur. It was a quaint looking abode made of proper wooden planks and nails with glass windows in all the expected locations. The red roof tile stood out against the suntanned fields around it. One lone tree stood beside the house with an outstretched branch with a hanging tire swing just begging to be played with.

"I'll have to admit," Nick said, taking in the entirety of Judy's birth home, "this looks a lot more cozy than I thought it would."

Blaring in from the side, setting Nick a bit on edge with the ninja-like quality of it, Stu rambled up beside them quite proud of his handiwork. "Why thanks for the compliment Mr. Wilde! I spent the better part of a year making that with my old pop. It's the house I'll be passing to my children and their children's children someday." He had a few tears already welling up in his eyes at the thought.

"Just the two of you?" Nick marveled, scratching his chin as he admired the house.

He propped his paws onto his waist, "Uh-huh. We were fearless when it came to building." He pointed at a few houses several miles away in other plots of land. "We helped build our neighbors' burrows as well."

Perplexed, Nick studied the rather small house. "How do you fit your entire family in there?"

Stu guffawed. "In there? Heavens no! There is a reason it is called a burrow! Most of it is underground via tunnels we've excavated."
"Well, that makes total sense." Nick nodded sagely.

"As a matter of fact, I was planning on adding an expansion to the back porch and I could use the extra help." Stu said; slapping a friendly paw on Nick's back.

Judy sidled up next to him, "Oh, now I remember why I asked you out here. We need you to help build the backyard sunroom."

"That's not what I agreed to!" Nick barked. Stu gave a worried look between the two of them.

"You agreed to go with me to see my family and visit the folks for the weekend and you shall be doing just that." She placed a cocky paw on her hip, her eyes demure. "I just didn't mention you'd be assisting us with the farm chores as well. It's called a hustle sweetheart!"

He jabbed a finger at her, "You're getting too good at this."

She wiggled her fingers at him in farewell, "I learn from the best." She skipped over to her mother, leaving Nick at a loss for words. He had been the con-artist most of his life, not her! Now she could run circles around him and get him all flustered and tongue-tied. The only thing he had on her was 'Jude the Dude' and even that wasn't much.

Bonnie was ushering in the last of the young ones into the burrow as a rather rotund Fox draped in overalls came waddling out of the front door. Stu's eyes lit up, "And here is the star of tonight's feast. I'd like you to meet Gideon Grey, our resident community baker. Famous from here all the way to the West Burrows! You are like kin. You should have loads to talk about!"

After another small pat on the shoulder, Stu wandered off to set up the farm for the evening hours. "Right." Nick plucked up his resolve and strolled up to Gideon. Flashing his best smile, he opened his arms in greeting. "Hello there…um…Mr. Grey. How are you?"

The fat fox's eyes alighted on Nick, taking a few seconds to recognize who he was. "Mr. Wilde!" He lifted the hapless fox in an uncomfortable bear hug, squeezing the air out from his lungs. Several excruciating seconds later, Gideon placed him down on the front porch more roughly than intended. "I hear from Judy you're a fine right feller!"

Flattening down his disheveled shirt and tie, he responded in kind. "I hear you aren't so bad yourself. You seem to have a knack for baking and I must commend you for having mastered a skill that even I wouldn't have the patience in doing. So kudos to you!"

An awkward silence drifted between him. Gideon, unsure of Nick's meaning due to his fast way of talking and city accent, anxiously stepped over a few paces to drag Judy by the arm into the conversation. "Judy, I understood about half the words he was saying. Is he talking in tongues?"

She gave him a bemused look before turning to Nick, "No he's not…Nick, he's a country boy. Born and raised here all his life. You'll need to speak plainly."

Nick threw his hands out in his defense. "I was speaking plainly!"

"Well no matter, dinner's almost done. Come inside and get ready! You're going to love it!" Judy was practically exuberant. Never had she been so proud to show someone else her family and what they could do. If anyone could appreciate her heritage and where she came from, it would be Nick.

"Well, it was sure nice to meet you anyway." Gideon tipped his hands in a lazy two finger salute before shuffling back into the house.
"This is going to go swimmingly." Nick mumbled to himself.

Chapter End Notes

The first half of the chapter was rather easy to write and came together quite fast. My goal was to give enough detail about what happened to Zootopia but not outright spoil the events that led up to it just yet. I also felt it prudent to continue to leave the 'monsters' in the dark for now until a later chapter to keep the tension and wild speculation high. I'm typically good at writing dark fiction and so the apocalyptic section was pretty rote for me. The hardest section was the last half which involved Judy, Nick, Bonnie, Stu and some Gideon Grey. I'm still getting a feel for the last three characters and introducing a few OCs of my own in this chapter. The hardest thing for me writing this chapter was getting the banter between Nick and Judy just right. I leaned heavily on dialogue prose from the movie, but just changing it up enough to be a good homage to the script while still being its own thing within the context of the story/chapter. The story of 'Jude the Dude' was taken from a real life story I learned of and applied to Judy, whether it works or not for readers is up to subjective opinion. I had originally conceived of another interlude for this chapter but a beta reader (Berserker88) suggested to take it out and place it in a later chapter or risk Darkness Induced Audience Apathy. It was a wise choice and the second half was split and put into the middle where that cut scene once was. I wanted to get into the dinner and later night character interactions but the chapter was running a bit long, so that fun will have to wait for chapter 3!
"So what do you call a three humped camel?" Nick's eyes roved around the table, blank stares meeting him from all angles. "Pregnant!" He exclaimed, mouth open wide in mock laughter to help sell the joke better.

A few seconds later, Stu Hopps busted a gut laughing. "Pregnant?! That's hilarious!" Many of the other kits around the table laughed timidly, clearly either not getting the joke or laughing because their father was.

Bonnie Hopps bunched her nose up slightly at the rather crass joke, "Delightful."

Gideon Grey gaped blankly, "I don't get it."

Judy rolled her eyes at Nick before placing a paw on his arm. "Seriously Nick? That joke is a bit stale."

"What?" He raised his hands confused, "It's one of my better jokes."

Bonnie and Stu shared a look at the gesture. A small clearing of her throat was all that was needed to have Stu stand up and address the throng, "This has been a great dinner and we are pleased and blessed to have you here with us Mr. Wilde to enjoy our company. Bonnie will show you to your room for the night." He clapped his paws forcefully, "Chop, chop everyone! Any kids who are done eating need to help clean up the table!" He called out to Judy once he saw her get up to follow Nick out of the dining area. "Oh, Judy? Can I get your help over here in the den please?"

"What's up dad?" She chirped, bounding into the nice, cozy living room just feet behind him.

Stu settled into a rather drab, brown reclining chair that seemed to sink under his weight. He gestured over to the earthy-colored, striped couch adjacent to him, indicating he wanted her to sit down. After she was comfortable, he leaned forward and took her paws in his, "Judy…your mom and I am delighted that you are doing so well in Zootopia and that you have a steady job in the ZPD. We're nervous as all heck but…we're glad you've gotten many people past the prejudices they had between predator and prey, heaven knows its profited us greatly here at the Burrows."

Judy's ear twitched slightly, "Dad, what are you getting at?"

Stu chanced a look back at the dining room, now all frenzied and loud from the excessive clinking of plates and silverware as well as multiple fits of laughter. He winced as a crash could be heard in the kitchen followed by a swift apology. "Yeah…that's going to have to be replaced." He returned his attention back to Judy who was staring at him intently. "Well…your mom and I are just concerned about your partnership with Mr. Wilde."

She crooked her lip up at the assertion, "What's wrong with Nick? I trust him. He wouldn't do anything to harm me. We're partners."

Stu took a rather embarrassed breath. He never had to deal with this type of 'talk' before with any of their children. Judy was the first in a lot of things. "I probably should have said relationship. That'd be the better term. We're concerned about your relationship with Mr. Wilde."
Judy had to stifle a laugh, "Wait…wait…wait…you think we're dating too?"

His ear's drooped a little, having to explain this to her. Could she not see what they see? "Judy, your mom and I think the world of Mr. Wilde already. He's a perfect gentleman," His eyes dazed off briefly as he recalled the dinner conversation, "with a great sense of humor, great with the kids and we couldn't be happier that he's your partner on the ZPD. However, we couldn't help but notice the way you act around him."

A note of disbelief crept into her tone, "Dad…are we really having this talk right now?"

Sensing defiance in her voice, Stu puffed out his chest and surged on, "Why yes, yes we are! You may be an adult and no longer living under my roof but I am still the master of this house and I'm going to speak my peace."

Judy heaved a big sigh before slouching, bearing down for the inevitable onslaught. It would do no good to argue since if she up and left now, it would be her mother next and there would be no escaping that conversation. She looked up to see Nick passing by the doorway with a pile of sheets in his arms. He gave a toothy grin while waving at her. She could do little else but return it with a half-hearted smile.

Unaware of the silent transaction, Stu barreled ahead, "Judy, we've noticed the way you look at him when he talks, how you place your paw on his arm or even around his waist without thinking about it, and how you are even on a first name basis with him despite the fact you two are professionals. I may not know too much beyond carrot farming and the Burrows, but I do know enough that this could potentially damage your career."

The fact he even brought up the idea that she and Nick could be in a romantic relationship seemed silly to her. She tried to think back over the events of that night. Was she really giving off all those signs? Did Nick pick up on them as well? Was she giving him the wrong impression or did she secretly have feelings for him but didn't want to admit it to herself? Was it really that bad that a bunny and fox could be dating? Isn't that was Zootopia was all about? To be whoever you wanted to be, even if it meant being involved with another animal?

Judy narrowed her eyes, folding her arms across her chest. "And the fact he's a fox?"

Stu cocked his head in full acceptance of that accusation. "Well, there is that too but I really didn't want to bring up that part of it."

"You started a partnership with Gideon Grey and that turned out fine." She pointed out.

He dismissed her fact, "That's different. That's business."

Arms unfolding, she shrugged her shoulders, "Look dad, even if we were dating…which we aren't, who is it really hurting? We'd be discrete about it at work and no one really needs to know our business."

He patted her paw a few times, his mind working overtime. "We're just worried about you should word get out. There have been instances of two different animal species getting married. In fact, there is a wonderful bunny and pig couple one burrow over that has a great tailoring business…great people. However, it is a rare thing and looked down upon. And furthermore, no one has ever heard of a predator and prey couple before."

Judy dragged her paws down her face, "Seriously? Are we still on lingering on that topic? Yes, there was a recent outbreak of savage predators but that was because of the Night Howlers being used to
make them go wild. There have been no reported cases about predators suddenly going savage for no reason. Simply being a predator should not be a factor if two people are in love."

Stu raised a paw in supplication, "I totally understand Judy, but we're just looking out for what's best for you. I may not look it but I've had my fair share of experiences with predators; enough to make me cautious of many of them."

She shook her head, "Dad...I love you, but please drop it. We're not dating. We're just partners. He's a good friend. Can I go now?"

Releasing her paws, he lounged back into his chair with a defeated look. "Sure Jude. Just be sure to give your mom a kiss goodnight before you hit the hay."

"Will do." She smiled weakly, getting up to leave. It pained her to see her father so morose but it just seemed absurd that he could be so backwater about the whole affair. Did they really think they were dating? Even if it were the case, how bad could it be? Granted, she couldn't recall any predator and prey relationships in recent memory but that doesn't mean they don't occur. Was it really that much of a taboo subject that not many people know that it even happens?

She padded across the wooden floorboards, moving by rote memorization through the winding paths down into the excavated tunnels beneath the house; wood transition to dirt, ceilings to roots and cemented clay while the lighting shifted to dim, electrical lanterns strung together by long wires. Judy made her way to the sleeping quarters with hundreds of different offshoots with individual rooms that could house up to ten kits per bed depending on their size.

Passing by several bedrooms, she waved hi to the plethora of brothers and sisters, each one shouting out her name or wishing goodnight as she walked. Taking another left turn, she strode up to the first guest room and rapped on the door. A muffled sound could be heard within but she couldn't identify its source. She knocked again. Without a further response, she opened the door and stepped through.

"Nick?" She snickered, seeing him backed up against the wall, arms and legs spread wide, a wild expression on his face. "Are you all right?"

He barely glanced at her, almost as if she wasn't even there. "No Carrots, I'm not. I never realized how claustrophobic I was until I came here. There is too much dirt all around me. We're so deep underground. There's no way out!" He seemed to be hyperventilating.

Her expression of amusement dropped once she realized he wasn't joking. "Really? Being underground terrifies you?"

"I've never been!" He barked, trying to scrabble sideways across the wall, trying in vain to find a weak point to bust out and up.

Striding over to him, she wrapped an arm around his waist while she plopped one of his around her neck. Slowly she began guiding him to the bed where he could finish getting dressed into his forest green pajamas. The bedding was immaculately made, most likely by her mother. She could have bounced a coin off that bed and have it fly five feet into the air. Judy had seen the inside of Nick's luxurious apartment, no doubt bought with the money he had made off those cons, and he was no expert at making his bed.

Sitting him down on the bed, she moved to head out the door to give him some privacy to change. "Carrots! Where are you going? Are you leaving me down here?!" The wild look began to resurface.

This time she couldn't help but laugh at him. "Oh Nick, seriously? I'm not going anywhere. I'm just
heading out to the hall to give you some privacy to change. I honestly thought you'd be done by now!" Judy couldn't believe he was this alarmed at being underground. She had no idea it was this bad. She had to admit that there was probably never a time in his life where he had a reason to go underground.

Finally realizing the improper nature of his request, he shakily pointed to the corner of the room which had a standing divider with a nicely painted mural of the Burrows on it, complete with a happy family of rabbits with raised hands in greeting. "Just…stand behind there and be nearby okay?"

Not hiding her enjoyment at the situation, she gave him a look before heading over behind the divider. "Oh, you big baby. This place is not going to cave in. If you knew the craftsmanship of us bunnies in creating burrows, you wouldn't be so worried."

"This isn't funny!" He snapped, quickly undressing and stuffing his limbs into the olive green pajamas as quickly as he could.

"You're really out of your element here aren't you?" Judy reasoned.

Nick nodded his head not grasping at the time that she couldn't see him doing it. "Just like you were Carrots in Zootopia. I had to show you the way around the place. I'm done now."

She stepped out to see him uncomfortably tucked under the blankets, now ruffled and destroyed of any semblance of order. "Are you quite done? I was coming in to say good night and make sure you didn't need anything else before bed." That was partially a lie. She really did come to ensure just that. However, a part of her wanted to explore the allegation her father brought up and work through any feelings she had just by being around him.

"Thanks for calming me down a bit." His gaze wandered around the room, taking in the curvature of the walls, tree roots adorning them in intricate patterns. "It is just a bit smaller than what I'm used to."

Judy giggled, remembering his expansive bedroom complete with aquarium and running fountains. "Just a bit?"

He returned the laugh, "You know what I mean. This is definitely different. I guess I just never realized how petrified I am when it comes to enclosed, dark, underground spaces."

"Aren't all foxes used to dens like this?" Judy stuck a finger up in protest.

He pointed at her admonishingly, "That's a fallacy and you know it. Don't be stereotyping all of us together now!"

Flashing a shrewd grin, she bounced down onto the foot of the bed, forcing Nick to adjust his legs to make room for her. "I know. I'm just teasing you." She sat there staring contently at the wall for a few moments. "I'm just glad you're here Nick."

"Well, anything for you Carrots." Nick smirked. Feeling a lot calmer now that she was here talking to him, he could think a bit more clearly. "I saw you and your father upstairs. It didn't look like a pleasant conversation."

Judy closed her eyes in frustration. "It wasn't."

"It couldn't be all that bad. It is your parents after all." He jabbed affably.

"You forget Nick." She sighed. "These are the same parents who told me to settle hard on my
dreams and not strive to become a police officer."

"Good point." He conceded. He folded his paws across his lap, waiting patiently for her to speak further. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to but I'm assuming you came down here for reasons other than for my own well-being."

She gave him a sidelong vexed look, "You have a knack for seeing right through me."

"Well, all you bunnies are the same, so emotional, practically wearing it on your sleeve." His expression never wavered as he deadpanned the statement.

"Ha! That's rich." She puffed, returning her focus to the opposing wall, her legs dangling off the bed, slightly swaying back and forth in idleness. After a time, "My parents are worried about you."

Nick cocked an eyebrow, "About me? Is it because I'm a fox?"

She inclined her head towards him but didn't dare to look at him. She felt embarrassed having to bring this up. What if he laughed at her? "That's partially it. It's more like, you and me. They think we're a couple and we're dating. They don't like the fact that I'm prey and you are a predator." She hiccupped a few laughs. "It's so silly isn't it? Of course we're close. We have to be. We're partners in the ZPD."

She closed her eyes, waiting for the ridicule to strike. Nothing happened for a good, long minute. His silence was deafening. What was he doing? What was he thinking? She creaked open an eye and peeped over at him. He had the strangest expression on his face. Did she say something wrong?

"Nick?" She asked hesitantly.

"Yes Judy?" He responded. She couldn't decipher his tone but she did pick up on her name.

"We're partners together right?" She said hopefully.

"If that is what you want us to be." Nick rejoined cryptically. He was being exceptionally vague at the moment and it was starting to slightly infuriate her.

A look of confusion played across her face, "Wait…are you saying you're interested in more?" The mere thought of Nick, a fox, a predator, loving her made her heart flutter in ways she didn't know were possible.

Ignoring the direct answer to her question, Nick explained, "I'll say this. You were the first person to ever treat me with nothing but kindness. You believed in me and that I could be more than who I was when you first met me. You helped me find the potential in myself to become a police officer and rise above the hand that was dealt me from birth. No one else ever did that for me but you Judy. So yes, I guess you could say I have strong feelings towards you because of that. Now if it goes other places, I'll leave that up to fate. I dare not push things further than they already are."

A rush of warmth and butterflies coursed through her entire body. She could feel a heated flush at her cheeks and an unknown yearning for something she never thought she could want. All growing up, she never found any of her kin to be attractive and Jaden had sworn her off bunnies altogether. She was committed to becoming her own person and making a name for herself as a police officer in Zootopia. She could never have imagined someone falling for her.

"You…had these feelings for me this whole time and never said anything?" She probed incredulously.
He shifted awkwardly under the covers, "Not at first. No. Over time, as we began to work cases together, you grew on me. I knew it might get weird if I revealed my feelings to you so I just kept quiet. We worked so well together as partners, why ruin that?"

Her concentration meandered off, her eyes not focusing on any one thing. She was prepared for just about any situation. She could take down felons and criminals with ease despite their size. She could crack cases and solve problems. It is what helped her rise through the ranks of the ZPD in the span of a short year to detective, completing the examination requirement for it with flying colors. Nick, being her partner, received half the credit for all solved cases at her behest, so he was hauled up with her to the same position; even helping him study those long hours every night to complete the test himself. She felt she could take on the world and make it a better place…and then this.

"Carrots?" He nudged her with his big toe.

She was visibly shaken from her dozing. "What? What's wrong?" She said animatedly, thinking something exciting had occurred.

"For a second there, I thought I had said something completely wrong." He frowned. She had been sitting at the foot of his bed for nearly five minutes, working through whatever it was she was dealing with. He hadn't realized she was nodding off until she leaned over onto his legs, a soft purring snore emanating from her nose.

"Said what?" She was a bit disoriented. She was still trying to figure out why she was still in Nick's room.

He gave her a pensive look. "You know what? It's nothing Carrots. You're tired and need to get some rest."

She tried to hide a rather large yawn. "You're right. It has been a long day. Good night Nick."

Judy slipped off the bed and padded over to the door before being stopped. "Could I ask a favor?" She swiveled around to see Nick bundled in the blankets up to his chin. He pointed with his snout over to the chair in the far corner of the room. "Would you mind staying with me until I fall asleep?"

"Seriously? We're back to this again?" She flashed him a dreamy smile.

"I might freak out again!" He explained offended. "I'm still underground. It is dark, cramped and very stuffy. I might cry out in the night.

"Okay, now you're being melodramatic." She whipped out from her back pocket an orange carrot pen with leafy greens up top. She hit the button on the side which repeated the last twenty seconds of audio she recorded.

Resounding out from the tiny speaker from the side of the pin was Nick's voice, "I might freak out again! I'm still underground. It is dark, cramped and very stuffy. I might cry out in the night."

His ears sagged and he shot her a nasty scowl. "Do you have to take that pen with you everywhere?"

She wagged it around in the air, "Of course! You never know when you will strike gold with it, very useful in providing solid evidence in court."

"Let me guess." His face dropping all expression, "I can delete it in forty-eight hours."

She tapped it to her chin. "Nah, more like tomorrow morning, but fine, I'll sit in the chair and wait until you've calmed yourself to sleep."
"Leave it to you to be the one to make light of my fear." He chuckled, watching her slump into the wicker chair. It looked rather uncomfortable as a sleeping spot.

She maneuvered around in the chair to tuck her pen back into her pocket before resituating herself properly. "I only tease you because I like you."

"I'm sure. So what is it you like about that pen anyway? Is it because it can record?" He scooted down the bed until he was lying flat on the hay filled mattress. It had odd lumps and spots of uneven smoothness.

She cropped a leg up over one of the arm rests before leaning back into a more comfortable position. "That was a big part of it I guess." Another yawn, "I guess I've always loved anything with orange and green."

Nick deliberated on that a few minutes. He flicked his gaze over to Judy as he heard the soft snoring again. Well that did it. She fell asleep before he did. This probably wouldn't look good to her parents if they discovered them tomorrow morning in the same room. It'd prove to her parents about their suspicions. Perception was reality after all, even if it wasn't true. Did she know this when she agreed to sit here with him or did she only do it out of concern for his phobia?

He continued to think about all the possible ways tonight could have gone. He figured it could have turned out worse. Slowly nodding off, his eyes abruptly snapped open. Wait a minute…did she really remember their conversation a few minutes ago? He checked his ginger fur that one might construe as being orange, and he recalled his mother telling him that his eyes were a brilliant shade of green. He stared over to Judy, sleeping soundly in the chair.

"Sly bunny…" He whispered before drifting off himself.

Judy woke up exhausted and didn't even know why. She was in yet another hospital bed. Blood stained the sheets below her waist. Her hind paws were perched up on two metal foot rests, spread apart at an awkward angle, opening her womanhood to an uncomfortable degree. Several nurses were rustling about the delivery room as a lynx doctor cradled a small kit, barely cleaned of its maternal fluids. Her eyes roamed over the scene, lost amidst the chaos until they landed on Nick, who had been beside the bed holding her paw the entire time.

"Nick?" She demanded tersely. "Where are my babies?"

He tried to pacify her by softly rubbing up and down her arm with his paw over and over again. "It'll be fine Carrots. They managed to save one of the seven. It looks like he'll survive."

"Seven? I gave birth to seven?" She asked dubiously.

Nick chuckled a bit before giving her a lick on the cheek. "Of course! You were such a brave mama. Dang near squeezed my arm right off!"

She winced at his indictment, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean too!"

"I know you didn't Carrots, probably all that pent up rage at me." He beamed at her, yet she could tell it was laced with worry.

Her eyes wandered back to the doctor who was handing the small kit to the closest nurse. "Doctor?" She prodded. "Can I see my baby?"

A firm shake of the head send icy shards of terror into her heart. "I'm afraid not Mrs. Hopps. We
have to get this kit to the NICU pronto or he won't survive." His whiskers twitched.

Judy's gaze glossed over the six stillborn bodies laid bare on the operating table behind the lynx, just visible past his long ears. Their tiny little limbs and ears forever locked in place in the eternal pose of death; never to breathe, never to laugh, never to cry, never to love, never to live. She began weeping at her loss. Even the loving cuddle from Nick was not enough to wash away her sorrow.

Without thinking, she brought her legs down and began getting up to go chase after the nurse. "Give me my baby! I want to see my baby! Please!" She howled miserably.

"Carrots!" Nick yelled, trying to restrain her. "They're doing all they can to save the one! Please let them do their job! It'll be all right! Judy! Please!"

She struggled harder against his strength, bordering on near hysteria. "Give him to me! Please!" She began tearing out the IV and pain killing tubes in her arms, oblivious of the pain it caused her. Nurses were backing up at the distressed hare, looking to the doctor for direction.

"Sedate her now!" The lynx susurrated, he signaled an aide to pick up a blow dart gun.

"No don't do that!" Nick snarled, trying to get in the way of the shot.

The nurse's aim was impeccable, having had years of practice in anaesthetizing wild patients. The serum worked within seconds as Judy expended all her energy in a mad rush to get at her retreating child, held in the arms of a light-footed doe. She crashed into the rolling table of birthing utensils, sprawling its contents across the floor before coming to a rest on the cool tile. Her last thoughts were of her children, the ones she'd never know.

Judy woke up screaming. Flailing about, she tumbled out of the chair and sprawled out on the ground. Nick shot up out of the bed, nearly flinging the small bundle of fur that had snuggled itself beside him during the night. The little kit squeaked with terror as both Judy and Nick were startled awake. Judy began to cry uncontrollably. In a heartbeat, Nick threw the covers across the bed, wrapping the terrified ball of fluff in its folds.

Getting down on all fours and placing a comforting hand on her back, he gently rubbed trying to soothe her taut nerves. "It's okay Carrots! It was just a dream."

"But it was so real…" She whimpered, trying to catch her breath between each word.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" He asked concerned.

She shook her head violently. "I…I don't remember. I thought I had the memory of it on the tip of my tongue, but I've completely forgotten it. All I know is that it was horrifying."

He grunted in agreement, "I've had a few of those before, a lot more when I was younger. I don't have them so much now though."

"I feel like I'm in a bad dream now!" A tiny, indignant cry emerged from the clump of disheveled sheets.

Flinging the covers back over, both were surprised to see Ami again. "What are you doing here? You should be in your bed." Judy scolded, her calm finally coming back to her after the terrifying adrenaline rush a few seconds ago.

Ami picked at her hind paws a bit before answering ruefully, "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd come
visit Mr. Nick to see if he could tell me any stories to put me to bed." She stretched her paws out at the two of them accusingly, "Then I find you two sleeping!"

"It's just Nick." He corrected, his heart melting at how cute Ami was, although he wouldn't tell Judy that.

"So you stole a spot on the bed?" Judy countered amused.

Shooting out her paw to indicate the bed in an exaggerated fashion, Ami retorted, "Well it was plain inviting me to be here!"

Placing a hand to his chest, Nick bowed slightly in appreciation, "Well thank you for keeping me company tonight. I probably slept better because of you Ami." The little kit giggled at his compliment.

"That's enough you two." Judy yawned; glancing over at the alarm clock perched atop the oak dresser. "It's six o'clock already?" Her eyes popped. "Mom and dad are awake and will be down gathering up all of us to go work out on the farm! I've got to get showered and ready! See you at breakfast Nick!"

"Carrots?!" He called out after her bewildered. It was too late. She was down the hall and out of earshot. Placing hands on his hips, he looked down at Ami, "Well, care to help me make the bed this morning?"

"Nope!" She peeped cheerfully. "I don't know how!"

Nick face-palmed, "No time like the present, I guess."

After enduring endless chatter from the amicable Ami, Nick had finally cleaned up the room to what he had hoped was a satisfactory condition, having the little tyke while away the time detailing her crazy antics with her brothers and sisters helped him keep his mind off the fact that they were dozens of feet under the earth.

"Ready to eat?" He asked, his mouth already salivating from the sweet aromas wafting from the house above.

"Starving!" Ami piped.

After many double-backs and dead ends, Nick was expertly led to the upper tunnels which fed up into the house proper; dirt giving way to wooden floor and the fresh scent of grass, hay and air. Nick licked his lips at the pungent odor from the kitchen. His feet directing him to the right room, he sat down with graceful tact. He noted quite a few of Bonnie and Stu's brood already at the table, staring at him expectantly. Clearing his throat, he gave a small wave before proceeding to take the folded, cloth napkin before him and drape it across his legs below the table. All the kits took their napkins and did the same.

"Charming." Nick remarked grinning.

"We don't get many visitors here." Ami explained, stealing a seat right beside him. "Other than big, fat Gideon Grey, you're the only other animal we've seen that wasn't family."

Nick frowned at her description, "That seems a bit rude."

"What? He is." She shrugged, putting on her best smile as Gideon walked in with a small platter of eggs.
Nick's eyes locked onto the slightly jiggling mass of white and yellow. He pointed over to it as Gideon set it between them before sitting down himself across from Nick. "What are those?"

"Aw, these?" Gideon made an apparent point to gesture to them. "These are my pa's yummy chicken eggs. I brought them over last night for breakfast. Mr and Mrs. Hopps don't care for them none, but they understand us foxes like them quite good. Since I heard you'd be in town, I figured you'd loved to share some of them with me."

A rather queasy feeling began to erupt in the pit of Nick's gut at the sight of them. He was fonder of cicada burgers and grasshopper shakes. Although chickens were still dumb, unevolved birds, he couldn't stomach the thought eating what basically equated to their unfertilized young. He unfurled his tongue unconsciously trying to get the bad taste he could already feel in his mouth. It was unfortunately misunderstood by Gideon as wanting.

"I knew you'd love them!" He whooped before slapping a gooey slab of yoke onto Nick's plate.

Nick looked positively mortified and extended a finger at the quivering heap. "Ami…" He hissed, 'Did you want this?"

Shaking her head smiling, "Nope! That's gross."

"You and me both kid." He grumbled, looking balefully at Gideon who was happily slathering his dish with the unborn.

"So how's breakfast looking Nick?" Judy chippered, smacking him on the back lightly, jostling him from his thoughts. She seemed to have freshened up some. He sniffed briefly and detected a small hint of perfume that smelled rather intoxicating. He couldn't quite place the scent though.

"Is there anything else on the menu?" He uttered softly to her, being especially careful not to attract the attention of Gideon Grey.

She took one glimpse at his plate, "Not that much into eggs? Funny, I thought you'd like them. I called ahead to dad to let Gideon know to bring some over for you."

Another face-palm. "Seriously Carrots? Do you not know me at all? Have you even been paying attention to what we eat when we go out?"

"Not particularly." She lied. She had noticed he preferred a lot of fruits and berries but also that he didn't shy away from proteins like insects and bugs. She figured as long as it wasn't true animal meat, Nick wouldn't have had a problem with it.

"I think I'll pass on breakfast then." Nick moaned, feeling his belly growling.

"Nonsense, I believe we also have buckwheat pancakes alongside mashed sweet potatoes and carrots. Does that sound better?" She offered, giving him a wry grin while wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

"Plenty." He approved.

"Okay, stay here and I'll go let mom know." She gave his shoulder a little squeeze before bouncing off to the kitchen. Nick turned aside to Ami who gave him a knowing look and giggle. Gideon Grey was ignorant of the exchange.

Bonnie wasn't surprised when Judy informed her of Nick's aversion to the eggs, rather she took it in stride and proceeded to create a rather sizeable portion for the fox. Satisfied that all was in order,
Judy was about to pick up several serving plates to help out and deliver them to the dining table when her father called her into the den. He was sitting in his favorite recliner but he was hunched forward watching a news report on the TV, devoid of any color given how old the set was.

Without looking up at her, he motioned to the monitor. "What do you think of these new immigrant refuges coming in to Zootopia? You met any of them yet?"

She paused to see the leopard reporter interviewing a few of the stressed, clearly overworked immigration officials as they tried to funnel the mass influx of hobbling animals through the gates and into the arrival facility for induction, paperwork and tagging. "No, not really. I think they're fine. They can do whatever they please in Zootopia as long as it doesn't break the law."

Stu settled back into his chair, grumbling as a few creaks and pops were heard from his old bones. "Even though it seems so foreign to me Judy, I'm actually proud of you for being so open to this." He held his paw out at the TV. "If we had a huge migration like that coming to the Burrows, I'd be immediately suspicious of them. It's in our nature to be skittish and mistrusting of anything or anyone new. I still can't shake the feeling they're bad news for Zootopia."

She seated herself beside him on the nearby ottoman, her eyes still locked onto the screen. "From what I've heard, they were being brutally terrorized and murdered in their own country just for being who they are."

"I understand that," Stu added, taking his hat off briefly to mop his furry brow. "but I suspect crime will go up for a time because of these folks until Mayor Lionheart figures out a way to house, clothe and feed them all."

Judy contorted her face a bit as she deliberated on this line of thought. Released from jail from previously incarcerating savage animals in an attempt to not only figure out why they went savage but also to save his own political reputation, Lionheart had again secured the public opinion swiftly. There was literally no one else qualified to run such a robust enterprise that was Zootopia than Leodore Lionheart. Several factions nominated Chief Bogo as a worthy candidate but he simply blew them down with his gruff saying the notion was preposterous.

"Zootopia is going to go through some hard times. We at the ZPD are prepared for that." Judy said proudly. "You're probably right. There will be some…crime." A flitting image of the bongo lying comatose in her apartment with two pricks in her neck dashed across her consciousness.

"Jude?" Her dad queried, seeing as she had stopped speaking for a rather inordinate amount of time.

Shaking her head, she dispelled the image. "Nothing dad. So yeah," she continued as if nothing had happened, "there will be some crime but our job is to help assist and ensure that this transition will happen smoothly. I have no doubt these people will be able to integrate well into Zootopia given enough time."

Stu raised an eyebrow at her, "You do know what they do right? What they need to survive?"

Again, another image danced through her mind of the hanging shape hovering over that bed in the bongo's loft. "I'm sure there will be substitutes we can find for them. After all, predator and prey are able to coexist perfectly fine in Zootopia. I don't see how it would be any different here."

"I hope you're right." He chanced a peek into the kitchen to see Bonnie now busy with cleaning the horde of dishes, each one completely spotless except for a few crumbs. "I didn't want to mention this in front of your mother. I think she has enough to worry about as it is with you being a cop in Zootopia."
Judy's expression softening, she folded down into his arms as she embraced him warmly. "Thanks dad for always looking out for me. You don't have to worry though, Nick's got my back and the entire ZPD can handle any crime."

Pulling away, she could hear Gideon Grey blaring at the top of his voice, "Nick, I understood about half of what you just said but let's get to building! Woohoo!" A large rumble of feet followed by several yelps of protest stormed out the front, leaving the screen door to slam stridently on its hinges.

"I guess I better go help Nick." She tittered, rising to save her hapless partner from indentured servitude on the farm.

Stu placed one last cautionary paw on her arm, "Be careful heading back to Zootopia Jude. Your mom and I worry." He hesitated a bit longer before adding, "And I'm also sorry for what I said last night."

She lolled her head in exasperation, "It's fine dad. I knew you meant well. Nick and I…"

Steamrolling over her, he patted her arm a few more times, "If you guys are together…I guess I can be okay with that."

"Dad, it's not like…" She began to interject.

He waggled a finger at her, clearly not heeding her words. "Just keep it quiet ok? I don't want anyone to judge you and hurt you for having a relationship like that. I'll figure out a way to tell your mom about it later."

"Fine! Fine." She huffed defeated; anything to get her dad to stop. She placed both paws on his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Nick and I will keep low about this, all right? No one needs to know."

Stu smiled, "That makes me feel better. Thanks Judy."

"Anytime dad." She smiled, before pivoting on her foot and stomping out the front door, rolling her eyes.

Was she really giving off the wrong signals? Did everyone around her think she and Nick were an item? Did Bogo or Clawhauser suspect? She wondered if this whole time working with Nick, she was leading him on, that would explain their weird conversation last night. She had thought it over in the shower but she most definitely remembered it happening, she was not dreaming. Maybe it was just her? Was she just hiding her own feelings from herself about Nick?

Her heart felt all muddled and she didn't know what to feel. On one hand, she loved her job and it filled her with an enormous sense of fulfillment, but in the end she always came back to an empty closet apartment with loud neighbors and a lonely bed. The enormity of her situation never really hit home since she had Nick and her job to occupy her days. Could sharing life with Nick both on and off duty be all that bad? She felt distracted all day.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was actually quite easy yet quite difficult to write at the same time. The hardest part was to get the overall flow of the chapter. The entire focus was to jumpstart
the relationship between Judy and Nick and to reveal that Nick already had repressed feelings for Judy but she was oblivious until this first visit back to her parents. The entire chapter revolved around this revelation to her. It was also a nice reprieve from the depressing parts of the previous first two chapters and it allowed the reader to sit back and just enjoy the characters for who they are. The biggest surprise was actually Stu Hopps who had a lot more back history that I never expected prior to writing this chapter. There seems to be more stories he has to tell... The big shocking swerve scene in the middle was intended for the previous chapter but was deemed too dark and brought it way too deep into apathy territory so it was moved here to better suit the two light-hearted halves of the chapter and keep the reader caged into the dark nature of the story. Where will this story lead? Even I'm discovering it as I go!
Chapter 04: Slept Through the Apocalypse

"O-M-Goodness! She's awake!" A boisterous voice exploded beside her. "Chief! Chief! Come here! She's finally awake!"

Judy's eyes flickered open, the glaring lights stinging her pupils with their harsh glare. She found herself yet again in a hospital bed, another IV puncturing her arm, slowly feeding her valuable fluids. Memory of her horrific experience in Mercy Hospital flooded back and she began to panic. Dread filled her soul as she sat up suddenly; thrashing her limbs trying to break free of the bed and rip the invasive tube from her limb.

Several spotted paws tried to ease her back down to the bed as a soothing voice bubbled, "Judy! Judy! Please settle down little bunny. You have nothing to fear from me. It's me, your buddy!"

She stopped her flailing, chest heaving, to look at the source of those words. She beheld a gaunt looking cheetah with sagging cheeks. He looked pencil thin but his condition did little to dampen his overall spirit. Her voice cracked as her mind pieced together the jigsaw puzzle that was her memory. "Clawhauser?"

"In the flesh!" He beamed. "I was so glad I found you! I had thought for sure something was holding Mai up and so I came looking for you."

Her thoughts still jumbled, she tried to make sense of what had happened earlier. "But…you attacked me. You chased me."

"Me? Attack you?" He brought his paws to his cheeks in sincere shock at the charge. "Judy, you should know me better than that! You're just too adorable to kill!" He practically squealed, supremely happy Judy was still alive. "I'm sorry if it seemed I was a bit violent, I only intended to herd you to where our hide-out was. You actually fell right on top of it honestly."

"It's good to see you again Judy." A deep voice echoed throughout the room. Stepping out of the gloom was a very hulking cape buffalo. He was wearing a black-knitted wife beater overlaid with a brown trench coat that flowed down past his waist over his jeans. He sported a genuine smile as he looked down at his most treasured employee, seemingly back from the dead.

"Chief Bogo…" She murmured happily, her head finally relaxing back onto the pillow.

"It's just Bogo now…at least until we can reclaim our city back and reinstate the ZPD." He grunted firmly, a look of determination on his face. "It's been so long that we had almost given up hope on you and decided to move ahead with our plans. Since you are back with us, it'd benefit the resistance more to have those still left in Zootopia see you at some point in the near future. It would do wonders for their morale."

"What happened here sir?" She asked, still retaining the formal titles used when the ZPD still existed.

Grunting loudly as he pulled a rolling chair over to the bedside before sitting his massive bulk onto its tiny frame. "A tyrannical coup. A species of bats were welcomed into Zootopia, having had their homeland reject them." Judy seemed to recall glimmers of this but her recollection was nothing but a hazy fog. She listened attentively to Bogo while Clawhauser idly picked his nails, waiting for the somber story to finish. "There were some transition issues and a lot of crime flooded through the
"Gazelle was one of the first to go!" Clawhauser wailed, the dam bursting and tears pouring out with wild abandon. A look of concern crossed Bogo's face as he placed a consoling hoof on Clawhauser. Their grief was shared since both were rabid fans of the sultry pop singer.

Bogo confirmed the horrid news, "It was by her shining example that we invited the bats in with open arms. It was unfortunate that they resorted to vampirism to survive. I had never heard of such beasts until the crime tickets came pouring in. You were embroiled in quite a lot of those cases Judy. You were the one that made that connection between the attacks and the new immigrants."

"I did?" Placing a paw on her chest, she berated herself for not remembering. What had happened to make her lose such a large chunk of her memories?

Bogo smiled warmly at the little rabbit before continuing, "You did. You were on the frontlines both trying to solve the cases and to help promote the rights of the new visitors."

"But then something happened…" Clawhauser began ominously.

Bogo growled out an objection to the cheetah's line of thought. It would do no good to remind Judy of that horrible event if, indeed, she had no memory of it. Better to just give her the bare minimum of facts to go on to keep her head in the game. Seeing the intense look on his chief's face, Clawhauser hushed immediately, suddenly finding great interest in his own spots.

"He's right." Bogo piggybacked, his eyes lingering a few moments more on the cheetah. "Your opinion of them changed drastically and you began to speak outright against them. You and Nick were an unstoppable force but by then it was already too late."

"They used some sort of toxin to control the predators…" Clawhauser began.

"It was a stronger version of that Night Howler serum you discovered." Bogo gestured to Judy. She remembered that case very well. "Animals that are struck with it never turn back. We've yet to find an antidote to this new strain and we've lost many friends to savagery."

"What about Mayor Lionheart? Didn't he do anything to stop this invasion?" Judy questioned; a look of worry on her face. Surely Leodore would have seen the issues of keeping the bats in the city and would have had them deported the first moment a negative report came in from the ZPD about them.

Clawhauser looked absolutely miserable, "We don't know when it happened but he was one of the first turned."

"He now resides in the old mayor office building in capital square but as a bodyguard to Rouge." Bogo finished portentously.

"Rouge?" Judy shifted. The name somehow did seem familiar to her.

"Rouge…the leader of the bats. She was the mastermind behind this whole takeover." Bogo pointed again at Judy. "You also were able to help establish that connection."

Judy looked around the room, trying to find a window that would give her a view to the outside world, "Where's Nick? I saw him when I woke up. He said he had been visiting me for five years."

Clawhauser and Bogo shared a look. "His comm link went dead about four hours ago." Bogo explained. "Around the same time Mai found and brought you to us. He was only allowed to go visit you provided he continue to do the dirty work for Rouge. In return for his cooperation, he was
promised never to be turned and given access to you once a week."

Clawhauser glanced at Bogo to ensure he had clearance to speak, "It was Mai's idea to use that agreement to smuggle items in to help free you should you ever awake. We waited five long years…"

"They used your relationship with him as a means of control but it looks like we ultimately profited from that arrangement now that you're here with us Judy!" Bogo leaned back satisfied with how the entire plan turned out.

"But Nick is…" Her voice trailed off. Of course they'd turn him savage now. He had deliberately defied Rouge by releasing her. It would have been more of a mercy to have him killed then become primal.

Bogo groaned, grimacing at the implications present there. "Nick understood the risks of the mission every time he came to call. He was far more concerned for you."

"There is one person who might know of a way to-" Clawhauser began, hope lingering at the edges of his voice.

A knock on the door interrupted them. It opened slightly to reveal two bunnies, one slightly taller than the other. The first was Mai, seemingly intact after their brutal encounter with one of the bats in the alley. She seemed little worse for wear and was sporting a huge grin on her muzzle. Beside her was a familiar face, almost like Judy was looking at herself in the mirror, except the nose was smaller and more rounded while the ears had a slide curve forward at the tips. The rabbit was wearing a rather bare, drab white t-shirt complimented by some free-flowing white slacks.

"Mom!" The smaller rabbit cried before bounded into the room and hopping onto the bed.

"Ahhh….that hurts!" Judy cried, spasms racking her body from the sudden weight pouncing on her.

"Oh! I'm sorry mom!" The hare leaped off and began apologizing profusely for not realizing that Judy was still recovering.

Bogo gave a knowing look to Clawhauser before getting up to leave, "We'll leave you three to talk. You probably have a lot to catch up on. We can fill you in on the rest later."

"Later Judy." Clawhauser waved enthusiastically. "It is so great to see you again. I even saved a donut for you…might be a bit stale but I figured you could need one after five years!"

"Thanks Ben, I might actually consider that." She smiled, raising her paw in a weak farewell.

"I see they found you okay." Mai expressed relief, slipping past the large buffalo and cheetah on their way out the door.

"You were amazing Mai." Judy complimented, allowing the little hare that was her daughter nuzzle in next to her on the sheets.

"Not as amazing as you Judy." Mai countered jauntily. "You literally woke up from a five year coma, in no condition to escape and yet you kept up with me and managed to meet Clawhauser safely. You got a fire in you."

"Of course she does!" The little rabbit retorted. "She's my mom!" The grey hare looked up at Judy with adoring eyes.
Mai sat down on the bed, rubbing a paw between the rabbit's ears, "We kept your memory alive for Nala all these years. She barely knew you before you were taken from us. I helped fill her head with stories of your great exploits and how much you cared for your family."

Nala tapped her paw quickly on Judy's chest in excitement, "Mai's even teaching me how to fight so one day I can be a cop like you!"

Mai looked rather embarrassed at being called out as her tutor. "Well, I figured you wouldn't be too mad at me for teaching the girl self-defense."

Wrapping a loving arm around the daughter she never knew she had until now, Judy rubbed her cheek through the little girl's fur. "Not at all Mai. I appreciate you taking care of my daughter for me." Her gaze wandered around the dank room taking in the dilapidated condition of the place. The wallpaper was peeling at the seams and a slightly moldy scent was lingering in the air. "Where's the rest of my children?" She remembered something about giving birth to multiple kits.

Mai's expression wilted at the question. "Judy…"

Judy looked from Mai to Nala. The little girl looked up at her with a few tears forming. "Don't you remember mommy? They all died. I'm the only one that survived."

"Hopps!" A boom echoed throughout the atrium foyer of the ZPD. Judy cringed as she slowly turned to look up at the third floor overhang to reveal a pair of curved horns topping the silhouetted form of Chief Bogo. He stabbed a finger in the air directing her to his room.

"Is this a trend with you two?" Nick quipped, hiding a knowing smirk.

"I'm starting to think so myself." Judy admitted, hearing the aggravated snort three floors up.

"You know it takes thirty days to break a bad habit." He joked.

"Don't see it happening anytime soon." She commented, sharing his mirth.

Seeing the retreating form of the Chief stomping off to his office, Nick straightened the tie on his uniform. "He's probably a bit irked about you butting in on that rape case."

"You think?" She jested, not the least bit concerned about the impending diatribe she would be receiving. "Besides it wasn't actually a rape. I believe it was an assault case."

"Well you better go on up there. He'll blow an artery if you don't respond in two seconds." Nick jibed, padding over to the front desk to greet Clawhauser, giving her one final wink.

Judy swept past the front desk where Officer Clawhauser was stuffing his face with another batch of sprinkled donuts from Frisky Kreme. She arched her nose a bit at the smacking of his lips with each delectable treat. As much as she loved the sociable cheetah, he was completely oblivious to good manners.

"Ask the chief if he wants a donut. I've been saving one for him!" He called out after her. She waved a hand in acknowledgement before proceeding to the elevator.

Riding up two levels, she poured over the multitude of responses she could start off with to help explain her reasoning why she chose to jump in on another officer's case while off duty. She didn't really have a good one since she was technically supposed to have been on a train bound for the Tri-Burrows that night. Seeing her name come up in the reports from Officer Pennington and Swinton
was probably a bit of an unexpected shock to Chief Bogo.

His enormous presence could be palpably felt through the office door. His dark frame visible through the stain glass, his name emblazoned on front. With a deep breath, she turned the handle and walked in. She opened her mouth to speak but a firm grunt and a jabbed hoof finger pointing to the chair in front of him silenced any protest. She rapidly shut the door and hopped up onto the rather large seat that almost seemed to swallow her as she sat in it.

Bogo has his glasses on, perched daintily atop his ears, flattened out by the enormous horns extending outward above them. He was scanning through the reports, slowly sifting through the papers. The fan above them lazily swirled in a haphazard pattern, clearly in need of repair to stop its wobbly rotation. The clock ticked on the wall as time passed. Judy was curling the toes of her feet and mashing her fingers together in anticipation of what was to come. Bogo loved making her squirm even if he never admitted it.

"Officer Hopps," Bogo began calmly, "were you aware that there have been two more assault cases since you left?"

Finally able to speak, her ears shot up. "No, I did not sir."

He glanced at her over the rim of his glasses before looking back down at the report. "All of them are linked by two defining factors. One factor which you discovered, the bite marks."

"I'm really sorry Chief. I didn't mean to-" She began to explain her reasons for intruding on the case.

"Shut it Corporal!" He bellowed, whipping his glasses off. "The only reason I brought you in here was to give you the case you seem to so desperately want." He slammed the manila folder shut, causing the tube of pencils on his desk to rattle. "I appreciate the new evidence that was discovered that no one else caught-"

"I'm sorry, it won't…wait what?" She tried to assert herself.

"-but the fact remains you were off duty and were tasked to the rainforest district this month. You were outside your jurisdiction for this case! I could have you for insubordination…yet again!" He could see Judy opening her mouth to confute this fact. "However, because of your assistance in it, you just made my decision much easier. I have conferred with my deputy and we both have agreed that you and Officer Wilde will be leads on the case."

Judy's mouth dropped open. She had been assigned multitudes of accident, traffic violation and larceny cases but none so dire as assault and potentially murder. This was leagues beyond anything she had been tasked to investigate. Although she knew deep down he was keeping her on the back burner with low key assignments, she was just happy they were being utilized as the cops they were in the ZPD. As impressed as Bogo was with Hopps' performance in the Night Howler case, the fact remained she was still a rookie on the force and as such had to earn her way up the ladder the hard way.

"Sir, are you serious?" She stuttered, trying to get the words out. She could hardly believe her luck. She was expecting more of a tirade but instead got a huge job!

"Don't act so surprised Hopps." He flashed a rather unsettling grin. "You've done good work." He pointed a hoof at her. "But do not let it go to your head! I'm giving you a chance to prove your worth to Zootopia. Although I agree with Mayor Lionheart that we should continue with Bellwether's idea for making you the 'friendly' face of the ZPD for the entire city, that doesn't mean you can skimp on your duties-"
"I never skimped on anything..." Judy decried, putting her paws out in a confused manner.

"...just because you are the 'new' jewel of Zootopia." He finished, completely ignoring her protest. "You need to back up your name with hard work and dedication and I believe you can do just that with this case. But first," Bogo leaned over to grab a stack of papers on the ground beside him before slapping it on the desk, its sizeable heft rumbling the wooden frame. "You have a report due to me by close of business and this case file and eyewitness accounts to read before starting work."

Judy's ears drooped at the exhaustive pile of paperwork ahead of her. "Chief...I can't possibly carry all this." She hopelessly indicated the gigantic stack in front of her.

"Oh, not to worry Hopps, I have Officer Rhinowitz taking it to your office after this morning's briefing. You'll have plenty of time to situate yourself with the case then." Not even trying to hide his merriment, he put his glasses back on before resuming his inspection on a completely different folder. "One last topic I'd like to address with you Hopps." The tone in his voice had Judy perk an ear up in curiosity. "I'd like to discuss your partnership with Officer Wilde."

The ear immediately sagged once more. "Sir, I don't know what you're-"

"It is becoming very clear to everyone on the force of your affections for each other. Not helped in the least by Clawhauser shipping you two together." He finished with a groan.

"Shipping?" She arched her nose up in befuddlement, she had never heard the term before.

Bogo sighed, "It's a silly, little term that I haven't the time for. Regardless, we have reports of you two going in and out of each other's apartments and now having a joint vacation to your home town."

A wry smile crept onto Judy's face, "Sir, did you have Clawhauser spy on us?" As much of a violation this probably was, Chief Bogo could just as easily explain it away as having it be nothing more than a friendly 'check-up' on his employees. The mental health division allowed for such things to help curb potential problems with officers who got depressed or anxious about their job.

"What? No!" He waved a hoof in the air to terminate that line of talk. "Nevertheless, even without his assistance, I can see that you two are close. Granted, partners should be close to help, protect and mentor each other. In your case, with your valedictorian status from the academy, you were best qualified to rein in a newbie like Wilde and get him up to speed in record time. It worked out and it was a timely partnership."

Judy's eyes shot to the ceiling in exasperation, first her parents and now her boss. Would this torture never end? "Sir, how is this a problem?"

He leaned forward over the desk, clasping his hooves together. "I don't care about the fact he is a fox and you are a rabbit. I don't care about the fact he is a predator and you are a prey. I don't care if you two are romantically seeing each other." She uttered a strangled cry of objection but he kept talking. "What I care about is the unity and integrity of my force."

"What does that mean?" She wasn't sure if he was condoning a relationship with Nick or condemning it. Was there more to this partnership with him than she let on? Was she just denying this to even herself about her feelings? The conversation at the Burrows certainly didn't help her emotional dilemma. Just how then did she feel about Nick?

He fixed her with an intense glare, "Do not speak of this to anyone outside of this room," He pounded the desk with a single hoof finger, "but I like you Judy. You are a good cop, one of the
best. You and Nick work well together and morale is high as a result of ZPD's success. I am reluctant to go and break that up. However, I do not want any potential relationship problems to surface at work and bring the force down. Keep it professional and off duty. You two do that and we'll get along swimmingly. Understood?"

"Yes sir…" She puffed out defeated. Were Nick and her an item now just by common consensus? Did anyone care how they felt or were they being pushed together by the mob that was on-the-job gossip? She would really need to have a stern talk with Clawhauser the first chance she got.

"You are dismissed Hopps. See you in the bullpen in five." He turned his focus back to the files on his desk, clearly done with the conversation.

Knowing it to be fruitless to argue with the Chief after dismissal, she slipped down off the big chair and headed out into the atrium. She could hear laughter from below. Nick and Clawhauser were having a grand old time swapping jokes and silly stories. Lowering her eyes in irritation, she rode the elevator down to ground level before bounding over to the information booth at the front. Nick managed to finagle a spare donut from Clawhauser and had already taken a few bites out of its speckled icing layer.

Nick took notice of her first, "So was he practicing his mood for the day by yelling at himself in the mirror?"

"No." She gazed over at Clawhauser to see him practically beaming over the counter at the two of them, his match-making glee fully evident in his toothy grin, complete with sprinkles. "Come on Nick, we got only a few minutes before we need to be in the bullpen."

"Everything alright Judy?" He could immediately see something was wrong. Her shoulders were slumped and her ears were down. As an afterthought, he turned back to Clawhauser, "Thanks for the donut!"

"Anytime!" He chimed back, resting his flabby cheeks onto his fists, watching the two of them walk off. "Those two are so adorable together!"

Nick may not have heard the soft whisper of delight but Judy did which only prompted her to increase her pace. Nick leaned over to offer her the donut, "Hungry? I made sure I left some of the icing for you."

"I'm not hungry." She intoned inertly.

"I gotta say Carrots, you are really hard to read right now. Usually you're like an open book." He meant the words in jest but it was not received as such.

"Let's just get in there for the briefing." She wagged a paw off ahead of them.

Nick was genuinely at a loss for words. He had a clever retort to say but decided it unwise to unleash it upon Judy at that present moment. Something Chief Bogo said must have really set her off somehow. Did she get chastised for intruding on an already established case? He wondered if her punishment would extend out to him by mere association.

They entered the room with the majority of their colleagues already seated, some having raucous arm wrestling matches while others trumpeteted and howled at several hilarious tales from the job. Few gave much attention to the either of them, not because they were several heights below their eye level, but because having a small bunny and fox on their crew was no longer a novel concept. It was just an accepted aspect of life that Nick and Judy were part of the ZPD, fellow comrades in arms.
They ambled down the rows of tables to the front where a lone seat was reserved for the two of them just opposite the podium where Bogo usually delivered his briefings. They climbed up onto the rather large chair and sat comfortably together. Officer McHorn, a rather imposing looking rhinoceros whose plate armor completely covered his upper chest, hiding up the multitude of ribbon medals he had earned over the years, gently pushed the chair in so the two could be closer to the table.

Officer Wolford opened the door at the front of the room, standing at attention beside it before calling out, "Attention on deck!"

All officers straightened out in their seats, ensuring their entire body posture faced the front of the room. All began whooping in unison, pounding the tables with their fists. Even Nick had gotten into the daily ritual, despite not making near the magnitude of shockwaves his compadres were. He stopped suddenly when he noticed Judy was not chanting with the rest of them, she seemed lost in her own thoughts, staring down at a singular spot on the table.

He inclined over to whisper into her ear about it when Bogo rumbled through the door. "That's enough!" He roared. Everyone quieted down instantly; knowing smiles on their snouts and lips as they eagerly awaited their daily tasking. With little fanfare, Bogo stepped behind the podium and set the folders down in front of him. He made a point to catch the eye of each occupant in the room, lingering on Wolford as he retook his seat toward the back. "As we all are aware, they have been several attacks on Zootopia citizens with no firm evidence, eye witnesses and most of all, no suspects."

A low stirring rumbled throughout the room, Bogo cleared his throat to silence it before continuing. "As such, we only have two items on the docket but one takes priority, both related. First let us address the rabbit in the room." All eyes swiveled to Judy who suddenly became very self-conscious about her position.

Nick nudged her encouragingly but kept his eyes straight forward, "There is a fox here too sir."

"Shut it Wilde!" Bogo boomed. "You're involved in this too."

"I should hope so sir!" He said in mock sincerity, hands clasped calmly on the table.

A squeal was heard from the back from Officer Pennington, Bogo grunted loudly to kill the whispers in the room. "Knock it off! As some of you know, it was Officer Judy Hopps who discovered a link we had never considered before between the three recent assaults which were previously believed to be rape cases. Each victim was attacked in similar fashion and each was left with two puncture wounds on their necks. We do not yet know if there is anything connecting these three victims or if it is just random selection."

Bogo gesticulated to the seat housing both Judy and Nick, "I have assigned Officer Hopps and Wilde to be leads on this case." Several murmurs of approval were uttered throughout the throng. "Their primary role is to fulfill central intelligence. Each of the teams will be covering different districts and all information will flow back into Hopps and Wilde. They will be compiling all data and make the final call on suspect intervention and arrest."

It was Nick's turn to drop his mouth open in surprise. Just what in the world did Judy get them into? He had just been promoted to detective not too long ago, months after Judy had passed her tests and now they were in charge of a large case spanning the entire city of Zootopia! Noticing the lowered jaw of Nick hanging there, Judy pushed a finger up to close it as Nick took a noticeable gulp. This seemed to be far more responsibility than he was used to having.
"Don't look so amazed Wilde. This will be far easier than you think." Discounting any reaction from the fox, Bogo surveyed the team selections in front of him. "Pennington, Swinton and Higgins," Elephant, pig and hippo stood up and walked to the front of the room to grab their file. "report to the canal district and investigate a fourth attack there. McHorn, Grizzoli, Johnson," He raised another file for the rhino, bear and lion tromping up to the front. "you head to Sahara Square and go undercover. There has been a bomb threat at the casino there."

"Anderson, Snarlof, Wolford," He address the two polar bears and wolf, "to Tundra Town. There have been disputas among the citizens regarding the new immigrants. See that the situation gets resolved peaceably." He turned his attention to the last remaining elephant, sitting beside a lion and tiger. "Trunkaby, Delgato and Fangmeyer, you are headed to the Meadowlands. There has been yet another assault there." As the final few cops filed out of the pen, he faced the last remaining officer in the room besides Nick and Judy. "Officer Rhinowitz, secure the assault case files and put them on Judy's desk and establish a custom computer set up for her and Nick to work with."

"Yes sir!" The hefty rhino grumbled before stampeding loudly out the door.

"Congratulations Hopps." Bogo smiled. "It looks like you're finally working a big case again. Do us proud and don't muck it up." His cheery expression never left his face as he stuffed the remaining paperwork under his arm and plowed through the exit back into the hall.

"So I guess that's what this is all about." Nick mused, watching the receding form of Chief Bogo. "A little too much to take on maybe?"

Judy sniffed once, jolted out of her contemplations, "Nah, this is nothing actually."

Nick raised an eyebrow, "Oh? Then what's bothering you Carrots? You've not been yourself ever since you left the Chief's office." A sly thought came to his mind. "Care to talk about it over dinner tonight?"

Her right foot was waving erratically with pent up energy, desperately wanting to smack something. "No…too formal for such a thing. How about lunch instead?" She offered, trying not to meet his eyes which were searching intently for her own.

His gaze remained on her withdrawn face a bit longer, "I can do that." He agreed.

The soft beeping of the heart monitor stimulated her senses, rousing her from her restful sleep. Judy was feeling a lot better than she had in a long while. Beside her bed was Nala, sleeping peacefully across her lap. Unraveling her arms from the blanket, she softly prodded her until she awoke from slumber herself. She blinked a few times before resting her eyes on Judy.

"Hey mom." She greeted lazily. "How you feeling?"

Judy puffed out her chest in an attempt to de-kink a few aches in her lower back before responding, "A lot better actually. Now I'm just really hungry."

Nala rose up to a sitting position and rolled the chair away to a small radio placed upon the corner table. "Hey Mai, you there? Over."

Static crackled before a response came back, "I'm here Nala, what's up? Over."

Nala regarded her mom warmly, the joy of being back with her evident in her tone. "Judy's awake and she's hungry. We got anything ready for her? Over."
"If I can wrangle something away from Clawhauser, I'm sure I can find something. Bring her down. Over." The radio clicked off as Mai most likely scurried off to snatch any remaining morsels Clawhauser had yet to devour.

As if on cue, a honey badger in a white lab coat promenaded in. Completely engrossed in her clipboard, she nearly bumped right into the bottom metal bars of the footboard. Jostled from her readings, she looked up to notice she was in the wrong room. She apologized quickly and turned to leave when Judy called her back, "Doctor?" She could only assume she was one given her garb. "Can you take this IV out of me? I feel well enough to head out and get something to eat."

The badger took one look at her and completely refused. "I'm afraid not! Unacceptable, you still need bedrest and plenty of fluids. We'll bring some food along."

Nala cut off the doctor's rambling, "Dr. Madge, it'll be all right. I'll take care of her."

Madge gave a pointed look at Nala before sighing and waddling over to the device. With the finesse of a mountain goat, she slipped the catheter out before swiftly placing a fur repellant band-aid over the freshly oozing wound. That would make it a lot less painful to rip off later once it had outlived its usefulness. She flipped the switch horizontal to stop the flow and wrapped the cords up around the rolling IV hanger and pushed it to the corner of the room.

Dr. Madge joggled a claw at Judy, "No stressing your body now. You over exert yourself and I'll be forced to sedate and have you carried back to your bed for a week!"

The key word of sedation brought flashes of horrible imagery into Judy's mind. She swooned and had to let Nala hold her up for a few seconds. The badger looked at her uneasily, her hand wavering down by her waist where a tranquilizer gun stood ready in its sheathe. Judy had to wave the apprehensive doctor down, "It's fine. I'm okay. I just need to regain my balance, that's all."

With no adrenaline pumping through her veins, her muscles had little reason to cooperate with her this time. Madge denounced the whole affair with a flap of her tail before bumbling out of the room muttering to herself about patients who thought they knew everything. With an arm around her daughter's neck, Judy staggered out the door and down the seedy hallway. Lights were dim and the wallpaper a garish hue of magenta and brown.

"Don't worry about her. She's just a bit bitter is all." Nala commented, trying to make light of the situation.

"What is this place?" Judy inquired, peering into rooms with beds of all sizes and mirrors arranged at odd angles. Several rooms had disco balls and others had TVs lining the walls. A few had some odd looking objects hanging up on the walls complete with a few chains and collars.

Nala took one look before slanting her attention elsewhere. She seemed really hesitant to even describe the building. "This was…um…a place of pleasure."

"A what?" Judy's eyes bulged, recognizing various utensils of desire and assuming correctly the uses of others. "Why are we here?"

Nala was mute for a time before responding. They had just rounded the bend to the stairwell that would take them downstairs to the commons where the brothel foyer and ultimately the makeshift cafeteria was. "It was the closest, unsuspecting location to Savannah Central where Rouge makes her home. It is hidden. It is secluded between high rise buildings and the entrances to the alley don't draw too much attention to us using it as a base of operations. We mainly take the sewer entry just outside the front door as our primary means of getting around the city."
"You are very articulate for your age." Judy complimented.

Nala beamed at her mother. "Thank you. I had dad to teach me."

"Dad?" A perplexed look crossed Judy's face. What other bunny could have been her dad?

"You know, Nick?" Nala said sincerely.

A deep flush came to Judy's cheeks. Of course it was Nick. She scrunched her eyes tight, trying in vain to remember. It was infuriating to have her memories scattered and fractured that she couldn't remember everything straight. Was Nick married to her? How did they get Nala? So many questions flitted out of existence the moment they materialized. What other parts of her life was she missing?

She helped Nala push open the swinging stairwell door and they stepped into the sultry lobby with plush divans, ensconced lighting and bad taste in paisley carpeting. Multiple make-shift tables were lined up in the middle the room, furniture cleared out to the sides, where she could see several mammals glumly eating their midday meal. Detecting Clawhauser in the far corner savoring some bean stew, something she was sure wasn't the first choice he would have preferred on the menu, she motioned that they sit next to him.

Getting back on the previous topic, Judy noted, "I never knew these types of places existed in Zootopia."

Sweeping in from the left out of the shadows, Mai interjected herself into the conversation. "Most respectable citizens don't. You had no reason to come to these sorts of places. In fact, this was one of the more reputable establishments, with it being inside the central district of Zootopia. In the months following your coma, Nick found us this place to use both as a means for keeping tabs on Rouge and being close to Mercy Hospital where you were kept."

"Are you saying Nick is not respectable?" Judy laughed, remembering how much of a con artist Nick used to be before she offered him the position of being her partner on the police force. He always claimed he knew everyone in town.

Mai shared Judy's gaiety, "Not at all. He's one of the most courageous foxes I know. His past connections helped find this place though. Notwithstanding that, I am thankful for it."

"Hey there Judy!" Clawhauser radiated, appearing positively exuberant despite looking like he had missed a full year's worth of meals. His shirt and denim jeans looked two sizes too big on him.

"Hey buddy." She caroled back, allowing Nala and Mai to assist her in getting onto the bench opposite Clawhauser at the table. "What are you eating there?"

"Oh, this?" His expression was a bit less enthusiastic about it. "Just peaches and beans." At a cringe-worthy look from Judy, "Yeah, I know. It's not the best of meals but it has ample sugar in it. I can stomach this a bit better."

"I guess I'll have what you're having." She resigned herself to the inexorable fact that there wouldn't be many options for food around here.

"No problem Judy, I'll go grab a bowl for you. I had them reheat it just for you." Mai placed a loving hand on her shoulder before nodding and walking across the room to a side hall which most likely led to whatever they utilized as a kitchen in this place.

Nala placed herself beside her mom and scooted in close. Now that Judy was back with them again, she never wanted to let her go. Judy's situational awareness took in the entirety of the room, her old
cop senses slowly coming back to her. There were a few animals that smiled at her when she looked at them across the scattered tables. A few even waved. She thought she recognized Rhinowitz and maybe Swinton but she wasn't sure from this distance and in this dim light.

Deducing correctly, Judy remarked, "I'm guessing you guys keep it rather dark in this place to avoid attracting unwanted attention?"

Clawhauser nodded, "It was Nick's idea. We also keep the blinds closed to avoid having them see into the building through the windows."

The more she heard about what Nick had done to secure ZPD's continued existence in this hellish landscape, the more she began to admire the fox who had become her husband seemingly overnight during her coma. She truly wished she could get those memories back, maybe in time she would.

"Nick really provided a lot to you guys," Judy stated with awe.

Clawhauser gave her a stupid grin, "You two were so cute together." After an irritated look from Judy, "Well you were! Then the cute part applies to him then." He recovered promptly. "He was so devoted to you that he'd always bring you a forget-me-not every week in the hospital. He'd come back each time always beaten up and more fur torn out of his beautiful coat."

"Benjamin…please stop," Nala began, not wanting to relive those painful memories of having to patch up her dad with ointments and bandages.

"It's okay Nala," Judy said, taking a ragged breath and placing a paw on her daughter's own. "I want to hear this."

Clawhauser looked between the two bunnies for a second before receiving another affirmative nod from Judy. He began hesitantly, "Well…he was so dedicated to you that as a price for visitation, he let them feed on him; them beating him up was just pure brutality on their part and not part of the deal. He'd come back limping and hurt but always with a smile on his face."

"Never let them see that they got to you…" Judy whispered. Her heart swelled with pride at her companion and all that he had accomplished right under the noses of the bats. And now his greatest achievement was her being free from their clutches. She wrapped an arm around her daughter as the tears began anew for Nala. A small movement from the tabletop behind Clawhauser caught her interest. "Who is that bunny?"

At the mention of his existence, the rather well dressed hare stood up from his vigil of watching them and paced over to their table. He was grey haired like Judy and Nala but had a few black stripes like a tiger, where the hair had grown in a different color, crossing the broad side of his cheeks and extending back behind his head as well as a few extra stripes at the tips of his ears. Sporting a rather ragged yet still moderately well-kept tuxedo, he convivially stretched out his hand across the table and shook Judy's confidently.

"Good to see you again Judy," he said cordially.

"I'm sorry…who are you?" Bewildered, she blinked trying to remember who this unknown bunny was before her. Her memories were still not returning all that quickly.

He frowned slightly but quickly recuperated, "My apologies. I shouldn't have expected you to remember me, given how little we worked together prior to your coma." He gave her hand another shake, winking at Nala as he did so. "The name is Savage. Jack Savage."
This chapter was unique in that I could take my time and really set up the new world that Judy has found herself in. It also gave me opportunity to present two characters, Bogo and Clawhauser, in two different lights based on the timeline of events in the story. If people didn't figure it out already, it was finally time to reveal that these 'monsters' are in actuality vampiric bats, something Zootopia has never had experience with before. It took several iterations until I finally landed on dialogue that gave 'just' enough information to satisfy the reader yet still kept enough mystery on how events played out that they'd want to read more. I also include a new rabbit, Nala, as Judy's sole surviving child, which further enhances the mystery behind Mai and her connection to Judy. A lot of this chapter foreshadows events in subsequent ones but the focus was on getting Judy's relationships established with characters such as Bogo and Clawhauser. As I wrote this chapter, I began to realize how Judy-centric this entire story is becoming - don't get me wrong, Nick will be involved a fair bit throughout the story but in the end, it is still Judy's story and now that I've realized that, I'll be writing better towards that goal. Also, hopefully some readers are intrigued by how I'll utilize the unused character of Jack Savage!
"So…" Nick began, taking a big swig of his grasshopper shake. "Quite some case we landed ourselves with right?"

"Uh huh." Judy mumbled; her foot tapping incessantly on the tiled floor of the Buga Burger they were spending their lunch at. It was quite evident that she wasn't exactly paying attention to him all that much and instead was gawking out the window, her vegetarian carrot Rueben half eaten in her tray basket.

Feeling a little miffed, he set his shake down and snapped his fingers loudly; to the point a few patrons around them turned their heads to regard them. "Carrots!"

That shattered her reverie, "What?" She barked, a bit more harshly than she had intended for she immediately regretted it seeing Nick's ears fold back in response. Her expression softened, "I'm sorry Nick. I didn't mean to yell at you like that."

Shrugging it off like it never happened, he resumed after another sip from his shake, "It is clear that you have a lot of things on your mind. You honestly haven't been the same since we got back from your parents."

Realizing she should get back to finishing her meal, Judy picked up her sandwich and bit into it, not really tasting the shredded carrots and sauce. Eating gave her some time to think. A lot of things had happened in a short span of time that really spun her for a loop. She wasn't concerned at all about the job Chief Bogo assigned them. In fact she welcomed the challenge. It was rather the fact two different sets of people saw something she couldn't that was well outside the comfort level she was used to.

"Anytime Carrots, this meal has been crazy silent thus far." He commented, slurping up the last few remnants at the bottom of the cup.

Why was this so hard to put into words? She never had any problems dealing with her thoughts, feelings and emotions when it came to defending the weak or standing up for what was right and fulfilling her duties as police officer. When it came to her own love life though, she felt muddled and confused. She never gave much thought to it at all, her entire dream and goal was to be a cop. Nick wasn't such a bad guy, he was charming and funny and very sensitive once you got past his sly fox exterior. Would he really be that bad of a boyfriend?

"Just been thinking a lot about things…" She began hesitantly, which caused one of Nick's eyebrows to rise. Judy being shy about her thoughts? This was new. His full, undivided attention on her was a bit unsettling but she couldn't mistake that he was fully listening to every word she said. "Twice now, I've been told that people have noticed us together as a couple; as something more than on-the-job partners."

"I gathered as much based on the one-sided conversation with Mr. Donuts at the station." Nick remarked, leaning back in his chair. Judy gave him a look at the nickname but dismissed it.

"Bogo sees it too. The thing is," she began, scrunching up her nose trying to think of the words to relate how she felt, "I'm not sure if I'm fully honest with myself about my feelings in this whole
matter."

Nick's heart started pacing a bit faster at this reveal, he was intensely curious as to how she felt about him. He admitted it to himself weeks ago that he had fallen hard for Judy. No other female, fox or otherwise, had captivated him quite like she had. Granted, such inter-species relationships were very unusual and the last thing he wanted was to make her feel uncomfortable so he repressed his feelings and continued to be that supportive and reliable partner she needed on the force. Now he wanted nothing more than to hear something…anything that reciprocated those feelings back.

Realizing she was just holding the sandwich there in front of her, she set it back down in the basket and looked directly at Nick. "You're a great and wonderful guy Nick. You helped me realize my faults too and how selfish and single-minded I had become in being a police officer. You helped me grow into a much better person than when I first came to Zootopia, for that I am grateful." Nick positively beamed at her. She couldn't tell that his heart was frantically pulsing so bad it could burst. "We make a good team. We've seen the worst of each other and still continue to remain friends regardless. I'd imagine that would be what any couple would do."

She paused there for an inordinate amount of time, to the point Nick leaned forward, his mouth slightly open and paws outstretched in anticipation. "Yes, Judy?" He utilized her name to help urge her along.

"I guess we could try it." She finally said at last, her ears down and her eyes distant looking out the window again.

"You're going to have to be less vague Carrots." He pressed, trying to get her to spit it out plainly.

She turned back to him, "Us. You and me. I guess we could try to see where it goes and if it doesn't work out, we can still remain just friends right?"

"Don't act too thrilled." Nick jibbed, showing her a toothy grin. "Of course we can take it slow. I'm in no rush if you aren't."

"So I guess that means we're together now." She stated; if anyone could have seen it, they would have beheld a furious blush on her cheeks just beneath the fur. After a few moments of silence, she put her hands in her lap sheepishly. "So what is it that a couple does exactly?"

Nick nearly face-palmed, she truly was an innocent in this arena. He would have to be real careful with her. "It's really no different than what we're doing now. We hang out with each other and go to lunches, dinners and such. We spend more time together and get to know all the ins and outs of the other person."

Judy smirked at his knowledge of dating, "You seem to be quite the pro at this."

He caught her ribbing, "I won't lie Carrots." He said with a false pomposity. "I have had my fair share of girlfriends in the past."

"Gee, making me feel really good right now." She rolled her eyes, picking her sandwich back up for
another bite.

"Well," He backpedaled quickly. "Those were all failed relationships, I'll grant you that. Either I didn't learn much or they didn't. I'll let you take your pick."

"I'll say that you have a lot to learn." Judy smiled.

"See? This isn't so bad. Nothing really has to change much. In time we'll move on to displays of affection and sleeping over at each other's place." Nick had said it so casually but the reaction he got was not the intended response.

She contorted her face in slight dismay, "You mean spend the night together?"

He stared at her incredulously. Did her parents have any sort of talk with her at all about dating and relationships? Or were they just assuming she's get her act together when she came of age for breeding? She was far from your typical bunny and her lofty goals drew her completely out of her parent's realm of expertise.

"Yes, the entire point of dating is to see if you are compatible enough with the other person to live the rest of your life with them to include living together under the same roof." He seemed utterly flabbergasted he had to explain this at all to her.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea." She faltered, nibbling on her paw. She never considered the long term implications of entering into a relationship with Nick. Of course he'd want more than just a few weeks of being more intimate than just job partners. The thought of that type of long-term relationship was daunting. How would it affect her job and role in Zootopia?

Nick smeared a hand down his face in exasperation, "Seriously Carrots? Just three nights ago you weren't phased one bit about taking a shower not even one partition away from me. And after that, you fell asleep in my room at your parent's house. Now that the notion of becoming serious with me has arisen, you're suddenly all shy and decorous? That makes little sense to me."

"You're right Nick. Absolutely." Judy seemed to be almost talking to herself through this. "There isn't anything abnormal about being a couple. Mammals get together all the time. It is just natural when two people are attracted…to…” Her voice trailed off the moment the epiphany hit her.

Nick seemed to have seen the light go on as well. "You know you're into me, curious to see what being with a fox is like." He couldn't help but grin.

Of course that was why she was so shy all of a sudden. She didn't want to admit to herself that Nick had grown on her so much that she now saw him as attractive in a way most bunnies weren't. A certain sort of peace settled on her heart as she gazed across the table at Nick, "Could I find a fox attractive? Yes…yes I can." Those words gave her a sort of strength, a sense of purpose now that a decision had been made. If she was going to attempt this, she would give it her all and not hold back.

"Great!" Nick chuckled, smacking the table in excitement. "How about I treat you out to dinner tonight?"

Judy gave it some thought, "That would be…”

She was interrupted by a slight jingle of bells from the entry doors and the ire of the restaurant owner, taloned fingers jabbing back out the entrance to his store. "Out! We don't serve your kind here! There is nothing here for you!"

Judy's ears shot up as she twirled in her chair to observe a rather raggedy, gangly creature stumbling
through the front door, jangling the bell attached to it stridently. It seemed extremely unsteady on its feet, lurching forward with each extension of its forearms, its claws ticking on the tile with each step. Its wings hindered its forward movement and it appeared it would have been far more comfortable flying than crawling along the ground. Its upper elbow joints, forming the arch at the apex of each wing, rose above even Nick's head. The trench coat covering its body was unpleasantly draped around its leathery appendages, just barely covering its shaggy furred front, giving it some small sense of modesty.

Several people gasped at the hideous nature of the beast's face. It had an open maw of misshapen teeth protruding at awkward angles, fully visible due to the lack of lips to cover them. Its nose was almost pigish in nature, the nostrils flush against its face, open to view from all angles. The upper tip of the nose was curved outward. Combined with its beady, black eyes and pointed ears, its features gave off a rather demonic impression. Several elephants in the room covered their children's eyes with their trunks.

"We do not serve bats here at this establishment! There is no food here for you!" The wolverine owner growled, forcefully pointing back the way the bat entered.

"Please kind sir, all I want is some of the meat here to eat. I have money." Her voice was hoarse but it was strong enough to be heard throughout the café.

"We don't serve meat. Just bugs! You should know by now that predators don't eat meat in Zootopia! You're disgusting. Get out!" The ferocious owner lifted a baseball club from behind the counter and began to advance on the cowering bat.

"Hey! You can't do that!" Judy was incensed. She leapt off her seat and paced over between the two. Nick stood up from the small table, just slightly bigger than they were, clearly not meant for animals of their stature. He straightened his tie before insouciantly resting a paw on the holster by his hip. "I think we all need to simmer down a bit in here." He called out firmly.

"What did this bat ever do to you to be treated this way?" Judy demanded, hands on her hips and police badge flashing.

The owner pointed the club at the bat, who had crept up behind Judy and was using her as a makeshift barrier. "That…thing has no business being here! We don't serve their kind because there is nothing here for them to eat."

"Not to disagree but it sounded to me a bit like discrimination. According to the Zootopia Civil Rights Act of 2001, discrimination by privately owned places of public accommodation on the basis of species, color, diet, sex and national orientation is illegal." The wolverine snorted at her encyclopedic knowledge of the city laws but bit his tongue, allowing the grinding of his teeth to demonstrate his displeasure. Judy ignored it and continued, "Now, you wouldn't be refusing service to…" She leaned over to the cowering bat. "I didn't actually catch your name."

"Rouge." She offered agreeably.

"To Rouge here based on her species or diet would you? Do you have anything on the menu that can accommodate her special dietary needs?" She clasped her hands together expectantly, daring the owner with her eyes to refuse.

After a few tense moments, the club sagged as the wolverine sighed. "No, there isn't anything we have here that would satisfy her except for maybe bugs."
"That'll be fine." Rouge accepted, sitting back on her haunches, letting the coat slump open, unveiling her bare front and teats to the terrified onlookers around. A small gerbil in the hanging dining floor above them let out a small squeal.

Grumbling to himself, the proprietor stomped behind the lit counter and rummaged around the food bins before grabbing clumps of insects and dumping them unceremoniously into a brown, paper bag. He rummaged around and shoved it into Judy's paws before demanding, "That'll be fifteen dollars and thirty-two cents."

Even Nick was appalled at the price. He took a quick glance up at the slanted menu. "For that much? If I didn't know any better, this is no less discrimination than what you did to Rouge a few minutes ago!"

"Fourteen dollars and thirty-two cents. That's my final offer." The stubborn wolverine was not budging. He propped his arm atop the club, now supporting his weight as he held out a paw to accept the money.

"This is ridiculous." She eyed that club of his. "I could also get you on attempted assault and battery, advancing on a civilian with a weapon with no probable cause and intent to harm." The aggressive owner bared his teeth, a deep growl emanating from his throat. Judy calmly crossed her arms. "And threatening a police officer."

Seeing that it was a no-win situation, the wolverine waved his talons at her. "Keep it. I don't want to see her or any of her kind here again."

"That's still discrimination, even if you don't have the food on hand for them." Nick reminded smoothly.

"Then she can file a grievance at city hall like everyone else." He snarled back.

She stuffed a ten and a five dollar bill in his furry fist, "You keep this. I refuse to extort food from a vendor. I am willing to pay fair market value as per the prices set on your board." The wolverine looked genuinely shocked but accepted the money all the same, grunting as he did so before resuming his duties.

Turning around with bag in hand, she held it out for Rouge to take. She was beside herself at the selfless act of Judy, "You really didn't have to do this for poor, old me."

Judy waggled a paw, "Nonsense. This is what we do in Zootopia, continue to strive and make the world a better place, one person at a time."

"Bless your heart." The grateful bat thanked, reaching out with her clawed hands to grasp the bag from Judy's paws. Judy yelped as her arms got cut by several talons from Rouge's hands. The bat was immediately submissive and regretful. "I'm so sorry officer!" she held her arms out to show the extent of her claws, "Sometimes I can be clumsy with these awful things."

"It's okay…ow." Judy brought up one of her paws to her mouth to suck on the wound, it throbbed something fierce. She knew she shouldn't be mad. It was quite clearly an accident. Ignoring the stinging under her skin, she nodded at the bat, "Just be sure to enjoy those for me okay?"

"Of course! Thank you again officer…?" She began, unsure of what to call Judy.

"Hopps." She smiled back, "Officer Hopps."

"Hopps." Rouge let that name linger on her tongue, watching Judy turn around to head back over to
the fox, who seemed genuinely concerned for her fresh cuts.

With the deftness from years of practice, Rouge quickly brought her talons up to her mouth to lick the fresh droplets of blood, savoring their salty taste. Judy was indeed delicious. Her mark now identified, she shambled out the door letting it slam on its hinges, the bell rattling loudly. Several patrons skirled at the sudden absence of the hideous bat, several still holding their children tight.

"You all right Carrots?" Nick asked, taking her paws in his own and scrutinizing the fresh lacerations. They didn't seem too deep, just enough to draw a thin line of bright, red blood.

She winced at his touch, "I'll be fine, I just need to clean it off in the bathroom and put a few band-aids on it. I'm sure she didn't mean it." She turned her head to regard the gruff wolverine still eyeing the creature lumbering down the road awkwardly before spreading her wings and flying up out of sight. "I'm just more appalled that people can be so narrow-minded here."

"I said it before Carrots, not everyone gets along here. Zootopia is not this magical place where everyone sits around a campfire and sings 'Kumbaya.'" He wrapped an arm around Judy's shoulders, helping her back to their table. "Tell you what, I'll file a grievance for... what's her name? Rouge. I'll file one in her stead when we get back to the station."

Judy chuckled. "That's not how it works Nick. You can be a witness but ultimately Rouge herself needs to file it against this store." Her eyes caught the bat's retreating form, seeing it dwindle past a few high risers before disappearing behind a rather tall, antler spiraled building. "I wonder where she lives... or rather any of them live. A lot came into the city recently."

"Finnick says they are currently being housed in the Canals since the majority of them detest sunlight. Their situation isn't good; living in nothing more than mere hovels from what I'm gathering." He remarked. Even he felt a bit sorry for them. They came to Zootopia to find a better life from the one they were living where they were constantly persecuted for what they are.

She looked at him funny, "You still in contact with Finnick?"

He sat back down across from her, feigning insult. "Of course I am! He and I go back ages, since the time of the Junior Ranger years." Nick saw the troubled look from Judy and he moved to allay her fears. "Oh, I'm over it. I most likely have a far better job than any of those louts by now."

Nick had a rather nasty encounter with his fellow scouts who were all prey. On the eve of his induction into being a full-fledged scout, they mercilessly teased and muzzled him, destroying any hope he ever had of being 'one of them.' It was traumatizing and his mother was so distraught over him that night. She had spent months saving up for his new scout uniform only to have him rejected completely just for being a predator in an all prey troop.

Ever since then, Nick never let anyone see who he truly was on the inside. If all they wanted to see was a sly, tricky fox, then that was exactly what he'd give them. Nick and his mother struggled for years after that, trying to make ends meet on the little money they had. Nick turned to a life of crime and discovered Finnick at a young age. The two became inseparable and pulled off many hustles and cons. Although he never admitted it to Finnick, half of his earnings always went back to support his mom, still living in her small flat just outside city central.

Judy made a small hum of pleasure in her throat, "No doubt thanks to me."

He winked at her, "No doubt."

Her face turned serious again, "Still... that seems like an awful way to live for them." She drifted
away, lost in thought, something she did quite often these past few days. "I think I'll go speak with Mayor Lionheart. I have an idea that might, at least, help with their food situation."

Nick snorted at the name, "Can't say I care much for the guy. Do you think he'll honestly make the time to see you?"

"Given my previous dealings with him, I believe so." She picked up her police cap confidently and readied herself to leave.

Nick stretched out his paw before them, "Lead the way Carrots."

With the cackling laughter ringing in her ears, the foggy haze of red slowly dissipated from her vision. Judy felt lightheaded, as if waking up from an alcohol induced buzz that didn't seem to want to go away. She trembled upon all fours, trying to make sense of where she was. The first thing she noticed was the blood. It was all over the cement floor and drenched across her paws and arms.

"Delicious, isn't it? I even remember my first taste as a child. I couldn't get enough of it then and I can't now!" The echoing voice skirled through the warehouse, its corners completely encased in shadow.

Judy could hear the flapping of wings and bolted her gaze to the ceiling, trying to identify the source of the voice. Trembling with nausea threatening her innards, she shakily maneuvered herself onto her rump and slowly backed up against the nearest strut supporting the roof. She could hear maniacal laughter as it was joined by not one or two but several dozen more. There was a whole flock of... things hanging from the sheet metal covering. The air reeked of ammonia.

She looked around for a way out and saw two doors at the opposite end of the structure. She flipped up onto her paws and began to make a sprint for it when a swooping shape dashed her along the floor, causing her to bump and slam into the pavement like a ragdoll. The creature's claws raked her skin, drawing fresh blood. Judy cried out in pain and looked up to see the retreating form of a bat. Where was Nick or any of her friends?

"Oh no, my little pet!" The voice crooned from above. "You are not going to escape that easily. Did you think you could actually make a difference? Animals cannot change who they really are, what they were born to be!" Several chortles could be heard from among the rafters.

"Where are you?" Judy screamed to the heavens. She looked down at herself to see if there were any weapons left on her. To her dismay, she was completely stripped bare of any clothing and was as natural as the day she was born. Splattered across her grey pelt were huge pockets of red and the putrid stench of death.

Clambering down the wall like a demonic spider was Rouge, her wings splayed out with each hand-hold to display the full measure of her presence. She grinned vilely at Judy, her smirk wrinkling her nose like some festering wound that would not heal. "Here I am, my prized prey."

"I'm not your prey! Get down here and fight! I'm not afraid of you!" Judy was furious. She had no idea where she was, the murkiness from her awakening still hadn't fully lifted but her blood was boiling in rage at the creature before her.

"And we all can see how well that turned out." Rouge simpered as she dropped to the ground, crawling towards Judy in a creepy, disjointed way, her wings twitching in anticipation. "Although, I guess I should be moderately afraid of you. After all, you did do quite a good job on Bellwether."

Judy's ears dropped the moment she heard that name. Dawn Bellwether was a sheep like any other,
but one who had been maligned and mistreated for so long by various predators in her life that she harbored a deep resentment toward them all. She was the mastermind behind the Night Howler plot to deceive the prey population in Zootopia that predators should be confined, exiled or best yet, killed for being what they are.

Judy saw Rouge incline her head to a mottled heap in the center of the floor, dimly spotlighted by the swaying lamp overhead. In horror, Judy followed the trail of blood leading from her straight over to the jumbled mass of wool. Rouge sniggered under her breath as she watched Judy begin to connect the dots together. She followed at a distance, observing Judy and her reactions, taking great pleasure in it.

"No…no, no, no. Please don't be dead." Judy murmured anxiously, getting closer to the chaotic bundle with each step.

Her worst fears were realized the moment she turned the carcass over onto its back, its frayed, blue overalls hanging in tatters. The glazed eyes of Dawn Bellwether gaped back at her, locked in an eternal visage of terror. Her throat was completely ripped open, her head barely stitched to her corpse by several tendons and ligaments. Bile began to form in Judy's throat as she began to recognize the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. What did she just do?

"You are now what you were meant to be Judy." Rouge gurgled, unable to hide her mirth. "You are a killer and a predator. You are what all animals should be."

"No…I'm not…" Judy was sick at heart. The mere notion that she just killed another animal with her bare paws…no, her bare teeth, was revolting.

"Don't try to lie to yourself about the reality of this world Judy!" Rouge derided, circling the rabbit like a hawk over its carrion feast. "Zootopia was a falsehood perpetuated by those secretly in power to keep it running so that they might profit from the masses, like sheep to the slaughter. We merely exposed the lie for what it was and thus liberated mammals from their societal contraptions!"

"That is wrong! People can change if only they see what they can truly accomplish together!" Her head hurt, her reasoning seemed sound but it wasn't making much sense. The clouds began drifting back in, threatening to choke her thoughts out.

Rouge eyed Judy carefully, taking a few steps askance from her. "I knew from the moment I met you that you were special Judy and that you would be my prize, the key to our domination and you did not disappoint! I offer you the chance one last time, to embrace your new life as predator by my side or become prey like the rest of the fodder."

This was too much. She began heaving, knees buckling, dumping her back onto all fours. She retched the contents of her stomach, repulsed as she identified several recognizable chunks of neck tissue, wool and muscle. She wobbled on her limbs a few seconds longer before passing out from physical and mental exhaustion. The last sound she heard was husky snickering from above as a shadow loomed over her prone form, teeth flashing.

Nick nudged Judy gently. She had dozed off slightly during their drive over to city hall. She had gratefully accepted Nick's offer to be her chauffer today. Although the car had seat pedals installed in the chair seat specifically so Judy could drive the rather oversized car, Nick was the one who drove them today. It was ingeniously designed where one could put padded plates over the pedals in the seat so a larger occupant could drive the vehicle when Judy was not at the wheel.

"We're here." He indicated the rather imposing building with a tip of his head. He continued to turn
the wheel hard to parallel park between a car and an obnoxious van belonging to a giraffe.

"I hope he approves of my idea." Judy murmured, looking out the window at the two grey, monolith pillars supporting the center glassed structure; each one unique so as to not create a symmetrical look to the building.

"Worry first about trying to seek a meeting with him. Last I heard, he's booked up for months. Seriously, what does he even do all day anyway, sign papers?" Nick quipped, clearly not sold on the idea that a mayor has a functioning job.

Judy scowled at him, "I'm not entirely fond of him either but he is the one that makes the big decisions for Zootopia, with proper checks and balances from the judicial branch of course. So he would be the one to talk to about this."

Nick shrugged his shoulders before resuming his search for a better parking space, "How about you hop out Carrots and I go find us a closer spot."

She nodded, "Sounds like a plan. I'll meet you in there."

Pushing a button on the dash Nick opened the door for her, watching her hop out. Now that they were officially dating, even if they just started not even an hour ago, he couldn't help but notice the small flick of her bushy tail as she made contact with the ground, as a way to help counter balance her weight and keep upright. He noticed a female hippo onlooker catching him staring at the way Judy swayed her hips ever so slightly when she walked.

He shook his head and closed the door before pressing on the gas. "Easy there killer." He admonished himself. "We've barely begun and you're already wandering."

Judy turned around at the slight huff of indignation to see the hippo shaking her head at the retreating cop car. What was that all about? Figuring it was some silly prejudice she had against foxes that she honestly didn't have the time to address; Judy whirled around and confidently strode through the automatic doors, hearing their clean, crisp sound as they slid into the walls to let her pass. It had only been two times during the Night Howler case that she had been to city hall which was conveniently located across grand central from the police station but she stopped to check the informational booth map to ensure she wouldn't get lost.

Finding the right elevator and floor, she bustled in with several other mammals of varying sizes and shapes. Some took little notice of her while others smiled and bowed their head in greeting, instantly recognizing her as the friendly face of the ZPD. The herd eventually thinned out as she finally got off at the top floor. Directly ahead past the curved pillars supporting the impressive skylight above was the grand double doors of the mayor's office. Situated directly outside them was a new structure built entirely within that year to give the new Vice Mayor an actual place to sit and conduct business.

Judy's face brightened the moment she recognized the sleek, brown furred otter sitting at the desk. "Mrs. Otterton! I didn't know you got a job here!"

"Judy!" She cried out calmly. Slipping out from behind the desk, the petite otter embraced the rabbit warmly. Each taking comfort in knowing the other was there for them.

At length they separated but each not letting go of the other. "So how'd you end up here? This is such a great position for you! How are the kids?" Judy was so excited to see a familiar face at city hall and even more overjoyed to know that it was Mrs. Otterton who was now the Vice Mayor. This would make things a bit easier to see Mayor Lionheart!
"The kids are doing swell. They're at home right now with their tutor, who is a delightful lady. I'm sure you'll love her too when you get little kits of your own!" She gushed.

Judy gave a nervous laugh, "Yeah…when I do."

Completely unaware of Judy's worries about the topic, Mrs. Otterton forged onward, "You'll be a great mom. I have complete faith in you! Oh, and I love your uniform!" She hugged Judy one more time before parting. "Well, ever since my husband recovered from being poisoned by those Night Howlers, he insisted along with the rest of our block that I run for Mayor." She giggled before slapping a paw through the air in ridiculousness. "I thought it was absurd! Me? Mayor? I'm just a simple wife to a florist…who regained his job servicing Mr. Big's family, by the way…and mother to two great children. What could I possible have to offer to Zootopia?"

Judy looked at her stunned. "Mrs. Otterton!"

"Please, call me Olivia." She smiled.

"Olivia…you have plenty to offer. You took it upon yourself to push the case along about your missing husband. You had the confidence and knowledge about just where exactly to go to get help. You saw there was a problem and you strove to find solutions to it! Those are strong qualities!"

"Exactly." She chimed in. "After a few weeks, I thought about it and I remembered you! I figured if a bunny can become a cop, I can become a Mayor."

Judy gazed over at the double doors. "So…why aren't you in there?"

Her smile flagged a little. "Mayor Lionheart was very influential in the new polls and clearly owned up to his mistakes. He was so honest and upfront about the whole affair that people gravitated toward his honesty. He said he'd make Zootopia great again and crack down hard on crime and bring the city back to the vision it was meant to be when it was first built. I couldn't compete with that so when I came to promote myself as candidate, Lionheart took me aside and promised me the position of Vice Mayor should he win."

Judy glowered at the doors, hoping that Leodore could feel the wrath of her glare through the thick oak. "That low down, sleazy…" She could already visualize in her mind the previous Vice Mayor, Dawn Bellwether, and the small storage closet they shoved her desk into, right next to the boiler.

Olivia raised both hands in supplication, "Please don't be made at Mayor Lionheart. He promised to make atonement for how he treated his previous employees. His time in jail has really made him see perspective on how he operates his position. I truly believe he has turned over a new leaf. The first thing he did when he got reelected was to immediately have this desk built for me so I could be near him at all times to handle his appointments and schedule."

Judy arched an eyebrow along with her nose, "Sounds more like a glorified secretary to me."

She dipped her head in thought, "I guess one could see it that way." Her eyes grew bright again, "But with two paychecks coming into the household and my husband's business flourishing again, we couldn't be happier!"

"That's great, I guess." She paused a few moments before remembering why she was here in the first place. "Oh, can I make an appointment to see Mayor Lionheart today?"

A look of consternation erupted on Olivia's face, "I'm afraid he's booked until late winter…"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Nick's voice rang out through the spacious atrium. Sauntering hot off of the
elevator was Nick, shades in full suave mode and his tail swaggering in high fashion. "Look who I found?"

Behind him were two large tigers dressed up in business suits complete with ties that sported Gazelle branding. Strutting behind them was the pop singer herself. She was dressed conservatively with a full body sun dress with one single stripe of blue crossing diagonally over her midriff. Judy's mouth fell open in shock. The closest she ever got to a celebrity as big as Gazelle was being in the front rows of her concert amphitheater. Here she was going to be up close and personal with the famous diva.

Nick flipped his shades down as he strolled up to the two of them, "Mrs. Otterton, congratulations on your position. You really did try everything!"

Gazelle's lilting laugh echoed around them. Placing a hoof to her mouth, she cajoled, "Oh, Mr. Wilde, you are a hoot."

"Like an owl, but funnier ma'am." He rejoined jovially.

"Is this your partner Mr. Wilde?" Gazelle indicated Judy before bending low to meet her at eye level, placing a hoof on each thigh. "You are an extraordinary bunny Ms. Hopps. I appreciate all that you have done for the city…our city. I can appreciate any heart that has a love for Zootopia and its citizens. You showed everyone the possibilities of rising above your station and become that which people thought you could not." She gave a few seconds of deliberation. "How about you and Mr. Wilde come to my house this weekend for a luau? My treat."

Judy opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to form words but could not think of any to say. Nick swept in from the side, wrapping an arm around Judy's shoulders, "That is such a grateful offer ma'am. We would be delighted to take you up on it. When shall we be there? Around six?"

Gazelle rose back up considering, "Yes, that will be good. I can't wait to tell you my hopes and dreams for this city."

A slight clearing of her throat brought all their attention to Mrs. Otterton. "Ms. Gazelle? He will be ready to see you now."

Judy immediately picked up on the fact that Gazelle had an audience with Lionheart. "You're going in to see the Mayor?" Her tongue finally catching up with her shock.

The fleet footed singer nodded, "Yes, it is urgent I speak with him about the rising immigrant crisis here in Zootopia. Thousands of these poor bats are being starved and forced to live in shacks and under bridges. That is no way to live. I have a few ideas that I'd like to promote and get the city behind, but first I'd like to see if they are viable enough to be implemented."

"That's actually pretty smart." Nick clicked his teeth, flashing a wry grin, "Not every idea can be funded or logistically supported based on the resources at hand." Judy shot him a look. "What? I discovered this during my…" He glanced over at Gazelle and her imposing bodyguards, "turbulent years."

Judy's eyes sparkled. If she could get Gazelle behind her idea, then she could have a shot at pitching it in front of Mayor Lionheart. With star power behind it, it had a chance of actually taking off and becoming a viable means to help feed the mass influx of bats. Based on what she read in the reports that morning, it might also help stop the crime wave, which she was positive had something to do with the lack of available food for them, although she hadn't exactly told Chief Bogo or Nick her hunch.
"Your friend is right." Gazelle affirmed. "Even I am not blind to what is possible and what is not. I may sing about 'trying everything,' and I intend to do just that in all aspects of my life but I won't be ignorant of when I'll need some outside or in this case, authoritative help."

"Well, I have an idea of how to help feed all of them." Judy piped, her ears proudly standing up.

This caught Gazelle's attention immediately. "Please tell me Ms. Hopps." Her eyes were intense but Judy sensed a kindred spirit of wanting what was best for Zootopia there.

"Well…I was thinking of maybe making a donor blood bank where mammals could freely come to safely and painlessly give their blood to be stored as food for the bats." It sounded crazy and even Nick seemed a bit shaken by the very idea of it.

Gazelle tapped a hoof to her chin, "That would definitely be a hard sell."

"How about incentives?" Judy offered. "Maybe give each person a day off work each month for donating blood? Or coupons to local grocery stores to help cut the cost of produce for donating blood? I'm just spit-balling here."

The diva smiled. "Your heart is in the right place little one. I applaud this idea and although I detest the way they feed, I agree that something must be done to keep the peace within Zootopia. If we cast them out for being what they are, then what hope do we have of being proud of ourselves for claiming this wonderful utopia?"

"So…will you support it?" Judy's heart was pounding. She was thrilled at the thought of Gazelle herself endorsing one of her ideas. Clawhauser would be so jealous!

"Of course. It seems you and I are of one mind about Zootopia Judy. Please," she stretched out her hoof to the double doors, "come with me inside. We'll talk to the Mayor together."

"Sly bunny." Nick whispered to her as they followed the pop singer inside.

"Clever fox. You helped by introducing me to her." Judy admitted. She couldn't take all the credit the way this played out.

He winked at her, "Yes, but you sealed the deal. I'm just glad I set up the pitch for you."

She beamed. "Guess I knocked it out of the park didn't I?"

"You sure did." He waved at Mrs. Otterton as they passed by, letting her shut the doors behind them.

Judy was optimistic. She knew this was a good idea. It had to be.

Chapter End Notes

A very difficult chapter to get all the narrative and dialogue 'beats' just right. I knew I wanted Judy and Nick to 'ease' into the relationship people seem to so desperately want them to be in. I actually used a conversation my spouse and I had as inspiration for Judy finally agreeing to the relationship. I'm very proud of how it finally ended up. The introduction of Rogue was important since she is the primary villain of the piece. I made a homage to the original Zootopia movie where I set up a similar situation in how Judy met Nick, but instead of meeting a future friend and partner, she's unknowingly meeting
a villain. Her description and actions in the Buga Burger and the flash forward scene in the warehouse was key in setting the tone for how this conflict would play out. I hope I removed all Narm regarding her name and false connection to another anthropomorphic series. I also began setting up the seeds for future events to happen and Gazelle just happened to land right in my lap as my solution to progressing the plot forward. I knew I needed to characterize her well so that she and Judy together would be the impetus to set the rest of the events in motion. Mrs. Otterton was just a nice bonus to throw in there, she may yet have a future purpose but it isn't decided at this time.
"Again!" The commanding voice rang out in the bare, concrete room.

Judy slammed her fists on the floor once more before gripping her pole, now bereft of its mop head. She bounced up to her feet and held the wooden rod out like a sword. Her opponent opposite her lunged in with a side swipe, intent to knock her out at the knees; sensing the predictable pattern, Judy instinctively leapt over the offensive stick whisking past her legs before swinging hers down with enough force to crack a tiny skull. She would have struck gold had the second form not materialized beside her and rammed her to the ground, causing her mock sword to be flung out of her hands and clatter against the floor several paces away.

"Dang it!" Judy fumed; a look of enraged self-loathing evident on her face.

Mai held a paw up to cease the advance of Jack. "That's enough for now. I think she's exhausted."

She held out a paw for Judy to grab and pull herself back to her feet. "You must remember Judy they don't attack as individuals, not usually anyway. You must be thinking to react to the second foe before you've even finished with the first."

"I know…I know." Judy scolded herself.

It had been an exhausting few weeks training and getting the muscles and bones in her body to work again. Since the second day of awakening in what could be best described as a derelict brothel in downtown Zootopia, Mai and Jack Savage had been helping Judy regain her strength and refresh her muscle memory especially with regards to her combat training. She was used to fighting against most mammals on land but engaging animals that could fly was an entirely different matter and it was difficult to simulate what a battle against one would be like.

"Don't worry love," Jack consoled with a flashing smile, taking his face mask off that helped protect against errant blows. "You've performed better in two weeks than I've seen new cadets do in months! You are definitely a stand out student!"

She beamed at him, "Thanks Mr. Savage."

He placed a delicate paw on her shoulder, "Please, call me Jack. That'll do just fine."

Jack Savage was an interesting bunny. He was one of the resistance's foremost spies and he brought intel from across Zootopia on a weekly basis. He claimed Judy had sent for him five years ago before her amnesia hit and they met under the pretense that they were to assist each other's departments in ridding their cities of these menaces. She discovered that there was more than one city that tried to do create what Zootopia had done but with far less stellar results, but that did not stop the oncoming horde of bats that subdued both cities under their tyrannical blood lust.

"So when are we going out onto the streets again? What is our plan of action?" Judy probed. She was still curious as to why they weren't speaking to her of their plans even after weeks of preparing her for war against these demons.

Mai and Jack shared a glance before Mai responded, "When we feel you are ready to join us on the force again, we'll press on with the attack as soon as possible. There are plenty of things still left to do before we strike back at Rouge and her brood." Another look between her and Jack, "I'm not
exactly privy to our next course of action, that is Bogo's role. He took command of this whole operation years ago and he knows the play. If we can find him at lunch today, you are more than welcome to go ask him."

Jack rolled his eyes, "A great leader that one, but he does tend to keep things close to the vest."

Mai walked over and picked up two towels, throwing one for Judy to catch. "How about we go shower up before we hit the lobby for lunch? Although I'm not happy the bats are enforcing slave labor to keep up city utilities, I'm still glad for the running water we get here."

Judy was aghast at the news, "Why don't the people rise up and fight back? Why did we let them have control?"

"We didn't." Mai said monotonously. "By the time you and the ZPD realized there was a genuine problem, the bats had already established themselves within the infrastructure of Zootopia. They completely leveled several city blocks. That was the first attack."

"That was when you did the research on them." Jack interjected, keeping pace with the two of them. "A call went out to our service and they sent me." He looked a bit disgruntled. "Not that I could have done much, I'm honestly not sure why they didn't send someone more capable."

Judy looked at him curiously, "So you're saying you're not an asset to the force?"

That comment shook him out of his reminiscence, "What? No! Just that a bunny compared to the horde of bats out there? What did they expect me to do against all that?"

They turned the corner leading to the showers, Mai pivoted to Jack, firmly reminding him, "Please excuse us, us ladies have to get cleaned up."

"And Judy?" Jack gave a pointed look at Mai.

The rabbit smiled back, "I'm sure she'll remember in time. We will figure this out."

"Remember what?" Judy said bewildered. The conversation had taken an awkward turn and she felt rather lost.

Mai shook her head, "Never mind right now. Jack was just leaving to get himself ready for lunch."

"See you there then." Jack made a casual wave before sauntering off down the hall, softly humming to himself.

"I feel rather disoriented Mai." Judy confessed. "It feels like I should know more, remember more than what I already have. Like a piece of information is just dancing out of my grasp and I can't catch it." She jabbed a finger at her, "And you being all cryptic with Jack isn't helping matters."

Mai sighed as she began taking off her shirt and shorts before leaping high to snag the wheel and turn it roughly, releasing the flow of water before slipping under the stream. "It was Bogo's recommendation, with advice from Dr. Madge, that we not force your memory to return. It just might make things worse. The best thing for us to do is to continue supporting you and get you back into fighting shape."

"That makes sense." Judy agreed. Try as hard as she might, if there was a memory that was pirouetting at the edge of her mind, trying to chase after it always did her no good and only served to frustrate her further.
"Come on in." Mai motioned a paw for Judy to shower with her.

Judy felt a bit self-conscious being undressed and showering with Mai but she proceeded to disrobe and start up a shower of her own alongside her. "So what happened with your scar?" She motioned at the rather hairless patch of skin crossing diagonally down Mai's cheek down into her neckline.

She didn't look at Judy directly however but she unconsciously put a paw up to her healed wound. "I was very young. Mom took all of us kits to Zootopia to help with the blood bank idea you came up with. There was a bat there that was supervising the process to ensure they got what they needed." She frowned. "I thought it was a dumb idea to have one of them there, but Mayor Lionheart insisted that she was a medical doctor for their kind and would know best how much each bat needed and where best to pull it from each animal."

Judy began rubbing up against the rather large, crusty bar of soap leaning up against the wall, allowing it to lather through her fur. "So the bat did that to you?"

Mai's ears remained drooped, "Yes. As...mom went in to get her blood drawn by the doctors to help donate to the cause, I was singled out and brought to a side room. I was assaulted and I resisted. The bat gave me this scar and then proceeded to suck the blood out of me." He paw dropped further to her neck where she could still feel the two prick lesions. "I almost died that day."

Judy felt utter remorse for Mai. "I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. I was the one who suggested the blood bank idea. I was the cause of your pain." The warm water felt icy cold to her now. Its pleasurable splatter on her skin was now like needles of blame stabbing her with their guilt.

Mai's eyes lifted to Judy's, "I don't blame you Judy. I never did! You were the one who actually heard my cry and came to save me."

"I saved you?" Judy was confused yet again. So many pieces of her memory were gone. She really wanted to know what had happened five years ago that caused her to lose so much of her past.

Mai shut her water off, allowing the remaining droplets filter through her fur. "You really don't remember me at all do you Judy?"

Judy tried to respond but a small intercom jury-rigged up in the corner of the showers buzzed and crackled. "Attention everyone." It was Clawhauser, doing his best to whisper through the microphone while still being loud enough for everyone to hear. "All members please report to the foyer for briefing and assignment." After some hushed talking that Judy couldn't quite make out, Clawhauser finished, "That is all."

"Is something happening?" Judy asked, killing the flow of water on her showerhead.

Mai picked up a towel and began wiping off the water, "Probably a supply raid or...most likely not a reconnaissance mission. We haven't had one of those in a long time."

"Supply raid? How much longer can we hold out here?" She really had to wonder, it sounded like they've been living this way for the entire duration of the five years she was out.

"Not much longer I'm afraid." Mai gave Judy an intense stare. "You truly did come back to us in the nick of time."

The luau was a resounding success. Judy was so nervous about it. This was to be the first party she had ever gone to in her life and it was being sponsored by the celebrity pop diva, Gazelle! It was double billed as a charity event for the rising influx of immigrant bats. Thousands of dollars were
donated by the wealthy elite in efforts to support and help build proper housing for them.

Although Judy could tell many of the guests just contributed to get the reputation and prestige of looking generous, they were really here for the social circles and networking. Gazelle's heart was in the right place but her clientele at the party wasn't fully in tune with her intentions. Regardless, enough money was raised that night to help fund both Judy's blood bank idea and Gazelle's housing proposition.

She had spent the rest of that week leading up to the luau in finding the perfect outfit for the occasion. She had to skimp and budget aside enough money to buy a floral tank top that had to be tied above the navel, revealing a good chunk of her midriff, something Judy was not used to but was willing to take the chance since this was such a special occasion. The bottom half was a wrap-around skirt with palm trees and coconuts, with a split on the left side where her left leg lay bare. When Nick came to meet her at her apartment, his jaw nearly dropped open at the sight of her.

"I feel like I'm underdressed now…" He took a quick gander at her revealing tummy and leg. "Or should I say overdressed?"

Nick wasn't wearing anything overtly different than what she was used to seeing. He had a pair of nice khaki pants complete with a green shirt and orange tie. She tapped her foot a few times, irritated at him, "Har har, I spent all week trying to find the best outfit and you just rummage one up from your collection of standbys?"

Nick looked down at himself, "What? This can be formal. It's not like anyone there will actually care a wink about us anyway. So we'll be fine!"

"That's not the point Nick." Judy crossed her arms.

Nick shrugged, "Kind of late for me to head home and change anyway, her limousine to come pick us up is already here."

"Her what?!" She stammered. Judy didn't expect Gazelle to send a limo to come collect and bring them to the party. This all seemed unreal to her.

Nick bowed before leading the way with his arms, "You being instant friends with Gazelle has its perks. After you."

They hopped into the limousine and got all cozy in the back. The jaguar driver nodded to the two of them before shutting the compartment window and rumbling off down the road. Judy was so anxious she couldn't stop fidgeting in her seat. Here she was, sitting insanely close to Nick in a rather revealing outfit and heading to what was going to be one of the most memorable experiences of her young life. She didn't realize she was trembling until Nick wrapped an arm around her shoulders, making her more aware of his body heat.

"It'll be fine Carrots. It is just a social gathering, like any other we've had. Just think of it as going out to dinner with the boys from the ZPD, just in a home setting. No big difference." He beamed at her, clearly enjoying every second of her agitation.

"You seem like you've done this before." Judy remarked, trying her best to give him a stern look.

He paused a few before responding, "I've done my fair share of party crashing before I met you. I'm not exceptionally proud of it but it was part of what I did. It got me by." He took a glass off the side bar of the cabin and popped the cork with a claw from the wine bottle and began pouring.

"What are you doing?" Judy asked alarmed. "That's not our liquor!"
"Relax Carrots!" Nick crooned. "If they didn't want us partaking, they wouldn't have left it out in the open for us to have. Here, I'll even pour you a glass."

"Nick, I'm not doing it!" Her eyes were locked onto the second glass, slowly being filled with amber. He caught a rather curious expression on Judy, "Carrots? Don't tell me you haven't imbibed before. Is this your first time?"

"No! Maybe...kind of." She seemed less sure each passing second. "My mother warned me of such drinks, saying it could make bunnies do weird, strange and awful things."

Nick turned serious, "Your mother may be right about that but that's only if taken in excess." He regarded her a moment, "Tell you what Carrots, I promise to look after you tonight and make sure you don't have more than what you can handle. You have my word. I'm just trying to get you to relax a little and enjoy yourself tonight. I like seeing my partner have fun."

She wanted to be mad at him but she couldn't resist that toothy, goofy grin of his, "Fine..." She whipped up a finger to his snout, "But you promised!"

He held up three fingers, "Ranger's honor."

She giggled, "You're not even a ranger."

He smirked, "That makes it even more true."

She thanked him for the glass and observed the silky smooth liquid sloshing within. Nick had already drunk half of his and was watching her with interest. She knew she could do this; she was an adult after all. There was nothing preventing her from enjoying a little alcohol was there? Just enjoy in moderation, Nick was here to make sure nothing crazy happened. She could trust him. She raised it to her lips and sipped it down, the liquid burned like fire in her throat and she coughed violently at its passing.

"Easy there killer!" Nick laughed as she sputtered over the glass. "First drink or two is the worst but it gets better from there!"

"Could have fooled me!" Judy fired back.

She gazed down at the drink again, feeling the spreading warmth of the booze penetrate her chest. It felt rather good. She raised it and took another sip. It still burned but not nearly as bad and Nick was right, it wasn't as jarring as the first taste. By the fifth sip, it actually started to taste rather good. Before she knew it, she had downed the whole glass and was feeling rather peachy. She motioned over for Nick to pour her another.

"Ah...ha, not that fast Carrots!" She gave him an offended look. "No, I'm serious. It is actually in poor form to show up to a party already drunk. A little buzzed is fine but I wouldn't press your luck, especially since this is your first time. Don't want to have the party end before it even begins!"

"Oh, whatever!" She said in mock anger, slapping her head against the side of his chest, leaving it there as he wrapped his arm back around her again. Something about this felt so right but she couldn't shake the feeling that they would be judged somehow for enjoying this quiet moment together.

At length the limo pulled up to a stop in front of Gazelle's rather quaint abode. Judy hadn't realized they were already in Savannah Central. She never knew the pop singer lived so far away from her place of business and revenue in Sahara Square, where the amphitheater was. She lived in a modest
two story mansion that seemed far less extravagant than her supposed lifestyle would imply.

Several palm trees were scattered around the premises giving it an air of the exotic in a place where none grew. The spiraling towers on either end of the structure resembled horns while the inner bulk of the building was a curved, interweaving overlay of glass and curtains, easily seen through by anyone on the outside; Gazelle certainly had nothing to hide from her neighbors and was not ashamed to display her living circumstances. They could see multitudes of revelers already in the throes of good spirits. To Judy, however, this type of lavish living made her stare at the home in awe.

"You ready Carrots?" Nick asked, slipping out of the side door before offering his hand to help her out.

"Yeah…" She said trembling; she wasn't sure if it was from excitement or from fear.

He patted her paw with his own before entangling her arm in his and began walking gallantly down the pathway to the front entrance. It was flanked by spotlights installed in the well-manicured lawn, each pointed at the building. "I can honestly say I'm glad to experience this with you for your first time."

Her eyes looked up to find his but he kept them straight ahead, reaching out to open the huge redwood doors. "Yeah…me too." She agreed.

She felt a bit braver knowing that Nick would be by her side and help ease her through this night. Her smile faded however as she caught the glances of several partying guests. At first their greetings were genuine but once it was clear Nick and her were going as a pair, a few raised eyebrows and some dirty looks began to surface. She recalled what her father said back at the Burrows how certain kinds of relationships were frowned upon. She tightened her grip on Nick's arm. She never had to think about this aspect of their relationship before when they were just simply work partners.

Thankfully she didn't have to endure the condemning stares for long when a lilting voice rang out over the din, "Judy! Oh Judy! So great to see you!" Gazelle was already heralding them to join her across the room by the cushy couch seemingly made up of nothing but plush pillows. "Please, please, come closer!" Several of her tiger dancers stepped aside to make room for the two to pass.

Judy went in for a handshake but was roped into a full blown hug with matching kisses on each cheek. "Thank you so much for inviting us here."

Gazelle waved a hoof, "Nonsense! I'd rather have real, honest people to talk to than those out there." She indicated the general mob of Zootopia's elite, dining on delicacies and fine drink. At a curious look from Judy, she continued, "I know that half of my party guests are not here for the charity, but they'll give to save their own face. I'm only concerned with the end result and how it'll benefit our Zootopia." A small sigh. "So, I put on parties like this to help fund causes I believe to be right. I'd use the money I get from my concerts but that is legally regulated to other areas and people."

Judy suddenly felt guilty for not bringing anything to contribute herself. "I'm sorry I didn't bring any money to-"

"Nor did I expect you to." Gazelle smiled, placing a hoof on Judy's cheek a moment before removing it. "I understand your position and your line of work. You are doing far more than anyone ever asked of you for Zootopia. I cannot get mad at that." She turned to Nick, "It is also good to see you as well Mr. Wilde. I am glad both of you could make it."

Nick bowed low, "Pleasure is all mine ma'am, I assure you. I'm mainly here to make sure Judy feels comfortable."
The diva looked surprised at this and placed a hoof to her breast, "Oh dear, I didn't realize this was all new to you." She clicked her hooves, two of her tiger companions got up from their pads. "Please set up the sound system and stage, I plan to sing momentarily." The two burly cats nodded silently before going about their business. Gazelle pointed at Nick, "I expect you to dance with this lovely lady tonight when I go up to sing."

If Nick was taken aback by the bold command, he didn't show it. Instead he kept the perpetual grin on his face, "If it pleases the lady, I would be honored to have the first dance."

Judy flushed as Gazelle chuckled, "There's a good date. Would you please get us ladies a drink Mr. Wilde…and do get something for yourself as well."

"Don't need to ask me twice my horned beauty." He clicked his tongue and with a wink was gone.

Gazelle tittered as she watched the waving, red tail swish away into the crowd. "Your partner is delightful Judy. I think he will be very good for you."

A furious blush erupted beneath Judy's fur as she twisted her neck to gawk at the singer, "What? Oh yes…he's a great guy. We work well together on the force. I trust him to have my back when we're in danger."

A bemused look etched itself on Gazelle's face as she regarded the shy bunny. "Judy, you can't hide from me what I see so plainly. You have the more fire and heart than I've seen in a long time, I believe it is not like you to be this timid."

Judy looked around at the expansive atrium that was Gazelle's living room. It was multi-layered with various floor levels, each looking down upon the other with a small river running through the floor, providing sustenance to the interior shrubbery that encompassed the middle of the den.

"This is all so new to me. I could never have imagined myself being in this position, here in your home." Judy finally revealed. "I'm just a simple bunny from the Burrows with dreams of being a cop in Zootopia." She never expected to be bumping paws with some of the most famous people in the city. Her aspirations weren't that high, she was just content to being a simple police officer and continue to make the world a better place.

The singer lounged back on the pillows, looking at the beautiful creature in front of her, completely oblivious to just how wonderful she was and what she could offer. "Judy, trust me when I tell you that I know exactly where you're coming from. I wasn't always famous or even popular. I had to endure a lot of ridicule and pain to get to where I am now. Most people don't even realize that. They only see me for the image I portray on stage, that's the only Gazelle they know. I see in you what I was myself once: a tryer. You won't back down whatsoever until you are absolutely sure there isn't anything more you can possibly do."

"Sometimes I feel like I don't have the power to change things because of those in authority who don't give me the chance to." Judy commented, giving an askance look at Gazelle.

"You speak of Mayor Lionheart?" She crossed her hooves over her belly. "He can be difficult to deal with but he means well, I know that much. Everyone has doubts about their own potential and self-worth. It is what makes us mammals. Judy, you can't let it get you down. You must rely on your friends to help see you through the tough times." She gazed out over the gathering, seeing if she could spot the ginger fox at the bar. "You should express these feelings to Mr. Wilde. He is your partner after all and I think it would benefit you both if you were on the same page as a couple."

Judy whipped her head back around to her, "You too? Everyone seems to think we're a couple!"
"Well are you not?" She asked flatly.

Judy shifted awkwardly on the cushion, smoothing out her skirt, ensuring it covered up a bit more of her leg. "Yeah, I guess. We did agree to become one earlier this week."

"So what is the problem?" Gazelle grilled, her expression of benevolence never fading.

"You're okay with that?" Judy probed.

The singer sat up a bit straighter, "Judy, you are letting the outside opinions of people who do not matter get in the way of what makes you happy. If Mr. Wilde is what makes you happy, then you should go for it with all your heart. Don't let society dictate how you should live your life. I know for I am happily involved with my crew."

Judy's eyes bulged, "Wait…you don't mean your back-up dancers?" Her eyes wandered over to each of her four, hulking Bengal tiger companions. She always thought they were just there for show and to provide amplified entertainment for the females in the crowd.

Gazelle nodded, "I love them all and we have a free and open relationship together. It may be frowned upon that predator would love prey but I know what is truth and I intend to continue to make myself happy. You should do the same. Do not be ashamed of your love."

A weird thought crept into her head, "Have you ever…?" She inclined her head toward one of her tigers.

Gazelle made a small vibration in her throat which sounded like contained laughter. "A lady never kisses and tells…" She waved her arm in the direction of the steps leading up to them; Nick was doing a find balancing act with three, rather full glasses of alcohol. Staring at the fumbling fox, Gazelle's plain speech opened Judy's eyes to the possibilities she never fully considered.

"Listen up everyone!" Bogo demanded with a firm voice, "This will be our first outing since Mrs. Wilde has come back to us." A lot of nods and murmurs of excitement rippled through the small congregation. Judy blushed a bit having been called by her formal married name. She cursed her own memory for not remembering her wedding day with Nick.

Unaware of Judy's inner turmoil, Bogo surged onward, "She needs to know the lay of the land out there before we can plan any further strategy of retaliation. We are assembling two teams. I have assigned Clawhauser, Jack and Swinton to accompany Mrs. Wilde while Mai, Rhinowitz, Higgins and myself will be the other."

Bogo pointed at a rather crude drawing of Zootopia, sections of it largely smudged off indicating certain areas that were no longer traversable. The entire layout had changed based on the destruction incurred by the bats. They couldn't simply use the roads to cross over between ecosystems. "We will be heading south into Sahara Square. Yes, I know it is very open and dangerous there with very little cover, but Jack has brought back word of a small cache of food and supplies still left nearby the old casino there. Our objective is to retrieve as much as possible and make it back alive."

"What's our rules of engagement sir?" Judy piped up, eager to be back in the fight. She may not remember or know everything that happened these past five years but she knew something had to be done to reestablish order and peace in Zootopia.

Bogo removed the glasses from his snout, one lens nearly cracked to pieces, it was a miracle he could see through it at all. "The same as it has always been. Shoot to kill. We do not negotiate with these bats." He moved his concerned expression from her to the throng gathered, "Everyone suit up
the best you can and secure your weapons. Dismissed!"

She seemed a bit taken aback by how final his orders were. She was taught at the academy you were not allowed to use more force than was necessary to put down the threat. Were the bats so terrible that it immediately escalated to using lethal force on sight? Mai shook her head to dissuade Judy from questioning further. She would soon see for herself what kind of monsters these animals were.

"Well it seems his briefings haven't changed much." She quipped, trying to keep the mood light. She followed Jack and Mai to the arsenal they kept in one of the storage closets of the brothel. Nala tagged along behind, skipping as she went. She was happy just to be around her mom again.

"From what Nick told me," Mai illuminated, "Bogo isn't willing to let go of past protocol and is still living life as police Chief."

"I think the words used were, 'like a stick up his butt.'" Jack noted. Mai shot him a scowl. "Which isn't actually a bad thing." He said cheerfully, accepting Nala's outstretched paw as she skipped alongside him. "Without his rigid structure and regime to keep this place running, I'm sure most of us would have cut and run or gone insane from the pressure of living right under their noses." He pointed up to the ceiling as if bats were roosting there at that very moment, glaring at them.

Judy could already tell the dynamics between the two bunnies. Mai appeared to be more deferential and respectful of authority. She didn't understand exactly why but it seemed Mai had more respect for Bogo and the position he held within their resistance, oft times taken offense for comments made against his good character. Jack seemed a bit more blasé about the whole affair and reminded her a bit of Nick and how he took things in stride. He also seemed to be very friendly to her daughter while Mai remained aloof most times with her.

"He's really nice." Nala chimed. "He sometimes plays board games with me."

"Bogo?" Judy asked incredulously.

"Yep!" Nala affirmed. "He's really not that good at it though but he keeps trying."

Jack chuckled, "The student has bested the master. He had to teach her at first how to play chess, but now he can't seem to beat her. Sometimes I like to sit back and watch the show when he loses."

The four of them rounded the bend and entered into the musty closet. Bolted into the walls were racks of guns, knives and shock-tasers. Most were too big for their small paws but there was a small section off to the side at the far end of the row with a few weapons built specifically for smaller cops, something that was just being implemented into the ZPD five years ago due to Judy's influence.

She picked up a small .38 caliber Smith & Weasel, testing its weight and grip. It felt good to have a firearm back in her paws again. It made her feel empowered, like she could take on the world and defend the weak from the strong. She closed her eyes as she let her fingers move across the plastic and metal, feeling out each crevice, lever and button. She wanted to memorize its form so that she could utilize it at a moment's notice.

Jack edged up behind her, his eyes looking over her shoulder at the piece. "Ah, that's actually my gun."

Her eyes shot open, she leapt back a bit before offering the gun up on her palm. "I'm sorry! I didn't realize this was yours. It just looked and felt right to me."

He chuckled a bit. "Relax, I'll just take an automatic instead. You can have that one. Just keep her safe for me alright?"
"Sure thing, thanks." She bowed her head slightly at his generous nature. Finding the associated holster, she strapped it to her waist and tested its position on her hip. "Do we have uniforms we can change into?" She inquired of Jack.

Mai responded for him, choosing to stick with her trusty sword rather than a gun. "No, it would single you out far too much." After a puzzled look from Judy, "The bats know better than to completely subjugate every citizen. They've given them a glimmer of hope for normalcy and most have flocked to it like moths. There are a few mammals who walk outside before curfew to keep the utilities of the city running and they are mostly unharmed as long as they do what they're told."

"Predators keep the law and order on the streets." Jack continued for her. "They are under the complete control of Rouge. There are watchers along the rooftops surveying everyone who walks below. If one steps out of line, they hit a nearby predator with a Night Howler dart and then watch them tear the offenders apart. They then swoop down to lap up the remains."

"Do we really have to talk about this right now?" Nala whined.

"Well it's true darling." Jack soothed. "One day you'll have to face this reality until such time we can rid this city of their menace."

Judy could see this type of talk was alarming to her daughter. She pressed a comforting paw on the girl's shoulder. "That may be true Jack, but for the time being, I'd like her to maintain her innocence for a bit longer."

He huffed a bit, "Well she can't stay protected and isolated in here forever."

Judy's lips fixed themselves into a tight line, "Yes, but for now please respect my wishes."

After a tense moment, his expression softened, "Of course. My apologies for upsetting you Nala." He knelt down on one knee and looked at the pre-teen bunny in the eyes, "Will you forgive me?"

She couldn't keep a straight face and broke out into a grin, "Of course Mr. Savage!"

"Please, just Jack. How many times must I tell you that?" He returned the smile.

"Until infinity." She cackled.

"Then infinity it shall be." He said jovially, bopping her on the nose. Standing up, he regarded Judy, "Lovely girl. You are truly blessed with her."

"Thank you." She accepted the compliment, wrapping her paws around the little kit, squeezing tighter as Nala gripped her arms.

"We'll let you two say your goodbyes for now." Mai motioned to Nala, "She cannot go with us just yet. Jack, Clawhauser, and Swinton will meet you out back in the alley. I'll go on ahead with Bogo and secure a route through the city to Sahara Square. See you there."

"With that, I must also bid you two adieu." Jack said, motioning his fingers as if tipping a cap to them. "See you in a few Judy."

"He's a great guy." Nala exclaimed abruptly as they watched the striped bunny walk confidently down the hall.

Arms still wrapped around her daughter, she gazed after Jack. "Yeah, he seems like a nice man." Her thoughts wandered to Nick and what was happening with him. She worried for his safety and if they
had punished him severely for letting her escape. She prayed that he was alive and well somewhere.

"Momma?" A note of worry interlaced with Nala's voice. Looking up at her, squishing her ears into Judy's breast, Nala asked, "Do you think we'll see dad again?"

She was at a loss for words. She could think of nothing to say to ease the burden on her heart. "I don't know baby." She muttered back, thoughts distant.

"You won't give up on him will you?" Nala grilled, clearly wanting firm resolve.

"Never!" She smiled, turned the kit around and giving her a deep hug.

It had only been a few weeks since her rescue and the discovery that she had a daughter left alive, yet she had grown intensely attached to her. Other than training, where she was not allowed to attend yet, Nala followed Judy like a shadow. They even slept together in the same bed, sharing their warmth and providing solace in the dark reaches of the night should either wake up to nightmares.

On their nightstand next to their cot was a picture of Nick and Judy on their wedding day. She was fully decked out in an ivory dress with a giant, elegant bow at the small of her back that stretched out like butterfly wings. Nick was in his finest tuxedo that she was sure their money combined had bought for him. It seemed like a beautiful memory she could never recall. She already had sleepless nights where she would spend hours just staring at the picture, looking at how the soft caress of Nick's tongue was kissing her cheek. Sometimes she'd put a paw up to almost still feel it there.

"Come on baby, let's get you back to the room." She suggested motherly.

Paw in paw, they walked down the dim hallway to their room so Nala could be dropped off when she blurted out something unexpected, "I really hope you remember how we can beat them momma."

Judy stopped dead in her tracks, "I'm sorry, what?"

Nala was nearly yanked backwards from the abrupt lack of motion, her paw so intertwined with Judy's. "What's wrong momma?"

She stared intently at her. This was exactly what Mai and Jack didn't want to talk to her about earlier! "What did you say?"

"About how we can beat them?" She asked innocuously. "Bogo says you have information on the bats. A weakness you acquired from an informant before you went into the coma."

She racked her brain trying to recall what that nugget of data could be while simultaneously trying to remember who their informant was. No wonder they waited so long in hopes she'd wake up before attempting an assault. They had no idea how to fight these things effectively and she did! They had almost given up hope until Nick rescued her! She was the key to all their plans and all their hopes rested on her!

"But…" She tried to reason it out mainly to herself. "Doesn't anyone else know this? I couldn't have been the only one. Didn't I tell anyone before I was knocked out?"

Nala shook her head, "No, you got captured before you could bring back the informant. No one knows how to beat these things. They have the advantage of the air, something we can't fight against."

"Was the informant killed?" Judy wondered apprehensively, she had a rising fear that one of her
recent nightmares was actually true.

"I don't know." Nala admitted truthfully, shaking her head morosely. "We never heard back from either one of you until Rouge notified us she had you in Mercy Hospital."

"Who was the informant?" She was dreading the answer, the taste of blood almost resurfacing back into her mouth, making her want to vomit.

Nala exhaled loudly, "Dawn Bellwether."

Chapter End Notes

The first and last parts of the chapter were the hardest to write. I knew the major points I needed to hit but it was hard getting the dialogue of the characters to bend to where I wanted the conversation to go to reveal those key plot points. However, given the characters I had to work with, I feel confident enough the reader will still receive enough information to understand a bit more of what is going on yet still beg more questions so that they continue to read. I know I'd love to explore more of Chief Bogo, Clawhauser and even Jack Savage's characters, it just didn't fit in the context of what I wanted to tell here in chapter 6. The part with Gazelle practically wrote itself. I wanted to express that Judy was still hesitant about her relationship with Nick even after agreeing to be his girlfriend, given what I had written previously, it seemed unrealistic of a jump to get them to the point where they are in the apocalyptic future already married and truly in love. So Gazelle, once again, saved the day by being that catalyst that would make a profound impact on Judy's life and help jumpstart their relationship proper. Furthermore, knowing from chapter 4 that Gazelle is doomed from the start, I made great efforts to build up upon her character so that the loss is that much more felt when it happens. Her seemingly small actions will have lasting effects on all characters.
"You can drop me off here." Nick called out to the driver from the back of the limousine.

Judy glanced out the windows and noticed they were not in a very nice part of town. In fact, this was in the complete opposite direction of where she recalled Nick's high-rise apartment being located. She yelled out, "No, keep going. Don't stop here."

"What are you doing? I can get home from here!" Nick argued. It had been a long night at the luau and he was exhausted, highly buzzed but still drained. He just wanted to find his warm, plush sleeping bag he had acquired a week ago with his most recent paycheck and just snuggle up into oblivion.

"No you can't and you're a terrible liar." She angrily gestured out beyond the windows of the vehicle. "You don't live anywhere near here! I've been to your apartment Nick. It's on the other side of downtown. Where are you going?"

As much as she wanted to believe Nick had reformed completely, certain aspects of his behavior warranted her to be vigilant. She knew an entire life grown from crime couldn't be dispelled with nearly a year of being a law-abiding and enforcing cop. Her finding out earlier that week that he regularly visited his former partner-in-crime, Finnick, was a bit of a shock. She did agree that he was a decent guy but old habits die hard and she didn't want Nick to slip back into his old ways and ruin the good thing he had now, especially with them recently becoming a couple.

"It's nothing Carrots. I just have to pick up a few items from a local store around here and I'll head directly home from there. It's just that I can't find this delectable cricket paste that they only sell at Sugar Cane Sally's down here on the corner." He pointed out the left side. Either it was clearly mistimed or the store in question had suddenly changed to a Furreal Function, a rather downtrodden clothing chain.

Judy crossed her arms, "Uh-huh, I'm sure." Nick winced for he knew he was caught fair and square. "Nick, I thought I could trust you. We're partners, we need to be fully faithful to each other and if I can't trust you in this, how can I trust you out in the field when we're in the line of fire? And if we're going to be together romantically, then we can't tell white lies to each other and expect the other to simply go along and accept it. This isn't going to work Nick."

"You are remarkably lucid for a bunny who has had five drinks." He remarked, a slight hint of astonishment in his voice.

"That's beside the point Nick." Judy rebutted, her eyes burning holes in Nick's composure. She wouldn't admit it, but her head was marginally spinning right now due to the alcohol. However Gazelle helped her pace the night through and recommended she drink plenty of water in-between drinks and eat copious amounts of food to keep up with the effects the liquor was having on her body. The only downside was that she had to excuse herself often to use the bathroom.

Nick raised his paws up in both defeat and defiance, "Fine, fine Judy. You got me. Okay?" He let his arms drop to his lap with a plop before turning away from her and looking out the window.

"Where do you want me to go?" The jaguar asked from the driving compartment, sensing the
conversation behind him was at a lull.

"Just drive, don't care where at the moment." Judy shouted back. With a nod, the chauffeur took a left turn and kept going.

"Look," Nick began, his voice soft yet remorseful, "that awesome apartment you saw last time…"

"With the interior water fountain and a grand view of all downtown?" Judy queried.

"That's the one." He confirmed. He shot a sidelong look at her before continuing, not truly wanting to meet her eyes. "That isn't mine, it never was. I was merely squatting there while the tenants were on paid migration for the week."

Judy's ears dropped, "Nick…really?"

He gave her a hurt look, "I'm serious, I'm struggling Judy. I'm trying to do what's right for you but I'm getting slammed. I filled out all my paperwork when I went through the academy and was excited to get my first paycheck for being a police officer. I was so proud." Judy spotted a slight glimmer of a grin before being erased by a frown. "Then the tax collectors came and ripped my check apart leaving me with barely anything to live off of."

She placed a comforting paw on his arm, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were having this much trouble."

"Well, I didn't want to put a damper on you so I just kept it to myself. I felt as long as I could get up in the morning and come to work and see your smiling face, I'd be alright. It can't last forever right?" He chuckled bitterly. "Soon they'll get all the money they need and I can finally start building my life all over again in about…" He began counting on his fingers, "10 or so years."

"Is that why you've been living with Finnick?" She guessed, noting that he had not pulled away from her touch.

A slight nod, "Yes, he and I have shared condemned buildings, shacks, shanties, vans, cars, underneath bridges and more." He finished, thus confirming her suspicions about his recent associations with Finnick.

"Have you…done any of your old work with him recently?" She asked, fearing the answer. She couldn't turn a blind eye to his misdeeds even if he was her friend.

This time he looked her straight in the eye, "No. I thought about it many times. About just how… easy it would be to just do a hustle or a con and get enough money to buy a decent meal for myself. Finnick still does his deals and that brings in enough cash flow to sometimes provide a roof over our heads. He knows better than to ask me to join him these days. I turn a blind eye to him working the streets and he leaves me ignorant of what's going on."

"Why didn't you tell me?" She placed her other paw on his arm, leaning in close.

Her heart broke for him. What a horrible partner she was! She had been working alongside him for over a year and she had no clue as to his living situation. She never bothered to check in to see how he was doing or how he was feeling. She was just content to come to work every day, greet him cheerfully and get right to the job at hand. Her eyes began to well up with tears just thinking about how terrible she had been yet again to him.

Nick shifted uncomfortably, "Judy, please don't get emotional again on me. I know it's a thing with you bunnies but you seriously got to stop."
"Oh shut up!" She barked back.

"Okay…okay! Look, I just didn't want to tell you because I felt you and everyone else would say that I'm just a dumb fox who can't get his crap together, so he has to go lie, cheat and steal to get what he wants. How typical huh?" He scoffed at himself.

Judy stared back at him, slightly offended, "Nick, do you honestly think I'd say that about you? Yes, you've had your issues and your past does precede you-"

"You're telling me," Nick interrupted, "Chief Bonebutt called me in the second day I was in the ZPD and slapped me in the face with all I had done; warning me that if I slipped up even a single hair he would fire me immediately and put me in the detention block, bail pending indefinitely."

Judy was a bit surprised. Chief Bogo knew a lot more than he was letting on. Was he fully aware of Nick's past when he had that talk about her budding relationship with him? Was it his way of ensuring Judy was kept safe from a potentially sly fox that had all the trappings of his kind tarnishing his good name? Was Clawhauser doing the stalking just for the juicy gossip of them together or on Bogo's orders to make sure Judy wasn't being taken advantage of by Nick? The chief was really playing this close to the vest and she was determined to have a serious talk with him the next time she came to work, his temper be damned!

Seeing the stunned look on Judy's face, he explained, "Yeah, it's like I said before, people can't seem to see past their own noses when it comes to us foxes. I'm trying it your way Carrots, I truly am but it is so very hard when you're running uphill with lead boots dragging you down." He emphasized the point by raising his arm up symbolizing the hill before dropping it back to his lap.

She squeezed his arm a little with her paws, deliberating intensely in her mind about what she should do. If she left him out on the street tonight, could she really live with herself now that she knew he'd just find some dumpster or bridge to sleep under and then come to work the next day with a fake smile on his face as if nothing was wrong? What kind of friend or at this point, what kind of girlfriend would she be if she did that? She lidded her eyes and brought her mouth taut in resolution, she knew what she had to do.

"Driver!" She shouted. He turned his head slightly to indicate he was listening. "Please head to my apartment complex downtown at 453 Roaring St."

"Yes ma'am!" He called back.

"Carrots, what are you doing?" Nick asked alarmed.

"Making sure you have a place to sleep tonight, you big oaf!" She said, slapping his arm roughly.

"First, ow." He raised a single finger and then another. "Second, what?"

"Come on, you're bunking over at my place." She was practically bouncing up and down in the seat, giddy at the prospect of having him sleep over. "I couldn't, in my right mind, let you out of the limo now knowing you got nowhere to go!"

He directed his raised finger to her nose, "Now I know you're crazy. I've seen that apartment Carrots. It is horrendously small and barely any room for one small bunny in that bed. I got nowhere to sleep unless you want me on the floor."

She stopped bouncing, her voice wavering slightly as she started, "Well, I figured we could share the bed."
A sizeable lump lodged itself in Nick's throat as he stared at the unrelenting bunny. As much as he wanted to have her extend this type of offer to him, to actually hear it with his own ears was mind-blowing. He cued in on the slight quivering of her nose. He knew normally rabbits wiggle their noses if they are alarmed or in fear of their lives, but was she apprehensive of his rejection?

"Well, we went from being completely unsure of even being in a relationship with me to offering your bed up within the first week!" He started guffawing; heaving from the gut it hurt so badly.

Judy's expression turned icy, "I could just kick you out of the limo right now. I'm sure the driver will have seen nothing."

"I don't know nothing ma'am!" The driver chimed in, clearly eavesdropping on the conversation.

Nick held a paw up in defeat, "I'm sorry, okay. It just seemed rather sudden. It took you nearly a week to warm up to the idea of actually being romantic with me and now you're going headlong into inviting me over to spend the night! With that type of proposition, I'm used to it going places where it turns a bit more intimate."

Judy leaned back, making sure she wasn't making contact with him anymore, and lounged casually into her cushy, leather seat. Gazing nonchalantly out her window, she spoke, trying to sound confident and control the edginess that she felt. "And so what if it does?"

"Judy?" He switched back to using her name. "What did you mean by that?" He shook her shoulder a bit. She merely brushed it off with her paw, humming delightedly to herself knowing that she got to him. "Judy, seriously…what did you mean?!"

She hummed a familiar tune in her throat that her mom used to sing to her when she couldn't sleep on those long nights in the Burrows. She completely ignored the incessant attempts of Nick trying to get more clarification out of her. She could tell he was intensely curious and was most likely in agony over her clear tease but taking a page from his own book, she didn't let him see that it got to her. She thought the view out the window was a lovely one.

Nick had left the sterile, dreary hospital room. They had cleaned the sheets and put her in a new bed that wasn't drenched in the blood of her womb. They had carted the stillborn little kits out and had yet to bring word of her last surviving child. They drugged her as she tried to chase them down with her baby. She had woken up in a completely different room with Nick by her side asleep. After he awoke, she had sent him away to get them dinner from the hospital cafeteria that would be closing within the hour.

The minutes ticked by on the wall clock. Her foot trembled uncontrollably as she stared blankly at the television, perched in one corner of the room. The cop drama shows were playing on endlessly but she paid no heed to them. Her eyes kept coming back to the small envelope with her name on it. Nick had mentioned it had come from Finnick who had dropped in earlier while she was out to express his condolences.

On an impulse, she snatched the white packet and ripped it open to find a single business card within. Written on the blank side was a neat scrawl: "Judy, I know we were not on the best of terms and we don't know each other well but I want to express my deepest sympathies for the loss of your children. Nick told me everything. If you feel the need to get revenge, I have exactly the person who can help you. It's all I can offer you. Your mutual friend, Finnick."

She flipped the card back over to see a sparse few lines of printed text. Assassin for hire, the initials were J.S. She raised an eyebrow at this. Why would Finnick think she needed this? Didn't he realize
who she was? The more she thought about it, the more she got angry at her situation. She had long
since given up on Zootopia and its false idealism and left the wretched place to its fate but the bats
wouldn't allow her family any peace and attacked her in the Burrows and caused her to miscarry.
Now she was dragged back into Zootopia and stuck in a hospital deep within its fetid bowels.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number. After a few rings, a calm,
collected voice spoke, "Go."

This wasn't the type of greeting she was expecting but what should she presume from a contracted
killer? "Um…yes, I'd like to hire you." She seemed a bit at a loss for words. How would one go
about talking to someone who killed mammals for a living?

"Yes, I know. What is the target?" The voice was smooth as butter, not mincing words.

"It's a bat or rather several of them." She replied dully.

A hint of interest in the voice, "That is intriguing. Do go on."

"These savages attacked me and my family." Her voice began to rise with each passing second as
she recalled the awful memory. "They murdered my unborn kits by dropping me from on high. I
want them all killed."

A low whistle from the other end of the line, "That is a tall order darling. You sure you have the
money for that? Bats aren't usually my specialty and due to the nature of killing them, it might require
a bit extra."

Judy thought about it a moment, this was probably not the most efficient way to go about this.
Changing tack, she suggested, "Scratch that. I actually want you to help me find someone and bring
them out of Zootopia."

"I'm sorry, I don't do escort missions." The voice said briskly.

"No! I'll be doing the escorting. Your job is to kill anything that stands in the way of me and 'my'
target." She speared the bed with her finger, uncaring if the receiver on the other end of the phone
could see the action or not.

"Hmm, still seems like an escort mission to me but if there is killing involved and I still get paid, I
can't complain. What is your name? I'd like to know who I'm working with and it'll help me contact
you further in the future." The voice inquired calmly.

"Hopps. Judy Hopps." She replied.

A long pause caused her to call out to see if he was still there. "Yes, yes, I'm here." There was a
slight vacillation to his tone. "Tell you what darling. I'll actually do this for you for free. Consider it a
gift from me. You have my condolences for your loss. Believe me I feel for you too."

It sounded like he was about to hang up but she cried out swiftly, "What's your name? I also would
like to know who I'm working with."

"The name is Jack. Jack Savage. I'll be in touch." He clicked off.

It had been almost five minutes of silence since his last attempt at getting her to talk but she figured
he realized it would do no good. Truth be told, she could feel her own heart beating out of her chest
with the very thought of what they could attempt tonight. She hadn't left for the luau thinking it
would end up like this but her conversation with Gazelle started a fire in her breast and a strange yearning in her loins.

The fact that the pop singer was so casual and accepting of such a concept that predator and prey could not only love each other amorusly but mate together was liberating to Judy and it helped put things in perspective with Nick. Sure he wasn't the most ideal guy, him being both not a bunny and a predator notwithstanding, but there was something about him that kept Judy coming back to him despite all the hassle and trouble he's caused her.

"I see in you what I was myself once: a tryer. You won't back down whatsoever until you are absolutely sure there isn't anything more you can possibly do." She could hear Gazelle's words ring in her head. Although she was there physically at the party, her spirit was off contemplating and entertaining many thoughts. Should she let an opportunity like this pass her by? Was she so wrapped up in her own world of law enforcement that she couldn't take the time to enjoy herself for once and find someone to share that with?

Heck, they've known each other for almost a year and a half, with the majority of it being the best of friends and partners on the force. Even if they had just agreed to be romantically involved this past week, wasn't it basically like they were dating this whole time? Shouldn't this be the next step? It was hard to contain the flutter in her heart at the prospect of being intimate with Nick. Judy was actually glad she wasn't drunk and just buzzed; she wanted to be in a right state of mind for this.

"Your stop ma'am." The polite jaguar intoned, tipping his cap to them both as Judy opened the door and bounded out.

Nick observed the small flick of her bushy tail as she balanced herself from the hop, her powerful legs alighting on the pavement. Her right hip curving outward as she stood up straight, revealing the bare fur of her left leg as it emerged from the split of her wrap-around skirt. He could hardly stand it. She had gone beyond teasing and was just toying with him now. It didn't matter if she intended it or not but he knew that little cottontail would be the death of him tonight.

She looked back over her shoulder at him, "Nick, you don't have a choice. You're not sleeping out under the stars tonight."

"I'm pretty sure," He said hesitantly as he placed a foot pad on the ground and stepped out of the limo, "that your landlady won't take kindly to a new tenant suddenly living in your room without some sort of paid rent."

She cocked a shoulder before responding, "I'm not too worried about it. I'll make the arrangements tomorrow for a roommate in the morning…at least until you can get back on your feet with a reliable place to live."

"If you say so Carrots." He said as he went along behind her into the building. He waved back at the retreating vehicle as it was driven back to Gazelle's garage.

The pair passed the hunched over armadillo at the front desk. Mrs. Dharma was the curator of the Grand Pangolin Arms, a 'luxurious' apartment complex overlooking a rather bustling section of downtown. She perked up at their entrance and was eyeing Nick warily through her spectacles. Her gaze trailing them all the way to the elevator and lingered on the doors long after they had closed.

"Friendly isn't she?" He jibbed, straightening the tie around his neck. "She and I had an interesting discussion about letting me in to pick you up earlier. That was a real doozy, let me tell you!"

"She can be a handful sometimes, but she's really all bark and no bite." She chuckled a bit,
remembering how she accidentally put too much soap in the washing machine two floors down and it nearly flooded the hallway and into another tenant's room. There was a lot of yelling that night.

She stopped before a rather nondescript door that looked more like a storage closet than an actual entrance to a legitimate apartment room. She inserted the keys into the knob and turned it before opening it inward to her small abode. It was a quaint, little, closet-like room with a small bed in the far corner to the left of the only window looking out. A small desk and chair with a simple, cheap lamp from Pig-Mart being the only adornment on the wooden top. The rest was bare save for a small closet and table behind the door and a rack of wooden pegs that Judy had hung her police outfits over.

Nick had seen her room before and although it was leagues better than what he currently called home, it was looking rather cramped. He poked his head inside and studied the walls, looking for additional rooms. "So...where is the bathroom in this place?"

Tossing her cell phone onto the desk and quickly setting a time to wake up the next day on her alarm clock, she pointed out the door with a crooked finger. "It's down the hall five doors on the left. Showers are there too." She added, responding to the open mouth of Nick with a question unasked.

He could see a problem with this scenario. "Carrots, what exactly am I going to wear tomorrow let alone to bed tonight? All my stuff is inside an abandoned amusement center right now. You're going to have to bring me home first before we head into work so I can change."

Satisfied that she set an agreeable time to wake up to the next morning, she turned to him brightly, "This is your home now." After a stunned look from Nick, "At least until we can get you back on your feet..." She clasped her paws behind her back and brought her knees together, looking completely innocent. "Unless that is, you don't want to stay here with me."

Dang that rabbit! She was too good at pressing all the right buttons to get him to do what she wanted. If it was the one thing he had not been able to do, it was hustle Judy. She was too good for that and cornered him at every attempt. He could see right through her. He knew she was up to something the moment he noticed her and Gazelle yakking it up at the party. Ever since then, she had been way too forward which was in stark contrast to her bashfulness earlier that evening. Something Gazelle had said sparked something inside Judy, he was sure of it!

"I see what's going on here." He murmured, breaking out into a sly grin, his teeth flashing dangerously in the moonlight filtering in through the lone window.

"Do you?" She riposted back.

He stepped into the room, silently closing the door behind him. "Me thinks you and Ms. Pop Star had a good, long chat about one Mr. Wilde here." He placed a paw on his chest for emphasis. "One thing led to another and I'm sure you spilled the beans on our relationship. She encouraged you and probably said she had something similar with one of her dancers."

"It was actually with all four of them." She corrected.

Nick made a fist, swatting the air, "I knew it! Something about that broad and her fondness for tigers didn't make full sense!" He confirmed it mainly for himself than for the benefit of Judy.

Realizing he just goaded the truth out of her, she stabbed a finger at him, "If you tell anyone I told you, I'm going to kill you."

He smirked, "I'd actually like to see you try."
"Don't tempt me." She countered.

"You already have." He leaned back, arms crossed.

The sexual tension in the air was thick. They each stared at the other for a long while. They knew they had come to a certain point that neither could deny. If no move was made soon, the moment would pass and everything that they had worked up to now would have been for naught. Nick's nose starting wiggling with an unfamiliar scent, he likened it to something akin to a floral musk. Judy's breath quickened as she noticed his interest in the new smell, realizing it was most likely from her.

"What is that Carrots?" He sniffed a bit louder now, taking a step toward her. "It's almost intoxicating." It was true, he had never smelled its like before and it made him intensely curious.

"Well, that wasn't exactly supposed to happen." She faltered, comprehending the fact that although she wanted to try this she was scared of it as well.

"What wasn't supposed to happen?" He probed, seeing her back up, bumping clumsily on the lone chair in the room. Her bare midriff and leg sticking enticingly out of her skirt was already driving him wild and the scent just compounded on top of that.

"Um…nothing!" She lied.

She had been on the pill since well before the first train she ever took to Zootopia. It was the only way to properly concentrate on her job and ignore the primal urgings that all bunnies have. If it weren't for that medicine, she would have been in constant heat year round. That was no way to live and function in a job which required her head to be in the game. One wrong move or her focus be drawn to her inner needs and she could die from an errant bullet or stray knife from a criminal.

However tonight, for some strange reason, her emotions were riding extremely high and her attraction to Nick at this moment went far beyond the effects of the pill. Her body was overriding the pill! She was in heat for Nick and it caused her mind to reel at the implications of it. Outside of Jaden the Jerk, she found no other bunnies attractive and certainly not any other males of any species. Despite this fact, Nick managed to wheedle his way into her heart and Gazelle opened her eyes to how she truly felt about him and the possibilities attached.

Knowing that she might be having second thoughts, he leaned against the wall, putting his hands in his pockets to try in vain to hide the fact he was rock hard for this. "You know you want me." He simpered.

She nodded timidly, "I do…want you." He raised his eyebrows but remained silent. He knew better than to force this. After a beat, she blurted out in a long, running ramble, "I'm just nervous. It's my first time and you seem very experienced. You're a fox and I'm a bunny and I have no idea how we're going to figure that out in bed. I'm afraid it'll hurt. I'm not sure if I can get pregnant from a fox. I don't-"

"Shhh…relax Carrots." He pressed forward quickly and put a single finger to her lips to calm her outburst. She was panicking and he almost regretted letting his feelings be known to her. "I can just sleep on the floor and you can still have your bed. It'll be all right. Nothing really needs to happen tonight. Look, I'll even sleep in the clothes I got on now. Don't even need to worry about pajamas for me, okay?"

Judy shook her head violently, her paws cupped below her chin close to her breast. "No! I feel after all this time, I owe this to you." He went to speak but she shook her head again. "Nick, I have been a horrible friend yet again. I was unaware of your feelings for me this entire time. I didn't even think to
check in to see how you were living and just assumed you had made a good life for yourself. I was so engrossed about being a good cop and just took you for granted as my partner. I never stopped to think about you and what you were feeling and going through."

"Judy..." Nick began.

She rushed forward and took his paws in her own and led him to the bed, allowing them both to sit at the edge of it. "We've known each other for over a year," she laughed a little to herself, "dated for not even a week, but I feel we've been together much longer than that. I owe this to you." After a brief moment of consideration, she hopped up and gave Nick a quick peck on the muzzle before sitting back down beside him. "I've been an awful girlfriend haven't I?"

"The worst." He snickered. He suddenly grew serious. "Are you...okay with this Judy?" His intense green eyes penetrated her own. He dropped all pretense of calling her by Carrots, nicknames no longer seemed appropriate right now.

She whimpered a bit. She had trained her whole life to serve and protect, to fight against bad mammals and make the world a better place. She never trained for this. She had completely ruled out any hope of ever having an experience like this so she never thought to ask her mother about sexuality and what bunnies do on a monthly basis in the Burrows. She had the general concept but the specific details were rather hazy to her.

"So...what happens next?" She asked naively.

Nick nearly face-palmed; he had been doing that an awful lot lately with Judy. He did have to give her the benefit of the doubt. This was completely new territory for her...for both of them rather. "Well, undressing for bed would be the first step I'd imagine." He suggested.

"Okay..." She obliged. She began unwrapping the knot on the tank top and pulled it over her ears. He could see her chest breathing fast and heavy. She was probably just as nervous as he was about all this. It wasn't like being with a female was new to him. He had hustled several vixens before but Judy was different and not just because she was a rabbit. Judy meant something to him and that made him want to be different...to be better for her.

He undid his tie and let it drop to the floor, unbuttoning his shirt before setting it aside on the lonely chair. "Would doing this at the same time be better for you?" He motioned to their bottoms.

After a curt bow of her head, he acquiesced her request and unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants at the same time she unfastened the skirt and let it fall to the floor. They stood staring at each other with bated breath. Her small, slender frame was accentuated by the rippling muscles beneath the fur. She was quite toned and he could tell she could spring at a moment's notice with those powerful legs of hers. Her chest had a small bush of fur that swelled outward, a clean sign of her femininity. His gaze dropped lower to the dark patch of grey, curled hair that signified her womanhood, the source of that heady scent.

She gazed at the flowing ginger fur that wrapped itself around Nick, his tail swishing behind him in agitated jerks. She could just see a slight glimmer of abs protruding, indicated by the undulating curves of how the fur lay across his stomach. Her scrutiny inexorably was drawn to the red, bulging shaft distended from a small double balled pouch. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of it. It was a lot larger than she had imagined it.

Perceiving the object of her focus, he placed his paws on his waist coolly, "I know it's amazing to look at and all, but didn't your mother tell you not to stare?"
"Killing the mood Nick." She rebuked.

He backpedaled from his jest, raising paws up in supplication. "Just trying to lighten the air in here Judy, you are getting pretty grim with your expressions." A long, inelegant pause later, "We should probably move back to the bed for this."

Her ears dropped as she pointed herself to the bed, "Right…right." She seemed to be talking more to herself than to Nick. He noticed a slight trembling of her limbs as she clambered up onto the petite bed, flipping over onto her back and facing him. "Is this how we do it?"

Nick put a hand to his cheek, shaking his head, "This is so not how I pictured this moment."

"Well it isn't a hayride for me either!" She retorted.

"Well put." He agreed.

Abandoning all pretense that this would be even remotely romantic, Nick crawled over her on the bed. His shadow loomed across her body, his hands and knees supporting him above her. He could sense a slight quivering ripple through Judy's body but she was putting on a brave front for him. She wanted this, he knew. How and why she suddenly needed this didn't matter anymore, all that mattered was that they both were eager to try.

He lowered his upper body and gave a small lick to her forehead. She made an unintelligible sound but did not resist. Seeing no further response, he moved his kiss to her temple, then down her cheeks. He halted for a brief moment, hovering his snout over her small bunny lips. Her eyes were searching his, curious to see what he'd do next but completely trusting that he'd not harm her. She was letting him lead, herself not confident in this arena to take the reins.

The touch of his muzzle to her lips was electrifying. It sent waves of energy surging through Judy's body at the sudden warmth pressing upon her face. She wondered what she should do next or if she should lick him back. Bunnies didn't normally lick when kissing, quite unlike foxes. After a few moments hesitation, she reached out her tongue and licked him. He drew back shocked, not expecting her to do that. His lust rekindled from that surprise, he resumed the kiss with more passion, dipping his tongue past her lips, tasting the salty flavor of her mouth.

Her muffled voice and a slight pound on his chest indicated he needed to back off, "Stop, stop! I couldn't breathe!" She was panting, partly from the exhilaration of her first real kiss and also from being overwhelmed by his invading accessory.

His desire was smoldering but he couldn't ignore her concerns. "My bad, I think I moved a little fast for you."

She beamed at him, "It's my fault Nick. I was the one that licked first." She gazed over at the clock on the desk. Had it already been fifteen minutes since they started this? Her attention came back to him. "Can we try again? Slower?"

"Of course." He smiled.

He brought his snout back to her and she took a paw and placed it onto the back of his head, bringing him closer. This time she was more prepared for it. She opened her mouth to receive his tongue and in return extended her short appendage into his own. It became a sweet, awkward, sloppy mess. Each trying to figure out the best position to place their faces so they could earnestly press into the kiss, the fact their face structures were so different didn't help matters.

Her potent scent of arousal was getting stronger and as Nick broke off from her mouth to pepper her
neck with kisses and licks. The titillating shocks with each press of his tongue down her nape were sending lightning bolts through her whole body. She cried out, "Nick...I don't know what I need...but I want it!"

He gave her a small nod, her body was aching for something even if she couldn't put words to it. He positioned his lower half over her inviting crevice and realized there was a problem. His height was actually a detriment to their love making. Being almost two heads taller than her, a missionary position put his face past her own and he was looking over the headboard at the dust piles beneath the frame of the bed.

"Not sure this is going to work." He mentioned portentously.

She was shaken from her anticipation and looked up the bed at him, "What's wrong?"

"I'd actually prefer if I could look into your eyes while I'm making love to you." He revealed. "As it is, it feels a bit impersonal."

That made sense to her. She regarded his body over her. "What about squatting over me and doing it that way?" She suggested.

He knew immediately what she meant but was flabbergasted she actually came up with the idea. "I could try that." He consented.

He brought his hind paws up to either side of her waist, steadying himself with his front paws on both sides of her neck. She rested her hind paws upon his thighs, trying her best not to put too much weight on them. He looked down to ensure he was actually aimed at the right area before trying to lower himself into her. This was really uncomfortable and he didn't think the muscles in his legs would support him for long in this position if it was drawn out to any length of time. As the tip of his phallus touched her, she jerked and it threw him completely off balance, causing him to tumble over sideways and onto the wooden floor with yelp and a thud.

Judy scrunched her feet up to her chest and brought her paws to her mouth, "I'm so sorry Nick! I didn't mean for that to happen! I just didn't expect it to be that warm!"

"Nope! I'm fine, really." He groaned, rubbing the aching bone where his tail was connected to his spine. He had fallen directly on it and tweaked it something fierce.

"How about this? Would this be better?" He looked up to see Judy on her hands and knees, rump high in the air, her fluffy tail twitching irresistibly. She was trying so hard to make this work. He half believed her feeling partly at fault for this going all wrong.

"We can try..." He said, not as confident now. This night had clearly not gone according to the plan he had in his mind.

Nick mounted her, placing both paws on her hips to steady them both. He was not willing to take a tumble like that again. He took a deep breath, he could do this. She squeezed her eyes shut, she could do this. Judy was on a mission to make this succeed. Once she put her mind to a course of action, she would try everything to see it through.

She shuddered again as the tip of his throbbing penis touched her outer folds. "Are we going to keep doing this all night?" Nick remarked, trying to stifle a laugh.

"I hope not." She called back, her face buried in the pillow.

He began to press in. She was so very tight and small. He had a sudden thought that he might tear
her asunder. What he thought was a moan was actually a small cry of pain. He could see her grip the sheets with her paws, the wrinkles of the pillow bending inward to her face as she bit hard into the fabric. The tip was barely in and he was causing her misery. He began to pull out.

"No…please, try again." She cried.

Against his better judgment, he pressed in again. At another strangled cry, he pulled out completely. "This isn't going to work. I'm sorry. I'm too big, and I'm not saying that to be prideful. I'm afraid I'm going to rip you apart."

She slammed a fist onto the bed in frustration, her butt slumping down onto the sheets in humiliation. Why was it so hard for her to accept him? How in the freaking world did Gazelle manage to handle any of her tigers, let alone all four of them?! Did she hurt like this? She couldn't wrap her mind around the thought. By relative size and height, the tigers were about as big as Nick was to her, so why couldn't they fit right?

Her eyes began to get misty. Nick lied back in the cramped bed, his legs draped over the baseboard. He wrapped Judy in close to him, cuddling her next to his warmth. "It's fine Judy. We gave it our best shot and it didn't work out." He grimaced, he knew he'd have to finish himself later in the showers after Judy went to sleep.

"I think I've failed you." She sniffed.

"What gave you that idea?" He huffed.

She looked up at him, her head resting on his chest. "I wasn't able to do this for you. Are we still boyfriend and girlfriend even if we can't do this?"

Nick snorted, "Judy, this is not the be all to end all. Of course we're still together. We can be romantic without being intimate like this. This changes nothing." After a moment's thought, "We could try telling each other our deepest, darkest secrets. That's something most casual friends don't do."

"I already know most of yours Nick. You're a hustler and have been hurt before by other prey mammals trying to become a Junior Ranger." She smiled at the memory of him explaining to her so openly about this experience.

He grunted, "Yeah, and the only thing I have on you is 'Jude the Dude.'"

She giggled. "You'll get to know more in time." She regarded the clock again. It had been twenty five minutes now. "Thanks Nick. Promise me we'll try again when I'm ready?"

"Seriously? After all that?" She dug her face in tighter to his chest. He chuckled, "Fine. Anything for you Carrots."

"Is that it?! All that build up for nothing?" An obnoxious voice boomed through the wall next to them. It was Bucky Oryx-Antlerson, one of the two loud neighbors living just next door. "At least give him a little something to ease his pain lady!" The other one of the pair, Pronk Oryx-Antlerson.

"What about her needs? She needs relieving too!" Bucky fired back.

"Shut up!" Pronk snapped.
"No, you shut up!" Bucky screamed.

Judy gave a swift kick to the wall, thumping it loudly. "You both shut up!" They instantly went quiet. Other than a few clops of hooves on the floor beside them and the muted sound of a television, it was mostly silent.

They were nearly asleep in each other's arms when a loud buzzing emanated from her desk. Someone was calling her. She fumbled over Nick; her hind leg accidently stabbing him in the groin, causing him to yip in anguish. After apologizing profusely, stumbling to the floor, crawling up the chair to yank the phone off the damned desk, she looked at the picture depicting the caller.

She rolled her eyes. "For the love of blueberries, it's my mom!" Sitting quickly in her chair, angling it so that she blocked the view of the squirming Nick behind her, desperately trying to remain quiet through their phone call and the dull haze of pain, she clicked the phone on. "Hey, mom! How are you?"

Bonnie cocked an eyebrow, taking immediate note of the lack of shirt on Judy. "Did I catch you at a bad time honey? Were you going to take a shower? If so, I can just call you back!"

"No, no…this is fine. It's just been a busy day and I haven't had a chance to get around to my laundry yet." She lied, keeping a big smile on her face.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you there. You leave it alone for one day and it'll take over the entire household." Her mommy senses were tingling; she caught some movement behind Judy. "Is there an intruder in your room Judy?"

"What? Oh…no! No! Nobody here but me." Keeping up the fake smile was excruciating.

Nick rose up from the bed, his breath husky. She had really dug in deep with her leg! Bonnie noticed the figure. "Oh my gosh! Judy! There is!" Bonnie yelled out behind her, "Stu, pack the bags and call the cops! We're coming for you Judy! Whatever you do, just do as they say and they won't eat you, okay?"

"Mom, please! It's not-"

"It's just me." Nick interjected, placing his muzzle on Judy's shoulder giving a weak smile to her mom.

"Oh my heavens! He's naked! Judy, did you know your partner is naked?" Bonnie said aghast.

Stu rumbled into frame, his eyes bulging at the two of them. "Wow Judy. I know I said I'd be accepting of this type of relationship but I didn't think you'd show that much initiative this soon!"

This was turning into a disaster. "Please, it's been a long day, I just want-" Judy pleaded.

"Are you using protection at least?" Stu interrogated. "You never know what those foxes can pick up."

"Foxes are the devil!" An old crotchety voice echoed from the background.

"Can it grandpa!" Bonnie shouted, she turned back to Judy. "Your father is right. You always need to be safe with these sorts of things."

"We're fine Mrs. Hopps. We're using protection. It's not like she'll get pregnant tonight." Nick interrupted before Judy could respond.
"Sweet cheese and crackers! They're trying for a baby!" Bonnie seemed near to fainting.

"He didn't say that!" Judy decried.

"Can bunnies and foxes have babies?" One of Judy's siblings asked, her father Stu just shrugged.

"Pack the bags Stu, we're coming over Judy! You're gonna need our help if you plan to start a family. I know a thing or two about that!" Bonnie said firmly.

"No! That isn't necessary!" Judy wanted to shriek at her phone. Before she could say more, the phone clicked off.

"Well, at least it seems we got your mom's blessing too." Nick murmured jovially.

She swiveled around and threw the phone at him. "You're horrible! I don't even know why I put up with you!"

Chapter End Notes

My longest chapter yet and it involves smut...well not all of it. It seems that's what most NickxJudy shippers want these days but I'm not willing to give it that easy! I knew this going to be a failed attempt before I even started writing it. I also knew a lot of humor was going to be inserted as well since as we all know (at least those who have had sex) it isn't always pretty or even as idealistic as we like to picture it in our minds. It seemed fitting to make their first attempt a failure and to stack comedic moments on top of that. The chapter practically wrote itself. However, I did want some character development so we got to learn a lot about Nick here and how he's been living. As for Judy, she is a bit more bolder but not because of her own volition (at first), but because Gazelle was what prompted Judy to take a bit more initiative in showing commitment to the relationship and I believe that comes out in how bad she wants it to work in the bedroom despite running up against blockades at every turn. Since their antics in the bedroom took center stage in this chapter, I 'HAD' to put in something from a different time period into the story, even if it was short. So that quick piece with Judy and Jack over the phone was inserted at the last minute, its intention was to raise more questions about Jack's character.
A knock on the door roused Nick from his stupor. He rolled over on the cramped bed, his paw searching out the diminutive warm body that kept him snug the whole night through. One eye opened at another rapping on the door. Combined with the lack of a furry bunny next to him, it caused him to rise up onto an elbow and lazily look about the room. It appeared Judy had left the closet door open, some hangers dangling empty. On the small entry table, her IPaw was missing along with her ear buds. She must have gone out early this morning jogging.

The incessant bumping on the wooden door was getting aggravating. He really needed his morning coffee. Flipping his feet over the side of the bed, he stood up tall, leaning back as he pushing inward on his lower spine, feeling several gratifying pops. After scratching the base of his tail a few times, he lumbered over to the door. With a yawn, he clumsily missed the knob the first time but nailed the grip on the second and opened it.

"What happened Carrots? You forgot your keys?" He ribbed.

"Oh my land! Stu! He's still naked!" Bonnie Hopps cringed back in shock, shielding her eyes with her paws.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hopps?" Nick barked stunned.

"Momma? What's that?" Ami pointed at the object between his legs. Dear heavens, they brought a few of their kits!

Stu was quick to take action, immediately grabbing Nick by the hand and dragging him further into the room, being quick to shut the door partially behind them. "Young man, it is quite improper to greet a guest, especially a lady with nothing but your birthday suit on!"

"I honestly thought you were Judy." Nick defended himself lamely, scratching the back of one of his ears.

"This makes my point doubly true." While Nick thought that over, Stu spied Nick's shirt and pants tossed in a heap by her desk and was instantly upon them, tossing them for Nick to catch. "Get some clothes on and then we can talk."

"So what brings the esteemed parents of Judy Hopps here to Zootopia?" Nick asked, stuffing a hind leg down his pants.

Stu put his arms out, fingers spread as if explaining something amazing to Nick. "Family planning my son!" Nick cocked an eyebrow; it seemed her dad had gone completely overboard on the whole support aspect of his and Judy's relationship.

"Dare I ask?" Nick wondered aloud.

"Is he dressed?" Bonnie called out from beyond the door.

"Come on in hun, he is now!" Stu shouted back upon seeing Nick beginning to button his shirt.

"Well that's much better!" She exclaimed, strolling in with Ami and two other teenage kits. She took
a cursory look around the small closet-like room, a bit of judgment evident in her eyes. "No wonder she never invites us over to visit, this place could use some sprucing up."

Nick's mouth almost dropped. Of course they wouldn't consider such a cramped space confining. Bunnies were used to making do with small burrows. This was no different. Bonnie immediately went around the room, making mental notes of how she could improve upon things or talking to herself, fascinated with the cop uniforms hanging up along the wall behind the door. Ami and the other two kits joyfully bounced up onto the bed, all looking at Nick expectantly.

Nick felt slightly uncomfortable. He gazed around the room at the small bunny family invading Judy's apartment. "I'm not entirely sure what you mean Mr. Hopps." Bringing the topic back around to his original thread of thought.

Stu put his paws on his hips in confidence, "Easy. Bonnie and I have talked it over and we've agreed to give our full support-

"One hundred percent!" Bonnie interjected from the side.

"to Judy and anything she does. We are very proud of her and couldn't be happier that she's trying new things we wouldn't dare dream of doing." Stu finished.

Her inspection complete, she sidled up lovingly next to Stu, inviting his arm to wrap around her waist. She looked up at Nick, "We've had to settle hard on a lot of our dreams but our little bun-bun has inspired us to think outside the box. These are our golden years, we should live them to their fullest, isn't that right Stu?"

"Too true!" He agreed enthusiastically.

"Little bun-bun?" Nick asked incredulously.

As if on cue, Judy sauntered in, a damp towel around her neck and a revealing tank top across her shoulders. Her sweaty clothes were hanging over one arm with the IPaw in the other paw. "Nick, I'm actually feeling ready to try again right – Nahhh! Mom! Dad!" She nearly choked on her words upon seeing her family in her room, ears immediately dropping.

"She's naked too!" Ami giggled maniacally, pointing at her older sister with no pants on.

"What are you all doing here!?" She shouted, covering her nether regions with her jogging clothes.

"We're here to help get you and Nick started off on the right foot." Stu said amicably, sticking his two paw thumbs underneath his suspenders.

"That's right bun-bun!" Bonnie put a paw up on Stu's shoulder, "We want to make sure you don't make the same mistakes that we did when we first got married."

Stu looked at her affectionately, "That we did hun and don't I know it!"

"That is so sweet of them. Isn't that sweet Carrots?" Nick asked amusingly.

"You let them in?" Judy said aghast.

Nick raised his shoulders and arms, "Not on purpose! I had originally thought it was you knocking on the door, forgetting your keys while out on a run or something!"

"I never forget my keys when I go out!" Judy snapped.
"Stop worrying dear!" Bonnie chided. "We meant no embarrassment, it's only natural a bunny your age has urges. I get them all the time."

"Indeed." Stu said proudly, closing his eyes. "We're on our fifteenth litter just this past spring!"

"Rather outgoing, aren't they?" Nick chuckled. Judy shot him a glare.

"Well, everything is fine here!" Judy brought herself around behind her parents and began slowly pushing them out the doorway. "It's going to be a busy morning. Nick and I have to get ready for work. Thanks for coming. We should do this again sometime!"

"Just hold on a darn tootin' minute Jude." Stu raised a paw finger, parental anger coming to the fore. "We just got here! We've been in Zootopia only once before. That one time for…what's her name's concert?" He looked around for assistance.

"Gazelle!" Ami piped up gleefully.

"Yes, Gazelle." Stu turned back to Judy snapping his fingers. "We only had a night stay in a hotel that last time but we figured this time we'd make a nice vacation out of it!"

"That's quite right." Bonnie jumped in, looking positively thrilled. "Your father and I decided to renew our vows here in Zootopia and have a two week long honeymoon here."

Stu scratched his chin in deep thought, "I called in a deal from an old friend who moved here and got us a penthouse suite at the Oasis hotel and casino."

"You're staying for two weeks?" Judy's jaw plunged further.

"Smashing." Nick deadpanned, clearly enjoying this. If Judy had eyes in the back of her ears, they'd probably be shooting daggers at him.

"Absolutely! But first we wanted to check in with you and let you know how proud we both are that you finally found someone." Bonnie tilted her head embarrassed, "Granted, it wasn't easy getting over the fact one of our children had fallen for a fox but that's life. Whatcha gonna do?"

"You're a tryer Judy." Stu pumped a fist through the air. He gave a nervous sidelong look at Nick before continuing, "Although I didn't expect you to try everything so soon…but who are we to squash our daughter's hopes and dreams, right? Sorry for the insult." He apologized to Nick.

"None taken." Nick smiled, putting his paws in his pockets.

Judy shut her eyes tightly, pressing her paws to her forehead trying to massage the insanity out of her skull. "Why is there no middle ground with you two?"

Both her parents looked at each other puzzled a moment before Bonnie perked up, as if remembering something. She gave a quick pat on the arm to Stu, "Oh, pull out that thing we picked up at the Burrows."

"Ah yes!" Stu rummaged around in his pockets, Nick leaned over clearly interested at whatever they thought was important to bring for the two of them. "Well, giving how you two are together, we figured you may not be ready yet for kids, being in a high-paced job and all."

Bonnie seemed absolutely excited that they were providing some great gift for their daughter. "We got you two a box of condoms. Our treat!"
Stu fished them out at the same time Bonnie declared its contents. Nick put a paw to his mouth to stifle the incoming explosion of laughter as Judy seemed mortified and about ready to melt into the floor. The three kits behind them on the bed began cackling like hooligans. Held in Stu's hand was a small box of premium bunny condoms, a picture of an ecstatic bunny plastered on the side.

"Mom…you didn't…" Judy's mind grinded to a halt.

"Well as my grandma used to say," Bonnie blazed on imperturbably, "sleeping over is basically the equivalent of marriage!"

"Too true!" Stu nodded sagely. "With us bunnies, that's cause for starting a family right there! In fact, your mother and I had our first two litters out of wedlock before we formally tied the knot."

"You were in our first litter after marriage Judy. Did you know that?" Bonnie drabbled dreamily.

Judy put both paws up to halt their rambling, "Would you two please just stop talking right now?"

Repressing a chortle, Nick pointed out with a claw at the small box, "Mr. Hopps, I believe they may not fit very well."

Judy spun around, glaring with the full force of death. "Nick, shut up!"

Bonnie smacked Stu's arm, "See? I told you to wait until we got into Zootopia and buy a fox specific brand!"

"What?" Stu shrugged his shoulders confused. "You know how they upcharge things here in the city! I would have been paying an arm and a leg for fox condoms. It's highway robbery for goodness sakes!" He scratched his chin a bit. "I guess I could have gone for the maximum bunny brand. Some of those sizes are ridiculous!"

"Please, just stop talking! Nick, we have to go. Now." Judy said with finality. She yanked Nick by the arm and nearly tossed him out into the hallway. Wrenching her work uniform off its peg, she stomped out into the hall with him. She swiveled back around demanding, "Don't you have to be at the Oasis right now or something?" Her foot tapping impatiently on the wooden boards.

"No, they won't have our room ready until after three o'clock." Stu informed.

"We figured you could let us stay here until then and we take a taxi over to our hotel." Bonnie added, looking around the room one more time. "Besides, I brought some things from home to help spruce up the place."

"No. There will be no sprucing!" Judy commanded. "You can stay here, but…just don't touch anything!" She began to close the door but reopened it one more time, "Not one thing, understand?" With that, she slammed the door.

"Your family is quite charming Carrots." Nick offered, trying his best to keep the grin off his muzzle.

"Urgh!" She raged. "I love them but it's either full on or full off with them. Why can't they just be like…normal?" She stormed off down the hallway, hell bent on a mission to get to work and pretend the morning never happened.

Nick followed her down the hallway, her uniform still in hand. He noticed the fuzzy bundle of fur twitching uncontrollably on her butt. "Carrots, do you realize you're half naked right?"
Nick hadn't come home that night. She figured it might have something to do with his mother but she didn't question. It had been a hard week for both of them. Her decision to leave Zootopia had been a difficult one but she couldn't stomach the lies and deception. The entire foundation of what the city stood for was nothing but an illusion manufactured by those wanting to remain in power. Dawn Bellwether had revealed that quite clearly to her.

She got the call early in the morning before the sun crested over the peaks of the skyscrapers. Nick's mother had died. She immediately pulled on a pink, wool sweater with enough stretch to cover her budding belly and high-tailed it out the door, still flopping around putting on a pair of khaki shorts. Taking the subway across downtown to where his mother stayed, he found Nick at the side of her bed grieving.

And now, not even a day later, they were at the Green Pasture Cemetery just within the bounds of the Meadowlands district, a place where his mom wished to be buried. It was pouring down rain and the wind was gusting sideways, making the meager umbrellas they brought mostly useless. Nick didn't care about the weather. He stood stoically in his full police officer uniform over the hole in the ground and stared at the brown casket six feet deep. The service had ended and the few people who bothered to show up had filtered away back home. Bogo and a few others from the department had already left and Finnick claimed it would be best if he weren't seen there but sent his condolences.

Judy sidled up next to him and wrapped an arm around his waist, laying her head softly against his ribs. He didn't pull away nor did he show any sign that she was there. Nothing needed to be said for her comfort to be effective. The only family member left alive he still cared about was right next to him.

"Gloria was an amazing woman Judy." Nick murmured flatly, his eyes never leaving the casket.

"She was." Judy agreed, looking down at the hole. "I'm so sorry. I wanted her to come to our wedding."

"I did too, but life doesn't always work out the way you want it to." He said bitterly. Judy couldn't believe he could keep all his anguish and grief inside. Surely he could let it loose around her? "I had hoped and prayed she'd be able to last just a week or two longer and finally see her son happy with the one he loves."

"Well," Judy sniffed, "She is in a better place and I'm grateful for the few times I spent with her. I'm glad I met her Nick. Thank you for opening your life up to me."

He shrugged. "It was the least I could do after being accepted so warmly into yours."

"She loved you so much Nick. Even I could see that." She affirmed confidently, giving his arm a gentle squeeze.

"Yeah, that she did." Minutes passed as the rain began pelting the fabric above them harder. Nick suddenly spoke, "She always wanted me to have a better life than she did. We weren't native to Zootopia Judy. We moved here when I was quite young, barely old enough to remember anything."

Judy didn't say anything but her ears perked up at the open, honest monologue she was listening to. It was better to let him get this off his chest than to interrupt. "As you know now, we escaped from that failed experiment that was once the first Zootopia and came here to start a better life. She ran from my dad and stole me away in the middle of the night in hopes James couldn't find us."

"James?" Judy asked.
Nick scoffed. "I never met the man that was my father but I've heard nothing but hate and bigotry about him. He was an alcoholic bastard that used to beat my mother senseless nearly every other night towards the end. To this day, I still don't know how he did it with a collar on. One evening she knew we had to leave and get away from that life. It was one year before I was to receive my first tame collar. I can barely remember it now." He looked off in the distance, trying to see detail of the rolling hills draped in a haze of rain.

Judy shivered at the term. She was there with him and saw what they had turned into, instruments of death and control. It was awful and she felt relief that Nick was delivered from all that. "She gave you a second chance at life. She gave you a better future."

"And I squandered it thoroughly." He reproved himself. "Just wasting my life away with nothing to live for, no goals to achieve but for the payout of the hustle."

Seeing as he wouldn't lean down to her, she put her hind legs on his thigh and climbed up to his cheek and gave it a lingering peck before dropped down beside him. He looked down at her surprised. "It wasn't a complete waste." She consoled. "Because then I met you as a result of her actions and you've bettered your life since then. I bet she couldn't have been more proud than when she heard you had become a police officer."

His snout finally broke into a grin, "She was proud but she was more excited when I told her I was bringing you home." He sifted a paw through the fur on her cheek, feeling her press into his palm lovingly as he did so. "She didn't care you were a bunny. All she knew was that you made me happy." This time he did bend down and kiss her on the lips.

Pulling back she beamed at him, feeling her heart soar at his affection. "She will be remembered as a strong woman, one who helped bring us together through one brave act. Although I barely knew her, I will never forget her for the rest of my life. You are a blessed fox to have had her as a mother, Nick."

They embraced again. This time he did break down crying. His racking sobs muffled deep into her shoulder as he knelt down in front of her. She gripped him tightly and held him close, allowing him to unleash all his pent up emotion onto her. There was no judge or jury here. She let him mourn for as long as he needed to. At length he pulled back and wiped the last remaining tears from his eyes.

"Thanks Judy. I needed that." He sighed with a ragged breath.

"I know. I love you Nick." She replied.

Nick looked around as the wind whipped up even harder. Standing off at a distance was the mole that was the grave keeper. It was time. Picking up the shovel stabbed into the ground, Nick lifted it out and scooped up a pile of dirt before tossing it onto the casket below. He handed it to Judy who proceeded to toss a smaller pile on top of the first. With assistance from Nick, she plunged the shovel head back into the ground. Nick nodded to the mole before enfolding an arm around Judy and holding both umbrellas over them as they walked to the taxi.

"You fine with leaving Zootopia for good Judy?" He asked, seeing the impressive skyline off to the south.

"Yes. All my bags are packed and in the trunk." She said after a moment. "Besides, I've got more important things to worry about." She continued, rubbing her growing belly. She looked up at him with a smile. "You fine with getting married to a dumb bunny?"

"Only if you are okay with getting married to a sly fox." He rejoined.
"Gloria raised a wonderful son Nick. I couldn't have picked a better husband." She reached up to bring his head down to her and gave him another kiss.

They walked silently the rest of the way back down the water logged path, indifferent to the mud gathering around their ankles. Nick opened the door for Judy, allowing her to step in first before entering himself. After a word of instruction to the driver, the car rumbled off down the dirt road heading southbound past the city and toward the Burrows. A brand new start at life lay before them.

"Morning Judy!" A boisterous voice echoed through the atrium foyer of the police station. She gave a wave and a weak smile to the excitable Clawhauser beaming at them from behind a box of donuts, sprinkles still left on his mouth.

"Hey there slick!" Nick clicked his tongue, giving Clawhauser the cool fingers as they paced up to the reception desk. "What's new and amazing today?"

The delightful cheetah rested his flabby cheeks on his fists as he looked down at the two of them. "Oh, you know, the usual. Couple arrests, a few dispatches for some assault and batteries. Probably nothing as exciting as what you two did this weekend!"

Judy raised an eyebrow at this reveal. She hadn't told Clawhauser anything about the luau. If she had, there wouldn't have been an end to the begging that he tag along. "Really? What sort of excitement was that?" Judy proceeded to lead the cheetah on.

Clawhauser swiped a paw through the air as if she didn't already know, "Oh silly, that amazing party you went to at Gazelle's house." He practically squealed. "You really have to tell me all about it! I got to know how she lives! Is it true she's into predators?" His anticipation was palpable in the air.

"I knew it!" Judy stabbed a finger up at Clawhauser.

"Uh oh…here we go." Nick remarked; flipping his shades back over his eyes and taking a few paces back.

"I knew Chief Bogo had sent you to spy on us!" She accused. "I never told him a darn thing about where we were going this weekend!"

Clawhauser's ears grew flat as an expression of horror and dawning realization seeped into his skull. He had completely forgotten that his knowing that juicy tidbit was supposed to be a secret!

The cheetah brought both paws up to his lips in shock, "O-M-Goodness! I'm so sorry Judy! I didn't mean any harm!" He began to explain fretfully.

Judy placed both paws on her hips. "Uh-huh, but perfectly okay to invade my personal life and stalk me. Did Bogo put you up to this?"

"I can't say." He answered suspiciously.

"That does it!" She fumed. Her cottontail twitching furiously, she stamped over to the elevator and slapped a finger on the third floor button inside.

Clawhauser frantically fumbled with the intercom on the phone beside him, paging ahead of Judy to Chief Bogo. "Sir, sir! She's on a warpath!"

"Who is it?" Bogo's voice emerged from the speaker, clearly annoyed.
"Hopps, sir! She's on her way to see you now!" He lowered his voice to an audible whisper. "I think she knows!"

An irritated snort and Bogo clicked off. Nick casually leaned up against the booth, his eyes scanning the upper balcony for the two telltale bunny ears traveling across the upper level to Bogo's office. "Relax speedy." Nick soothed, taking a deep sip of his latte. "Let those two sort this out. My hunch is that you'll be walking out of this free and in the clear." Clawhauser didn't look so sure.

Judy hopped up and jerked the handle sideways before using her weight and momentum to push the door inwards. She landed with a thump in Chief Bogo's office. He stood up to his full height and bellowed at her, "Officer Hopps! You do not have the rank to just barge into my office unannounced!"

She stood her ground and indicted him boldly. "And you do not have the right to have one of your employees tail us; finding out about our personal commitments, relationships and associations with intent to utilize said information for personal or profitable gain. Which," She stated matter-of-factly, "according to the city law code 2261A is classified under stalking. I should know, I studied the entire book of."

Bogo slammed a hoof down on his desk booming, "You shut your tiny mouth now Hopps and close that door behind you." She huffed defiantly before doing as she was ordered. "Sit." He commanded, pointing at the rather large chair in front of his desk. She leapt up and sat squarely in the middle, the seat seemingly swallowing her whole frame.

"You have some explaining to do…sir!" She added the last word as an afterthought.

"As do you." Bogo dropped a manila folder packet of papers in-between them with a racket. Judy ripped it open and began filing through its contents, seeing pictures of herself in various situations and actions. Bogo continued as she scrutinized, "Coordinating with underground crime bosses, moonlighting as a fighter for gambling purposes, associating with tracked criminals and con men." His last allegation landed at the same time she shifted to the picture of her with Nick visiting with Finnick almost a year ago.

Her heart began to sink in her chest. When put in this light, it really did seem like she was a crooked cop. "Sir, I can explain all of this."

"Shut it!" Bogo roared. "I could go on with several more counts of misconduct." He took back his seat in front of her, its structure groaning under his oppressive weight. He tapped the wooden desk heavily with a finger hoof as he leaned toward her menacingly. "The only reason I'm not firing you is because of how bad it would look upon this department." She opened her mouth to speak but he steamrolled over her. "Yes, you are a good cop but you are associating with the wrong people. The last thing I want to see you do is throw away your career. Lionheart has already rolled out the first billboards and signs with your mug as the friendly face of the ZPD. Tomorrow they'll be going up all across the city districts. How would I look if I fired you the very next day?"

"I'm sorry sir." Judy lamented; ears drooping down her back.

His expression softened. "I'm not without sympathy for you Hopps." She looked up into his eyes. "You have proven yourself time and again that you can get the job done and have successfully solved dozens of cases since being assigned here. I would be remiss to see all that talent go to waste."

"Then why won't you send me out on the frontlines with the guys? Out there investigating these assaults and bomb threats? I'm already involved in the Ms. Stipe case." Judy grilled fiercely,
throwing her paw out behind her to indicate her colleagues out in the lobby.

Bogo sighed exasperatedly, trying to explain as if to a child. "A case you butted in without proper authorization or request." He could see the protests evident on her face but he ignored them utterly. "You are assigned to this major investigation as a data keeper and archiver. Yes, it is a position up and out of the line of fire, I understand that. But if you spot something we've overlooked then we'll, by all means, go reconnoiter and apprehend any potential suspect you deem relevant to this case. You are a good cop Judy, but in my opinion, you are getting reckless."

She opened her mouth in indignation, "Reckless?" She put a paw to her chest in pride, "Sir, I think I know the law inside and out. I wouldn't dare to-"

He slammed another hoof onto the stack of papers in front of her, "Yet you blatantly break them without regard if it suits your needs! Shall I go on?"

"How does anything I did suit my needs? It was all in efforts to help the ZPD and this city!" Judy exclaimed, stunned that she was getting the seventh degree treatment from Bogo.

He gave her a hard stare before casually reaching down and slapping another manila folder atop the first. "Let me see..." He put his glasses on and opened the folder to begin reading, "You had me hire on, at your behest mind you, a known conman and criminal, one Nicholas P. Wilde onto my force." He whipped his glasses off to glare at her. "Don't think for a second that I don't check up on my men. A background check is required of all who seek employment in the ZPD!"

"He's reformed sir!" She said affronted, trying to defend Nick. "Sure he had a rough start in life but he's trying to get on the right track!"

"He's had a lifetime of criminal experience Hopps. That is not something that can be so easily swept under the rug." He glanced down at Nick's file. "Yes, it shows here that he has done some good work with you as his partner but his detective test scores were barely passing." He pointed at her with his glasses, "If he wants to continue to prove he is an asset to this department then he needs to stop riding your coattails and do the work himself! He can't just show up to the station and take credit for all the good work you're doing for him."

Judy felt like she was trying to climb up a muddy hole in the ground with chains attached to her ankles bolted into hard concrete at the bottom. There just was no angle she could fight back with. "Sir, he's intelligent, smart and resourceful! Sure he may not be book savvy but that doesn't mean he isn't street smart. He helped me plenty of times with his past criminal experience in solving cases. He made me look at the cases in a different way than I would have which led to a lot of arrests."

"Yet he's written none of your reports." Bogo said ardently.

Judy's eyes popped at this. She couldn't deny that he balked out of the office when it came time to write the evening reports for filing the next day. Paperwork was not his strong suit unless it benefitted him; that was apparent given his extreme knowledge of commercial and private sector law during his time as a conman. He had researched just enough to get the proper permits to continue his operations and to fall well within the applicable laws. Judy had tried to catch him in it once and succeeded when Nick didn't take into account tax laws based on the income he was receiving from his hustles.

"Officer Hopps," Bogo set his glasses down and rubbed his face with his hooves, "I know your relationship with Nick is given you a preferential bias towards Mr. Wilde."

"Officer Wilde." Judy corrected, giving Bogo a pointed look.
He snorted at the interruption but continued, "However, that does not mean you need to keep him afloat in the ZPD. Whether he fails or succeeds should be on his own merits, not yours. Your personal concern for him should not factor how you treat him on the job. I believe his…very nature is influencing your work." Bogo struggled to be tactful but he couldn't deny the underlying preconceptions of how he felt about foxes.

"So you're saying my relationship with Nick is affecting our performance at work?" She stood up in the chair boldly, her foot tapping furiously with agitation. "It's been a year Chief. A year! You knew about his past since day one and you said nothing this entire time until it started getting serious between Nick and me. And only this last week, I wouldn't have known about your lap cat, Clawhauser, if he hadn't been tailing us on your orders!"

"Leave Officer Clawhauser out of this!" Bogo warned.

"No, you clearly haven't!" She crossed her arms hotly, "What Nick and I do in our off time should be none of yours or anyone else's business in this department! As far as I'm concerned, if we get the job, which we are paid to do, done effectively and efficiently to proper standards and within regulations and protocols, what difference does it make how we feel about each other? If I recall correctly, it was your words to keep it 'professional' while at work and we're doing just that! Or did I mishear you?"

"You will not take that tone with me young lady!" Bogo stood up suddenly, causing his chair to fall back with a clamor. "You will not be seeing that fox again, do you hear me?"

Judy clucked offended, "Young lady? I am not your daughter to order around sir! I am your employee, as appointed by the mayor, to administer the law in Zootopia. What I do with my personal life is my own!"

Something snapped inside Bogo as his eyes saw red at the challenge, "That's enough Arriane! You will not be seeing that cub again and that is final! Get to your room now!" He was pointing out his office door, his chest heaving massively. The haze from his eyes began to dissipate as he realized just what exactly he had said.

Judy stood bewildered at his outburst. She cocked her head as she tried to get his attention again. "Sir? I'm Judy…"

Closing his eyes in remorse, Bogo covered his head with his hooves. "Please, just go. Be in the bullpen in ten…” He sounded defeated, as if he had revealed something he wished had been kept hidden.

Judy quietly hopped down with a small patter to the floor. She was halfway to the door before she turned back to him, "Sir, if it's all the same to you, I'll be in my office. I'm going to go over last night's reports to consolidate data. I think I'm starting to see a pattern."

After no significant response from the chief, she silently opened the door and headed out. A cacophony of feet, hooves, paws and more stumbled over each other as the majority of the precinct was hovering just outside Bogo's office. Even Clawhauser and Nick were in the throng of eavesdroppers. All looked extremely guilty and not trying to hide the fact they most likely heard every word spoken through that door.

She gazed at Nick listlessly as she walked past, "We have work to do. Let's go."

"Yes ma'am." He responded succinctly, falling in line directly behind her. He figured now would probably not be a good time for a joke.
Clawhauser mouthed an apology that was mostly ignored as they walked past. Nick gave him a consolatory pat before continuing to follow Judy. Although he hated the fact he still wasn't fully trusted at work, he couldn't deny that he still had failings that he needed to live up to. Every day was a struggle but he knew that with Judy's help he'd be okay. He felt such pride when he recalled how much Judy defended him to Bogo just now. He wasn't quite sure how seriously she felt about him until that moment. Nick loved that bunny so much.

Jack held up a fist to indicate them halting. Each of them ducked low behind an overturned car blocking the alley they were in, its gas long since emptied out onto the pavement creating a dark stain. Overhead was a pair of bats wheeling in circles over a rather disgusting feeding below. A lion was ripping hunks of raw meat off the hind quarters of a rather plump tapir. Its glazed eyes and lolling head seemed to be staring directly at Judy from nearly a block away.

"This is horrible." Judy shivered, watching the macabre spectacle.

Swinton crept up beside Judy and placed a hoof on her arm. "Most likely he acted out of line and a nearby predator was tagged to take him down. In a few minutes, the lion will be gorged into a coma and the bats will have their way with the corpse."

"So disgusting." Clawhauser blanched, sticking his tongue out in revulsion. "Just thinking of meat gives me gas."

"Isn't there anything we can do to prevent them from defiling the body?" Judy asked fearfully.

"None that I can figure." Jack murmured with finality. "It's a cruel world but we can't risk the chance of blowing our cover just to save a dead body. We've still got to meet Bogo and the others at the rendezvous point. The path they left us is as clear as day."

Her heart beating wildly in her chest, Judy stomped her foot down. "Well if none of you will do it, I will."

"What? No!" Jack hissed. "Clawhauser, stop her!"

"I can't!" He moaned as she jumped through his sagging arms. "She's too quick!"

Jack let out a growl before leaping up from his position. He hopped up to the dangling fire chute ladder before swinging off the bottom rung onto the dumpster beside Judy. She swiveled her head to glance at him but continued running toward the open street. He dove out after her and tripped her in mid-step. They tumbled together across the sidewalk until he forcefully rolled them beneath another car parked alongside the curb.

"Get off me!" Judy snarled, trying to escape his vice-like grip.

He pressed further into her arms flattening them against the concrete, trying to make her give up the struggle. "No!" He whispered harshly. "You go out there and they'll pick you up for sure! We just got you back and we're not going to lose you again!" His eyes were intense. He dared her to resist.

At length, her muscles went slack. She turned her head to look out from under the car to still see the lion desecrating the carcass. She had no idea who that tapir was. He could have had a family, maybe even kids; all that had been destroyed, leaving nothing behind but a dead husk with seemingly no sentimental value to anyone.

Seeing her pained expression at having to face this harsh reality, Jack exhaled with vexation. "Fine, but it is better to not leave their dead bodies around lest they catch on there is someone fighting back
against them."

With a cool, level air, he rolled off of her and onto his stomach. Reaching down by his waist, he pulled out his automatic and aimed the barrel down the street toward the lion. He used his other paw to pull out three tranquilizer darts and a silencer. Attaching the piece to the end of his gun, he loaded all three rounds into the rather elongated chamber.

With well-practiced ease, he leveled his eyes down the sights and took aim at the lion. He took one breath and let it out. He fired. A clean shot! The lion went to sleep within a matter of seconds. The bats above took their cue to feast and swooped down on the tapir, sinking their fangs into the flesh and slurping hungrily. Two more silent shots and they were sleeping too. Something inside Judy triggered as she saw the cool, calculated finesse with which Jack took down his targets; a fleeting memory that was dancing along the edges of her consciousness.

With a satisfied grunt, Jack motioned for Judy to crawl out from under the car with him. Judy had to stop suddenly as she noticed the devastation of the skyline. Where once had been huge towers rising high above the rest, the pinnacle of several major corporations, there was nothing but open sky. Her route from Mercy Hospital to their hideout did not take her within view to see the overall scope of the damage the bats had caused to her beloved city. She put her paws to her mouth as tears began to form.

"Are we moving his body or not?" Jack asked, looking at her expectantly.

"Yes." She called back after a moment's hesitation.

The tapir was a heavy mammal and both Swinton and Clawhauser were called out to help move him to the alley where they could hide him in the dumpster. Judy dissented at first but eventually agreed that it was better than leaving it out in the open where another predator could finish the job. It seemed an ignoble way to be buried.

"We have to get moving." Jack pressed. "Those bats and lion will be awake soon and we best be well on our way to Sahara Square by then."

Judy and the rest nodded and continued their slog through the back alleys and grime of Savannah Central. They would reach the barrier wall bordering the desert ecosystem of Sahara Square within the hour. They didn't see too many more incidents like that along the way, which gave Judy plenty of time to think and to take in the sights and sounds around her. Zootopia had sure changed since the last time she could recall being here.

Her thoughts drifted back to where her and Jack were hiding out under the car. It finally clicked in her head why it looked so familiar! Jack Savage was not a cop at all, hailing from another city! He was a hit mammal, one who was contracted to carry out assassinations and she had hired him! Why the sham? Why tell people he was a cop and continue fighting for a cause she believed he wouldn't care one whit about? So many things didn't make sense as to his motivation to even stay for the resistance.

She sped up her pace to meet up alongside him. He wasn't paying full attention to her, his eyes scanning the rooftops, but there was no doubt he was aware of her presence. "Yes Judy. What is it? From your demeanor, it would appear you want to tell me something."

"I know who you are now Jack. I know why I hired you before I was trapped in a coma." She said it low enough so that Clawhauser and Swinton could not overhear. If there was a legitimate reason he didn't want to divulge his true nature, it would be unwise to reveal it so openly here in front of them. She had no idea how he'd react.
He stopped abruptly and faced her, his eyes steeled and his words firm. "Good thing you remember something at least. That'll clear up a few things quite handily." He took a small gander over to Clawhauser who was panting in exhaustion. Although he was in better shape than before her coma, he was still not fit. This was the most exercise he had gotten all month. Ignoring Swinton as much as she was disregarding him, Jack considered Judy again. "As far as you and I are concerned, I'm still under contract by you. I am under your orders until released of my obligation."

Chapter End Notes

This was a very complex chapter with a lot of major plot points coming together in one place, all of them centered around a central trope/mechanic which was what prompted the chapter title. I knew I had to resolve the 'morning after' issue presented at the end of the previous chapter, so that was inescapable. I then knew I had to deal with the fallout of Judy discovering Clawhauser was tailing them at Bogo's behest which then opened up yet ANOTHER character plot line that I've already planned out and funnels into the major themes of the fanfic. I also laid a few revealing bits of Nick's past to prepare readers for what's to come. Finally, I knew I had to get back around to that raid mission set up in chapter six but I also wanted to use a small moment between Jack and Judy to establish a new type of relationship between them that'll carry us through the remainder of their arc. Hopefully all plot threads will pay off in the end, but I have a rough general idea of where each is going.
Mai sniffed the air ahead of them. Of the four mammals, she was the one with the keenest sense of smell. The scent of death wafted along the winds toward them from the south. She shook her head at the most obvious route through the stucco plastered buildings of Sahara Square, bleached a golden tan from the rays of the sun. It was unfortunate they’d have to head north around the central market square but it seemed a huge gathering of bats were feasting on an unknown count of bodies and they couldn’t afford to be seen.

She motioned for them to follow her down an alleyway. Deftly sidestepping a few stray soda cans, she forged onward to the parallel street that would curve eastward towards the site of the once flourishing Oasis hotel and casino. Bogo and Higgins managed to avoid the can as well but Rhinowitz was not as lucky. It bounced off his rather large foot and clattered against the nearby trash dumpster.

Each of them slammed up against the walls of the opposing buildings, trying to stay in the shadow cast by the descending sun. Within moments, several clicking noises could be heard above them. Four clawed hands peered over the parapet of the flat roofed building overhead before the grotesque faces of two bats stared down into the alley. They chittered incessantly, trying to see something amiss that could have caused the disturbance. The rest of the murder was still gorging at the bazaar.

All eyes were looking up at the squinting bats, their vision diminished in the blazing evening sun. The clicking of their vocal chords stopped. Bogo cursed under his breath as all could see they were switching to a different way of seeing. They wiggled their noses, feeling out the heat sources present in the atmosphere. One gave a squeal of excitement as it detected several signatures of warmth flowing through four bodies below.

"Look alive!" Bogo shouted as all readied their weapons.

The two creatures swooped down on the four of them with claws and fangs bared. Rhinowitz batted the first out of the way, sending it careening across the alley, slamming up against the adobe wall with a crunch. The second swerved to the side, narrowly avoiding the swinging baseball bat coming from rotund hippo, Higgins. Bogo caught the bat unawares and rammed it with his horns into the nearest wall, hearing several of its bones pop from the impact.

Quickly recovering, the first boosted itself off the wall and swooped low under the next swing from Rhinowitz, going straight for Mai who was already in a stance close to the ground, her arm behind her back and paw on the hilt of her sword. It opened its mouth wide, twisting its body in an attempt to nail Mai in the neck before carrying her up into the air to finish the job. With swift precision, she cartwheeled to the side before swinging back up with her sword, completely severing the creature's head. The body flew several meters more as its head plopped to the ground, its mouth still opening and closing in its final death throes.

With the decapitated body tumbling into the street with blood gushing onto the cobblestone, its partner, galvanized by the threat of death, clawed at the back of Bogo. It got enough purchase to use its hind legs to scratch the buffalo's chin, drawing both crimson and an infuriated bellow. It kicked off Bogo's face and crawled up over his head and down his back before stabbing its fangs into his back in several places. It looked up at a sudden shift in movement to see Higgin's bat smash its skull, several grey chunks flinging out onto the ground. It released its grip on Bogo and collapsed to the
ground in a twitching heap.

All were breathing heavy and ears attentive to potential cavalry. They weren't exactly being quiet when they killed them both. After several minutes of tense silence, they all slumped against the alley walls. Mai rushed to Bogo's aid, his condition a bit worse than most. Already he could feel the euphoric tingling of their toxin that they apply to their teeth before every attack. It made him feel good and relaxed; something he shouldn't be feeling at this present moment.

"Sir, are you alright?" She kneeled quickly, helping him lean forward as she inspected the tiny wounds, red seeping slowly from the pricks.

"I'm fine Mai." He grunted. He had felt these rapturous effects before, it could be weathered and eventually pass. It would have been far more dangerous had there been no one to save him after the bite.

"We should have gone into smaller groups. We are too large and too easily seen." Mai admonished the group.

Bogo waved her down, leaning back onto the plaster wall with a wheeze. "No, it was better this way. We have strength in numbers."

"The chief is right." Rhinowitz added, lumbering up next to the petite rabbit. "Look at what just two of them could inflict. It would have been potentially fatal had there been less of us to contend with them."

Higgins just got done poking the convulsing body with his pole and sauntered up to the other two hovering around Bogo. "These things are vile." He quivered, his nose flaring at the smell. In the midst of the commotion, Mai hadn’t been overly cognizant of the pungent ammonia odor emanating around them and encircling the two dead corpses.

"You feel able to move?" Mai grilled; her eyes intense.

Bogo grimaced, his lower jaw aching something fierce from the lacerations. "I'll be a bit dizzy but I believe I can press through this. I don't think he injected too much of the toxin into me, I think I'll be fine in a few hours."

"I think this was a bad idea." Higgins shared, his gaze looming over the rooftops toward the market. "We knew the Oasis was overrun and yet we still staged a raid for the last remaining supplies in it."

"We haven't a choice." Bogo groaned, placing a hoof to his thigh to help steady himself to standing. "We must hold out as long as we can. Now that Judy is with us, we have a chance at fighting back."

"If she remembers..." Rhinowitz grunted, clearly not sold on the idea that Judy would ever get her full memory back.

Bogo gave him a riled look but grumbled and began walking slowly down the alley toward their original destination. They each took a look up and down the street before quickly crossing over to the other side, retreating to the shadows once more cast by the buildings. Staying in the darkness, moving with haste towards the bend that opened up onto the avenue to where they beheld the grand spectacle of the Oasis hotel and casino, its singular, rising spire of palm overlooking all of Sahara Square.

Mai kept pace with the hulking buffalo, still in great physical condition even in the present situation. She stole a glance back at the tailing rhino and hippo before whispering to Bogo. "Sir, I am not entirely sure why you thought it was a good idea to let Judy accompany this mission. If she is as
important to our cause as Jack says she is, then why risk her getting captured again?"

Bogo kept his eyes forward on the towering palm tree structure ahead of them. "Dr. Madge said her memory may or may not return. Taking her out with us and having her see the devastation and the bats firsthand as well as visiting familiar locations may help jog her memory."

Mai paused before responding, her eyes downcast. "And...if she remembers the wrong things and chooses to yet again leave Zootopia?"

He sighed inwardly, his whole bulk seemingly shrinking an inch. "That is a risk we have to take. This whole operation has always been a gamble. Maybe she'll remember just exactly what we need to gain the advantage and maybe she won't." He pointed a hoof finger at the hotel. "In the meantime, we need to last long enough so that can happen. Those supplies Jack told us about in there are necessary for us to hold out at least a few weeks more until we can get the information we need from Judy...hopefully." He added the last word hesitantly.

Mai looked up at the big buffalo. "Do you think we can trust Jack? I wonder because you kept having me watch him this whole time yet you let him off the leash so quickly and now left him alone with Judy."

Bogo kept walking, his gait becoming a little more confident now that the toxin was slowly being worked out of his system. "I trust Jack about as far as I can throw him."

"That can be pretty far." Mai remarked with a small grin.

"Fine, less than that then." He muttered. "The fact remains is that he's an expert marksman. I've seen him do some amazing shots. Of all of us, I believe he is the most capable of protecting Judy."

"Yes sir, but what makes you believe he won't turn tail and run? I can't figure out why he stays." She lowered her voice, almost whispering to herself. "And his fixation with her daughter is a bit unnatural."

Bogo picked up on that last comment but ignored it. "All I know is that he was with Judy at the time of her coma yet refused to leave her side until they got captured. Since then he has assisted us by discovering the location of her imprisonment at Mercy Hospital and negotiated a sort of truce so that Nick could go in to see her." He slowed a bit when they heard some clicking a few blocks over but kept going. "He has some stake in this because of Judy. How and why is unknown to me but if I can use that to our advantage, then I will. As long as she is here with us and fighting for our cause, I don't believe he is a threat."

"Do you believe he is a cop from the old Zootopia?" Mai asked plainly.

"No." He replied flatly, his eyes never leaving the Oasis. "I don't believe he thinks he's got us fooled. If anything, Judy would be the only one who hasn't seen through his lies."

"You're playing a dangerous game sir." Mai rebuked.

"These are desperate times Mai. I do what I must for our Zootopia...and for Judy." He added.

She smiled at his expression of concern. "You really do consider her like a daughter."

Bogo seemed irritated at the accusation but did not deny it. "She reminds me so much of Arriane, it's uncanny." He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Regardless, I don't plan on repeating the same mistakes I did with her last time. We need to protect her but we can't coddle her."
"Like you're doing now by not revealing what happened and why she left?" Mai interjected.

He rumbled in annoyance, "Dr. Madge said memory is a fickle thing. She would know better than all of us. If we allow her to regain her memory naturally instead of force feeding it to her, maybe she'll only recall the parts we need and leave out the rest."

"You're afraid she'll leave again." She charged.

Bogo let out a peeved exhalation trying not to look overly worried, "Yes…yes I am." Mai continued to stride silently next to the buffalo for a time, a slight smile on her face after having gotten Bogo to admit his concern for Judy. After a while, he turned his head to regard the small bunny. "So she still doesn't remember you, does she?"

A forlorn look etched itself on Mai as the looming shadow of the Oasis covered them with its shade. "No…no she hasn't."

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Judy was staring blankly at the computer monitor, a radio perched beside her open to all incoming transmissions. She was leaning back in the chair, her feet crossed and lounging on the desk next to the keyboard. She was tapping her carrot pen on her front teeth absently, her thoughts swirling around the confrontation from earlier that morning. She couldn't really place why Bogo had shouted at her like that.

She pressed the button again on the pen to hear her voice, "Young lady? I am not your daughter to order around sir! I am your employee, as appointed by the mayor, to administer the law in Zootopia. What I do with my personal life is my own!"

Following her outburst, Bogo screamed back through the small speakers, "That's enough Arriane! You will not be seeing that cub again and that is final! Get to your room now!"

She clicked it off again and kept tapping her teeth with it. What cub would he be talking about? Was Arriane a daughter of his? She never knew Chief Bogo even had a family. He never talked about his personal life. Even when there were social events open to all police officers, he would always show up briefly to make pleasantries and then leave before it actually got underway. The only thing that actually seemed to get him worked up emotionally was Gazelle and her songs. She furrowed her brow at the thought; yet he wasn't as infatuated with her as Clawhauser was. What was the connection then?

"Burning the midnight oil?" A small neigh clucked behind her.

Judy scrambled frantically to grab the carrot pen that had slipped out of her paws. She swiveled the chair around to face Detective Oates, a strapping, brown stallion who had been on the force almost as long as Bogo. He was the star investigator of the ZPD and Judy looked up to him in all things. A huge grin broke across his muzzle, a strand of wheat twitching between his teeth, as he considered the hare sitting in the small cubicle Bogo had ordered set up for her ages ago.

"Detective Oates!" She exclaimed surprised. "I thought you had already gone home!"

Stretching his back, hearing some satisfying pops, he put a hoof under one of his grey suspenders holding up his pants that seemed a bit too big for his waist. "I'm also working very hard to crack some difficult cases. Good to see my young, little protégé has taken a piece off the old block." He chuckled at his own joke.

Judy blushed at his praise. She shyly turned her head away to avoid looking into the horse's green eyes. "Oh, you know, just trying to do my part in making the world a better place."
At the mention of this, Oates grew serious and plucked the wheat strand out of his mouth and leaned over Judy and examined the monitor before her, his garish, purple tie dangling about. She dropped her ears and looked up to see him above her, his eyes intent on the data at hand. She idolized the horse and the multitude of things he had accomplished during his time in the ZPD. She was flattered he had even shown interest in what she was doing right now.

"The way I see it, there is something odd about the way these attacks have occurred." He noted with confidence, raising back up but never moving away from behind Judy's chair.

"I thought so too." Judy agreed, pointing her pen at the monitor. "I've already established that it is the bats causing all these attacks but what I'm unsure of is who and how and more importantly, when the next is going to happen."

"Who would be a difficult question to answer Hopps," Oates nodded his head sagely. "There are literally thousands of immigrants galloping into Zootopia. And we can't just…"

"…single out an entire group based on their species." Hopps finished. "I get it."

Oates nickered a bit, "Granted, I haven't met any of them personally myself but I am positive that they all can't be that bad. I'd wager it is just a few rotten apples that are spoiling the whole bunch and the rest will happily accept your blood bank proposal." He patted Judy lightly on the shoulder which made her blush even harder.

"Thank you sir." She said meekly.

"Oh, come, come now!" He reproved. "We are detectives! One and the same! I am no more over you than you are over me!" He flashed a devilish grin. "We are equals and we need to help each other out if one starts to flag."

"Wow." Came a voice from beyond the cubicle which set the hairs on the back of Oates' neck roaring. Nick stepped out from behind the partition with two steaming cups of Snarlbucks Coffee. "So does that make us equal partners too?" He was clearly not as impressed with the dashing buck.

Oates brayed petulantly, "Hardly! You have a lot to learn if you think you could ever be on the same level as Hopps and I!"

"So you're implying that I would have to work twice as long to get to where Judy has reached in less than a year and you in seven years?" Nick snorted, handing a cup to Judy who accepted it gratefully.

Oates crossed his arms, looking down on the discourteous fox. "You need to put forth the time and effort into the job, something Judy has clearly shown with her work ethic." He gestured to the cups of coffee Nick has brought in. "As far as I can tell, the only reason you seem to even still be at the station past three-o'clock is to provide gopher services for Hopps."

Affronted, Nick placed a paw on his chest, "Carrots needs this nourishment to keep burning that 'midnight oil.'" He crooked two fingers for emphasis. "And I certainly don't see you or anyone else sticking around to help support her in this case."

Judy whispered urgently, "Nick, please, show some respect for Detective Oates. He knows what he's talking about."

"I'm sure Carrots." Nick murmured unimpressed. "But knowledge does not equate wisdom."

Oates sniffed with disdain, "Of course, I had almost forgotten your pet name for Officer Hopps." He made a point to say her proper title. "If it weren't for your relationship with her, I doubt you'd have
gotten this far in the police force."

"Detective Oates!" Judy said shocked.

"Now wait just a minute!" Nick slammed his coffee cup onto the desk, spilling a bit out before jabbing a finger up towards the big horse. "Yes, I may have had Carrots help me study for my test but I still put forth the time in learning and I passed just like any of you."

A smug grin spread across Oates' face, "More like cheated no doubt."

Judy stood up in her chair and placed a paw on each of them as soon as she saw Nick growl violently. "Stop it you two! Seriously! This is ridiculous!" They each stepped back a pace, quiet but still giving each other the death glare treatment. Judy fumed, "Now, I don't know what's gotten into you two but ever since Nick became detective, you both have been nothing but antagonistic to each other! Is this how professional police officers are supposed to act? We're all on the same team here!"

Oates broke his scowl at Nick to look off down the row of cubicles, "You're quite right Hopps. This is petty of me, of that I have no doubt." He looked back down at Nick, still upset over the altercation. "Very well…Wilde. You still have a lot to learn but stick with Detective Hopps and you'll manage to reach the finish line just fine."

"Really?" Nick mouthed incredulously at the backhanded remark. Oates still hadn't changed his tune other than saying it in a nicer tone.

"Thanks for the encouragement!" Judy acknowledged, trying her best to dissolve the situation and have Detective Oates be on his way.

"Oh you are most certainly welcome my dear Hopps!" He inclined his head toward the monitor. "I'm sure you'll figure this out in no time and we'll be making arrests on the morrow!" He chortled before swinging his brown coat over his shoulder and sauntering down the row.

"Nice to see you again too Oates." Nick waved with a sarcastic smile. "Thanks for the ride of my life the other day too!"

Judy slapped a paw to her face, "Why'd you have to bring that up Nick?!"

Oates spun around bristling. He clopped up loudly before getting in Nick's face. "How dare you speak to me of that horrible incident! I am not some vehicle you can just ride! I am a horse, not a car!"

"That may be true but our patrol vehicle wasn't available at the time and the perp was getting away." Nick crossed his arms self-assuredly. "Seeing as there were no other modes of transportation to commandeer, you were the only thing left that could catch up to him. Besides," He wiggled his butt, letting his tail swish arrogantly. "You were oh-so-comfortable in the seat!"

"Why you little…" Oates raised a hoof to strike down the cantankerous fox.

"Detective Oates!" Judy shouted, pointing a finger toward the front foyer. "Please, just go home."

Oates whinnied in disgust but rose up. "Good evening to you Hopps." He bowed his head before promptly leaving the small space, not deigning to look at Nick again.

Judy punched Nick in the arm, eliciting a surprised look from him. " Seriously? You could have left it alone…but no, you had to get the last word in." She plopped back down into the seat before pulling it up to the computer. "Unbelievable. What is it with guys and the need to appear macho in front of
women? I just don't get it!" After a sip from her drink, she added softly, "Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome Carrots." He smiled before pulling up a seat.

She turned to look at him, "I'm still mad at you."

"For what?" He raised his paws.

"For inciting Detective Oates. He's six years our senior, you need to show him the proper respect for his station." She reminded.

"When pigs fly." Nick scoffed, folding his arms. "He's so full of himself it's disgusting."

Judy looked offended on Oates' behalf. "He's not the easiest person to get along with but neither are you Nick P. Wilde."

Nick opened his mouth in shock. "Oh, now I get the full name treatment! I must have done something especially heinous!"

She couldn't hide a smirk at his snarky comment, "The worst."

A gleam in his eye heralded something naughty, "Am I going to get punished tonight for it?"

She gave him a bemused look before returning to the monitor. "Maybe…we'll have to see." She pointed back at the screen. "But I seriously need to focus on the case."

Nick didn't want to admit it, but he really hadn't been paying too much attention to the overall evidence flowing in from the various officers all across the city. Judy had been the primary data collector and had merged it all into a single diagram overlaid over the map of Zootopia. At first there didn't seem to be any discernible pattern to the bat attacks and looked to be completely random.

"So should we segregate all the bats to one area and put a fence around them?" Nick offered casually.

Judy smacked his arm. "No, of course not!" She shook her head and pointed at four distinct points on the map. "There are sporadic assaults throughout the city but these four concentrations at these locations are where they have occurred the most. The frequency of reported attacks is higher in these four areas than any other."

Nick's gaze wandered over the map, taking in the information. After a time, he took a sip from his coffee and suggested calmly, "Well it appears they are targeting the four major crime bosses."

Judy whipped around to him. "What?"

He set his coffee down as he leaned forward to point at each location. "Mr. Big in Tundra Town, Longneck in Sahara Square, Rosco in the Rainforest District and Stipe in Savannah Central."

Judy's eyes bulged. "Ms. Olivia Stipe was a crime lord? Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged, "I didn't think it was relevant to the case at the time."

"Didn't think it was relevant?!" She balked. "If high level mob bosses are being targeted specifically by the bats, we need to find out why. This could be a lot bigger than just a random smattering of assault cases done by immigrant bats!"

"Well if we want to get an idea of how this all went down…may I drive?" Nick asked as Judy slide
on over to allow him access to the mouse. After moving it around a bit to find the cursor on screen, he continued, "We need to first figure out the order in which all this happened. Did you apply time stamps to these?"

"Of course, I brought over all the data from every report and attached it to each object before placing it on the chart." Judy confirmed. "You just need to hover the cursor over each to get the pertinent info from the object."

"That's pretty handy." Nick complimented. After a few minutes of observing the time stamps, his eyes lit up at discovering the pattern. "It seems the bats got lucky with Ms. Stipe."

Judy looked at the screen confused. "How do you figure?"

He floated the cursor over the attack plots around Ms. Stipe's apartment complex in Savannah Central. "There were only two documented attacks before hers." He moved the mouse toward Sahara Square. "There were a grand total of fifteen reported cases before the sixteenth ended up being Longneck himself."

"What about the Canal District? There are a lot of random assaults there just after the ones in Sahara Square." Judy pointed out. She was starting to see the pattern but she still wasn't sure if Nick was truly onto something or not.

"This is where it gets interesting." Nick grinned, his eyes flickering back and forth between the multitude of times and dates. "Look here," he pointed at the Rainforest District, "it appears they were zeroing in on Rosco's location but none of the victims turned up to be him." He directed her attention to the Canal District attacks. They indeed happened after every single attack in the Rainforest District stopped. "I believe Rosco discovered they were targeting him and further retreated into the canals to evade them. Their sporadic attacks and their eventual cessation support this theory."

She dove for the mouse and dragged it over to Tundra Town's markings. "And since they've stopped tracking Rosco, they are now penning down the location of Mr. Big instead!" It was true. Each of the Tundra Town occurrences had all been within the past few hours. She sat back in her chair, thoroughly blown away by this revelation. She looked at him proudly, "See, I knew you could be an excellent detective."

He returned the smile, "Just don't tell feedbag Oates that, I have a reputation to keep."

"Stop." She laughed before dropping the humor. "But no, seriously stop. He is your superior and you're in trouble enough with Chief Bogo as it is. Starting fights with him will do no good for your career."

Nick shrugged. "I don't plan on starting trouble here Carrots. I just come here to do my work and then go home with the occasional paycheck every two weeks."

"Is that all?" Judy regarded him with concern. "Don't you want more from your job?"

"Don't misunderstand me Carrots," he looked at her with those beautiful, green eyes, "I am actually honored and proud to serve on the police force with you. However, I know less than half of these guys working with us and I'm fairly certain the majority of them have preconceived notions of who I am despite the fact I've been working alongside them. It's easier for you to prove your worth since you don't already have a bad rap against your good name."

"Well that's something that can be altered with time. It may be awhile before people's opinions change but it isn't impossible, with hard work and dedication." Judy offered.
Nick shook his head, looking down at the carpeted floor, undulating in brown swirls that resembled tusks. "Please spare me Oates' adages. You simply don't understand Judy." Her nose wiggled a bit, she had picked up on the dropping of her nickname. "I thought I could finally get a fresh start. I was filled with pride at becoming a police officer, something I never could have imagined myself being. I thought to myself, surely now people will look at me and see more than just a shifty, untrustworthy fox."

"I think that-" Judy began.

He put a paw up to stall her response, "And then I find that it's no different here in the ZPD than it is out on the streets. It's just another kind of discrimination and stereotyping." He pointed up in the general direction of where Bogo's office lay. "That whole spat you had with the chief? You want to know why I always duck out on paperwork or that I'm seen as less reliable than most other officers? Because I tried my hardest starting off and all I got was stepped on by those my senior, the very ones I'm supposed to respect!"

Judy's heart broke for him. This was just as bad as the awful muzzling and rejection at the Junior Rangers initiation so many years ago. She put a loving paw on his arm. "I'm so sorry Nick. I didn't know."

He gave her an askance look before withdrawing his arm from her. "Nor would you...of course they wouldn't say these things about your partner to your face. They'd always do it behind closed doors."

He said scornfully. "I'm nothing but an unreliable fox trying to pretend at being a police officer. It's not what they said but it is most certainly implied. This is why I stopped being so adept at my job, the moment I realized that there was a glass ceiling for someone like me."

Judy stood up in her chair and gripped both sides of his snout and brought him to face her directly. "Nick, this is awful and I won't stand for it. Tomorrow I am going to speak to Chief Bogo about this mistreatment and get those who keep putting you down docked or even worse, fired!" She gave him a quick peck on the lips. "You have my word on that!"

He gripped her shoulders, drawing her back. "It wouldn't do any good. You're at the same disadvantage as me." She cocked her head at his statement. "It's no secret that we are dating and romantically involved. You striking out on your own to get Chief Bogo to scold those officers in question would fall on deaf ears. It would only be viewed as you showing favoritism for the one you love rather than defending my job from an objective point of view. Perception is reality and it would only serve to put you in a more negative light and you can't afford that. We can't win this one Judy."

He turned from her and redirected his attention back to the screen. "I just want to keep my head down and do what little I have to and get my paycheck. Nothing more."

Judy began tapping her foot on the chair seat furiously, "This is ridiculous! I can't believe this is even happening in the ZPD! I thought we all were above this and trained professionals! If I find out Chief Bogo knew about this and condoned such behaviors, I'm going to go straight to city hall!"

Nick's shoulders slumped in defeat, "You're really not going to let this go, are you Carrots?"

"Never!" She rapped a fist on her chest, beaming as she did so. "I think everyone should be given the chance to prove themselves and be whatever they want to be in Zootopia!"

"Just like you were given a chance at being meter maid?" He simpered.

She narrowed her eyes, "Well sometimes you have to make your own way to be seen for the true value that you are." Nick started busting up cackling. "What?" She asked annoyed.
"Nothing…you just looked dead serious when you said that." He tried hard to contain any remaining fits of laughter. "Maybe Bogo was right, you are reckless!"

"Har har…" She snarked before flopping back down into the seat and rolling it forward to the keyboard. "So what do we do about this?" She gestured to the Tundra Town portion of the chart. "Think we should pay a visit to Mr. Big and ask if he knows anything about this or the other three crime bosses?"

Nick raised an eyebrow, "Seriously? This late at night Carrots?"

She looked over at the wall clock, "What? It's only eleven-thirty. The night's still young!"

He rose up both paws to halt her enthusiasm. "Easy there…Bogo already has you on a short leash by regulating you to the desk. You going out to involve yourself with Mr. Big would probably not be a good idea right now. How about we divide and conquer?"

"How do you propose we do that?" Judy leaned back, arms crossed.

"Easy, you go visit Stipe and Longneck in Mercy Hospital and see if they can give you any information on their assaults. Tell them that you know me and they should open up to you some. That shouldn't raise any red flags back here at the station. Let me, the 'untrustworthy' fox, go pay a visit to Mr. Big and see if he's aware that he is being targeted." Nick sat back, very self-satisfied with his plan.

A slowly spreading smile filled Judy's face. "You are really good at this job." He gave her a look of not denying that fact. She clicked her tongue vexed, "It just irks me that nobody but me can see the talent that you have!"

"Well, thanks for the compliment." He traced her gaze back up to the ticking clock. "So I take it we're not heading back to your apartment tonight?"

"Nope!" She locked her computer and hopped down off her chair, her fuzzy tail bouncing back and forth as she walked. "Get your coat Nick, we're going out!"

He rolled his eyes, "There goes any hope for that punishment…"

"I heard that!" She called back. He couldn't repress his mirth at her response.

"You think they already went inside?" Clawhauser gaped at the small flag ripping in the breeze, hardly noticeable except for those already expecting it to be there.

"It was tied up to the post here, what do you think?" Swinton snapped at the cheetah.

"Simmer down there. We've all had a stressful day." Jack quipped, clearly in high spirits.

"Easy for you to say." Swinton huffed. "We almost ran into a roving pack of bats practically at their dinner table! We narrowly escaped with our lives if Judy hadn't noticed the previous marker having us go another route around the market square!"

"Please, let's not argue. Let's just get inside before it gets dark." Judy pleaded, sweeping past them into the revolving door entrance.

Swinton gave one last glare to Clawhauser who seemed clueless as to why he was being yelled at. They each slipped into the circular enclosure housing the now defunct door. With a single push
together, they were able to shove the door around until they were able to reach the interior opening. They stepped into a rather dark vestibule with plenty of scattered tokens, broken glass and ripped clothing.

Judy scanned the environs to see dimly rows upon rows of slot machines and other tables of gaming chance situated along the edges of the lowered central gambling floor. There were several skeletons of various mammals she could only guess at what they originally were, picked clean by scavengers. Something danced along the fringes of her memory, teasing her with potential illumination on the place. Try as she might, she could not recall what was so significant about this hotel.

"By my calculations," Jack spoke softly through the oppressive silence, "Bogo and the others have reached this zone about an hour ago. They should be at our rendezvous point two floors up at the grand buffet restaurant."

Swinton snorted, "Of course that'd be our meeting spot, at the very place where food once was. What a way to torture us further than to tease us with a place we can no longer rely upon for food!"

Jack tapped a few buttons on his watch before eyeing the former swine officer, "Must you always be a negative Nancy?"

"Who is Nancy?" Clawhauser asked, clearly not getting the allusion.

"Nevermind." Judy waved off the question. "We're all tired. It is past sundown and we need to sleep before tackling those supplies." She turned to Jack. "They are here right?"

He stared at her a few moments, "They were the last time I was here about a week ago."

"And the bats haven't eaten them all up?" Clawhauser queried fretfully.

Swinton exhaled loudly, "Of course not! They only feed on blood, not real food like the rest of us."

"Oh, right." Clawhauser felt really dumb.

This was his first outing in over a year. He was overjoyed to finally be out in the field with Bogo. Well, there was the initial task to get Judy back to their hideout, but that ended up in their favor by mere accident. He had quite forgotten how deadly these bats were from being away from their presence for so long. It was hard to comprehend that these bats only subsisted on the raw essence of their bodies to survive.

Judy reached up and put a comforting paw on Clawhauser's arm. "Don't worry too much about it. I'm still trying to remember a lot about them myself."

"Thanks Judy." He smiled back at her.

"You think the elevators still work?" He skinned longingly across the deserted floor to where they would be.

"I don't think so." Jack affirmed assertively. "We will probably have quite the stairs to traverse."

Clawhauser looked positively depressed. "That would make complete sense."

Jack and Judy led the way across the gambling floor. They skirted around various aisles of machines, noting several games still left un-played on several of the dealer tables. At last they entered the back hallways leading to the restrooms to find the nonoperational elevators. They pushed the adjacent swinging door open and filtered into the rectangular stairwell. Looking up the ninety floors worth of
stairs induced a light case of vertigo in Judy.

"Did they seriously need to build it this tall?" Clawhauser whined.

"This was the premiere entertainment outlet in Sahara Square, seen by just about every corner of the district. Of course they were going to make it grand." Swinton whistled. She had never been inside the Oasis herself.

"Let's all be thankful we only need to meet with the others on the third floor tonight. We'll tackle the rest tomorrow." They all nodded at the good news.

For the most part, their trip across Sahara Square had been uneventful. Bogo and his team scouting ahead for a safe route proved essential in their safe passage. If what Jack said was true about the supplies, they not only would need all eight of them to transport it out but also a form of conveyance to quickly make it back into downtown. It seemed to Judy, unless Jack and Bogo has this all figured out, the plan wasn't fully formed from beginning to end.

They met the others exactly where they said they'd be. Jack took first watch that night, settling himself atop one of the glass overhangs trailing the length of one of the buffet counters. He readied his automatic and casually laid it across his lap. This was truly the safest place for them to spend the night since very few windows were present along the edges of the room and there were only two entrances that lead into the dining room proper, something an expertly situated lookout could cover with ease.

The last thing Judy noticed before accepting a light blanket from Clawhauser, that was dug out of the small pack he had brought, was the massive shape of Bogo awake and towering over her. He wasn't in any position to intrude on her sleep. To Judy, it seemed he was more of a watcher over her. She didn't understand why since they already had one present. She followed his gaze across the room and realized he was staring unwaveringly at Jack. She had only begun to think upon this before sleep overtook her.

Chapter End Notes

The dialogue in this chapter was a difficult one to nail down. The entire scene with Detective Oates (Disney game FTW for introducing a new character!) wasn't expected to last as long as it did but it helped provide an opportunity to flesh out a bit more Nick's motivation for his lack of discipline and effort in the ZPD - sort of a way to vindicate him from the allegations Bogo laid upon him from the previous chapter. We haven't seen the last of Detective Oates but this is a good starting point which features his distaste for foxes, Nick in particular, and his love for what Judy has accomplished. The chapter was originally going to include more of the raid but was eclipsed by the scene at the ZPD. So I had to make each raid section count. I wanted to reintroduce the concept of how the bats got their victims to comply with their blood sucking, the after effects introduced way back in chapter 1, but now we get an idea of how it makes the victim feel during feeding. Finally, I wanted to set up the relationship between Jack and the others and that he truly is an outcast among them and to keep his dubious nature a secret. We still have no firm idea who he is, what he wants, why he stays and what motivates his actions - questions that'll all be answered soon.
A soft padding of feet awoke Judy from her slumber. She pushed up on one paw and gazed around sleepily. She had to orient herself to figure out where she was. She looked above her to see Bogo sleeping soundly on the long table next to her, his arm draping down into one of the chairs. They had slept through most of the night in the grand buffet of the Oasis. The carpeted floor wasn't entirely uncomfortable but it was definitely no bed.

She pushed back the small blanket and scanned the environment, noting that the sound that roused her was Jack coming back from somewhere, leaping up onto the hanging glass above the buffet lines. Stretching out on the floor and kicking the rest of the blanket off with her hind paws, she stood up and lazily walked over to him. If he noticed Judy advancing on him, he made no motion to indicate his attention on her.

"You're up early." She said, trying to be cheerful on such a gloomy morning. The mere thought that they were stuck in the middle of Sahara Square in a part of Zootopia overrun by bats did little to improve the mood.

"I can't sleep when I'm out on a mission. It's beginning to be a problem." He smiled after adding that last bit, finally looking at her.

"Sounds like you may need to get that checked out." Judy rejoined; trying to maintain the levity Jack had started.

"If only there was a bunny doctor to help me?" He grinned.

Her smile dropped, "Okay, now you just went creepy."

He chuckled softly, looking down with embarrassment. "I must apologize then. I did not intend to make you feel uncomfortable." He sighed, eyeing the two entrances leading to the dining area.

"After so long without seeing any bunnies outside of Mai and Nala, it was a pleasant surprise to find yet another added to our ranks…especially one as beautiful as you."

Although Judy dropped her ears in nervousness, she couldn't help but bring back the smirk he had brought to her face initially. She waggled a finger at him, "Flattery will get you nowhere buster!"

A wounded expression passed over his face before being replaced by something happier. "Of course darling, I meant no harm. Married woman and all that…" He paused for a long second before continuing, "How is it being married to someone who isn't a bunny?"

Judy crooked her nose at the rather blatant question, "I'm not sure…that's appropriate."

Jack placed a paw to his chest, "My apologies again, I was only curious since I had not personally seen such a combination before."

She shrugged, clambering up onto the glass to sit beside him. "I don't have many memories of our marriage, mainly bits and pieces. What I can remember is happy though. I wasn't sad, lonely or miserable. I can recall my first year with him on the force and we were the best of friends then." She knocked her head with her paw several times. "It's just this stupid coma, or whatever those bats did to me. I can't seem to remember much more than that."
Jack nodded, fully understanding her frustration. "I can imagine Judy. Being forgotten is one of the worst things that can happen to someone. I pray that your memory returns."

She brought her paw around to wrap her ears along the right side of her neck, opposite Jack. "Thank you." He grunted amicably before resuming his vigil. They say there for a time before she glanced over at him and asked, "So, what about you?" He made a noise of interest. "Surely you've made advances on Mai right? She seems like a well capable rabbit that has as much skill in combat as you do. You probably have a lot in common."

"Not even a full month getting to know us and you're already playing matchmaker." He laughed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to assume!" She began to sputter.

Jack had to fight to contain his mirth. "Please, it's alright. You are quite correct, I was drawn to Mai from the start but she had unfortunately rebuffed my advances. It doesn't make me think any less of her. Remarkable woman she is."

Judy looked down at the floor in disappointment. "I'm sure there was or is someone out there for you Jack. You are quite the handsome mammal."

He beamed at her praise, "Why thank you Judy. And you are quite beautiful, Nick was lucky to have you."

"Is." She corrected.

Jack placed a paw up, "Yes, 'is.' He is still out there, most likely thinking of you right now. I'm sure of it." They shared a smile at this sentiment. His expression turned sour, his eyes returning to the floor. "It really does me great pleasure in hearing you say those words though Judy. Throughout my young life, I was mocked and ridiculed for how I looked."

"What?" Judy said surprised, "I see nothing wrong with you…well, not yet." She added coyly, trying to lighten the suddenly somber mood.

He gave a half-hearted attempt at being glad but he went on to explain, "It was these," he gestured to his black fur markings around the sides of his cheeks and going across the back of his head, "I was a community outcast for the simple fact of the color of my fur. I would get beat up and mercilessly tortured by the kits in the colony."

Judy's heart was torn. This seemed too similar to Nick and how he was rejected by his peers for the mere fact he was a predator. She put a paw on Jack's arm, "How did you endure? Did they eventually change their minds about you?"

He shook his head. "Not in the slightest. I went my own way and left the place of my birth. I came to Zootopia to make a name for myself but like you, I was met with opposition from every side. Bunnies weren't allowed to do a lot of jobs because of bias and false assumptions."

"Yeah, I kind of know how that is." Judy agreed.

"So, I went into the underbelly of Zootopia in the Nocturnal District and learned the art of my craft there." Judy gasped as this reveal. He turned his head to regard her, "Yes, the fabled Nocturnal District, a place that can't be found except for those invited or those who already know where it is. That is where I educated myself in the ways of the gun. In time I grew so proficient that my master contracted me out to do my first hit."

"What was it like to kill your first mammal?" She asked tentatively, unsure of how deep she wanted
to go down this topic with him.

He gazed at her skeptically, "You don't know? Surely you've had to put down an uncooperative criminal at least once in your job?"

She scrunched her nose trying to think, "I honestly don't know. If I did, I certainly don't remember it right now. I'm not sure how I'd feel about taking another mammal's life."

Jack flashed a look of reservation, "But as police officers, you are at least prepared to take a life if the job required it, yes?"

She bowed her head in agreement at his assertion, "Absolutely. If lethal force was necessary, we were authorized to use it."

He made a quick jerk of his head, as if confirming something for himself before addressing her again, "Well to get back to your question, my first kill was...both invigorating and terrifying." She raised an eyebrow at this juxtaposition of description. A gleam in his eye glinted as he got lost in his ruminations, "The novel feeling of ending someone's life, something that took decades to put together, in a single instant was exhilarating. However, the very idea of what I had done and how many lives I had shattered with one bullet brought me great panic and biliousness to my stomach."

"Well there's a four dollar word Mr. Savage, as Gideon Grey used to say." Judy quipped.

"Who?" He asked puzzled.

She waved a paw to negate his question, "Don't worry about it. Just someone I knew back at the Burrows. I was referencing your biliousness."

Jack had to catch himself from laughing too loud and wake the others. "Oh...that! My master was also very wise and helped train me in book knowledge as well. I'm quite well informed in a lot of areas. I owe a lot of my life to him."

"So...did it get any easier? Killing mammals for hire?" Judy switched back to the previous topic.

Jack pondered the question a bit before answering, "It didn't get easier, if anything, it got less personal. I stopped feeling for the mammals I killed. I eventually just stopped asking questions and simply did the job."

"That sounds like an awful way to live." Judy remarked.

"It certainly doesn't allow for many friends." He added. "You end up telling so many lies that you start believing them yourself."

She contemplated this as she looked out over the rest of their motley crew still sleeping on either tables, in chairs or on the floor. "I've noticed they don't trust you very much."

"And I don't blame them." He said offhandedly.

"So why the deception up front? Why say you were a cop from a separate division?" She probed, wanting to know if anything he said was reliable.

He scrutinized her to see what she was getting at, "I was still under your contract Judy. I had not finished my job. So the only way I could have stayed in touch with you after your capture was to place my lot in with them and at the earliest opportunity - reestablish contact with you. It was just unfortunate that you were already comatose once we were finally informed where you were."
Yet, I do recall now that you had done this for free. Why do that when you work for money?" Something wasn't adding up and her old detective senses were tingling.

"It was my choice Judy." He stated flatly.

They stared at each other for a long time. Jack clearly had given his answer and it was sufficient for him but it was gnawing at Judy like a cancer. Something didn't make logical sense about Jack. She appreciated that he had been thus far willing to help her and support their cause but it baffled her why he'd show this much devotion to an employer who couldn't offer him any money in return. If he wanted her as a husband would a wife, she already established with him that she was taken. So why stay?

"My answer displeases you…" He murmured.

"No…I mean, yes…it does!" She stammered.

He snickered, "Just accept that I'm willing to do this for you and leave it at that. Consider it a way of paying you back."

"Paying me back? For what?" She grilled, utterly confused.

Before he could respond, Clawhauser let out a great snort before rolling onto his back. The braying sound alarmed Swinton and Bogo to their feet. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, the large buffalo looked out the doorway to the lone window visible from this angle. A sliver of morning sun peeked through the outer hallway and dressed itself across the carpeted dining floor as a single ray of warmth.

"Alright everyone, it is time to get up and get our butts moving! We have a lot to transfer to the car." Bogo boomed.

He was right, he and Rhinowitz did recon upstairs before they retired the previous night and confirmed the stash of food and medical supplies Jack had discovered earlier. It was far more than they were expecting. Jack had also secured a vehicle still with gas down in the parking garage and had it ready a week ago in preparation for this operation. Even with eight people, it was going to be a lot of heavy lifting and it would take the majority of the morning to pack it into the minivan.

"We'll talk later." Jack stated, inclining his head toward the others before hopping down from the buffet and walking over to pick up the rest of his gear.

Judy looked over and noticed Mai was still lying down in the chair where she had last seen her but her eyes were on Jack. How long had she been awake and listening to them? She didn't get a chance to ask when they had to calm down a very excitable Clawhauser who woke up nearly shrieking at being mauled by bats.

Judy's visit with Longneck went less than expected. Just even finding the numbers to both Ms. Stripe and Longneck's rooms was a hassle. Due to the Mammals Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, it was nigh impossible to convince the nurses at the front desk to reveal that information, citing patient privacy was paramount. After flashing her badge and threatening to come back with a freaking warrant, they finally relented and divulged the precious room numbers.

She decided to hit Longneck first since he was at a higher floor level than Ms. Stipe and was due to be released earlier. So she figured she'd start up at the top and work her way down. After some gruff greetings from the ornery giraffe that had a massive bulge on his neck of the cancer variety, she unfortunately dropped Nick's name like he had suggested. Much to her dismay, Longneck began
ranting and raving at her, physically throwing objects, bottles and literally anything within arm's reach that would knock her out cold if it connected.

She let him off with a warning but stomped down the hallway to the elevator, promising Nick a swift kick in the butt for even thinking mentioning his name would actually get her somewhere with these crime bosses. Outside of Mr. Big, she hadn't formally met any of the other major kingpins that cordoned off their piece of the Zootopia pie. Maybe Ms. Stipe would be a lot more agreeable?

Nick was right about one thing, Bogo probably knew the identities and names of each of them yet lacked sufficient evidence to tie any of them to a major crime he could arrest them for. So going to the hospital under the pretense of checking in with the afflicted victims for additional data research without knowledge of their true nature was a safeguard for her career and would alleviate any assumption that she was co-conspiring yet again with a crime figure.

Finally coming up to the proper room number, she rapped on the door a few times. After no response, she tried again. This time she could hear movement behind the door and a very weary, "Come in."

Judy opened the rather large door and shut it quietly behind her. She could hear the soft beeping of the heart monitor piercing the silence of the room. The garish curtain was draped across half of the bed, revealing only the two lumps under the salmon colored blankets where Stipe's hind hooves were. She peeked around the fabric to see the bongo awake and seemingly well, if not a bit tired looking. She had an IV drip and looked far worse for wear than Longneck did. Judy wondered if the recovery times from these attacks might differ from mammal to mammal.

"Oh, Officer Hopps." Stipe said softly, beckoning her to come closer. "I have heard so much about you."

"You have?" Judy marveled, pushing a rolling chair into position before leaping up onto it and swiveling to face her.

She smiled, "Of course. You know as well as I do that I have connections. Don't think you can lie and tell me you don't know who I am at this point."

Judy dropped the pretense and spoke plainly, "Yes ma'am, I know you are one of the four major crime bosses of Zootopia."

Stipe tittered at the description, putting a hoof to her mouth to contain the laughter. "You make it sound so black and white. We four are much greater than just simple criminals. You who are partnered to Nick Wilde should know this better than anyone."

Judy blushed at the statement but concluded Stipe may not be aware of anything outside of their professional relationship in the ZPD. "That's right. He told me you were one of the four." She gestured to her with a paw. "So if you don't perceive yourself to be a criminal, than what are you?"

Stipe looked out the window, scratching an itch on her tawny fur. "I prefer to think of myself as a silent defender of Zootopia. A protector of the peace, if you will."

Judy tilted her head to the side, confusion evident in her eyes. "That seems a bit pretentious. We at the ZPD already fulfill that function. We enforce the law and protect the peace in Zootopia." She was actually kind of upset Stipe would compare herself to being a police officer.

Stipe turned her head back to Judy to see the rising anger. She coolly rebuked, "You think just because we do not fall on the right side of the law that we are not capable of loving our city enough
to defend it? You are not the only one who wants to see this city succeed. We just go through other means to achieve our goals."

"That's the difference between you and I. You think it is okay to bend the rules to your whims and get what you want." Judy accused.

The bongo calmly placed both her hoofs in her lap, eyeing the police bunny with pity. "So says the cop who leaps through the loopholes in those rules to get what she wants." Judy opened her mouth to refute but Stipe silence her with a glare. "Look, we could go rounds all morning about what is right and wrong but I believe that was not your purpose in coming here. So if you have something to ask me then do so…otherwise my men will see you out."

"Your men…?" Judy began before jerking in her seat a little at the two antelopes who had seemingly appeared in the room. She hadn't even noticed or heard them come in which was odd. They stood on either side of Judy and were serenely standing at attention, their hooves clasped behind their backs.

"What?" Stipe said amused. "You didn't think I'd have bodyguards here at the hospital? You never can be too sure about one's safety, even in a hospital, when your enemies might want you dead."

"Okay then…" Judy said nervously, suddenly wondering just what it was exactly that she got herself into. She pulled out a small notepad and her carrot pen and flipped open to a blank page. "So, to the best of your recollection, on the night of the twelfth, what can you recall about your attack?"

"I had just finished my grocery shopping at the local Grazers and Lawn and traveled home directly to my apartment on Humphrey Lane." She began, recollecting as much detail as possible. "I took my limo of course but upon reaching my apartment, I sent away my bodyguards to their respective homes. I do not believe in keeping my employees on overtime just to watch me while I sleep." She added to explain her reasoning.

She put a hoof to her chin, "At that time, I did recall a chill in the air and noticed my upper loft window had been left open. I thought this was odd since I didn't recall leaving it that way when I left that morning. I closed it and began to sort my bought things in the kitchen to be put away."

Judy remembered that was where the start of the scuffle happened. "Did you check everywhere in your apartment to make sure nobody had snuck in through the window?"

"Of course." Stipe retorted. "I wasn't stupid. I checked every room and corner but unfortunately, I did not think to thoroughly check the larder since a quick glance in that small space revealed nothing hiding on the floor."

"You never thought to look up." Judy finished.

Stipe nodded, "As I was putting my groceries away, it attacked." She paused a few moments before continuing, "It felt like a searing fire had injecting itself into my neck. I tried to fight it off but it dragged me into the living den."

"What happened then?" Judy grilled, her eyes transfixed on the bongo.

"A most wonderful sensation, it felt like I was flying with the birds without a care in the world." Her expression dropped, "And then I wake up here in the hospital."

Judy's ears dropped with disappointment, "So you don't recall if anyone was tracking you that day or that you were being followed?"

Stipe shook her head, "No. There was no warning that this attack would occur."
Judy looked stumped. It was nice to get her documented account of the attack but it still didn't shed any light on the overall plot Nick supposed was happening. Nothing new was learned about the case. At length, she flipped the notebook closed and hopped off the chair. "Thank you so much for your time Ms. Stipe."

The bongo shrugged, "I'm sorry I couldn't have been more help." She gestured to her two antelope. "It was nice to meet you Officer Hopps. My men will see you out."

Judy raised a paw, "No, it's okay. I know the way. Have a good evening." Stipe gave her a curious look but said nothing as Judy headed out into the hallway on her own.

She was flummoxed. She couldn't really identify how the bats figured out who the crime bosses were and why they were targeting them. Ms. Stipe was unfortunately little help since she didn't reveal anything new about her assault. Longneck was disagreeable but she was sure he was more aware of what was going on before it happened to him too. She really got nothing out of that interview except some account of…

Her eyes popped open. The strange feeling of flying! Judy suddenly remembered that the signs of scuffle had ended as the scratches in the ceiling reaching the living den. That would have been about the time Stipe felt that sensation. Something about the bats biting into you made you feel good and less likely to resist. That was it! None of these mob bosses in their right minds would allow themselves to get caught unawares like that unless they were snuck up on and by the time the bats bit them, it was already too late! But…she needed an actual bat to bring in and examine what it was that was causing this pleasurable hallucinogenic reaction.

She had just stepped outside into the nippy, early morning air. She sent a text to Nick to make sure he was aware of her findings. He had yet to reply back. Hopefully he was all right. Seeing as he had the patrol car when he dropped her off and Mercy Hospital was within walking distance from home, she decided to just hoof it. It was yet a month or two away but she could tell winter was coming and not just the continual winter in Tundra Town.

She was walking past a small alley between two tall buildings when her ears perked up to the sound of a strangled cry. Unclipping the gun from her waist, she proceeded cautiously into the dank backstreet, stepping over trash and muddy puddles of filth. The sounds of grunting and shifting of fabric gave way to squishing and other unsavory resonances.

Gun pointed downrange, she rounded the bend to see a rather large shape thrusting heavily into something it was holding. What looked like blood was spurting out the top of this object. Judy reacted immediately, "Freeze! Don't move!"

The hulking shadow turned in her direction before ripping the object off and tossing it aside like trash. A huge torrent of what looked like blood dropped out of the thing that was cast to the ground. The mammal got on all fours and clopped off hurriedly, she fired a shot but it dinged off the building side. Judy ran down the alley as fast as she could, busting out the other end onto a busy street. She looked up and down the road, seeing nothing suspicious other than the slow traffic of pedestrians and bar hoppers at three a.m. in the morning.

Cursing her slow reactions, she holstered her gun and walked back to the object of interest. She kicked on her phone flashlight and just about vomited at the sight before her. Lying haphazardly like a hollowed-out shell was the body of an opossum, no bigger than she was. Its organs had been completely pushed up through and out of its mouth and were lying in a bloodied mess a meter away. All that was left was a huge cavity from the slacking jaw of the mammal all the way to its anus.

Shakily, she gripped the radio at her belt and brought it to her lips to call it in, stuttering slightly. "All
units, this is Officer Hopps. We have a 187 near the c-c-corner of Roaring and T-T-Tumbler. Please send for coroner and c-c-clean-up crew. I repeat…"

She collapsed to her knees, paws in her lap, unable to fight back the tears. This was beyond anything she had ever seen in Zootopia. She knew there were occasional murder cases all across the city, but she did not expect one to be this heinous. Something seemed familiar about it, however her mind was in a blank haze and she couldn't remember what exactly was pinging her memory. After a few minutes, she could hear the sirens wailing down the streets. In moments the flashing blue and reds were highlighting her in the alley.

"Hopps! Are you all right!?" A concerned Officer Wolford ran up beside her. He placed a paw on her back before turning to the object of her focus. "Holy crap! What happened to that opossum!?!"

Judy shook her head. "I don't know." She was barely able to speak. This was her first look at a dead mammal, insides and all. Her mind was grinding to a halt trying to process the image before her.

Wolford picked up his own radio, "We may need an escort for Officer Hopps. It appears she is distressed."

"Report in, what's going on?" Chief Bogo's voice echoed through the static.

"Officer Hopps found a dead body sir…its insides are scooped out." Wolford added.

A small intake of breath, then the voice of Bogo, "Understood. Detective Oates is in the nearby area, have him pick her up and take her home."

"Roger that sir." He took his finger off the talk button.

Officer Wolford brought Judy out to the street and waited with her until Detective Oates came by in his undercover cop car. He opened the passenger door and motioned for them to help her get in. Wolford shut the door, nodding at Oates before he turned to establish the crime scene with his partner.

Oates drove in silence for a while, not caring if his passenger was sitting without a seatbelt on. She seemed distant, staring at his glove compartment box but not really seeing it. He nickered, "You alright there Hopps?"

She slowly turned her head to realize she was being talked to. "Yeah. I think so…"

Oates sighed heavily, "Seeing a dead body for the first time can be quite shocking. I know…I've seen plenty in my time."

"Does it get any easier?" She responded blankly.

He shook his head, making a corner turn, "You get used to it though. It's all part of the job." He smiled at her, "Look, I like you Judy. You remind me of myself when I was younger. However, these types of crimes are common place when you're a detective. You need to realize that."

Finally getting some semblance of sanity, she started looking around out the windows, "Yeah, I know that. I'll be fine. It was just a shock, that's all. I had never seen something like that before."

"It's bound to happen to every cop at least once in their career, it just happened to you earlier than expected." He suppressed a chuckle. "Consider it a rite of passage." She flashed him a dirty scowl; clearly the humor was a bit too dark for her. "Okay, maybe that doesn't help you that much…" He backpedaled. Presently, he gave her a sidelong glance. "So…did you happen to see who it was that
killed the mammal?"

She looked down at her feet, dangling over the rather large car seat, "No, it was too dark in that backstreet. I couldn't see anything outside of the general size of him."

"That's unfortunate." Oates commented disappointed. "More than likely I'll be handling this case and I was hoping for a bit more to go on; in fact I should be there now investigating the crime scene but I was asked to come pick you up and take you home."

She beamed at him, "Well, I do appreciate you taking the time to do so."

He pulled up alongside the Grand Pangolin Arms, unlocking the doors so she could get out. "Anytime Hopps. As I said, us detectives need to stick together."

"Like Nick and I?" She queried, knowing the type of response she'd get.

Oates flattened his ears, giving her an irritated expression, "Yes…yes, like you two." He rolled his eyes, as she gave him a pointed look. "Fine, I will try to ease up off of him." He jabbed a finger hoof at her, "But in return, you need to make sure he does his work and not slack off. No helping! Got it?"

"Got it!" She piped up cheerfully.

His expression softened. "Just remember, if you need to talk to me about this…or anything, feel free to knock on my door. Okay?" She flushed at his offer, thrilled that her idol was extending such a generous proposal. "Good night Hopps. Try to get some rest. I have to gallop back to the crime scene and figure this out." He exhaled peevishly, his eyes back on the street. "A detective's work is never done."

Judy waved him goodbye as he drove off down the road. She worked her way up to her floor and turned the key in the handle. She opened the door to find that her mom had indeed spruced up the room. A slightly bigger bed had replaced her small one, large enough for Nick to fit in alongside her. Several pictures of her family now adorned the walls, one of her parents suspiciously placed to overlook her and Nick sleeping. A new desk lamp stood to provide more light to the room.

"Really dad!?" She cried out as she saw the brand new package of fox size condoms on her nightstand. They really did go out and get the proper brand.

It had been an exhausting morning. They couldn't fit all the supplies in the back of the minivan but with Swinton's masterful help of packing things in tightly, they were able to maximize the amount of space available to fit over half of the non-spoiled food, medical equipment as well as several clips of ammo from the security post in the hotel. Clawhauser was wheezing down the last flight of stairs to the humid garage with the final box of food.

"I got that for you." Higgins offered, taking the rather full box off of the cheetah's hands.

"Oh bless your heart." Clawhauser rasped.

"That's the last of it." Bogo noted with a self-edifying nod. He scanned their small group, "Is everyone here?"

Judy checked herself and noted all were present and accounted for, outside of Clawhauser who was seated at the bottom of the stairs, still catching his breath. He may have lost a ton of weight but it still didn't improve his overall stamina that much.
"Everyone is here." She confirmed.

Bogo gave a lingering look at big cat before shoving himself into the tiny passenger seat, forcing the door closed from the inside. "Clawhauser! Let's get moving!" He roared.

Rhinowitz and Higgins hopped into the two side doors while Swinton, Mai, Jack and Judy had to scramble over their bulky bodies to get into the back seats, spreading out to share the seatbelts in the back amidst all the boxes and gear. Clawhauser made an unintelligible response before pushing off his knees to wobble up to standing.

He began to limp over to the van, tired already. A scrabbling sound of nails on metal perked his ears up to a bat that had been awoken by Bogo's rather loud shout. It seemed to have been sleeping atop the hood of one of the parked cars, unseen by any of them. Its leathery wings awkwardly bulging out at the joint as it tried to maneuver up over the roof of the car, it spied the cheetah and snarled, glistening drops of saliva dripping atop the metal.

Petrified, Clawhauser whipped out his gun and fired off a shot. It miraculously plowed right through the creature's face, bursting out the other side spraying crimson everywhere. With a shriek, it collapsed atop the car before its weight slid it down the side in a heap on the pavement.

"Clawhauser, you idiot!" Swinton yelled from the back seat. "You just alerted all of them!"

All three rabbits' ears shot to attention as they heard the multitude of clicking all around them. The sounds were hustling down the floors to where they were in the garage while more were closing in fast from the outside. Clawhauser gasped heavily as he plopped into the driver seat and slammed the door.

"Floor it!" Bogo bellowed, not giving the cheetah time to fasten his own seatbelt.

The cobalt minivan peeled out of the parking garage and into the blinding sun, zipping down the road at a decent clip. Rhinowitz glanced back to see a steady stream of bats erupt from one of the secondary garages. "We got company!" He barked.

"Mai, Jack, Judy! To the roof now!" At a look in the rearview mirror at the baffled look from Judy, he clarified. "Higgins, Rhinowitz, be sure to hold them tight. Do not let them go!"

Mai unbuckled herself and put a paw up, unsheathing her sword. "I do not need such assistance." Bogo grunted but did not argue.

Both Higgins and Rhinowitz opened the side doors, letting them slide to the rear before allowing the three rabbits to climb up top. With each holding a foot of both Judy and Jack, the three bunnies steadied themselves against the buffeting winds. Jack peacefully loaded his automatic and pulled out a scope to attach on top for better aiming. Taking the Smith and Weasel she had procured, she pulled it out and aimed it down on the incoming stream of bats.

Within seconds, Jack began firing into the ground with alarming precision. One shot per bat as they tumbled and fell from the sky, crashing into barrels, cars, buildings, windows and trash cans. Judy picked off a few with her own gun, her heart beating fast. Several swooped and evaded her shots, closing distance on their car. Mai leaped high, slicing several necks on the way up before landing on the backs of two bats, cutting their wings off at the joints, spraying blood everywhere. She rode them down until she was able to leap frog her way along the stream, cutting off heads, to finally land back down onto the minivan, right next to an impressed Jack and startled Judy.

"Hold onto something!" Clawhauser screamed, making a hard right turn to throw the bats off their
Jack crouched low alongside Mai, who proceeded to grip his arm for balance on the tight turn. Judy caught on too late and was swung out over the side off the roof. She yipped in fear before Rhinowitz resituated his hold on her ankle and brought her back into the van, her gun sailing off onto the street, clattering uselessly on the cobblestone.

"Well there goes my favorite." Jack mumbled under his breath.

"You okay?" Rhinowitz asked concerned.

Judy bowed her head unsteadily. "Yes, put me back up there."

"Give her a weapon!" Bogo commanded. Swinton tossed her small pistol before Rhinowitz helped her get back onto the rooftop, ready to fire more rounds.

"Dear heavens..." Mai exclaimed. All eyes went to the Oasis, the towering palm tree looming over Sahara Square. All the windows seemed to shatter as droves of bats flew out of the hotel, congregating together like a black cloud that blotted out the sun. "Go faster!" Mai yelled.

"I am! The pedal's already to the floor! It won't go any faster!" Clawhauser complained. Bogo shunted his hoof over and pressed down hard on the cheetah's foot. "Ow, ow, okay now it's to the floor!"

They had a few more blocks to go before they reached the open sands and the long stretch of road to the barrier wall. The bats were closing in fast. It seemed their meager attempts to shoot them down was futile, there was simply too many. Mai was the first to notice several bats flying up and over them, carrying a rather long metal cord in their mouths.

"Look above!" Mai shouted.

Bogo immediately saw what they were going to do as they descended down in front of them, stretching the line taut between them. "Turn Clawhauser!"

"I can't sir!" He panicked. "There aren't any more side streets big enough for this van! We got nowhere to go but straight to the highway!"

"Everyone duck!" Swinton screeched.

Both Higgins and Rhinowitz yanked Judy and Jack back into the van, holding them close to their bodies as they leaned out their respective doors. The bats ripped through the upper half of the van with their cord, using the combined velocities to tear the metal roofing clean off. Mai back-flipped over them and landed in the back seat beside Swinton, looking back to see the top part of the vehicle clang on the pavement drawing sparks until it came to a complete stop. Her eyes zeroed in on the massive influx of bats swirling around the main street towards them. They'd be upon the van in seconds.

"Open fire!" She cried.

On cue, both Rhinowitz and Higgins lifted Judy and Jack above their heads, allowing them to fire back at the incoming swarm. Bodies fell left and right but it kept surging onward. Jack disentangled himself from Higgin's hands and hopped over to get Judy down below the level of the seats. Mai saw the danger as well. With them being so small, they could easily be picked up and carried off. She hopped low and stared up as the first few bats hit the car.
"Slam them into the wall!" Bogo ordered.

Clawhauser brought the wheel hard left, crushing the bats against the nearest building, dragging them along its surface, trailing bright red smears. They hissed and clawed but could not gain purchase to escape. At length, they reached the end of the final building and the bats fell past the van, toppling to the ground in a convulsing, injured heap. Rhinowitz and Higgins struck a few more off the van that still had managed to hold on.

"The boundary wall is straight ahead!" Rhinowitz pointed out.

"We're not going to make it!" Swinton cried.

She stood up to get a better view of the tunnel that was to be their salvation. It was her last mistake. The bats flowed across the car again, catching up once more. All three bunnies squatted low to avoid being snatched up. Jack and Judy peppered them as best they could with holes, some flopping into the cabin with them, jerking in their death throes. Bogo, Rhinowitz and Higgins were punching them clear off of the road, their bodies tumbling down the sandy embankments on either side.

Swinton screamed as several bats gripped her shirt and ears with their talons, lifted her completely out of the minivan. Within seconds, they had zoomed along with her. Judy howled, pointing up to the ensnared pig. She was being bitten from all angles, fangs piercing her skin all over. The toxin overlaid on their fangs infused itself into her bloodstream. Within seconds she stopped screaming and went limp, immediately soiling herself with the euphoric orgasm wrought by their bites. She was now nothing more than a grotesque, wriggling mass of brown wings and fur. They had lost sight of Swinton.

"I got this." Jack said calmly, sidestepped another bat that had been shot down and landing into the back seat beside them.

Steadying himself at another swerve of the van by Clawhauser, he swiftly pulled out from his pocket a small barrel attachment for the bottom of his automatic and loaded what looked like an explosive round into it. He brought it to eye level, took a breath and fired. His aim was true and it sunk into the mass of writhing flesh. Judy's eyes teared up as the shockwave from the explosion hit them. It blew open a wide, cerise hole in the cloud of bats, many of them raining to the earth like fireballs. Jack had done Swinton a mercy.

Splatters of blood and mist drizzled onto them all as he turned to the front. They were nearly there. Bogo glared back at Jack, "Do you have any more of those explosive rounds?" Jack pulled out two more in affirmation. "Good, shoot down the tunnel entrance behind us!"

"Up ahead!" Rhinowitz informed.

Several bats were crawling up the boundary wall like spiders, angling themselves over the tunnel in an effort to pounce on them as they got near. Judy took aim and popped one off the wall on the left while Mai unveiled a few shuriken and impaled the other by its wings to the structure. It squealed in pain and tried in vain to release itself from the embedded stars, which only served to tear bigger holes in the membrane until it slipped completely and collapsed to the ground, its wing still dangling on the wall.

"Now!" Bogo boomed.

Jack fired at the central arch above them as they passed underneath it. The explosion reverberated through the tunnel, deafening them for a brief moment. The column of bats squawked and trilled as several mighty blocks of concrete and metal rampage down upon them, sealing up the entrance.
completely. Clawhauser flicked on the headlights to see down the dark tunnel now that they had no more light sources.

They were all breathing heavily, the adrenaline still not yet out of their systems. Using several flashlights, they helped the three rabbits pick up the corpses that had fallen into the vehicle and unload them off the side as they continued to press on. None said a word for there was nothing left to be said. Clawhauser felt the guiltiest of them all, but it wasn't entirely his fault. They all knew what they had signed up for going on this mission. It was just Swinton that had paid the price.

"We should be in Savannah Central soon. We can make it back to base from there." Bogo said wearily.

Judy shook her head, even though the buffalo wasn't able to see it. "No, they would know where this tunnel ends up. We should take Maintenance Route 2B. It's just up here on the right." She suggested.

"How do you know that?" Bogo snorted.

"When you work with a conman as a partner, there are a few things you remember about the road systems of Zootopia. This should put us past Savannah Central and directly in downtown, which would be closer." She reasoned, slumping down in the seat, completely drained and unable to continue.

Bogo accepted her recommendation with a flick of his head. "Clawhauser be prepared to turn right here soon."

"Yes sir." He said, tears streaming down his face for Swinton.

Mai and Jack sat on each side of Judy as they rode on in the dark. This was what she needed to see; the extent of the desolation and the lethality of the bats. It wasn't something they wanted to expose her to but it had to be done to get Judy to understand their position and why she was needed so much for the information she carried. They laid their heads together and embraced the silence of the road.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter came together quite fast once I nailed down an overall narrative flow. After promising to finally conclude the raid several chapters ago, I ensured I made good on that promise here. I knew this would be one of the biggest action scenes yet and would set the stage for more to come. The conversation with Jack Savage was an attempt to establish his character a bit more and his deepening relationship to Judy and what happened in the past that she still needs to remember - that and to keep the air of mystery around him a bit longer! The action scene itself had to be carefully handled since too much of it would burn readers out. In cinema, you can have this stuff going for 15-20 minutes but here, you need to make sure each 'beat' of the action has a point and purpose, otherwise it gets repetitive. I knew I needed a chance for each of the bunnies to shine, a moment with Clawhauser, several attempts of killing bats, the entire top of the car getting sliced off, smashing bats along a wall, explosions and Swinton's death. As long as I hit each major action beat, I could move onto the next and it was a free-flowing scene that did its purpose. For the past event with Stipe, as much as I really wanted to follow Nick to Mr. Big's home, these memories are Judy's and so I could only stick with her end of the events. I will get around to Nick's side from second hand sources but I really wanted to follow our protagonist, Judy. This rather horrific murder she stumbles
across ties into events that'll lead to the conclusion of the past storyline arc, so I wanted to introduce it now. Enjoy and more to come!
Chapter 11: Parents as People

The next few days were hectic for both of them. Nick had come in that first morning just as Judy was waking up; having gotten a second set of keys made for him the day prior. He made little comment about the new additions to her room; he simply undressed out of his police uniform, having it crumple to the floor in a heap, before rolling into the bed next to her and wrapping a furry arm around her waist.

She tensed, thinking he might want to try again that morning, but within moments he was out cold, snoring like her grandpa on a midsummer's eve. She couldn't help but smile and shake her head into the pillow. It felt weird having another person to share the bed with. She was used to her younger siblings sneaking into bed with her back at the Burrows, but that was different. Now it held a completely new meaning and it made her heart race.

She knew she had to be at work soon and provide a decent enough cover story for why Nick wasn't coming in with her, but she couldn't deny the serenity of just lying there and feeling the softness of his chest against her back rising and falling with his measured breathing. She basked in the warmth of his body, letting it flow through her as he unconsciously drew his tail up and over her legs. The soft, possessive flutter of his fur tickling hers shot shivers of excitement through her limbs.

She didn't realize her breathing had sped up in intensity until she felt dampness around her loins. Just being near him in such an intimate manner was beginning to turn her on! As much as she'd like to act upon her urges, she knew he had been out all night trying to find Mr. Big. She disentangled herself from his loving embrace and slipped over his sleeping form on the bed. She softly padded to the desk and checked her text messages on her phone.

"Hey, it's me. Looks like no one is here. I'm going to investigate further." She flipped to the next. "Signs of a scuffle and a comatose polar bear who ended up being a bit too happy…Gross. I called it in and they'll take him to the hospital." She swiped to the final text from Nick. "Tonight has been a failure. No contact with Mr. Big. I'm assuming he went underground like Rosco. I'll be home soon."

Judy broke into a smile and looked back at the sleeping fox. The poor thing, he was out literally all night. No wonder he passed out. She had to suppress a giggle. He at least knew where home was now, so that was a big step in their relationship together. His internal autopilot didn't direct him back under a bridge or some condemned building and instead brought him directly to her apartment. She wondered how he felt about all of this moving in with her. He appeared rather shocked when she first suggested it the night before last…it seemed like an age ago.

She pulled the covers up over his shoulders and gave him a small peck on the cheek before getting dressed into her uniform. She clipped on her badge and stopped at the mirror, scrutinizing herself. Judy felt she wasn't particularly attractive. As far as bunnies go she was pretty average. Something about her made Nick fall head over heels and Gazelle helped Judy release the shackles from her mind and view Nick in the same way. She gazed over at him once more and marveled: 'That is my fox.'

As Nick expected, Chief Bogo accepted the story of her visiting bite victims to get their firsthand accounts to help further the case along. He was a bit disgruntled when he was informed Nick had gone in search of Mr. Big without backup but he was impressed that no one but Nick noticed the connection between each individual attack and the targeting of the four known crime bosses in
Zootopia. Because of this revelation, he gave Nick a pass that day to sleep it off and to come in bright and early the next to file his report.

Several of her colleagues, including Wolford, Pennington, McHorn and even Detective Oates came by to check in to see if she was doing any better since her rather ghastly discovery earlier that morning. She assuaged them that she was perfectly alright now and they needn't worry. She typed up her report from the previous night's events and began correlating all data based on Nick's discovery to include Mr. Big's disappearance just that morning. By the time afternoon had rolled around, she was already yawning, having not slept much earlier.

Officer Swinton tapped on her cubicle partition, strolling up with a smug look. "Hey there superstar!"

Judy's eyes went wide before swiveling the chair to look at her, "What did you call me?"

"Superstar!" She snickered. At the perplexed look from Judy, Swinton whipped out her phone and tapped on it a few times before turning it to show her a picture. "You're all over town now. I'm surprised you didn't get mobbed on your way in!"

Judy gripped the phone from Swinton and stared at it. There was her academy graduation photo, complete with full department regalia on her left breast. Her ears up proudly and a shining smile on her mug, her cap held underneath her right arm. It was plastered along the side of a bus in the center of the picture. It looked like the image was angled just right to also catch Judy's picture on the side of an enclosed bus stop as well. Three words were emblazoned next to her: Trust. Integrity. Bravery.

Swinton took the phone back from a stunned Judy. "You're even up on billboards across the entire city in all districts! How could you not know?"

She was in complete shock. She never even bothered to look up while driving to work. She was so completely focused on getting here she didn't realize her face was everywhere. Lionheart really went full throttle on this public face of the ZPD campaign. What once started off as Bellwether and Chief Bogo's idea had now blossomed into something of astronomical proportions. She never truly comprehended the full gravity of what this could do to her reputation until that very moment. If people weren't already aware of her via the Nighthowler case, everyone would know her face and name now and soon find out about her personal life with Nick. She began feeling weak.

"Judy?" Swinton probed tentatively, a look of concern on her face. "Is everything all right?" She certainly didn't look fine to her. Judy was darting her eyes around like a caged mammal, her breathing intensifying beyond normal pace.

Looking up at Swinton, her eyes slightly glossed with not actually seeing her, Judy blurted out. "I'm…not feeling well. I need to go out for a bit."

"Judy?" Swinton asked again, attempting to put a hoof on her shoulder for comfort.

Judy swiftly locked the computer, slipped down off the chair and deftly sidestepped around Swinton before running down the row of workspaces. Clawhauser called out to her in cheerful greeting, trying to find a way to pull her aside and talk to her about his involvement with tailing her and Nick but she ignored him and kept going out the front revolving doors. She moved with purpose to her patrol car and hopped in. Standing on the pedals in her seat, she buckled up and swerved out of the parking lot onto the main road through the roundabout in the center of downtown.

She took the roads almost by rote memory based on what little she saw out the limo windows when they were driven to Gazelle's party. She pulled up to the front entrance and had to literally hang out
by a hind leg to push the call button on the exterior speaking perched just meters before the dual metal gates leading to the diva's circular driveway. After a few minutes, the device crackled to life.

"Who is calling?" A gruff voice, no doubt one of her tigers.

"It's me, Officer Judy Hopps." She yelled into the speaker, trying her best to hang on to the car window with her hind feet and the device with her front paws. "Can I come in?"

Another short wait and the bars started swinging inward. Judy praised in relief as she pushed off and got back into her car seat. Slowly pressing the gas and maneuvering around to the steps leading to the double doors, she could see through the windowed living room Gazelle making her way to the front door. Several of her dancing troupe lay draped over several pillows in the atrium, shockingly half nude revealing their brilliant stripes.

"Judy!" Gazelle cried out joyfully, extending her arms out to her as she shut off the engine and hopped out of the car. "It is so good to see you again." She picked up the little rabbit and kissed each cheek in turn before setting her down. "But so soon…?"

"I'm sorry to intrude, it's a bit of a story but I didn't know who else to turn to." She explained hastily, nervousness evident in her posture.

"Oh, you are always welcome here Judy. Come in, please." She opened the door wider for her to step in. She clopped her hooves sharply twice. "Get some refreshment for my guest." She motioned with her arm into the sunroom off to the left where she had set up a small reading nook with several books piled high on the cushions. "We can talk in there."

Gazelle molded herself into the pile of multicolored pillows that were propped up against the bookcase at one end of the semi-circle of raised cushions. She was wearing a one piece sundress with a very beautiful pineapple print that split at the thigh on either side. Presently, a tiger came with a tray and two glasses of sun tea to which Gazelle thanked him and handed Judy the smaller of the two.

"So what brings you here Judy? Was my advice not good? I thought for sure you and Nick would hit it off." She seemed troubled but her expression remained placid.

Judy took an uneasy sip from her tea which was just lightly sweetened to help ease the parching of her throat. "Oh, we did... boy did we..."

"No, actually." Judy corrected. "We didn't really go through with it." Gazelle cocked an eyebrow at this. Judy put her paw out to clarify. "I mean, thank you for helping me get over a few things I was dealing with about Nick. I don't think it would have gotten as far as it did without your advice but then-"

That strange, throaty laugh reverberated from Gazelle as she regarded the endearing bunny. "You're rambling Judy." She accused jokingly, making the rabbit flush furiously. "Is it a size issue?" After some hesitation, Judy nodded meekly. Gazelle smirked but did not laugh at her. Instead she gazed out over her glorious tigers lounging in the foyer. "Do you think it was any different with me? It was something we all had to work through together with trust, respect and a lot of patience." She turned back to Judy. "Just like you and Nick will eventually."

Judy's ears dropped in embarrassment at what she was to say next, "But he's so big!" She exclaimed,
spreading her hands out wide, nearly spilling her tea.

This time Gazelle did not contain her laughter. "You two are so adorable together." She put a hoof up, "Let me see if I have something that might help."

Judy's interest was piqued as she watched Gazelle step away and climb up the spiral steps to an enclosed loft, presumably their bedroom. At length, she came back down with a small bottle in hand. She sat beside her again and handed the rather large tube to Judy, requiring her to set down the tea and hold it with both paws. She read the side writing and opened her eyes, half mortified this was being offered.

"Predaglide?" She mouthed. "Sleek feeling and smooth action gel." She looked up at Gazelle. "I don't think I deserve this."

The singer actually looked a bit ruffled, that something Judy had said seemed offensive to her. "Nonsense! You are a young, beautiful bunny in the prime of her life. You should treat yourself once in a while."

Judy looked deflated, her shoulders slumping, "I just can't believe I'm even here. What is so special about me that would make a famous pop star my friend?"

The thought that she was getting sexual advice and assistance from Gazelle floored her. What did she do that made her deserve such attention from the famous singer? It was just a one-time meeting before the doors of Mayor Lionheart's office. She couldn't have predicted it would lead her here, now in front of Gazelle accepting sexual lubricant from her.

Realizing the seriousness of Judy's conflagration, she set her tea down and leaned forward toward her. "Judy, the moment we met, I saw that you had a big heart. While others were wasting their time being ignorant of these bats, you took the time to think up of a solution so that Zootopia could grow with their inclusion. You sought answers rather than finding problems. That drew me to you immediately. I understand that you are at a new stage in your life where you are taking the next big step to be involved with another. I do not underestimate your uncertainty. Just take courage in knowing you have someone who loves you regardless of who you are."

Judy looked down at the tube for a time. Maybe Gazelle was right. She was just scared because this was something new that she had not trained or prepared herself for all her life. She was still apprehensive about trying sex again with Nick again combined with the thought of what others would think of a predator and prey dating. So many unknowns lay ahead of her. It was much simpler when she had a clear goal to strive for with measurable milestones. It was much easier to organize her life by the next quantifiable challenge in view on the horizon.

She reread the text on the tube and lifted it slightly, "Is this really going to help?"

"Try it next time, my treat." Gazelle crooned, picking her tea back up and taking another sip. "That might make it easier for you two." After a pause, "Is that all you wanted to talk about?"

Judy set down the lubricant and put her paws on her lap, "No…there's something else." Gazelle said nothing but it was clear she had her undivided attention. Judy looked out the window, not wanting to meet the gaze of the pop singer. "I guess I'm still unsure of how people will view me and Nick being together as a couple."

"Why should that matter?" Gazelle asked.

Judy motioned outside back toward the central area of downtown. "You saw them…my face is
plastered everywhere, in all districts! People will know me by sight now if they haven't before! And they'll see that I'm involved with a fox." She turned back to Gazelle, "He's already getting a bad rap at the ZPD for being who he is and I'm trying my best to support him but it's hard when people aren't willing to give him a fair shake from the start."

"Do not be selfish about your job Judy. It is a good thing that you are standing by your man. It shows depth of character to defend your mate when everyone is against your union." She gestured to her tigers. "Take my love for them, for example. I was ridiculed for being in love with predators when I was younger. I was not afraid of them because I saw them for who they are...as people. They needed and wanted the same things we all do - love, respect, admiration. I realized this at an early age and chose to have my first love be a bear."

At a curious look from Judy, she continued, "It didn't end up working out but it helped me overcome my fears of loving whom I love. When I got my big break with my first hit single that topped the charts, I was suddenly thrust into the spotlight and I could do no wrong. It seemed my personal issues paled in comparison to my fame as a singer. Nobody cared about who I was as a person the moment I took up that microphone. It was then I met these four and we've been together ever since."

Judy wasn't so sure, "Well your spotlight is a lot different than mine. You're a celebrity, I'm a cop. I'm bound by duty, rules and etiquette. I feel Nick would be judged more harshly because of his relationship to me."

"Admit it, you're scared of being condemned yourself for loving a predator, ashamed that you've gone outside the norm and fallen in love with a fox." She smiled at the bunny with empathy. "It is all right to acknowledge our own faults Judy, as long as we strive to correct them and be a better person each passing day."

Judy wasn't sure if love was the right term for her feelings just yet toward Nick but she did have to admit her bodily reactions when around him could not deny her interest in him. "I do like him a lot...yes." She confessed softly.

"Love whom you want Judy. Let the rest of the world take care of itself." Gazelle snapped her hoof fingers, "That's it! You just inspired me to write a new song!"

"I did?" Judy looked at her incredulously.

"You did!" The diva smiled. She motioned her over to the rather large, oak dining table situated just alongside her open kitchen. "Come with me. I'd like your input on the lyrics. I think helping you put your feelings to words will alleviate this burden on your heart."

Judy beamed as she took Gazelle's hoof and hopped down from the cushions before following her into the dining area. Never in a million years could she have imagined herself in the home of Gazelle, helping her write what could be her next hit single!

"Momma!" Nala cried, bounding off the bed, her baggy, white shirt flapping and tackling Judy as she walked in through the door. Her eyes got wide as she spied splotches of red scattered all across her mother's fur and clothes. "Are you hurt?" She wondered, her nose twitching.

"No, but I am very tired." She mumbled wearily, setting the kit down.

Stepping into the room behind her was Mai. She was also covered in sporadic drops of crimson. "The operation was more or less a success." She informed the little hare, although her tone also sounded defeated.
"Did anyone get hurt? Why is there blood on your clothes?" Nala pressed, clearly not okay with the situation, already wringing her paws with anxiety.

"Swinton died." Jack said casually from the doorway, his shape leaning up against its frame.

"Jack!" Judy snapped, giving him a glare. "You could at least be a bit more sensitive around Nala!"

The striped rabbit shrugged. "I understand you've had very little time to be around your daughter but I think you underestimate her too much."

"Please, that's enough." Mai motioned for Jack to get a move on.

"See you later tonight for dinner ladies." He headed down the hall smiling, giving a wave as he went.

Nala sniffed a bit but was holding up rather valiantly to the abrupt news. "It's okay mom. At least she'll be with her children now. She's no longer suffering."

Judy blinked. She barely recalled Swinton even having a family, let alone kids. She rummaged around in her mind for some semblance of recollection but all she could recall is that her husband left her quite early in the marriage for a younger swine. "Kids?" She asked.

Nala nodded, "Yeah, they escaped with everyone else during the first invasion of the bats. I was not even a year old when Dad," Judy had to mentally remind herself that Nala's dad was Nick. She remained silent and allowed her to continue, "finally found this place. We were discovered on the way here and her kids weren't fast enough..." She paused, trying to find the strength to continue. "They didn't make it."

"Those monsters grabbed them as they stumbled. I wasn't much older myself than them at that time." Mai filled in, wrapping an arm around Nala's shoulders. "Officer McHorn saved the rest of us little ones and managed to get us to safety. He went back out there to use himself as bait." She cast her eyes downward on the next statement. "We haven't heard from him since."

Judy remembered McHorn back in the early days of being on the force. Her first day in precinct one, he was beside her in the bullpen. She was all bright-eyed and bushy tailed, without a care in the world; excited that she was finally making a difference and enthusiastic to be working her first day as a police officer. When she prompted him for a fist bump, he humored Judy by pressing her and the chair she was on literally several feet across the floor. In the end, he wasn't a bad rhino and was a softy at heart.

"I don't know any of these people they speak of." Nala commented quietly, her ears droopy. "They all sound like really nice people and I wish I could have met them." Her eyes gazed upwards into Judy's. "I almost didn't think I'd get to meet you. I kept asking Dad over and over again to let me join him just once to see you. He kept saying no."

"I would probably say the same if it were reversed." Judy agreed, taking what she believed to be a motherly tone. "After what I have just seen today, I don't want you anywhere near the front doors of this place."

Nala began to get flustered. With her ears raised, she tore her paws away from Judy's defiantly. "But it is reversed mom! Now Dad is the one that needs help! Are we doing anything to go rescue him?"

It was Mai's turn to step in, giving Nala a gentle squeeze with her paw. "We're still figuring that out honey. I understand it is frustrating to have your Dad gone suddenly after all these years. We just need to have Judy remember what-"
Nala stood up suddenly, knocking off Mai's arm. "What if Mom never remembers?!" She cried angrily, looking Judy directly in the eyes. "How many more of my friends have to die before you remember?" She glared accusingly. "I bet you don't remember Dad either! Do you even love him anymore?!"

Before Judy could say anything, the kit ran out of the room crying. They could hear her sobs waning down the hall and down the stairs. Judy slumped to the bed, slamming her fist into the linen sheets. Why was this so hard? She felt like a terrible mother. It was one thing to give birth to a child and be there during the formative years of their life, it was quite another to be shoved into having a kid that was already old enough to take care of themselves. She didn't know how to relate to Nala or how to treat her.

Mai patted Judy on the arm, "I wouldn't let her get to you. She's just upset. I'm pretty sure she didn't mean what she said. Give her time and she'll come around."

"No…" Judy said mournfully. "She's right, what if I don't remember? What if I've just damned Nick to an oblivion of savagery because of my amnesia?"

"That wasn't your fault Judy." Mai reminded. "Whatever the bats did to you these past five years was the cause. You had no part in that." She looked off to the open corridor again. "It has been quite empty around here without Nick around. I'll give her that. He loved that kit so much. Even when he was extremely busy doing things for Bogo, he would make time to sit down and read her a short story."

"We have books around here?" Judy queried, her eyes skimming around the room at the rather odd toys and contraptions that no young bunny should ever have to look at and question its purpose.

Mai chuckled. "No, not from here, but Nick and Savage did go out on a few raids to the nearby libraries to bring back some for her."

"That was thoughtful." Judy observed.

"It was." Mai took a deep breath before walking toward the door. "Anyway, we should clean up and get dressed for dinner. You should go and talk to Nala again when you can. I'm sure she'll have gotten over her flare up by then. She is a pretty resilient child."

She was on her way out when Judy called her back, "Mai, how old were you when the bats attacked?"

Mai rested a paw on the doorframe, pondering the question. "I was only five at the time."

Judy was stunned. "You're ten?"

"Eleven." She smiled. "I just turned eleven a few days before rescuing you." Her smile faded. "We've all had to grow up in ways we wish we hadn't. See you at dinner Judy." With a lingering sorrow, she departed and proceeded to the showers.

By the time Judy got around to gathering her clothes for the evening, which were thoughtfully put out by Nala prior to them returning home, Mai had just gotten done with the water and gave her a bow of the head in greeting before heading off to her own room to freshen up. Judy lingered in the shower, watching the swirling flow of water take the rivulets of blood down the drain, the last evidence that Swinton had ever existed at all. Would any of them have anything left for others to remember them by when they died?

Judy was ruffling up her fur with the towel before casting a care at a picture on the nightstand by her
and Nala's shared bed. Alongside the wedding photo, there was one with Nick and Nala just beside
the main staircase in the foyer leading to the second floor. He was sitting on the bottom step, hugging
their kit tightly; giving a playful nip on the ear as she was giggling incoherently in his tight embrace.
They looked so happy and innocent, despite it being taken within the past year. She could almost
pretend it was from a happier time when none of this had happened.

Judy picked up the photo and stared at it, yearning to know the little girl in the picture. Sure they had
conversations and gotten to know one another in the past few weeks. She knew that Nala actually
hated carrots and despised their texture and that her favorite color was ginger. Judy snorted at the
thought. Of course her favorite color would be that of her dad's fur! No chance of her being a
mommy's girl at all.

A faint wisp of a smile loitered on her face. She couldn't ignore that there was a disconnect between
them. Most of their talks consisted of mainly surface level things or when asked about Nick, Nala's
eyes would brighten and she could talk for hours about him. Whenever any other heavy topics came
up, her interest would wane and the moment would peter out between them. Sure she felt love there,
but it wasn't the type that was uniform. It was almost like a key ingredient was missing from their
relationship and she couldn't begin to know where to find it.

Setting the frame back on the stand, she slipped into a pair of jeans and a red blouse that had draping
sleeves. She did have to compliment her daughter's interesting tastes, granted these procured clothes
were probably already here from previous bunny sized 'employees' that worked at the brothel.
Something about that thought set her off slightly, knowing that the original wearer of these clothes
was not just a call girl but was also quite possibly dead by this point. She shook off the idea and
closed the door to their room before striding down the hall to the scullery below.

Quite a few other former officers were already there. Rhinowitz, Higgins, and even Trunkaby were
situated in their seats of varying sizes, eating whatever was available from the kitchen. They glanced
up at her entrance, each giving some acknowledgement before settling down to eating some more.
There were a few other mammals she didn't recognize as cops but she assumed they were also part of
the resistance. Not seeing Nala at all in the small gathering, Judy moved past them into the
kitchenette proper.

Scouring the sleek, metal cabinets, she spotted two bunny ears protruding up past the island stove in
the center of the room. Walking around she saw Nala working at the smaller counter where things
were more their size. She was working on frying up some vegetables in a pan over low heat. The kit
had yet to notice her mom's entrance; either that or she didn't care. Judy wasn't exactly sure which
yet.

"Hey Nala." Judy tried to sound casual.

At first it didn't seem like she was going to respond, she just continued to stir vegetables in the pan to
ensure all sides got thoroughly cooked. "I'm sorry...about earlier mom." She finally said at last.

Judy stepped closer to her daughter and looked over her shoulder at the food. "It's okay. We just met
two weeks ago. To think, I suddenly found out I had a daughter! We're both struggling to figure out
how to relate to one another. Besides I probably deserved it."

Nala shook her head violently, stopped stirring, and looked up at Judy. "It wasn't right. I blamed you
for Dad being gone. I know it wasn't your fault. He loved you and risked his life every day because
of you. I should be more grateful for him bringing you back alive."

Judy regarded her with amazement. "You are really articulate for your age."
Nala smiled, moving her shoulders like she knew this to be true. "Well, when you have the best Dad in the world, it kind of comes with the territory."

"And have inherited some of his wit." She jibbed, ruffling the fur between the bunny's ears. The little girl chuckled.

"I love you mom." She hugged Judy.

"Love you too Little Carrots." She replied back, filling the void with the nickname.

Nala backed up suddenly at the name, a huge grin on her face. "That's the same name daddy gave me!"

Judy raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? I came up with that just now."

Nala slammed her head into Judy's chest, snuggling in deeper. "You can call me that too Mom. I don't mind." She listened to her mother's heart beating. "Makes me feel like he's still here…"

A slight change in odor signaled Judy to direct her attention to the food. "Well if you don't want your food burning, we need to stop hugging and turn it!"

"Oh right!" Nala laughed, releasing Judy before turning to the pan. She flipped over several of the cabbage and onion pieces which looked quite scorched on the bottom.

"Are you using any spices?" Judy exclaimed, not seeing any of the telltale flecks of green and black that would normally be present in some of the dishes she used to enjoy back at home.

Nala shook her head before pointing up to the tall cabinets. "No. I can't leap high enough yet to reach the upper cupboards to grab what I need. So I just cook them raw." She gestured to the small bottle of oil next to the stovetop. "At least we have that to help sauté them with."

Judy punched her fists onto her hips in indignation before decrying, "Oh, this just will not do!"

With a playful leap, she bounced off the side of the large oven before landing on the upper counter that the larger mammals could work at. She yelped a bit as she hopped off the active range that she landed on. Who the heck left this on? Cursing her luck, she steadied herself before leaping up to the upper cabinet door knob. Gripping it tight, she pushed off the wood to get it to open slightly. Clambering around the side of the door, she climbed in and began delving through the myriad of herbs, spices and condiments.

"Can you catch?" She called down to Nala.

After a nod, Judy grabbed some basil, oregano and thyme, tossing each one down at a time. With a satisfied smirk, she hopped down beside the kit and began unscrewing off the tops of the bottles which were almost as big as she was. She grabbed a few small pawfuls of each and sprinkled them into the pan before stirring it a bit more to ensure it all got mixed in.

"It is a shame there wasn't any sauces up there." Judy lamented, continuing to stir. "I could really make this into something grand. What my mom used to make at home."

"You mean grandma?" Nala inquired, her ears perking up with interest.

"Oh, did Nick take you to meet them?" Judy asked surprised.

"No." Her face despondent. "Are they still alive?"
Judy stopped moving the wooden spoon, her ears dropping. Try as she might, she couldn’t remember what exactly happened to her parents. "I…don't know." She began stirring again. "Last I can recall I had left Zootopia to live with your dad back at the Burrows where I was born."

"You left Zootopia?" This was news to Nala. She had never heard from anyone that her mom actually wanted to leave the city for any reason.

"Yes, I did." She stated flatly, trying to recall the dream she was now sure was a memory. "Although I do not know why." She looked out to where the rest of the mammals were eating. "I haven't really told anyone I know. I'm afraid to. I don't know what I'll think if I do remember the reason for my leaving."

Nala gripped her mom by the waist. "I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay!"

Judy sighed. "Stay here? Where we're constantly under threat of death? Where we must be wary of making too much noise or light that the bats find us? This is no way to live."

The kit said nothing but held on tighter. This was all she knew. If there was a better way to live out there, she was not privy to it. She grew up in the defunct brothel, being doting on and raised by the community of stragglers, former cops and Nick. To Judy it seemed a terrible way to live and grow. She longed for the carefree days at home where she could run out with her fellow bunnies on the farm all evening until the sun dipped below the horizon. Life seemed a lot simpler then.

After seeing she wasn't going to get a response, Judy finished up the cooking and grabbed two plates for them from the bottom cupboard. Scooping equal portions to each of their platters, she handed one to Nala before setting the pan aside to cool and turning off the stove. She had just turned to follow her daughter out when she noticed something she hadn't remembered seeing before.

"Nala, what is that at the base of your neck? It looks like…dirt." Judy pointed out the small black patch at the base of her skull.

She giggled, "Oh that? Daddy said it's my special birthmark. Take a look." She crooked a finger and pulled her shirt away from her fur, allowing Judy to look down her back. It was true, the black patch of fur extended all the way down to her tail. Judy never noticed because Nala always wore clothes that covered it completely.

"Well I'll be darned. That is a cool looking birthmark." The kit smiled at Judy's compliment. "Don't ever be ashamed of it."

Smiling together, they walked side by side into the main foyer which was now the cafeteria commons. They hopped up next to Mai and Jack who were already eating something more akin to porridge which looked far less appetizing to Judy. Jack leaned over gazing with interest at what Judy and Nala were having. As if on cue, both of them wrapped an arm around their plates and shifted them away from him.

"Don't you dare! I cooked this for me and my daughter." Judy warned.

Jack smiled before raising a paw in supplication. "Not my intention to steal, I was just curious as to the wonderful aroma you got there. You are quite the amazing cook if I could smell that heavenly scent from here!"

Before Judy could say anything, the last person she expected stabbed a fork over her arm into the plate of vegetables, piercing a zucchini and part of a cabbage slice before stuffing it in her mouth. Judy whipped around shocked, "Mai!"
The rabbit giggled, holding a paw up to her mouth so she wouldn't splatter the food out or choke on it due to laughter. After swallowing, she continued her cackling, "And it tastes just as heavenly!"

"Really now?" Jack stood up straighter, his interest piqued. "I shall have to try myself!" He stabbed his own fork into Nala's food before stealing some away.

"Hey!" Nala looked offended.

"Quick! Eat up!" Judy exclaimed.

All at once, the four bunnies began scrambling for the food, Judy and Nala stuffing their faces as Mai and Jack began to assault their platters with their forks, trying in vain to skewer a few more precious pieces of vegetable. Judy was shoving her paw into Mai's chin, pushing her as far away as she could from her food. Trying to gain purchase on the bench beside her, Mai's foot struck out and kicked her bowl of porridge to the floor with a clatter.

"That's enough!" Bogo shouted. Everyone who was enjoying the small scuffle among the bunnies suddenly sat quietly, all eyes and ears directed to the buffalo up front by the stairs. He gave them a stern glare, forcing each of the four rabbits to slap their rumps back into their seats. "You are all acting like children and making more of a racket than you need to be making!"

"I'm sorry sir." Mai spoke up, immediately taking the blame. "I just figured we needed a bit of levity tonight. We could all use some of that."

Bogo considered Mai for a moment. "True as that may be, we have protocol to follow. We must pay our respects to Swinton and honor her memory."

A hush fell across the room as Clawhauser gave the invocation for the proceedings right there in the foyer. The short ceremony was informal but done with reverence. Even though she was disagreeable at times, Swinton was still one of them, a police officer. They needed to uphold her memory and recognize her contributions to the ongoing war effort, for that is what it truly was, a war; between them and the bats. One side would eventually win and the other would be obliterated from existence forever.

"You sure about this Carrots?" Nick stood, looking up at the neon sign above them.

"Absolutely." Judy said with determination. Her eyes steeled forward at the glass doors before them.

"Alright then, let's just…go on in there." Nick said uncomfortably.

The bell jingled as they entered into the sterile waiting room of the facility deep in the heart of Savannah Central. Nick was looking nervously all around. Judy smirked at his reactions. It could only mean one of two things. He was quite uncomfortable with the overall idea of this place or he had been here before to donate and didn't want her finding out about it.

As he held the door open for her, another mammal stalked out, briefly bumping past her. She spun around and yelled out to him, "Hey! Watch it!"

"My apologies!" He shouted back. "I am in a hurry so I must be going!"

Nick shook his head, "What a dumb-dumb."

"You know that jerk?" Judy scowled at the retreating figure who was crossing the street before diving into the coffee café opposite them.
"Actually, as a matter of fact, I don't." Nick said surprised. He would have to look deeper into who that mammal was at a later time, provided they ever came back to Zootopia.

They stepped up to the counter where a very portly Lynx was typing furiously away on her keyboard. After a few waves from below and a whistle, she looked over the counter at the two of them. "You here to donate again Mr. Wilde?" She said in monotone, completely unsurprised.

"Ah-ha…um, no." Nick said blushing furiously, trying not to make eye contact with Judy. "We're here to-

"To get pregnant!" Judy said cheerfully.

The lynx looked unimpressed that a fox and rabbit would want kids. Given her profession, it was possible she had seen all manner of crazy stories and combinations roll through here. They were no different. She tapped a few keys angrily, despite her face showing little emotion.

She handed them a large clipboard with a pen. A huge stack of papers were sandwiched atop of it. "Please fill these out." She said curtly.

It was time-consuming going through each sheet to fill out all their personal information, but Judy felt it worth it in the end. As they were writing in the info, she gave him a leering smile. "So you've been a proud donor to this place before, huh?"

Nick chuckled nervously but kept his eyes on the forms, "Yeah, I did. It was some extra cash in the pocket at the time."

"My, my…” Judy joked. "I wonder how many vixens out there are running around with little, tiny Nicks!"

"That's not even funny." Nick snapped.

"What? You're the one that donated! You should expect to have hundreds of little unknown Nick Jr's by now." Judy couldn't contain her laughter. This was actually funny to her.

Ever since her doctor visit regarding conception, she had made peace with the fact she'd never truly have Nick's children. It had been a hard day and Nick wisely left her alone for the majority of it. Once the decision had been made to leave Zootopia, she resigned from the force while he stayed in long enough so they could have a stable income flowing in while they transitioned back to the Burrows. Having bunny sperm artificially inseminated seemed to be the next best option for the two of them to raise a family together.

"Ha! The last thing I need is some random pup knocking on my doorstep saying he wants a daddy." Nick remarked heatedly.

"Aww…” Judy said with sarcasm, her ears dropping in heartfelt emotion. "I'd adopt the little guy right away!"

"Seriously?" He shot her a look.

"Well, why not?" She simpered at him with a hand on her waist. "I'm used to having a big family and besides, that's just what we bunnies do!"

"Wonderful, I have a feeling I'm going to drown in children." He snickered. "I don't think I can handle the cuteness."
She waggled a finger at him, "You're the only one I'd tolerate that word from Mr. Nick Piberius Wilde! Don't abuse it!"

"Yes ma'am!" He ribbed back.

Presently they finished the paperwork and handed it back to the lynx who looked positively bored. She gestured to the side door for them to enter where a Pudu deer standing just below the height of Nick’s ears was waiting for them. She seemed very agreeable, much nicer than the receptionist. She guided them along the white hallway to a smaller door than the others. Upon opening the pressure sealed lock, they stepped into the cooled room.

There were rows upon rows of locker boxes, each with a label and a name. The Pudu turned to look at them, "Do not touch! Just look and decide!"

"Wow…there were a lot of happy bunnies at one time." Nick observed.

"Just as there was a happy Nick too." Judy tittered.

"I'm still happy!" Nick defended.

She bopped him on the nose, "And I intend to keep it that way." She gave him a rather inviting look that indicated he was going to be getting something enjoyable later that night.

After much scouring and reading of multiple tiny-font labels, they finally agreed on a sample to be used. It was a good thing too since both were chilled to the bone at the controlled temperature in the bank. The Pudu didn't mind one bit, having prepared with a puffy coat that looked well insulated. After selecting a date to come in for the operation with the receptionist, they jingled the bell again on their way out the door.

"So you think we can afford this fifteen-hundred dollar price tag?" Nick asked, hands in his pockets.

"If we pool our money together, I don't think it's insurmountable. Besides, who can really put a price on our future children?" She smiled, just thinking of what it would be like to finally have little ones growing in her belly. Her mother would be so excited.

He jabbed a finger back at the facility, "Well, apparently they can."

"Oh stop!" She clucked. "We'll be fine. Sure it'll set us back a bit but I'm sure this will all be worth it in the end."

"Of course Carrots." Nick agreed.

They walked hand in hand down the sidewalk, barely noticing the mammal in the café across the road staring at them. He was quietly sipping his coffee, shades pulled down over his eyes. He kept looking at his watch, as if expecting something to happen at any moment. As he waited, he continued to track the bunny and fox down the road, thinking it odd that those two would be a pair.

Suddenly his phone rang and he picked it up. "Go."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was harder to write than any other yet, it was beyond belief. I knew these
two relationships: Judy/Gazelle and Judy/Nala would be important in defining who Judy would be as a character later in the story in both time arcs. So getting the dialogue down just right to convey the meaning behind what the characters intend was very difficult and I spent almost two days of not writing anything while I mulled it over. With the help of Berserker88, I was able to find a good thread line through the present time arc with Nala. Without that help, I could not have finished the chapter. The scene with Gazelle sets up two things, one is the future concert event that is looming on the horizon and the second is more relationship development with Nick and Judy, something I'm sure readers are wanting to see more of. The final scene at the end was placed to help round out the chapter by detailing just how Judy got pregnant and to confirm that one cannot cross-species and get children. A few key pieces of foreshadowing and info was dropped in this chapter to help solidify future reveals and twists.
"Hopps!" A bellow reverberated throughout the front vestibule of the ZPD. "Get these rascals out of my room right now!"

"Right away sir!" Judy hollered up, leaving Nick at her computer before sprinting fast across the foyer, blazing past a bewildered Clawhauser in mid-bite of a delectable donut. "I'm going to kill them!" She grumbled under her breath as she vaulted the stairwell four steps at a time.

It was literally the previous night coming back from work to find an already awake Nick in bed with three mischievous bunnies, dropped off by her parents earlier that evening. Nick had informed her that Ami and her two brothers were not behaving well at the Oasis hotel and casino in Sahara Square and to better enjoy their vacation, Bonnie and Stu decided it best to drop them off in Judy's care for the remainder of that week.

Judy couldn't trust them at all to stay out of trouble at her apartment while she and Nick were gone at work twelve hours a day. That was a recipe for trouble. She had no choice but to bring them along to work and see if either Clawhauser or other available officers were willing to watch them off and on throughout the day to ensure they were occupied and didn't cause any ruckus in the station. It didn't quite work out that way.

Clawhauser was the first to volunteer and was absolutely tickled to be surrounded by such adorable little kits, all questioning, hopping, bouncing, laughing and teasing him. After a few minutes, it was clear that he had bit off more than he could chew and by the time he realized his donut box had been cleared out, he was more than just a little upset at the little cretins. Seeing the need to assist Clawhauser after witnessing him collapsing to the floor, wheezing after a short chase across the main atrium, Officer McHorn scooped up all three kits gruffly and promised them an extensive tour of the facility, provided they remain silent. That was little less than an hour ago.

Slightly panting from the exertion, she rounded the corner of the upstairs balcony, gripping the bannister to maintain momentum as she hit the turn and bolted down the straightaway. She could hear Bogo roaring from within his office, the door left ajar. She swung it open wide to behold three kits bounding around the room, the chief trying in vain to capture things that got errantly displaced off his shelves. Ami herself was swinging on the ceiling fan, its wobbly grip at the base teetering on complete implosion.

"Ami! Get down this instant!" Judy yelled, stabbing a finger to the floor. "All of you quiet!"

Ami obediently hopped off the fan, rebounding off the desk before hitting the floor with a thud. The other two skidded to a stop just behind her. Bogo looked extremely relieved that the chaos had subsided for now. He was frantically placing his awards, decorations and other precious memorabilia back to their proper places. Once finished, he turned warily to eye the three kits with a menacing glare.

"Officer Hopps," He said commandingly, "I understand your position right now with your siblings. They were unfairly dumped into your lap and you were wise not to leave them alone at your apartment. However, bringing them here for the week is simply not working out." One of the little kits began thumping his foot, getting bored and ready to leap again but was cut short with a scathing look from Bogo. "Until such time your parents take them home this weekend, I'm going to have to
"force you on leave for the duration."

"But sir-" Judy protested hotly.

"They are a nuisance!" Bogo thundered. "If you cannot contain them, being as they are your responsibility, then I have no choice but to put you on leave! Paid leave…mind you." He added, as if that would soften the blow.

"What about the case? We just got a huge lead that Nick discovered!" Judy began to explain.

"Then let Nick handle it!" Bogo snapped, causing Ami to jerk a little with fright. "You keep defending him and his work. Stop and let him prove he can handle the job! I'm sure if he is as good as you say he is at it, he should have no problem at all managing this case while you are out!"

Judy's mind reeled at the thought of not being a part of this case at the cusp of a major breakthrough. They were just figuring out how to predict the rough location of the next bat assault. "I don't believe I'm actually going to say this but…sir!" She stood up tall, looking up at the massive buffalo. "Put me on meter maid duty for the remainder of the week. I can keep them out of trouble and show them the city at the same time! It should put them out of the office!"

There was a tense few moments between them, all three kits darted their eyes back and forth between the two, wondering which would break first. At length, Bogo growled with irritation, "Hopps, I do not know why I put up with your insubordination. Just take them and go. You are tasked to meter maid duty for the remainder of the week or until such time you are relieved of their interminable burden. Whichever comes first."

"Thank you so much sir!" She began, thankful that he agreed to her idea. "You won't regret this! We'll be so out of your hair that you won't even notice-"

The final screw bolting the fan to the ceiling came loose, causing the entire thing to crash onto the desk just a few inches behind Bogo. Judy winced at the racket, her eyes widening with horror as the crushed fan toppled over a rather expensive 'commissioning plague.' It shattered into a dozen pieces on the floor, shards of glass flying in all directions. Ears low, Judy meekly smiled back at Bogo, whose aggravated snort was one decibel shy of utter rage.

"I'm just going to take these kits out of here." She spied a small seep of red on Ami, who yipped but did not cry at the sliver of glass that had impaled her paw. "Besides, it looks like they might need some medical attention. I'll report downstairs for parking duty within the hour! Later Chief!"

With a yank on all three of their arms, she dashed out of Bogo's office before he could wring her neck. She was already on thin ice with him based on all the indictments he had thrown her way recently. This was just a long string of unfortunate circumstances that further crumbled her position with the chief. Her mom and dad owed her big time after this nonsense! First the unannounced visit to her apartment, then the sprucing up of her room and now finally dumping her siblings in her lap so they could enjoy the second coming of their honeymoon. She didn't know exactly how, but she was going to make them pay!

"Ow…are we going to get this fixed?" Ami raised up the injured paw, stumbling slightly to keep up with Judy's breakneck pace.

She glanced down at her wound. It didn't look too deep a cut. The shard was definitely lodged in there, enough so that she'd need some tweezers to get it out. "Yes, we will. First I have to drop our brothers off with someone." She scanned around the offices perched up on the third floor and found Officer Fangmeyer's, a light still on beyond the opaque glass window. "Over there." Judy pointed.
She knocked on the door a few times, a calm voice called out from within. "Come in."

Judy pushed the door open to see a sleek, collected tiger combing through a variety of reports. He was one of the senior cops on the force and had years being on the beat under his belt. Nothing fazed him anymore. He took in the sight of her and the three little bunnies and smiled, revealing a sparkling set of sharp teeth. "What can I do for you today Hopps? If you've come for my report for last night's attack over in the Rainforest District, I'm not entirely done with it. I should have it ready for you to consolidate with the rest later this evening."

She shook her head briskly, "No, it's not that. In fact, send that Nick's way instead." The tiger raised an eyebrow but did not object. "I've been temporarily reassigned." She omitted the real job, "In the meantime, Nick is currently the lead analyzer for the case. I should be back with him by the weekend."

The big feline set down a sheet of paper and looked at her intently, "So what is it you need of me?"

A desperate look etched into her face, "Please Fangmeyer, I need to attend to Ami here. She was hurt and we need to head to the medical department. I can't trust these two," She jabbed a finger at her two younger brothers, already curious about the contents of the room, "to not run off and get in trouble while I'm dealing with Ami. Is it at all possible you can look after them for at least a few minutes until I get back?"

He rolled his eyes at her, "Sure Hopps. I do have a few precious moments of my time to spare. I can watch them until you get back."

"Thank you so much!" She said gratefully, practically throwing her two younger brothers into the room. "Come on Ami!"

"Just don't make it too long!" Fangmeyer called out after her, already getting up from behind his desk to wrangle a few devious kits who had already gotten into his container of pens on the bookcase.

"Does it hurt?" Judy asked, after they had descended to the bottom floor and made their way to the medical quarters where she procured a first-aid kit from the sloth working the desk.

"A little." Ami admitted, flinching as the glass was ripped out of her paw.

"That's good." She said, setting the red-stained sliver into a small clear dish. Judy went about sanitizing the tweezers in the sink, having to leap up to its level just to reach the faucet. "I love you guys, I really do, but I'm already in trouble enough at work as it is and you three are not helping."

Ami dangled her hind paws off the large chair, swinging them back and forth as she answered, "Are you going to get fired because of us?"

Judy's expression softened, "No, I don't think so." She leapt back down to the floor. "But I don't want to lose my position on this case, not when I think I'm actually getting somewhere with it. This is the biggest case that Chief Bogo has ever entrusted to me and the last thing I want to have happen is to lose my stake in it."

"I'm really sorry Judy." Ami said morosely. She did genuinely seem regretful of her antics this entire morning. "We were just having fun."

Judy put both paws on her hips, "That's all well and good but you're getting to be a teenager soon! You are the eldest one and should be showing a bit more maturity! Take responsibility for your two brothers and show them how to behave in public! Not everyone takes kindly to rowdy kids." She grabbed the dish and dumped the glass into the trash.
"I know… I just feel like it is more fun to be out there, on the street." Ami gestured to the exterior hallway. At a puzzled look from her older sister, she clarified, "I love what you do Judy! I want to be like you… be a cop." Her sister's jaw dropped. Ami idly picked at a piece of fuzz on the chair before continuing, "I just didn't realize it'd be this boring all the time. Do you stay at the ZPD all day and write reports?"

Regaining enough of her sense to shut her mouth and force her mind to think, Judy managed to sputter, "No… we actually are out on patrol most of the day. I'm just on a rather unique case. Does mom and dad know about this?"

Ami shook her head, "No. I don't think they'd approve."

Recovered from her previous shock, Judy huffed, "Oh, so you think they wouldn't accept you as a cop too? They've already come around to the fact that I'm a police officer. Why wouldn't they accept the same from another of their children?"

"I don't know." She mumbled, shrugging her shoulders.

Judy leapt up beside her little sister on the chair, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Look, if anything, I helped bring mom and dad to their senses and see that we can be anything we put our minds to in Zootopia. We may not always get it right, but as long as we try that is what matters." She nudged her with a hip. "Besides, I'm sure they'd be proud to have another officer in their family when you're old enough. I would love to fight alongside you one day."

"Really?" She looked up with a sparkle in her eye.

"Really." Judy affirmed.

Ami displayed her paw again, "What about this? Shouldn't we bandage it?"

Judy inspected the cut, "It doesn't look serious. It'll heal within the hour." She glanced up at the clock and noticed her little trip down here had run on a bit long. Grabbing Ami's good paw, she hopped down to the floor. "Come on, we better go save Fangmeyer from a fate worse than death!" The kit giggled at this as they ran out of the room.

They didn't have to go far to find Fangmeyer urgently scouring the front foyer of the station. Even Clawhauser was roped into looking for her two brothers. A stifled squeak emanated from the cheetah as he turned to see Judy and Ami striding up to the reception desk. He blurted out the side of his mouth to Fangmeyer, trying his best to look nonchalant. "Psst, she's here!"

"Fangmeyer!" Demanded Judy. "What are you doing? Where are my brothers?"

The tiger stood up a bit more straight, directing his attention on Judy. "I… er… um, well they got away from me a bit."

"They what?!" She exclaimed loudly, causing several onlookers strolling past to gaze in their direction. "Did you see where they went? What happened?!" Her eyes began flitting around the multi-tiered floors, her ears up on high alert trying to pinpoint any potential sound that could lead her to them.

"I'm sorry Hopps. I tried fix something they had broken and before I knew it, they were out my door and gone! I thought I could catch up to them." He apologized.

"Did you see where they went?" She grilled Clawhauser.
"See who?" He rejoined honestly, his mind completely blanked.

"My two brothers!" She roared.

"Oh, oh! No, I didn't!" He flustered.

"Bogo is going to hang me for sure now!" Judy began panicking when a small trickle of laughter caused her ear to do a one-eighty. It was coming from the second floor offices. "I know where they are!" She cried.

With Ami and Fangmeyer close behind and Clawhauser calling after them that he'd provide backup at the front desk, she vaulted up the stairs. She could hear the giggling drifting down the hallway dead ahead. Judy didn't even realize whose door she busted open until she stopped dead in her tracks to behold Detective Oates tossing one of the kits in the air before catching him on the way down. Each bunny was cackling maniacally, both wanting a turn to be thrown.

"Oates?" She fumbled, trying her best to spit out the name.

The horse nickered joyfully as he gripped the bunny in hoof and set him gently onto his desk. He had to suppress laughter of his own. "Are these little kits yours?" He asked.

"Yes, they are my brothers." She answered, quite mortified that they had intruded upon Detective Oates' office. "I am so sorry! I'll make sure they don't bother you again!"

"Come, come now!" He rebuked cheerily. "I was just getting fatigued at my computer, buried under tons of paperwork when these two came in. Trust me it was a pleasure to have a reprieve from this tedious rhythm. As my grandma used to say, 'those who don't know when to hold any in reserve cannot keep pace to the finish line!'" He chuckled some more.

"Thank you for the kind words. Kids, down now!" She ordered, pointing to a small plot of flooring right next to her. They reluctantly slipped off the large desk, saying their farewells to Oates, who happily obliged them. She turned to Fangmeyer, "Can you please prep the meter maid mobile and make sure they stay there until I get down?"

"Of course Hopps. I'll be sure to not let them out of my sight this time for sure!" He simpered, watching the deviants with a careful eye.

"And you Ami." She pointed at the budding bunny. "You need to act your age and be a positive role model to your brothers. This isn't the Burrows anymore. I'm putting you in charge!" Fangmeyer raised an eyebrow at this.

"Yes ma'am!" She snickered, trying her best to form a proper salute.

Judy shook her head, "Just go, I'll be done in a moment."

She watched them trail off down the hall, each holding a firm tiger paw as they made their way to the elevators. She exhaled loudly before slumping against the door frame, drained already and it was not yet noon. Oates was observing her with interest before locking his screen and stepping around the desk toward her.

"Your family is quite lovely Hopps." He commented, a smile still on his face.

"Yeah, well you don't have to live with them." Judy fumed. "Urgh! I don't understand why my parents had to bring them along anyway! It's not like they had a place on their honeymoon!"
Oates whinnied, "Honeymoon? How wonderful. Where are they staying?"

"At the Oasis hotel and casino in Sahara Square." She replied numbly.

"That is truly a grand spectacle. I've gone there myself quite a few times. You can easily get lost in the hullabaloo about that place. I darn near lost my wallet trying to beat the house one time." He reminisced fondly.

"Well, I hope they are enjoying themselves." She commented bitterly.

Oates leaned down and put a comforting hoof on her shoulder, rubbing gently. "Don't be so hard on them. They've lived a good life raising all of you and they should take time off to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Just consider this another trial to overcome. When has anything difficult ever stopped you before?"

Judy couldn't help but smile at Oates. "You always did know what to say to cheer me up. You're right, I don't know when to quit." She stared down the hall with more determination than ever. "I'm going to occupy these kits so much they'll want to fall asleep from exhaustion when I'm done with them!"

He guffawed loudly, "That's the spirit!"

She looked up at him one more time, "Thanks again for keeping them busy just now. I was almost afraid they'd had gotten lost or worse!"

"Not to worry!" He swiped a hoof through the air to assuage her fears. "I know there are plenty of crazy mammals out there and you are right to worry about your siblings, but here at the ZPD they are safe." He inclined his head down the corridor, "You should get going before long. They're going to wonder where you've gone and get into more trouble no doubt!"

"Thanks again Detective Oates." She bowed slightly before sprinting down the corridor.

"You're welcome Detective Hopps!" Oates yelled after her. As she turned the corner and was gone, he chuckled to himself. "That is one cute bunny." He turned to sit back into his leather chair and continue work on the murder cases he was tracking.

The scent of smoke and death still permeated the sky. Ash and soot was still caked to her fur as she roared down Savannah Central, dodging fallen debris and parked cars in her police cruiser. A heavy pall of dust hung in the air, making it hard to see the road. Her mind was on a singular goal and she cursed herself for not following up on it when she had the chance. She didn't believe Rouge when the bat tipped her off to the connection. It seemed too far-fetched to begin with.

She whipped around several hairpin turns before screeching to a halt directly outside the city jail, its massive imposing structure looming outward over the street. Two marble pillars jutted outward and formed a circular horn edifice where the sign symbolizing the prison was hung from. She set her eyes on the front doors, noting that the guards were not manning their stations, having been called off alongside every other unit in the precinct to help deal with the catastrophe downtown.

"Judy!" The radio crackled to life beside her on the seat. It was Nick. "Please come back! We need to-"

She switched it silent before turning the engine off and stalking out of the cruiser, wiping the tears from her eyes. She could hear sirens and wailing wafting up from downtown central, multitude of rescue crews and the majority of the ZPD still helping with the salvage efforts. She paced up to the
sliding doors and stormed into the place. Deftly leaping over the secretary's booth, she was surprised to discover the computer had not been locked. This would make things that much simpler. Hopping across the keyboard and moving the rather large mouse with both arms, she managed to open the prison roster listing.

"Where are you?" She grumbled to herself, scrolling down the rows of inmates. She finally found the one she wanted and memorized the cell number.

Glancing about the sterile entryway, she spotted two hallways to her left leading off to each branch of the prison. Looking up at the wings, she knew the cell number in question would be down the west branch. She studied the bars blocking the hall leading to the prison proper and noticed a gap at the corner where the sliding mechanism went into the wall that was big enough for her to slip in.

She grunted with satisfaction after shoving herself through. They probably didn't get a lot of small criminals here. Padding down the passage, she ignored all the moans, cries and cat calls from the various brutes who were trying in vain to snag her by the ears. One wrong move and she could be dragged into a cell with them and heaven knows what would happen to her then. She took the elevator down one floor and popped out to find the room of her search just down several meters on the left.

Judy stopped abruptly in front of the closed cell, the bars just wide enough to see in but certainly close enough that the inmate couldn't escape through them. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the small, sleeping form huddled on the cot that was bolted into the concrete wall opposite her.

"We need to talk."

It took a few seconds before the figure inside the cell stirred, and a soft, rancorous voice emerged.

"Now to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure of a visit?"

Judy wasn't in the mood to exchange pleasantries. "You knew they were coming, didn't you?"

Dawn Bellwether rolled over onto her side to look coyly at her visitor. "Why, I have no idea what you're talking about, Judy."

"The bats?" She pressed.

The sheep put a hoof to her lip in an expression of pure innocence. "Hmm...nope, I'm afraid little old me doesn't know a thing about that, dear. You'll just have to look 'somewhere else.'" Her gaze abruptly turned murderous before that sweet smile returned. "If that's alright with you."

"Cut the crap, Dawn. I looked up the old Zootopia. The one created before this one. Your name came up in the news reports following the condemnation of that city."

"Oh, you mean 'those' bats. Well why didn't you say so, silly? I'd imagine my family name would come up there." Bellwether crooned.

"You knew these attacks would happen, yet you did nothing to warn the mayor or...anyone!" Judy huffed loudly.

"And start a mass panic? Even Mayor Lionfart knew better than that." She tittered. "Not like anyone would believe a lowly sheep such as me about any of that."

"That's not the point! You said fear always works. If you so believe in that principle, why not use it to help bolster people's resolve and funnel that into something productive like building our defenses?" Judy raised her paw up in exasperation.
"Ah," She raised a hoof finger quickly, setting the small cowbell on her neck to jingle. "There is a difference between complete hysteria and orderly terror. My plan would have worked perfectly with the predators under control."

"How do you figure? As far as I can tell, removing the predators from power seems counterintuitive to providing a good defense for Zootopia." Judy said smugly. "They are some of our best fighters, I should know because I have sparred with some of them."

"Oh, sweet, naïve, dumb Judy." Bellwether mocked, setting the rabbit's ears to twitch irritably. "You're completely missing the bigger picture." She dropped down to the ground, dusting off her orange prison overalls and waddling over to the bars, looking squarely into her eyes. "Lionfart did exactly what I expected him to do, cave in to political pressure and serve the city to the bats on a silver platter, instead of gunning them down like the monsters they are!"

"He couldn't have known about what happened at the previous city. He was doing what was right and following the ideals and precepts of what Zootopia is all about."

"Stop beating around the bush." Judy warned.

Bellwether turned serious, "If I had my way, with the prey in power, there would be no one to stop me from ordering any and all bats shot down the moment they stepped foot in Zootopia. They are savage animals that do not belong in a civilized society. Sure I'd let a few attacks happen here and there, with the help of some Nighthowlers, but once the public got wind of just how dangerous these bats were, no one would bother sympathizing with them."

She thrust a hoof finger through the bars at Judy, "If it weren't for you and that meddlesome fox, this attack wouldn't have happened!" She indicated the muted TVs perched up in the corners of the passage, just within eyesight of her cell. "How ironic that it was the star jewel of Zootopia that helped bring about its destruction."

"Don't give yourself so much credit Dawn, you couldn't have prevented this either. You wouldn't have lasted long as mayor anyway, especially if the ties to your father's organization, the Group for Prey Supremacy, were discovered."

The ewe grinded her teeth, "He was a brilliant man, a visionary! He overcame the obstacles that had plagued the old Zootopia by providing control and order."

Judy snorted at the pitiful sheep, "By forcing collars on predators. It was never going to work. The rebellion was inevitable."

"Unfortunate, but that did not stop him from researching how best to control the savage ways of the predator. Even now, this Zootopia runs on a form of control so that the predators remain calm and the prey stay safe. Even your precious 'best friend' is a hair breadth away from turning savage if it weren't for the safety measures in place to ensure he doesn't turn." She leered.

Judy narrowed her eyes, "Nick would not do that unless forced by Nighthowlers or whatever diabolical scheme you have cooked up."

Seeing a sore spot, Bellwether rubbed her chin a few times, "Have you ever truly taken a tour around the Natural History Museum? It really is quite fascinating. You haven't? Well that is quite the shame
because I'm sure if you had, you'd realize that predators can't seem to help themselves but to maul, maim and eat prey. They're biologically predisposed to hunt us."

"That's a lie. They can change, they have changed." Judy defended.

"Only with the help of prey controlling them along the way." She sneered. "You see, history tells us that we did try to build a utopia where we could live in harmony with the predators but we just kept having accidents," She put a hoof and leaned over in a whisper as if telling a big secret to Judy, "you know, getting eaten and all."

It was Judy's turn to grit her teeth but Bellwether summarily ignored her, taking great joy in describing the history of Zootopia. "Did you know that this great, beloved city we live in is just the seventh iteration of Zootopia? I know right? I was shocked too but our forbearers keep building these museums in each city so that we can learn from the mistakes of our past, but do we?" She spun around angrily. "No! Because nobody cares about the past or their future as long as it doesn't affect their present!"

Judy's mind reeled. Zootopia was the seventh attempt at creating a utopia for predator and prey? That didn't seem possible. Why would nobody know about this? Surely mammals weren't as ignorant as to be unaware of such a cover-up. All her young life, this current Zootopia was the only thing she'd known, there was no other. There were no failed experiments or cities overrun with age old laws of eat or be eaten. It was completely alien to her.

Oblivious to Judy's inner turmoil, Bellwether quite enjoyed getting this all out of her system. "So every time some 'dumb' prey gets it into their head that this preposterous idea can work, another Zootopia gets funded and built. Each time a new method of predator control gets implemented, it really is enthralling reading up on all of them. The one used today is quite devious, I wouldn't have been aware of it myself if my father had not come from the previous failure."

"I don't believe you." Judy stated flatly, her nose twitching nervously.

"Not that I would expect you to dear." She chortled, waggling a hoof at her. "After all, why trust a criminal mastermind?" She shook her head before making a motion back towards her cot. After resituated herself comfortably, she stared back at Judy, her silhouette framed by the fluorescent lines behind her. It was clear they had reached a stalemate in the conversation. Clicking her hind hoofs together innocently, she leaned forward, "Would you like to know how they originally contained the bats?"

Judy's nose trembled a bit more. "This isn't the first time?" She asked hesitantly.

Bellwether began admiring her fore hoofs, as if they weren't any less grimy than before. "If you had bothered to research our history like I have, you would know there was a common factor in all their downfalls: the bats. They have been the scourge of every single attempt. They are predators just like your friend and, just like a predator, they cannot mesh well with civilized prey. It is impossible for them to."

"Anything is possible if they are given the chance to-" Judy began, a bit unsure of herself now.

"Not when your primary food source is the blood of other animals!" Bellwether interrupted. "They tried to find alternative sources of food for them but they ended up getting weak and dying off by the hundreds. I'm surprised they didn't just let them starve to extinction, would have saved us all the trouble." She gave a sharp scowl at Judy to silence her impending remark, "And this…blood bank idea of yours? It would have only been a band-aid to the much bigger problem. It would never have been a long term solution. The only resolution to this whole vile species is utter annihilation."
Judy's eyes widened at what she believed to be the ravings of a mad woman. "You're talking about genocide. That is barbaric."

Bellwether made a guttural, incoherent sound as she leaped back off the cot and slammed up against the bars, causing Judy to back up a pace, her arm immediately going to her holster. She was confused for a moment until she realized the ewe was pointing back up to the monitor, drone images of the disturbing, smoldering remains of the market towers.

"No, that is barbaric Judy!" She trilled. "I would have had everything under control if you didn't interfere, but now there is no hope in stopping them from coming in, setting up shop and breeding like rabbits." At a look from Judy, "You heard me."

Recovering from her shock by the racist insult, Judy regained her composure. "So what do you propose we do? It's clear you know more than anyone else here about how we stop these things. So tell us, oh mighty sheep, how can we be rid of this menace?" She made sure each word punctured the air.

Bellwether could tell she was getting to her but remained calm. "The only way I figure is to head back there, to the sixth failed Zootopia. It's the last place I can recall where they were contained. Maybe we'll find answers there?" She shrugged, feigning disinterest in the whole affair.

The fur on the back of Judy's neck stood on end, something didn't seem to gel well with how Bellwether was cooperating so easily all of a sudden. "What's in it for you?"

"What was that?" She asked, acting as if she didn't hear.

Judy tapped her foot a few times, "You heard me. You wouldn't just help us for free, there has to be something in it for you."

"You're right." Bellwether admitted, leaning back against the cool wall. "A full pardon would be nice." Upon noting the biting look from Judy, she changed tack. "Either that or a lighter jail sentence and/or extra amenities here in my cell would do wonders for my disposition. In fact, it'd make me more willing to tell you what I know if you promised me that."

"You know I can't promise any of those things." Judy responded ardently.

"Of course you can't, how silly of me to forget." She giggled. She retrained her eye back on Judy with purpose. "But I'm pretty sure you have the pull with the right people to help bolster my case. After all, if I did a good deed in service to Zootopia, wouldn't that be enough to warrant at least one of those things I requested?"

She still didn't trust the sheep. There had to be something else. "How can we trust you won't backstab us and actually stick around to help all the way through to the end?"

Bellwether clinked her hooves together in her lap, regarding Judy. "I'm honestly surprised you are considering this given our…past transactions, but to tell you the truth, you're just going to have to take a risk either way."

The two stared each other down for several minutes, neither one wanting to break the contact. Presently, Judy's ear tweaked to the side as she heard the pitter patter of foot pads careening down the hall. She barely turned her head to acknowledge the entrance of Nick, a look of utter relief evident in his face.

"Judy! What are you doing here? I had to track you down with the GPS tracker in your cruiser. Who are you talking-" The word caught in his throat as he noticed the arrogant ewe, her spectacled eyes
burning daggers into his soul. "What in the holy bugger shake are you doing talking to her? Now...of all times?!” He barked, clearly upset with Judy just up and leaving the scene of the attack.

"I made a mistake earlier Nick." She waved a paw in Bellwether's direction. "I was tipped off to a potential connection between her family name and the sixth failed Zootopia and I was too busy to bother following up on it. She says she knows of a way to stop them there."

Nick was visibly shaken by the news. "You were aware of that place?"

"I am now." She nodded; a look of surprise on her face. "You were too?"

He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat before bowing his head in affirmation. "Not as personally as you'd be interested in but I'm better off for it as far as I'm concerned."

She tilted her head slightly to look back at Bellwether. "She just confirmed for me what I had already suspected. She, or rather her father, was involved in the creation of the sixth Zootopia and helped contain these bats. Somehow they got loose and have now migrated here."

"Either that or they killed everyone there and have moved here for a new meal." Bellwether piped up cheerfully, although the vicious grin on her face indicated otherwise.

Nick growled at her, fangs bared. "I will do to you what you wanted me to do to Judy right now if you don't shut up!"

"Nick! Stop!" Judy put both her paws on his heaving chest, slowly placating him with her touch. "You are an officer now. You have a reputation to keep and killing an inmate in a contained facility will not do well for your future."

He slapped his paw against the bars, giving them a rattle. "And you here considering releasing a known criminal isn't any better!"

Her gaze shifted to the ground swiftly under his intensity. "I know...but Nick, this may be the only way we can find out how to contain these bats ourselves. I was blind and now it's gotten so out of hand," tears began to form at the edges of her eyes, "some of my friends have already died. I can't help but feel responsible and that I could have prevented this if I had only realized sooner just how much of a danger these bats really are!"

His expression softened, but he locked his glower on the sheep. "Can you tell us right now how to eliminate the threat these bats pose?"

"I can't really say." She drawled. "My father knew all the specifics and he's dead now, rest his soul. If anything, I could remember something if you took me there personally."

"See?" He snapped. "This is tantamount to suicide! The last time we were together, she wanted me to go savage and kill you! Who is to say this is all a lie and she doesn't know a damn thing about this 'miracle' solution for the bats? Are you off your blueberry pills Judy? This isn't a good idea! I can't...I can't chance the thought of losing you because of her!"

She backed up from his grip, brushing his paws off of her shoulders. "I understand that Nick! But just look outside, things have gotten out of hand! There is too many for us to handle just by ourselves! I've realized that today. I was too stupid to see it earlier and I regret ever trying to be nice to them. I thought they could adjust and be whatever they wanted to be in Zootopia! I was wrong! Okay?" She stamped her foot. "But do you want to see Zootopia fall? This may be a fool's quest but I have hope Nick. Hope! Maybe I am just a dumb bunny, but if there is even a one percent chance we could find our answers to this problem in the old Zootopia, shouldn't we consider it an absolute
certainty?"

Nick's breathing became heavy. This was too ridiculous to even comprehend. How in the world did they get to this point where they were actually considering breaking a known criminal out of prison, absconding with her to a place that he was sure was all sorts of bad news and quite possibly losing their lives in the process? The ewe's pupils shifted back and forth between the pair as they stood staring at each other, unsure of what the final determination would be.

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Judy's eyes opened suddenly, her vision blurred from the last vestiges of sleep. In front of her in the bed was the sleeping form of Nala, curled up beside her, arms and legs wrapped over her body. The idea had come to her just before her waking and it was getting more solid by the second. Carefully getting out of bed, taking extreme care to not disrupt her daughter's sleeping, she hastily wrote a note and set it in a visible spot on the nightstand. Hopefully she'd get it upon the morning.

Quickly shifting into tactical clothes that encompassed an under layer of white cotton with a navy blue vest that zipped up down the middle, she stuffed her hind legs into a loose fit pair of jeans before giving one final kiss to Nala on the forehead and noiselessly slipping out the door. She followed the myriad of dank hallways to the room in question before carefully opening it a crack, letting the dim, generator run lights funnel into the room.

She could see his sleeping form on the bed mat. She found it odd that he never accepted the pleasures of the lavish bed and cushions in the room but rather slept on the floor with a single pillow. She crept up beside him and nudged his shoulder a few times. He roused and flipped over on his other side facing her. He studied her a moment, sleep still palpable in his demeanor.

"Oh, good, I figured you'd come around." He murmured sleepily and wrapped an arm around her waist, dragging her down beside him before resuming his soft snoring.

"Jack!" She hissed, slapping his face sharply.

"What?" He said alarmed. Jack Savage was most definitely awake now. With the skill from years of practice, he jerked his pistol out from beneath the pillow and aimed it right at her face. Upon realizing who it was, the barrel was dropped to the floor. "Judy! Do not startle me like that! I could have killed you!" He reprimanded.

A little shaken but undeterred, she looked at him earnestly. "I've come to a decision. We need to leave now. Is there a safe way out of Zootopia where we can travel abroad?"

His interest was piqued. "Oh where, pray tell, are we going?"

"I'll tell you along the way. So is there or isn't there a safe way out of Zootopia where we won't be seen by the bats?" She pressed again.

He nodded slowly, "One that I'm aware of but you're not going to like it." At a quizzical look, he clarified. "It is through the Nocturnal District."

Chapter End Notes

Another thanks to Berserker88 for helping trim down the fat with the Bellwether scene, without him, it wouldn't be as dramatic or as revealing as it was. Now the first half of
the chapter may seem like filler when taken by itself within chapter 12 not counting the scene with Ami, however there were a few key plot foreshadowings I wanted to drop into this series of events and to get Judy away from the ZPD station with the kits to help set up further sequences in chapter 13 onward. So it was more of an upkeep part of the past arc to help establish characters in their proper geographical locations for upcoming story events. As for the primary meat of the chapter, it took two full days to fully flesh out and realize the conversation between Judy and Dawn, primarily because it drops a rather major bombshell of a plot twist that is necessary to understand before moving any further into the story. This also begins the third concurrent arc that we'll be following so I wanted to start it off with a climatic encounter. Finally, to move things along so they'll happen at key plot points simultaneously with the other two arcs, I wanted Judy to make a firm decision based off Nala's conversation and outburst from the night before and propel her and Jack to new locales.
"So what type of place is this?" Judy probed, readjusting the holster on her hip. She had considered bringing a sword because it made less noise but she was nowhere near as adept at its use as Mai was; that and she felt far more comfortable with a gun by her side.

Jack walked calmly beside her; one hand holding aloft a cell phone charged will full battery back at the brothel, using its flashlight to illuminate the darkness. "A type of place that bunnies really shouldn't be going. I was almost killed here several times during my first visit."

"And you think taking me here is going to be the safest option?" She smirked. She wasn't unnerved by the fact that it could be dangerous. They had slipped out without anyone noticing, the moon still high in the sky, and delved deep into the sewers beneath the city. It wasn't long before Jack led her to an unfamiliar part of the vast network of canals, tubing and pipes to a rather rocky corridor that was seemingly hand crafted and most definitely not natural.

"No, I didn't say that. All I'm implying is that it is our only option." He gestured to the granite ceiling above them. "There is really no safe place above ground where we won't be seen. Those bats not only have echo location that can be used to track movement but they have some sort of ability in their noses to detect the heat of our blood as well. Very few materials can block their ability to see us but it can be done. I'd just rather not risk it at all."

They strode on in silence for a time as Judy pondered this. "I did wonder how they were able to track us so well. It seemed no matter where we went they always seemed to know just exactly where we were."

"It's why we were completely unprepared when they first attacked the city. We would fire nets at them and they'd sense them coming and avoid them in mid-air. I'm not entirely sure if they were just too big that they were detected or just too slow that they were easily dodged." He sighed. "Then the chemical bombs from the air. It was a horrible experience. The stench didn't go away for years."

Judy looked away furtively, staring at the barren rock wall of the tunnel, "I...kind of avoided all of that." She could tell he was watching her from the corner of his eye. "I don't remember everything just yet, but I do remember leaving Zootopia right around the time the second attack hit. I just... abandoned everyone and I don't even know why."

"That is surprising." Jack commented dryly.

"Really? How so?" She was curious now about his opinion.

He gave a brief cough. "I figured you a mammal who doesn't like to give up on things. So for you to simply leave without even trying your best to defend the city seems a bit shocking."

She batted him playfully on the arm. "Don't give me that! You knew who I was before my coma. I'm pretty sure you know things about me or things I've told you that I don't even remember saying! After all, why would you offer to work with me for free back then? You must have known who I was."

Knowing that his ruse wouldn't hold up forever, he gave her a slight nod. "Your memory is returning slowly but surely. This can only be a good thing Judy."
After a few more moments of silence, she swatted his arm again with a bit more gusto, "I'm serious! You are not avoiding me this time. Why did you not accept any payment?"

A trace of a grin fluttered on Jack's face. "With just the two of us here, guess there is no escape for me is there?"

"No there isn't buster!" She laughed.

He turned his head slightly, lowering his phone flashlight a bit before answering, "I recognized you from five years ago, before you left. I didn't know it at the time, but you had bumped into me at the Savannah Central sperm bank on Whaler St."

The memory slammed back into her brain like a thunderclap. She stopped and pointed directly at his chest. "You're the jerk who slammed into me as we went into the bank!"

He paused in mid-step and turned to face her, "That would be me, although I wouldn't describe it that harshly. I do apologize for my rudeness that day. I was in a rather hurry. I was to accept a phone call from a new employer for my next hit. I wanted to be done with my business at the bank before sitting down to accept the new contract."

"Oh…right." She had been around Jack for so long now she had completely forgotten that his original profession was that of a hit mammal. If she had known this back when she was a fully authorized police officer, she would have no choice but to arrest him for his crimes and cart him off to jail. Now, with society in tatters around them, it seemed hardly fitting to bother with such rules of law. Her ears perked up when she cued in on his last statement. "Wait…your business there?"

He grinned at her, "What? Just because I was a professional assassin doesn't mean I didn't have urges and needs like any other bunny. I just didn't have anyone to share my life with, so instead I did the next best thing and that was to donate to the local sperm bank."

A rather rosy flush permeated Judy's cheeks as her eyes trained themselves hard to the floor. She felt awkward now speaking to him about this. She felt she pried a bit too deep into his business. "I'm sorry. I don't think I should have asked."

This did elicit a chuckle from him. "Relax. I'm not too concerned with modesty at this point. If there was just one bunny out there that could benefit from my donation, then it was all worth it." His gaze lingered on Judy a bit more before retraining back onto the dark corridor ahead.

Noticing that he had started walking again, she kept pace with him. "So do you feel there was a happy bunny out there?"

Jack seemed to be lost in thought for a time as he considered her question, gauging whether it was worth it to finally tell her. At length, he smiled, "Well, there is one right beside me."

"Har, har, that's not funny Jack." Judy mocked.

"I'm being serious," He insisted, never losing his stride. "Where else do you think Nala got that stripe down her back? She was born with it." He indicated his unique markings on his face and down the back of his neck. "Just like I was born with these."

She cocked an eyebrow at him, "Just because you share similar fur markings don't necessarily mean we chose your seed out of all the ones in that sperm bank. Any numbers of rabbits could have similar genetic features."

"Then riddle me this," He seemed to think this was amusing, which vexed her, "when was the last
time you had seen another rabbit with my unique birthmark? Furthermore, I know for a fact there were only three other rabbits who donated to that specific bank and I supplied the most out of all of them. By sheer probability, you had a good chance of selecting my seed out of the other three."

Judy wrinkled her lip at how disconcerting the conversation had become. "So you think Nala is your child?"

"I'm positive. Although without a DNA test, you can choose to believe me or not, it makes no difference to me. I will still consider her my own even if you choose not to." He finished with finality, seemingly satisfied that he had made his point.

Judy’s mind swam through a maelstrom of emotions. She had never considered that Nala's unique birthmark could be connected by blood to Jack Savage. She did remember bumping into him briefly at the sperm bank, so he had his very presence there as an alibi. It would not have been outside the realm of possibility that in selecting a sample of sperm with which to start their family, Nick and her could have very well chosen Jack's. If that was the case it would explain why he was so close and loving with Nala and why he chose to do the contract for free, but then how did he know about her children?

"How did you know it was me when I first called you? That I was the bearer of your children?" She grilled, suddenly interested intensely in his response.

"When I first saw you walking past the café, I didn't put two and two together until later that you were 'the' Judy Hopps, the face plastered over all of Zootopia." He spread his paw out ahead of him, waving it around as if billboards were in front of them. She gave him a dirty look but he just smiled and continued on, "Seeing how you and Nick were together, I figured you had gone in with the sole purpose of getting pregnant, most mammals do. It wasn't until you told me that they had killed your children that I realized you might have selected my seed. If that was the case, then I had lost part of my family as well. That is one of the reasons why I chose to work for you freely."

"What then?" She prodded.

"When I beheld Nala for the first time and saw that beautiful stripe down her back, I knew for a fact that she was blood of my blood." A faint look of happiness was present in his eyes, a stark contrast to his usual cool demeanor. "However, I knew she could never be fully my daughter."

This turn was a bit unexpected and it struck her as something odd for him to say, "I don't see why you'd think that."

This time he stopped and faced her, "Because she is first and foremost yours and Nick's. You brought her into your family and he raised her best he could by your values and beliefs. She is a remarkable child with incredible intelligence and skill. I'm just the donor who has no right to claim her. As per the bank contract, I have no play in Nala's life."

Although this was quite possibly the weirdest conversation Judy ever had in her life, this did pierce her heart. She reached out a paw and pressed it gently onto his arm. "I'm so sorry Jack. This entire time you've been around her…"

He stifled a bitter laugh, "I only stayed to make sure she was safe. In all honesty, I should have left a long time ago. When I first had discovered where Rouge put you, I was determined to get you out. I alone was not enough to do it. With much toil, lies and capitulations, I finally got Rouge to strike a deal by convincing her of Nick’s love for Judy. It was the only way she'd allow contact with her, through him. I suffered a few rejections for it." He lowered his suit collar a bit to show her the faded prick marks through his fur.
Judy felt awful for even thinking ill of Jack with regards to her daughter. How hard it must have been to help Nick raise her these past five years yet never bond with her in a way that Nick had. Even if the possibility that Nala was his was true, it would be hard on any parent to watch someone else care, love and dote on one of your own without you having any say in how they raise them. Despite this, she still wasn't entirely sure she could just allow Jack to come into their family and be a part of their lives. Would Nala be ready for it? Would she be ready? Judy was confused and for the first time in her life, she had absolutely no solution.

"We're here." He stated, drawing her out of her musing.

"Where? A dead end?" She said perplexed. Ahead of them was a blank wall with nothing but layered shelves of colored rock settled onto each other from multiple centuries of sediment build-up.

Jack winked at her. "That's what we want you to think!"

Leaving her to be puzzled, he moved forward to feel along the rock with his paw, moving his hand down after clicking his tongue a few times to ensure he found the right handhold. At first it didn't look like much from her angle, but when she moved to the edge of the passage and viewed the wall from that vantage point, she could see a tiny outcropping of stone, just big enough for a small mammal to press in.

"This is why you are either invited into the Nocturnal District or you already know how to get in. This is but one of the few ways one can enter. Several of the larger entrances are further away and not worth traveling to." He informed.

Using a single finger to indent the switch, he backed up as a low grinding sound rumbled throughout the channel. Silt and dust fell from the ceiling as a dark outline began to form on the rock before them. A lopsided, rectangular piece began to retract further into the darkness allowing them access to yet another passage but one where the slope of the floor sunk downward at a steep rate and a slight breeze began to stroke their faces from the deep.

"Ahead of us lies what many residents above believe to be the fabled Nocturnal District." He craned his neck back to look at her. "You ready?"

With a look of resolve, she bowed her head confidently. "Yes. I need to get back to the old Zootopia. I need to remember what was so important there." As they proceeded down deeper into the bowels of the earth, she glanced behind them toward the opening. "Is that going to close on its own or should we do it?"

Jack kept walking but he shifted the phone to the other paw, his current arm getting tired of holding it aloft. "There is a time delay on it. It'll close eventually, most likely long before anyone from headquarters ever realizes we're gone."

She sped up her gait to get ahead of him so that he'd stop. "You do realize that we're being followed or haven't you been hearing the soft patter of footfalls behind us this entire time?"

He looked at her before facing the inky blackness behind them. "I did notice a long while back. I just knew it wasn't anyone who was especially antagonistic to our plans." He turned to raise his phone up high and flood light back onto the door mechanism, still locked in its open configuration. He raised his voice just enough to be heard, "We know you are there. You can come out now!"

After a minute, from out of the shadows stepped Mai, complete in her black overalls tied securely with a belt and a leather strap around her chest to hold the sheath for her katana. She made no indication that she was either surprised or nonplussed about her being discovered. She greeted the
two of them with a small movement of her head.

"And just where were you two heading off to at this time of night?" She asked casually.

"How much did you hear?" Judy wondered.

Mai gave Jack a hard look, "Enough. But I'm still unclear as to where you're going in the Nocturnal District and why. You know the dangers of this place as well as I do Jack."

Judy's gaze shifted back and forth between them, slightly baffled as to what they were talking about. Before she could ask, Jack responded to Mai smoothly, "We don't have the time to go visit our old master. I figured it would be best we not draw attention to ourselves and keep away from any of the larger crime bosses here."

"Then just who are we seeing?" She pressured, arms crossed and one foot slowly increasing in intensity, it's soft pattering echoing down the corridor. "All routes out of the lower city have been claimed by someone at this point. Just who are we striking a deal with for safe passage?"

"I only know of one who would be willing." Jack answered cryptically.

Judy's plan worked out flawlessly, much to her surprise. Ami and her two brothers were actually quite adept at following simple orders when it involved getting their pent up energy out of their little systems. Each of the kits assisted Judy on her meter maid duties by pinpointing each telltale sound of a parking meter going off; even to the exact order they had occurred down the street. She was amazed at how skillful they were at identifying illegally parked vehicles based off a few basic rules she had laid out for them at the outset.

For the tall cars belonging to giraffes and other similarly large mammals, she taught them how to use the environment to include signs or shop awnings to leap up high enough to swipe the parking ticket under their windshield wipers. Pointing out landmarks while also giving them something to do and focus on was a tremendous burden reliever for Judy. She didn't have to corral the kits but rather direct them and they more or less functioned autonomously, all she had to do was type out the tickets and hand them to each sibling to deliver.

There were a few hiccups where one angry moose blared at her indignantly, crumpling up the ticket in his hoof and shaking it at her. "What the heck Hopps? Just because you're famous across Zootopia doesn't mean you can abuse your power and make people pay more! I'm struggling enough as it is!"

Normally, back during the first few days on the force where she was regulated to meter maid duty, she would have taken great insult to these accusations. With many months on the streets and handing out tickets, irate complaints like this didn't faze her. She simply smiled back with a friendly wave, "Sir, if you wish to file a grievance, you may contest your citation in traffic court. Have a nice day!"

The moose glared at her as she drove past, considering real hard on whether it was worth it to kick her vehicle.

She worked her way diligently around Savannah Central, Sahara Square and Tundra Town before taking a scenic route through the Meadowlands back into Precinct 1 Downtown via the Rainforest District. It was had been a long, exhausting day but she felt mighty accomplished at keeping the kits entertained and engaged with the ticketing. Maybe it wasn't so hard to look after young ones after all.

They had stopped for lunch just before leaving Sahara Square at a local delicacy shop where they enjoyed some delicious baklava dripping with sweet honey. It was a rare treat even in the Burrows and all three of her siblings loved it. Now that the day was ending and she had to get back to the
station to drop off the mobile and clock out, she needed to supply dinner for the three bunnies and it would be easier if she still had a method of transportation to get her to an eatery.

She was looking down the shop fronts for a suitable place when she noticed Mr. Otterton strolling down the street with a bushel of flowers. It appeared he was bringing them into the Flora and Fauna, a shop he co-owned with a rather swarthy pig named Bert. She pulled to a stop abruptly and put her parking lights on before reminding the kits to behave and not interrupt when she was talking. They all waited semi-patiently in the vehicle, eyeing her with interest.

"Mr. Otterton!" She bounced out of the mobile.

He looked genuinely surprised to see her, he wasn't paying any particular attention to his surroundings, so focused he was on delivering the flowers to his shop. He beamed at her before speaking in a rather deep, yet friendly voice, "Officer Hopps. What a pleasure to finally talk to you in person. Please call me Emmitt. My wife sings your praises at least once a month."

"Oh, you don't have to do that!" She remarked as he maneuvered the rather awkward package in his arms to shake her hand. "I'm just trying to do my best to protect and serve, no thanks needed for that!"

He continued to pump her hand vigorously, his bright eyes only magnified through his thick lenses. "No, it truly is an honor. Without your assistance, I probably may not have been able to regain my true self and never have seen my wife again. You helped my family out so much." He glanced up at a nearby billboard with Judy's smiling face plastered over it. "It seems you have grown to be quite the treasure yourself in Zootopia, young lady."

Judy hadn't meant to blush as hard as she did. She was hardly the one to take unabashed praise like this, it simply didn't feel right. "Oh, that? That wasn't really my idea."

Emmitt scratched his chin, "You deserve it nonetheless. In fact, I must thank you for something else as well." Judy turned back around from the board, her curiosity piqued. "I do appreciate you not telling my wife about my…extracurricular activities."

Immediately reminded of Otterton's unique interest in free living at the Mystic Spring Oasis club where all mammals shed their clothes for a more primitive experience, Judy flushed even harder. "Well, case details are confidential and on a need to know basis. I wouldn't expect anyone in the ZPD to reveal that type of information to your wife. That sort of thing should stay privately between a husband and wife." She also surmised he was also referencing his ties to Mr. Big as well, the mob boss of Tundratown.

He gave her a leisurely nod, shifting the bushel in his arms again. "Well, I appreciate the discretion all the same. Knowing my wife, she just wouldn't approve. So I feel I owe you something for helping my family in more ways than one." He gazed down the street a bit, the gears evidently turning in his head. Suddenly his eyes opened wider as he recalled something nice. "I know just the thing."

"What is it?" She asked, her attention briefly diverted to Ami and the other two as they surreptitiously sneaked out of the vehicle and were slinking their way toward them.

"Are you seeing anyone in particular? A love interest perhaps?" Emmitt pressed.

Judy turned back to him, the line of questioning striking her as a bit odd. "I guess I am."

"Splendid!" He seemed rather pleased that his recommendation would be suitable. "There is a great
place just out on the water overlooking the entire lake and the sky horizon of Zootopia. It is called
the Oat and Cloister. They have excellent food there and I happen to know the owner who also
frequents the Springs. I'll give him a call to give you guys a VIP lounge room along with a discount
off your meal!"

She was rather taken aback by the enormously generous offer by Emmitt. "Mr. Otterton," she
switched back to his former title, "that is a bit too much of a gift for me to be accepting. You see,
we're actually not supposed to be accepting favors like this or it could be misconstrued as an
exchange for preferential treatment."

A slightly irked expression developed on his face, "I don't expect anything in return Officer Hopps.
It was simply my way of expressing gratitude for your help." He inclined his head to his shop, "I'd
still have to charge you full price for any and all flower arrangements you purchase here."

Judy bowed slightly, paws clasped. "Thank you so much for the offer then. I gratefully accept it!"

"Consider it done then. I'll phone ahead to the manager to be expecting your name soon on his
reservation list." He smiled convivially.

"Well, I didn't say I would-" Judy began.

Their conversation was interrupted when the store entrance banged open, jangling the bells attached
to it stridently. Out stumbled a frazzled mammal, having tripped over the carpet in the entryway. As
he toppled to the ground with all the grace of an elephant just learning to be a ballerina, Judy could
see that he was a skunk, dressed in a yellow shirt and brown cargo shorts, along with a hat that had
the letters ZNN emblazoned garishly on front.

"Are you okay?" She asked, handing the skunk his dropped supplies.

"Thanks." He stuttered. He got up slowly, brushing himself off. She could now see his necklace,
which was shaped suspiciously like a tree air freshener. "That carpet is a felony, I tell you. Why, I
outta write a strongly worded post...about..." He trailed off once he recognized who he was talking
to, his eyes popping. Before she could ask what was wrong, he suddenly gasped and pointed a
clawed finger straight into her face, just inches from her nose. "Holy musk, you're Officer Judy
Hopps!"

"Yeah, that's me." She said sheepishly.

"I've read all about you!" He said excitedly, his claw waggling wildly.

"You have?" She inquired nervously, backing up a few inches from his finger. Just how much did he
know about her? In fact, how much of her personal information was publicly available?

"How rude of me!" He said all in a fluster. He brought his palm down to wipe it onto his shorts a
few times before extending it out again toward her in greeting. "I'm Stinkman, Steven J. Stinkman, at
your service! I work with the Zootopia News Network as a journalist. I was tasked to follow up on
the Night Howler incident that started with all these silly florist stores."

"Really? After all this time?" Judy wondered, taking his hand lightly. It had been over a year since
the last incident after Bellwether was imprisoned.

"Ahem." Grunted Emmitt, still standing by with his collection of flowers, he did not seem the least
bit amused at this journalist reporter calling his store silly. "If you'll excuse me Hopps, I have to get
back to work."
"Oh, of course! It was nice to see you again." She called back waving.

"And I you." He nodded amicably. "I'll phone ahead to my friend." With that, the otter stepped through the entryway, deftly avoiding the welcome mat that the skunk had so egregiously tripped over earlier.

Shushing her three young charges, who had just started to get rowdy again, Judy turned back to Steven. "It has been a long time since that serum was destroyed. Why are you even being tasked to report any further on it?"

Her question broke him out of his reverie at watching Mr. Otterton resituate the mat on the floor, he refocused back on her. "Hmm? I mean all those reports about midnicampum holicthias being stolen from florist shops. Isn't that why you're here?"

Judy's ears went up like a shot. "What?! Are you serious?" She practically wanted to take the skunk's shoulders in her paws and shake him. This was not a funny joke.

"I guess so…I mean, yes, completely serious!" He said with renewed confidence. A spark of inspiration hit him as a smile burst onto his face. "Say…do you have time for an interview?"

"No, I don't." Judy denied, her mind racing a million miles a minute. The fact that she wasn't aware of this development was disconcerting. Granted, she was occupied fiercely in the bat assaults case and this may have slipped under her radar. It was quite possible one of the other officers in the precinct was tracking these thefts and because it didn't seem related to what she was working on, she was made unaware of its happening.

"Officer Hopps?" Steven probed again, his notepad already open to a blank sheet and his pen hovering a few millimeters above the surface. "Just a few questions, please?" He tried his best to give her his best sad face.

She didn't have time for this. She needed to get back to the station and find out what was being done about these burglaries. She already suspected Chief Bogo knew about them but she was curious as to why he didn't bother telling either her or Nick, especially since they were deeply involved the previous time around. "I'm sorry. I have to get back to the ZPD. It was nice meeting you Mr…?"

He didn't even have the time to respond when a dark shadow loomed over them all. Ami squealed as a huge shape thudded next to them with a gust of wind, knocking over a few plants, shattering their pots on the sidewalk. Steven shriveled in terror as he shied away from the bat that stood before them, slightly bigger than Judy at the highest joints on its wings. The skunk quivered as he unconsciously let loose a small yelp, his tail fluttering violently.

"Rouge!" Judy said surprised, taken aback by the bat's sudden appearance.

She turned her gnarled face down to regard the rabbit, a toothy grin emerged on her frightening visage. "Judy, it is so good to see you again."

Judy took one glance down before bolting her eyes back up to her face, "And I see you've lost your coat." It was very evident that the crumbling jacket she had worn the previous meeting had long since been abandoned and Rouge was wearing nothing but what nature gave her at birth.

She shrugged at the bunny's observation, "I care not. It really was quite cumbersome." She started sniffing the air, her curved nose wiggling. "What is that putrid odor?"

Judy and the others didn't actually realize the smell until Rouge mentioned it. All at once, they backed away from Steven, Ami crying out, "Aw man, that reeks!" They could almost see the slight
haze hovering near the skunk's tail. Rouge raised an eyebrow in interest.

Steven looked positively mortified. "I'm so sorry! I'm usually a lot better at holding it in." He stabbed a claw at Rouge. "You startled me. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have had this accident! I'm very sorry Judy! I didn't want to embarrass myself on our first interview."

"I didn't say I'd do one." Judy reminded firmly. "Besides, you shouldn't put blame on Rouge. She didn't know you'd be alarmed so easily."

Rouge lifted a hand, the wing along with it stretching, to help placate the matter. "Please, excuse me. I do admit I was coming in a bit faster than usual. I was just overjoyed to finally see you again Judy." Her fanged maw was a bit frightening.

"You two know each other?" Steven stammered, quickly scrawling away on his notepad.

Judy shifted quickly back and forth between Rouge and Steven before responding agitatedly, "No… I mean, yes. We've met only once before, in a restaurant."

To affirm her statement, Rouge brought her palm and laid it across her breast in what appeared to be sincere thanks, "It was Judy here that helped defend me from a most vicious wolverine from pummeling me to a pulp."

"Wow!" He murmured in awe, his hand scribbling faster across the page. "Hopps is quite the hero then! Willing to save even the universally disliked bats flooding into Zootopia! You really are a wonder Officer Hopps!"

Judy put both her paws out, "That's not really how it went…"

Rouge waved a claw through the air to dismiss her argument, "Don't be so modest, you were quite the sight, standing up to that nasty wolverine that could have torn you to shreds, all on my behalf." Sniffing the air once more, she maneuvered around behind the skunk, her voice turning low and husky. "So…what manner of creature are you? I do not believe I've had the pleasure of acquainting myself with your kind."

The skunk nervously clutched the pen and pad to his chest as he gripped the air freshener tree around his neck and gave it a few puffs to cover the pungent odor, realizing he leaked out a bit more at the sudden, grotesque bulk inspecting his backside. "I, I'm…a, uh, polecat." He chattered nervously. Upon seeing the bat was doing little else but admire him, he turned uncertainly back to Judy, his journalistic integrity overriding his fear response. "Um…Officer Hopps, now that everyone in Zootopia knows your name, how do you feel about being the official face of the ZPD? Do you feel it has made your job easier or harder as a result?"

"I'm not really sure that is relevant right now." She changed subject quickly. "So what is it about these midnicampum holicithias? How many instances of theft have there been so far? Do you know how many bundles have been stolen?" Judy whipped out her own carrot pen and began recording the conversation.

Steven bristled at the reversal, "Hey, I'm the one asking the questions!" He yipped suddenly and dashed around behind Judy, nearly bowling over Ami and the other two kits in the process, as he felt Rouge lift his tail and squeeze it. "Would you please tell her to stop doing that!"

Realizing that the situation was getting wildly out of control, Judy had no choice but to resolve the situation. It was quite clear she was not going to get any solid information out of Steven and she would be remiss if she simply left the rattled skunk alone with Rouge. Placing both paws on her hips,
she stared sternly at the bat, "Rouge, I believe you mean no harm but if you don't stop invading Mr. Stinkman's personal space, I'm going to have to charge and arrest you for harassment and disorderly conduct!"

Recognizing that her examination of the polecat was drawing the wrong type of attention, she rocked back onto her haunches and beheld the small group of mammals before her. "How rude of me! I was just so entranced by this marvelous specimen here that I had quite forgotten why I came to find you in the first place. I've actually come to warn you."

It was Judy's turn to look confused. "Warn me? About what?" She looked down and reached out to grab and pull Ami back who was curious enough to step forward and put a paw out to feel the fur on Rouge's knee.

Rouge leered unsettlingly at the kit, "What a delightful bunny." She regarded Judy again, "Yes, you are being hunted by a serial killer. One who has had his eyes on you for quite some time."

"Officer Judy Hopps? The famous face of the ZPD being hunted?" Steven began jotting notes furiously onto his notepad, barely peeking out from behind her shoulder.

Judy was suspicious. She barely knew Rouge all that well and it seemed quite odd that she'd come find her specifically to relay this piece of information. "Why are you telling me this?" She queried, cocking her head to the side.

Rouge pounded both of her front palms back onto the pavement, swinging both wings out wide, drawing a small shriek from Ami's brothers. "One good turn deserves another. You helped me find food and defend my dignity and I help you in not getting killed. Seems like a good way of paying it forward. Besides, without my help, you may not even be aware of the danger in your very own department."

She had to chuckle a bit, "Sorry to disappoint, but we're already aware of the rogue elements in the ZPD. We arrested them over a year ago in connection to the Night Howler case. So, although I appreciate your concern for me, it is much appreciated, I don't think there is anything to be worried about for the rest of the ZPD. Chief Bogo would have already known by now if there was a mole in Precinct 1, besides how do you even know about some sort of stalker anyway?"

"Oh Judy…" Rouge gurgled in what seemed to be a rather disturbing, guttural laugh. "You are so sweet and naïve. I knew there was a reason I liked you." She paced on all fours around the small group, drawing an anxious look from Steven, who matched her movements around Judy. "I wasn't talking about Dawn Bellwether's men. My kin and I have the power of flight; we can observe from up high events that many are not privy too. I've been keeping close watch over you since our first meeting and I can assure you that someone is hunting you."

A slight shiver went through Judy as she gazed disbelievingly at the bat, "That's a little creepy and somewhat alarming." She raised a single finger up. "Rouge, I am sure you are a nice person but do not be following me or anyone else, that could be considered another form of harassment."

Rouge simply shrugged her wings, spreading them in preparation to lift off. "Do whatever suits your fancy Judy. I am simply here to pay back a debt. But might I suggest that you look into any open serial killer cases on your books, you may find whom you're looking for." With a gust of wind, she vaulted into the air before spiraling down the street, gaining altitude with each passing second. She flipped sideways, holding a leg out for balance before disappearing behind a skyscraper.

"Whew, I am so glad she's gone!" Steven exhaled loudly, clearly unconcerned with how he sounded. Shaking out the jitters from his tail and a quick puff from his dangling neck air freshener,
he seemed eager and ready to finish the interview. "So Judy, given that you are now basically a
celebrity cop in Zootopia, I'm sure you've been getting a lot of fan mail from across the city. Perhaps
there are quite a few bunny admirers out there? Surely you've had your eye on one or two of them,
yes?"

Her focus still fixated on the last location she had seen Rouge fly past, her mind wasn't exactly on the
conversation. "Not exactly, I'm not really looking for anyone in particular."

A slight trace of surprise floated past Steven's face, "There must be a few suitors lining up at your
door, you are quite attractive for a bunny."

That last line irked her in a way it probably shouldn't have, she gave him her full undivided attention.
She put a paw to her hip, tapping her foot crossly. "That's a rather oddly unprofessional thing to say
and I'm really not sure I agree with this line of questioning."

It was most unfortunate that Ami took this inopportune time to fill in the details, her little body
bouncing up and down with excitement. "Judy doesn't like any rabbits! She thinks they're all ugly
and disgusting! She's dating a really nice guy named Nick!"

"Nick you say?" Steven pressed, clearly zealous on this juicy tidbit. "Who is this mammal?"

"Oh, he's a fox. He's so awesome and-" Ami gagged as Judy nearly strangled her.

"Will you shut up?!!" She threatened, quickly dragging all three kits back into the meter mobile,
jamming the seatbelt across all their laps. "It is time to go now!"

Steven stood aghast at the news, a rabbit dating a fox? A prey being in a romantic relationship with a
predator? This was even bigger than he thought! He ran after her, calling out enthusiastically,
"Officer Hopps! The citizens must know what it's like! Such a taboo subject! This must be thrilling
for you on a daily basis! Please, can you tell us more about your relationship with Nick?" He was
rambling so fast it was near incomprehensible.

"No, that is enough questions for today! I'm leaving now! Goodbye!" She buckled herself in and
slammed on the pedal. She swerved out into traffic, nearly hitting an oncoming car. She yelled out an
apology before zipping down the road, eager to be back at the station so she could investigate this
new string of robberies. If it was as she feared, this could turn into something bad.

"It's okay!" Steven shouted out somberly after the retreating form of her vehicle. "I think I got what I
need…"

"What about dinner? I'm hungry!" Ami whined, tugged on Judy's sleeve.

"You'll be lucky if you get even that when I'm through with you!" Judy snapped, furious that Ami
had spoken out of turn back there with the journalist. She was certain that a horrible impression had
been made and dreaded next week's newspaper.

"You're a cop Judy! Wouldn't you just arrest yourself for child abuse?" Ami reasoned flippantly.

Judy gritted her teeth, "There is no such thing as sister abuse and I will have my revenge!" She
ensnared Ami in a headlock with one arm before taking her other paw off the wheel briefly enough
to give her a horrendous noogie.

"Ow, ow, ow! Stop!" The little kit trilled.

Releasing her grip, Judy returned her paws to the steering wheel. "There will be more where that
came from tonight! You are going straight to bed when we get back home. That goes for all three of you!” The two brothers gulped apprehensively.

She shook her head as she charged down the road, her mind already at the station planning out what she'd do that evening. It wasn't until later that night while she was cuddled next to Nick, his soft breathing caressing her backside that she realized with a start that she had never mentioned anything about Dawn Bellwether to Rouge.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was only half as difficult to write. The first portion with Jack and Judy actually flowed very smoothly and was completed in a single night. I knew that from the subtle clues in chapter 11, I needed to resolve the lingering shadow looming over Jack and Nala's connection. I also wanted to put a more unique spin on Jack Savage and his relationship with Judy as a result of Nala, something I have seen so little of in other Zootopia fanfictions. I feel this deepens him as a character and makes his motivations and future actions much more relate-able. The part of the chapter that was most time-consuming was the second half with Judy, Rouge and Stinkman, a character cameo of Berserker88's zoosona! Thanks to him for letting me use him! The actual street-side conversation may not have been as interesting as one would hope, but it helped set up quite a lot of plot points and foreshadowing. It was intended to be read very snappy like it was happening very quickly and with very little time for characters to react. Hopefully readers still enjoy the interactions and look forward to what is planned to be a very exciting chapter next!
"Oh great, she's dragging us back here to reenact her failed victory!" Nick snarked.

"Shhh, will you be quiet?" Judy snapped, sharing a look with Dawn at the bristling fox.

He snorted indignantly, "If she wanted to kill us softly, she could have been a lot less obvious about it."

They could still hear the sirens and massive cries of mourning from outside the Museum of Natural History. Judy had driven their police cruiser through various side streets, avoiding most of the traffic congestion resulting from the attacks. As much as her heart wanted to go out to the fallen and those who had lost many loved ones, she knew that this problem had grown bigger than anything she felt the ZPD could handle. As much as she hated to admit it, Dawn Bellwether might be right about finding some form of containment to dissolve the threat these bats presented. Was she a cop going rogue and as reckless as Chief Bogo claimed? She didn't even know anymore.

"You either trust me or you don't. You could have simply left me back there in the cell to rot but you didn't. So just deal with your decision and have faith that I'll do you right." Dawn said jovially, pointing a hoof finger at him, taking great pride that she was getting to Nick.

"It wasn't my choice." He growled. Nick hated the fact that Dawn was able to crawl under his skin so easily, the fact her trying to make him kill Judy the last time they met might have something to do with it.

Dawn cast a knowing glance back to Judy, who returned it with a glare. "Oh, right, I almost forgot, you males always do follow the decisions of your better half."

"Stop it, both of you!" Judy shushed, giving Dawn a little push on the shoulder to get a move on. She could tell Nick was about ready to pounce on the diminutive sheep and tear her to shreds. "Are you going to show us the way out of the city to the old Zootopia or what?"

"Of course, of course!" She bleated, etching that devious smile of hers onto her face. "Such savagery. One of these days, you'll get it in your head that having a partner like him isn't going to work out for you. He might turn on his own and that'll be the end of Hopps!" Dawn cackled.

"If I do, I hope you're right there with me." Nick threatened, baring his teeth.

"Nick, I will punch your arm…with my foot if you don't stop." Judy hissed.

Knowing that her leg strength was multitudes more powerful than anything her forearms could accomplish forced him to quiet down, but it did not stop him from casting evil scowls at the sheep. They stalked onward into the dark atriums and hallways of the museum, following the orange jumpsuit laden sheep, hoping deep down she wasn't going to betray them. Her little jingling cowbell stopped as she regarded a very interesting exhibit beside them.

"What now?" Nick exhaled loudly.

Turning her head, as if just realizing they were there, she giggled. "Oh, I thought it prudent to stop off and admire our city's history. It is quite fascinating you know." She extended a hoof to the
mannequins of two primitive bunnies with spears warding off a rather menacing jaguar, perched on a
rotting log on all fours. "Did you know that it was prey that first gained evolved intelligence? They
were the ones to ultimately tame predators into living peaceably among them; figures that it would be
the docile mammals to ultimately enlighten the more primitive species."

"Get on with it!" Nick barked. "We don't have time to waste learning about some dumb history."

Dawn gave him a pointed look, "History that I'm sure you are already aware of." She made a small
gesture to outline her neck. "Aren't you?"

Judy caught the exchange and regarded Nick with confusion, "What is she talking about?"

A low rumble emanated from his throat, he did not look at Judy but kept his eyes trained on Dawn.
"It's nothing Carrots, just not looking forward to traveling with her tonight."

"Watch that temper now," Dawn warned, "you should probably go eat something to settle your
stomach." She crowed some more as Judy forcibly turned the ewe around and nudged her down the
gallery.

"I just might make an exception to my no meat diet just for you." He rejoined harshly.

Trying to stave off the inevitable conflict, Judy switched topics. "So why go back through here
anyway? Are you just trying to gloat how prey are superior and taunt Nick?"

"I won't deny that might have been part of it," she hummed, "but no, I'm actually using the subway
entrance here because it is the closest one to another drop point."

"And a functional subway car." Judy finished Dawn's thought.

The sheep click her hooves, "Exactly! We didn't have a chance to set up fully the Night Howler
operation inside of it but it should be serviceable for our needs."

"I swear if there is even a hint of Night Howlers in that car, I will destroy it all…right before I
destroy you." Nick rumbled.

Judy sighed, "Yes Nick, I agree that the last thing we need is to be led into another trap."

Dawn nodded her head sagely, "I admit that your distrust is warranted and I have no doubt of your
intentions if our ride was riddled with the stuff, but knowing your reactions ahead of time I wouldn't
be leading you into a death trap. After all, I do want to live myself."

"Oh look Carrots, she does have a brain on her shoulders after all." Nick quipped.

"Please, let's just get to the subway and be on our way." Judy pleaded. She did not want to have to
deal with these two bickering the entire trip.

They passed several more galleries and dioramas all depicting various facets and pivotal events in
Zootopia history. Nick's eye lingered on one in particular where several predators were doing manual
hard labor for several prey over-watchers; each predator had a collar with a singular, glowing, yellow
light. He glanced at Judy to see if she noticed but she had her eyes trained forward, watching Dawn
lead them further into the museum.

At length, they found the subway entrance and skirting around the massive mammoth statue set to
welcome visitors into the museum, they padded down the stairs and into the tiled corridors of the
station. After scrutinizing the myriad of track tunnels, Dawn finally remembered which one to take
and hopped down onto the rails with assistance from a very disgruntled Nick. She continued to prance down the tunnel until at last their flashlights drifted across a seemingly abandoned subway car, situated alongside a dilapidated landing platform that had clearly not been used for decades.

"I'd ask if you were kidding but given how all derelict railway cars can still be run as if brand new these days, I'm not going to bother." Nick remarked, setting off to do an inspection of the exterior to ensure there were no booby traps lying in wait.

"So where exactly are we going?" Judy asked; her eyes watching Nick prowl around the carriage.

Dawn watched her from the corner of her eye, "You know very well where we are going. You even released me from prison to show you how to get there."

"That's not what I meant!" She exclaimed, her ears drooping down angrily. "I'm asking what route are we taking exactly to get there?"

"Oh, then you should have been more specific." She chuckled, Judy just grumbled under her breath. She was having second thoughts about this plan. "There is an old railway that branches off the main thoroughfare in the Sahara Square tunnels. It leads east across the lake through the woods. Nobody really travels that way anymore and I highly doubt the railways have been maintained, so I'm not sure if we'll make it all the way there by train."

"Why connect the two Zootopias if one was condemned with no hope of recovery?" She thought it a prudent question to ask, after all if the current leadership of Zootopia didn't want the citizens finding out about past failed attempts, why bother making a way to link them?

"As far as I can recall," Dawn reasoned sincerely, tapping a hoof to her chin, "it was mainly used to bring materials and supplies in from the old city to help build the new one...alongside select residents who wished to relocate, of course. Once that was accomplished, they probably decommissioned the rail line and sealed it off; most likely too expensive to demolish it outright."

"All clear!" Nick called out.

Judy nodded before escorting Dawn up to the back compartment door. They opened it to see a mostly empty cabin with a few tables and chairs set up to accept another nursery of Night Howler plants. Thankfully for Dawn, it seemed it had not been fully refurbished and Nick's threat remained unfulfilled. Judy hopped to the front and began flipping on several switches to start up the engine. Given her experience with the previous one it was almost identical in nature to control.

Nick assisted her in handling the gear lever and before they knew it, they were chugging down the tracks. Dawn kept up front assisting Judy in changing the lanes to properly navigate their way to the neglected railway leading eastward, away from Zootopia. At intervals, they needed Nick to take one of the chairs in the back and hand it up through the roof trapdoor to Judy atop the car so she could hind kick each off at the incoming rail track switches. After a tiresome hour of circumventing a good majority of the railway system, they were finally out over the water on a rickety wooden bridge with pieces crumbling into the water at their passing.

"It's getting time to rest." Nick looked out the window at the full moon overhead. Even with the illumination it provided on the lake, it was doubtful anyone was looking their way to see them.

"You're right." She turned to Dawn. "How far do you think it is?"

The ewe shrugged. "I honestly haven't been. Maybe a few days, maybe more?"

Nick threw a paw out at the sheep, "Are you serious Judy? This is probably the most ill-conceived
out plan in the history of making plans! Look, I know you are serious about defeating these bats,
especially after what they did. I am too, but I think this is rather foolhardy, even for me. And now
we're stuck in a caboose with a convicted felon who tried to kill us last time!"

Dawn huffed and crossed her arms, flicking her chin up into the air haughtily. "You know, I could
have just let the bats come in and lay waste to Zootopia, but I'm choosing to place my bets on you
two imbeciles to solve the problem. I could have handled it just fine if I was still mayor, so a little
more appreciation here would go a long way!"

"And a little less homicidal sociopath would go a long way too!" Nick retorted.

"Please Nick, let's just get some sleep. She's got nothing here that can harm us. We're both trained
cops and can defend ourselves. I highly doubt she is going to try anything." Judy placated, putting
her paw on his chest. Her very touch and presence seemed to calm his visible fury.

After one last glower, he followed Judy to the front control booth and situated himself up against the
metal sheeting. Spreading his legs wide to accept her furry body, she sat down between them and
leaned back onto his chest and stared out at the passing trees. He enveloped her with his arms before
wrapping his tail around her legs to keep her warm. She ran her paws through its plush texture,
feeling his warmth through the fur.

She began lightly pounding her head against him, "This is a good plan. This is a good plan." She
repeated.

"I hope it is too Carrots. Just know that I put my trust in you, not in her." He reminded. "As long as
we're together, we should be all right."

"Should be?" She laughed softly.

"Well, you know, as well as we can be given the circumstances." He smiled, placed his muzzle on
her head. After a moment, "I really am hungry though."

"We'll stop off at the first Buga Burger we find." She promised smiling, her eyelids getting heavy.

"I would be most obliged." He responded happily, stifling a laugh.

Dawn eyed them from a distance, shivering in her thin prison garb. She didn't want to quite believe it
when she first laid eyes on that newspaper article but it seemed to indeed be true. Judy and Nick
were together and neither one was afraid. She puzzled and pondered on this revelation for a long
time before she too drifted off to sleep.

Bogo was again handing out assignments in the bullpen that morning. More cases were reported in
Tundra Town and in the Canals. It seemed the search for the remaining two mob bosses was
ramping up. Longhorn and Stipe had already agreed to stand down and stay put at Mercy Hospital
under the protection of both the ZPD and their own subordinate constituents. None of the men across
the precincts were amenable to the idea of providing sanctuary to known criminals but they all
agreed that it would be worse if there was unnecessary loss of life, which all were sworn to protect.

Although Judy was in the bullpen with Nick, who was now tasked as lead investigator on the case
due to her dismissal as meter maid for the week, she continued to attend the morning briefing as a
way of provided moral support. He was under a lot of stress and although he didn't show it on the
job, he usually came home exhausted and unwilling to do anything with her each night. She was
determined to make sure he had at least one good night this week.
"And finally Hopps and Wilde," Bogo boomed out, coming to them last as always. "You have one more day with your family, am I correct?" He looked down at her from above the rim of his glasses. She nodded at him. "Then this will be your last day on parking duty." He said more calmly than usual. Ever since his outburst earlier that week, he had been more careful around her. He was still his usual disgruntled self but there was a slight change in his demeanor when he was around her. It was subtle but just enough for her to pick up on it.

"Well good thing too sir," Nick began cheerfully, a grin plastered on his face, "I was worried I wouldn't be getting my little minion helper back."

Bogo slapped his remaining papers on the podium, stabbing a hoof finger at him, "Shut your mouth Wilde! I am having a good morning today, don't make me un-think my happy thoughts!"

"A good morning chief? That certainly is great news for the whole precinct sir!" He jibed. "Did big Ben save you your favorite donut with the cream in the middle? Oh, oh! Or maybe the one with the top icing that looks like the face of Gazelle?"

"Quiet!" He roared, prompting Nick to close his trap, yet he still stared straight at the chief with his trademark, perpetual grin. Judy was nudging him roughly with her leg, whispering to Nick to not say anything else stupid. "I regret my own opinion but you are indeed doing a great job but you are seriously making me consider putting you on parking duty for the remainder of the month when Hopps comes back on the case. I'm sure she is more than capable of getting you up to speed on 'that' job." At this threat, Nick's countenance faltered, ears flattening. "Good day Officer Wilde." With a self-satisfied smile, Bogo walked out of the bullpen with a slam of the door.

"Sheesh, talk about testy today." Nick said in a jovial tone. "I wonder what's pestering his rinder." His tail swishing as he hopped down from the oversized chair he and Judy shared.

Alighting next to him, she walked beside him toward the hallway door. "I believe he's just under a lot of stress."

"I think stress seems to be his modus operand Carrots. There is nothing he does without having a few veins bulging to demonstrate how strenuous it is." He joked, holding the door open for her.

She rolled her eyes at him, "I'm being serious. We're even pulling people in from the smaller precincts; what with our forces being spread thin across the precincts trying to predict and stop these bat attacks, our humanitarian assistance in the northwest quarter in helping patrol and assist construction of the new bat housing community, and now with this new string of robberies involving Night Howlers, he's got a lot on his plate Nick."

"Don't we all." He sighed, finally revealing his true feelings. "I'm doing the best I can Carrots, but it is killing me trying to micromanage so many officers afield and compile the data." He waved over at Clawhauser as the cheetah attempted to wave back with a donut in hand, nearly dropping it to the floor as it slipped out of his paw. Judy cringed but was relieved to see him snatch it just in time before it hit the marbled floor. Nick smiled but continued on to his cubicle office, "We believe there is going to be a coordinated attack soon that will be converging on the last known location of Mr. Big on the south side of Tundra Town. We believe he is going to hunker down in Little Rodentia, completely upending his normal base of operations."

"Well hopefully I'll be back on the case tomorrow when that goes off. I'll be there to help you through it." She put a reassuring paw on his arm, following him around the corner down into the hallway leading to their shared desk. He glanced down and gave her a weak grin. Her resolve suddenly hardening, she stopped and spun him around to face her. "Nick, that's it!"
"That's what?" He looked rather baffled.

"You clear your schedule out tomorrow night." She put both paws on her hips confidently, her ears up at attention, an assertive expression on her face. "We are going out on a date!"

Nick's eyes went bigger at this. "I'd love to have one with you Carrots but are you sure this is the right time to be doing this?"

"Yep!" She piped enthusiastically. "Just leave the planning to me. You got the big case to worry about right now. All I ask is that you try to cut out early tomorrow and I'll pick you up in our cruiser."

"You do know that is ZPD property and we can't just use it for personal affairs." Nick reminded her.

"He is quite right Officer Hopps!" A boisterous voice echoed through the hall.

Nick's ears flattened again as he drew his eyes closed, "And here comes Mr. Racehorse himself."

With acute hearing that was amazingly accurate at the distance he was down the corridor, Detective Oates marched up to them with big strides. "And I finished all my races in the lead." The horse bragged, looking down his snout at the fox. Shifting focus, he turned to Judy. "Department property cannot be for personal use or gain. Judy, you of all people should know this." He beamed at her, amused that Zootopia's star officer and academy valedictorian was going to be bending the rules for her benefit.

"Yeah…" Nick drawled. "I'm going to skip out on this lecture." He pointed with his thumb down the hall. "I'll be at our desk if you need me. See you stud." He waved back casually at Oates, not wanting to give another look at the arrogant horse.

"As pleasant as ever." Oates said with thinly veiled sarcasm. Shaking his head he regarded Judy. "I won't deny that he's been doing an admirable job with you gone but he's got a bad case of the attitude. A big stink does no one good, but a fresh aroma brings everyone around to the table as my mom used to say."

"I hear you." Judy agreed; her paws clasped in front of her, unsure whether her date plans would even come to fruition now.

"Well now Hopps." Oates spoke dryly, placing both hooves under his brown suspenders, holding onto them as he talked. "Why would you need a police cruiser off duty? You can always take the subway or the monorails as well as taxis to get to where you're going."

She started to wring her paws now, embarrassed that she even wanted to broach this subject with her idol and mentor. "Well, we would…I mean, I would." Oates cocked an eyebrow but said nothing. "There is this nice place I heard about that is out on the lake that can't really be accessed without a personal vehicle. I'm a bit short on cash to buy one myself and…"

"…you need to borrow one of our cars to get there." He fiddled idly with one of his suspender clasps for a few seconds, debating on something. Presently he smiled down on the bunny, "And what is out there that you want to get to?"

"The Oat and Cloister…" She mumbled.

"Oh come, come now! That is a fancy dig! Who is the lucky guy?" Oates proclaimed loudly, causing Judy to look around in case there were onlooker eavesdroppers.
She waved a paw off in the direction she last saw him. "Officer Wilde."

A ripple passed over Oates face but it was gone the moment it appeared. His expression furrowed, "Ah…yes, so the rumor mills have told me. I was hoping it untrue but one cannot hold back the pull of love, it makes no distinction between that which it pierces."

Her eyes widened a bit at his opinion, "You don't approve?"

"Not entirely but I will say that is my own bias and opinion of the man. Do not let my word sway you one way or the other." He stared off down the corridor for a time before finishing. "Judy, you can take Wilde on this outing. I will stay quiet on this. I raised one hoof before she could gush her thanks. "Just remember, I'm not reporting this to the chief for you, not for him. Understand?"

"Yes! Yes! Thank you so much!" She tackled his leg in a tight hug, throwing him slightly off balance.

After recovering from the initial surprise, he laid a hoof on her head, flopping her ears back and forth. "All right, all right Hopps. Let's try to maintain some semblance of professional bearing."

She jumped back abruptly, flashing a big smile at Oates. "I promise once we're done with the Oat and Cloister, we'll bring the cruiser right back!"

"Of that I have no doubt." He let out a contented sigh, "Alas, I must get back to work on this galling murder case. Do try the oven baked tomatoes for me there, they are to die for!"

"Will do!" She radiated, skipping down the hall to rejoin Nick so she could relieve him of the three kits and take them for another round through the city.

She was excited about the prospect of tomorrow night. The fact she got the approval of her ZPD idol was even more intoxicating. This was going to turn out to be a wonderful date! Nick did not know what was coming to him! She pulled out her cell phone and began dialing the number Mr. Otterton had given her. After a few rings, she heard a very stuffy voice pick up the phone.

"Yes? Is this the Oat and Cloister? I'd like to make a reservation for tomorrow evening." She said; glee evident in her speech. "The name is Judy Hopps."

The squealing ended brusquely as the rat gurgled its last breath, choking on its own blood. To ensure it was dead, Mai gave a sharp twist of the sword, forcing the neck to loll and the head to fall slack onto the dirt. Alongside her, Jack had just put a bullet point blank into the forehead of another rat, his silencer cutting out all reverberations from the shot. Judy had downed two herself with her gun, with a muffler loaned to her by Jack adorning its front.

Shaking herself from the toil, Judy kept her finger close by the trigger and reproached her two companions, "Do we really need to utilize deadly force on every mammal we meet down here?"

"I'm afraid so darling." Jack said indifferently, placing the weapon back into its holster on his leg. "Most mammals down here only care about one thing and that's getting ahead, be it with wealth, food, land, or power. In this case, these rats looked like they were starving and they probably wanted us to eat."

Judy shivered at the notion of such barbarous practices. "I'm just not used to shooting first and asking questions later. We usually use a graduated approach to any situation, only resorting to lethal force if necessary."
Mai finished wiping the blood off her blade on one of the rat's clothing before sheathing it and turning to Judy. "We aren't ZPD Judy and this isn't that world anymore. Maybe it will be again one day, but not now."

"We need to get to Big Ray's Wild Times. It would do us no good if we died in the process of reaching it, so yes we have to eliminate anything in our path that wishes us harm." Jack finished matter-of-factly, his attention now focused on the sloping path ahead.

"I'm still not comfortable with this but I understand. We were trained after all to be willing to take a life in the line of duty should the job demand it." Judy conceded, lowering her gun further before holstering it.

"That's the spirit." Jack smiled, waving her to follow him. "It's not far now."

Nocturnal District was a wholly alien world to Judy and it unnerved her that both Jack and Mai were decently comfortable with it. Granted both had prior experience living and training down here in the past but it gave her no less comfort knowing this. The tunnel they had exited from over an hour ago had opened up into a rather vast cavern filled with twinkling lights. Multitudes of stalactites were dangling from the ceiling; some formed together into larger structures with linked ropeways and balconies where denizens could travel to and from each hanging structure, most hanging over a vast underground lake.

A huge swath of stalagmites rose from the floor, some touching their counterparts on the ceiling. There were hundreds of wooden roads wrapping around the circular pillars of limestone, forming makeshift highways for the creatures of the deep to traverse the dull gloom of the cave. They could see that it was nowhere near as populous as the city above but there was plenty of movement shifting through the lit windows dotting the dark landscape. It was like they had stepped into another world entirely, one of danger, menace and uncertainty.

The three rabbits moved on in silence, their paws never far away from their weapons. As they moved into the city proper, the noise around them grew louder as several bar brawls traveled inevitably out into the streets. A caracal smashed through one of the glass windows of a local tavern, tumbling head over heels as it crunched on the ground. It was followed quickly by a pair of tiny bilbies who promptly leaped onto the comatose form of the caracal before stabbing it hundreds of times with their miniscule knives.

Jack put out a paw to stop Judy from surging forward to protect the caracal, "Stand your ground." He whispered. "This is not our fight. We would only be attracting more attention to ourselves and get into a situation in which we may not saunter away from alive. Keep walking."

"And don't stare." Mai added, looping an arm around Judy's and gentle pressuring her to keep moving forward.

Reluctantly, Judy did as she was told and continued to follow the pair of them. They traveled up the rising plank walkways before descending back down to a darker part of the sprawling subterranean city. Several bystanders, seemingly covered in filth and grime, made a point to spit on the ground before them making it quite clear they weren't wanted. Ignoring the riffraff and various sounds of mugging and the occasional scream, they finally made it to their destination.

Before them was the ramshackle façade of Wild Times, its garish, neon lights blinking in the oppressive pall of the cavern; the light casted itself across a circular half dome, the front exterior's upper portion a mass of rectangular glass windows. A small line formed outside the one and only entrance with a couple of badger bouncers at the door. Jack made a motion to stay behind him while he did the talking. Adjusting the ragged tie of his suit, he stepped forward into the flickering lamp
light hanging over the entryway.

One of the badgers noticed them and immediately brought up a metal pole, ready to club them to death with it. "Oy, what do ya think yer doing here?"

The other badger snickered stupidly, "Maybe they be wanting to become part of da festivities?"

Jack cleared his throat, "Actually, no. We are here to see Big Ray. I am an old friend of his. We go way back. As proof, here is my membership card." He fished out something from the inner pockets of his jacket and showed it to the two idiot bouncers.

Snatching it out of his hand, the first badger eyed it carefully, "Ey, it does seem ta be quite legit." He handed it to his partner. "What ye think?" After a shrug from the other, he handed it back to Jack. "I'll lead ye to Big Ray." He waggled a clawed finger at the three of them. "Don't go snooping around and stuff!"

After putting the card away, Jack turned his head slightly and nodded at the two does behind him. "Just follow me and don't wander, please, for your safety."

"He has a membership here?" Judy stared wide-eyed at the imposing structure. It was exactly the type of seedy place she wouldn't take her mother to.

Mai gave her a blank look, "I know just as much as you do."

The four of them entered the building proper, sidestepping around the rather shifty line of predators, eyeing the three bunnies with extreme interest. Judy had to wonder what kind of place this was, it certainly was a far cry from the brothel she had been staying in the past few weeks. A dank smell of sweat and musk permeated her nostrils as they walked past the foyer. Several predators lounged in the couches lining the sides, their stares following them across the floor. Judy could hear all sorts of growls, moans and whimpers coming from various rooms both on the ground floor and up the open staircase on the overlooking terrace. Her ears were darting to and fro, her instinctual flight response progressively building with each passing minute.

Judy quickened her pace to be alongside Jack. She whispered to him out of the corner of her mouth, "So what exactly is this place and why do we have to go here again?"

Jack kept his eyes forward but he put his paw out to give hers a reassuring squeeze. "All secret exits out of Zootopia are either blocked off, sealed by gangs or mob boss turf. This is one such route. Wild Times is literally built right in front of it and we need to go through here first, however it would behoove us to consult Big Ray, the local mob boss here, for permission to access. Otherwise things may get a bit more…complicated for us."

Mai sidled up next to Jack's other side, clearly onboard with Judy in not feeling comfortable with this plan. "Who is Big Ray? How long have you known each other?"

Jack thought about it a moment before answering, "Well, he wasn't always a mob boss until a year or so after the initial bat invasion. Before that, I knew him as a bodyguard. I took my orders from his boss through him and since then, he's kept me as an assassin on call. Except…he hasn't had any real need to use me in the past four years. However I do believe our past relationship should be enough to get us through this cesspool and out of Zootopia."

"If this is what it takes." Judy said nervously.

Presently, the badger stopped before a rather large, wooden door. The peeling pomegranate wallpaper on either side did little to soothe Judy's flutter in her stomach. This was a side of Zootopia
she never thought she'd see.

"Oi, this here is Big Ray's room. For yer sake, I sincerely hope yer an ol' friend of his or you could end up his dinner." The badger hooted uproariously as he swung the door inward and shoved the three bunnies in before slamming and locking it shut from outside.

"What the hell did we just get into?" Mai hissed at Jack.

"Jack, Jack, Jack…" A low, rumble resonated throughout the room.

Lounging lazily on a bed, slumped in the middle under the oppressive weight, was one of the biggest polar bears Judy had ever seen. Not really in height but in overall girth. It seemed the predator barely moved and simply ate and got fatter until it was nothing but a furry pile of rolling flesh and fur. There were stains of blood and other yellowish crust stuck to various parts of the bear's body. His eyes had turned a sickly color of yellow and there was bacteria build-up around the edges, most likely leading to a slowly diminishing quality of vision.

"What brings my old friend Jack here?" Big Ray droned, absently picking a piece of unrecognizable flesh from between his teeth with a claw.

Bowing low to his past employer, Jack rose up with poise. "As you know, I am still on your books for hire. Despite this, there has been far less work for me than I would want and so I am lacking in funds. As a result, I have to take other sorts of contracts to get by." He motioned to the two does beside him. "I have been employed by these nice women to escort them out of Zootopia. A protective, bodyguard mission if you will. All I ask is that we pass through your establishment and be on our way out."

Big Ray leered at the two females with interest, his eyes locking onto Judy in particular. A low, guttural chortle rocked the bear's body, sending his fat all aquiver. "Oh Jack…you were smart to come to me." He clicked a button on a remote situated on a shelf of blubber on his stomach. The corkboard panel on the adjacent wall slid up into the ceiling as it revealed a plethora of televisions, each linked to various rooms, hallways and exterior locations. "If I hadn't known it was you prowling around my territory, I would have sent my men to come kill you all."

"Then I am certainly glad you didn't. It would have been quite messy…for your men." Jack retorted politely.

Another deep laugh, "You were always the confident one Jack. That's what I like about you, nothing fazes you." Big Ray's expression darkened as he leaned forward, causing Judy and Mai to take a few steps behind Jack. "Unfortunately, I'm also lacking in funds and there have been less and less prey to go around for me to remain in the green. These are dark times Jack and people want release here. If I cannot give it to them, then we have a problem."

A flitter of worry passed over Jack's face. He hadn't expected pushback from Big Ray. Sure, all other options involved some form of danger and potential death but he figured due to his past connections with the bear this would be the least of the evils to negotiate with. It was clear now it wasn't going to go as he had planned. Mechanically, he began surveying the room and noticed several candles and incense burning in the room alongside a rather jagged machete at the foot of the bed.

"I don't have much money of my own to give." Jack lamented calmly.

"That is a shame." Big Ray agreed, admiring his claws as he did so. "However, I do see that you have two lovely specimens in tow that could serve as adequate payment for safe passage through my home."
Now a flash of concern was visible on Jack's face as he quickly glanced over at them. "That is not going to be agreeable. These are my two charges and I am under contract to keep them safe. Letting either one go would negate my deal with them and I wouldn't get my money and there's no point in letting me pass through when it is these women who need passage."

"Pity, I'm actually willing to let you go, for old time's sake." The polar bear grumbled, leaning back into the bed, its supports creaking loudly in protest. "You may leave with your 'precious cargo,' but if you want to leave Zootopia through here, you're going to have to agree to my terms." He indicated Judy specifically with a claw, "If you'll indulge me in a little pred-play with that one, I can forget that I even saw you here Jack. I'm sure there would be other...less unsavory folk who would love to know you're down here right now."

"Out of the question! No!" Jack shouted, swiping his arm across to emphasize the point.

"Pred-play?" Judy probed tentatively.

"We are not doing this!" Jack swiveled to look at her, intensity in his eyes.

"This is disgusting Jack!" Mai wanted to vomit. "Why'd you take us here!?"

"You're right, this was a bad idea." He affirmed. "There are plenty of other avenues out there we can take."

"Really Jack?" Big Ray murmured. "After that stunt you pulled with your old master Rosco? If I let slip that you're in town, you wouldn't last two seconds and neither would these delicious bunnies." Judy's ears perked up at the name, something about it seemed familiar.

"I thought you just said you'd let us go free just now!" Jack snarled.

"I think I had a change of heart. I'm feeling mighty selfish right now." He sneered, licking his muzzle as his eyes gleamed in the dark for Judy.

"What is he asking for?" Judy asked again, tense yet upset that no one was explaining this to her.

Jack put a paw to his forehead, scrunching his nose in loathing. "Wild Times is an establishment for predators to live out their natural tendencies by stalking and hunting prey in enclosed rooms or arenas."

Judy's eyes bulged. "And they pay for this?"

Mai nodded, she had some vague knowledge of these sorts of places. "Some prey pay for it as well. The thrill of being hunted excites them too."

"Does anyone die?" She stammered, taking a few paces back from the leering bear.

"Not always," Big Ray responded for Jack. "Most have their fun and then go back to their daily lives. However, if a particular predator client should pay a little extra, well...then a prey may end up missing the next day." He guffawed loudly, rattling the structure of his bed.

Nausea set into the pit of Judy's stomach. This was not what she had expected at all when she first came to Zootopia. The thought that these sorts of atrocious acts were going on right underneath the noses of the common populace was appalling to even consider. Back before her coma, she wondered, did the Mayor even realize the Nocturnal District was this depraved? What hope is there for an idealized city where predator and prey live together in harmony if barbaric forms of entertainment like this exist within its borders?
"So...he wants to eat me? How does this help our contract Jack?" She shot back at him, trying her best to keep up the lie he started. She gripped her stomach trying to fight down the bubbling bile inside.

"It doesn't!" He glared at Big Ray.

"Oh...Jack, Jack, Jack...I'm not going to harm her. I just want to feel a full belly for once." He raised three fingers in a salute. "Ranger's honor that after I've had my fill, I will give her back to you safe and sound...maybe a little messy but intact. You do this for me and I'll give you access to the way out of Zootopia."

"Ha!" Jack scoffed. "You were never a ranger!"

"Take me instead!" Mai stomped up defiantly, ears shaking with fury.

"As appealing as that would be, I've already chosen my playmate for this exchange. It must be her." Big Ray rebuked, giving a scathing look at Jack. "So what will it be Jack? Let me have some fun with one of your 'clients' or take your luck elsewhere? You won't get a more fair deal than this."

"No deal. We'll just head-" Jack began.

"I'll do it." Judy said shakily, her entire body visibly trembling.

"What? No!" Mai exclaimed shocked, rushing up to Judy and shaking her shoulders. "Are you nuts? We can't trust this bear! We don't know if he'll renege on this deal."

Ignoring Mai's frantic pleading, she looked over to Jack. "What are our chances out there in the Nocturnal District in finding another route out that doesn't involve the bats?"

Jack rubbed his forehead with increasing frustration, his calm cool finally breaking. "Not very likely. Many of the other mob bosses would sooner kill or eat us than bargain with us. Rosco wouldn't be very accommodating either."

"I can attest to that." Mai attested hesitantly; her eyes searching Judy's, hoping she'd reconsider.

Her ears flat on her back and a determined look, she stepped aside from Mai and looked Big Ray directly in the eyes. "I accept, but you must keep your promise and let us go after you're done." Decision finally made, her shivering stopped.

"Judy!" Jack admonished, striding over to prevent her from doing something stupid.

"Stop it Jack! If this is the best chance we have of getting out of Zootopia and getting back to where I can remember how to stop these bats, then we have to take this chance. Where else are we going to go?" She reasoned, batting his arm away from her. "Let's just get this over with so we can leave this awful place!"

"Good...good. I knew you'd see it my way." He gestured to Judy. "You'll need to remove your clothes for this."

"Wait, what?" She jerked, staring disbelievingly at the bear.

"They're bulky and scratchy and just not comfortable going down the throat. It's better if they were removed. You'll get them back afterwards." He sniggered, inclining forward with apparent lust for what was to come.
"Fine." If this was the course of action she was going to take, she was going to see it through to the end. Reclaiming back her Zootopia from the bats was far more vital than modesty; she needed to remember what was important. Jack immediately turned away as she slipped off her shirt and dropped the pants to her ankles. Standing nude before them all, she handed her clothes to Mai. "Please take care of them for me."

"Of course. Be careful!" She warned, her paws itching to find a reason to grab her sword and cut Big Ray to pieces.

Big Ray playfully tapped his bare belly, setting it to jiggle. "That's it. Just hop on up here and come to me." Judy crawled onto the bed, repulsed at the damp, sticky nature of the sheets, before scurrying up to the bear's chest, coming face to face with his snout. She stood proudly before him.

Judy cocked her head as she regarded him. Something pinged in the back of her mind. "Do I know you? You look familiar."

"I don't believe so my dear." He susurrated. "It might be a little tight for you but just squeeze on in and you'll be fine. I'll do the rest for you."

Her mind was telling her to stop, something was not right. Her memory was blaring that she knew Big Ray but she couldn't remember why or how. As she gazed into the open mouth before her, a growl issued from within, signaling impatience. She turned one last time to Jack and Mai. Both were on edge and ready to spring to her defense at a moment's notice. Jack specifically had a paw over his gun.

"Remember Big Ray," Jack cautioned, "No biting or chomping. Pristine, got it?"

Taking a deep breath, Judy bent low and put her paws into the bear's mouth, it folded into the squishy tissue on each side of the tongue, wet and uninviting. Ducking her head between the teeth she crawled over the tongue to proceed deeper into his maw. As her tail passed the ridges of his upper teeth, he suddenly moved his tongue up to lick the underside of her completely causing her to gasp with shock at the violating nature of it.

"And no licking!" Jack roared.

A chortle came rattling up his throat, causing Judy to wince at how loud it was up close. She had to take small breaths to keep the stench of rotten meat and fish from overpowering her sense of sanity with each rush of warm air blowing up from his lungs. She inched further to the back of his tongue where a yawning dark abyss appeared below her. With an insistent nudge and his paw on her butt, Big Ray pushed Judy the rest of the way into his throat.

Immediately she began sinking down his gullet, feeling the fleshy walls pulse around her as he began his swallowing reaction, forcing her slowly down into his belly. Mai cried out but held firm as she watched the rather abnormal lump descend down Big Ray's neck and disappear into the mass of fat that was his abdomen. Judy was hyperventilating, unable to see anything and barely able to hear what was going on outside. At length she suddenly dropped out of the enclosed cushion of his esophagus and plopped into a sloshy space that reeked horribly, causing her to wretch violently.

"Ah…" Big Ray laid back casually, patting his tummy, which appeared even more engorged than it had before. "You simply have no idea how it feels to have a living thing inside you, unable to escape, unable to flee, unable to do nothing but be digested. It feels so…right!"

"Okay…" Jack began, taking a few intimidating steps toward the polar bear. "You've had your fun. It's time to spit her back up. We kept our end of the deal."
Big Ray bellowed merrily, "I can't do that. You were right about one thing Jack. I am no ranger and I'm not sticking to our promise! Besides, I had a debt to pay back to this rabbit."

"What?" Jack gasped, his eyebrows rising.

"She may have forgotten me, but I have not forgotten about her!" He thumped his belly harder, no doubt shaking Judy roughly inside. "You hear me you little shit?! Did you think I wouldn't remember you embarrassing me in front of all my friends and my employer in the boxing ring all those years ago? You ruined my honor and reputation. I lost my job because of you! Now it's time I repay the favor. If you haven't figured it out yet, it's me, Ramon! And now you're just the next meal in my belly."

At this, a high pitched screeching could be faintly heard from within Ramon as several paw prints could be seen bulging out of his stomach, Judy frantically trying to break free of her fatal prison.

Instantly, Jack and Mai drew their weapons and trained them on the massive polar bear. "Spit out my friend now or I will personally put a bullet in your head!" Jack thundered.

Ramon rolled his eyes, "Those idiot badgers, did they not even check you for weapons? What the hell do I even pay them for?"

As if on cue, a loud thump slammed up against the locked door before a slight click heralded a newcomer just outside in the hall. All eyes turned to see the door swing open, the body of one of the badgers slumped forward, a knife lodged in its throat. Mai and Jack gazed up at the darkened shape, now stepping over the dead body and revealing itself in the dim glow of the candles.

Mai and Jack shared a look of horror as they both screamed in unison, "Nala?!"

The small kit looked around the room apprehensively before resting her eyes on the two of them and smiling, another knife still held in a paw. "Where's mom?" She asked.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter simply flowed out of me because I had a clear vision in mind for all three parts. I knew that we had to come back to the plight of Judy, Nick and Bellwether after leaving them alone for a chapter. The whole goal was not only to explain the method of travel they use to get to the old Zootopia, but also to deepen the dynamic tension between the three of them as well as dropping a few plot hints along the way. Their banter was actually quite easy to pin down and helped me define the relationship the three will have going forward. The middle scene with Judy, Nick and Oates was more catered to setting up my upcoming romantic date chapter with Judy and Nick, which will finally give readers payoff for the slow burn we've been having with these two. Finally, the biggest draw of the chapter was the Nocturnal District, a place I had great relish in fleshing out and describing to the most rottenest detail! I inserted a nice callback with Big Ray that I'm sure most readers didn't see coming but makes sense in hindsight and helped establish a link to Jack and other characters from the past. Finally, the vore scene, if it grossed you out completely then I did my job as a writer. When I was first introduced to this part of the furry fandom, I was appalled and disgusted. It's sad but it would be logical that stuff like this WOULD happen in Zootopia so I needed to address this graphic topic at least once and depict it in the most horrifying way possible, through the eyes of a prey.
Chapter 15: His Greatest Failure

Bogo took another sip from the amber liquid in the glass, taking mild enjoyment of the tinkling of ice within. He closed his eyes, letting the fluid burn as it went down. It had been a long time since he drank alcohol. He swore to himself he wouldn’t drink again since his daughter’s death. However, given the circumstances and losing Swinton, he felt drained and just wanted a little bit of relief. He took another sip and grumbled pleasantly. If he wasn’t careful, he could just as easily fall back into his old habits.

“Sir,” A gruff but calm voice resounded behind him, clearly having just entered the bar, “I thought we talked about this?”

“Don’t tell me what I can or can’t do to my own body Rhinowitz.” Bogo groused, setting the glass down before grabbing the bottle to pour himself another shot.

The portly rhino ambled over before squeezing his big belly between the barstool and the countertop. He leaned forward, crossing his beefy arms over each other before turned his head to look at his chief. “I just don’t want to see you in a dark place like when Arriane-”

Bogo slammed a heavy hoof onto the counter, rattling the bottle beside him, nearly tipping it over from the vibration. “Don’t want to talk about it!”

“Then when?!” Rhinowitz blared. “As far as I can tell, you’re moping around rather than getting back up from a setback like you usually do and solving the problem. Last time you did this was when your daughter died.”

Bogo smashed his fist again into the wood, causing a small crack to form where his knuckle contacted it. “I know what happened! You don’t need to remind me!”

He untangled his arms, spreading them out in supplication to Bogo, “Look, I’ve known you for a long time chief and I’ve stood beside you for years. You are one of the closest friends I have. So I understand where you’re coming from, it is always hard to lose someone you love. We’re like family, always have been on the force.”

Fury still present in his eyes, Bogo regarded his glass with uncharacteristic contemplation. “Which is why I feel she needs to be protected.”

Rhinowitz shot him an odd look, “You’re talking about Hopps, right?”

Bogo barely nodded in affirmation. “I’m very fond of Judy.”

“I can understand your sentiment there. I almost consider her like a little sister to me now. The last thing I’d want to see is her or Nala come to harm, but she is not your daughter chief and you can’t keep protecting her from the past.” He chanced placing a foot pad on the buffalo’s shoulder.

“Don’t you think I know that?” He grunted, taking another swig from the glass before looking away from the rhino. “She has this attitude and passion that reminds me so much of Arriane. That stupid, little bunny has grown on me.”

Rhinowitz chuckled, “As has she on all of us.”
Bogo stared down into the swirling liquor before uttering, “I just feel like I could have done it better, handled the situation more efficiently. I’m trying not to make the same mistakes with Hopps like I did with Arriane.”

The rhino sighed heavily. “My men and I think you are.” At an aggravated snort from Bogo, he clarified quickly, “Well, to put it bluntly sir, she’s been with us for weeks now and is still unaware of her entire situation. She’s not even aware of what she’s supposed to know! How is this properly protecting her by denying the very information she needs to succeed?”

“It just is!” He thundered, shattering the glass between his hoof fingers, causing him to swear loudly.

Rhinowitz, having heard enough, got up from the stool, letting it topple to the ground. “Sir, someone needs to give you a real, hard talk and I guess it’s gonna to have to be me! Hopps is not some substitute daughter for you and she shouldn’t be treated like one! She’s one of us. She’s family and us cops, former and current, need to stick together. You need to stop living in the past and get over your failures and prejudices, that’s what got your daughter killed in the first place!”

“How dare you!” Bogo roared, standing up suddenly. The alcohol hit him hard as he gripped the counter with his bloody hoof, trying to stabilize himself. He jabbed a hoof finger toward Rhinowitz, “Arriane was my life! I did not fail her! I was only trying to protect her from the world until she was old enough to handle it!”

He looked upon his former chief with pity, “No, you were protecting her from that cub. She loved someone you didn’t approve of and you forced her to do what she did. In the end, that was no one’s fault but your own. If you had been more understanding of her decisions throughout her life, she may have actually come to you for support instead of lashing out like she did. Do not take what happened with your daughter and apply it to Judy and Nick. They are their own persons and deserve the right to make their own decisions!” He respired loudly. “Judy needs to know the truth of our lies and I’m going to be the one to tell her.”

“Rhinowitz, stop!” He bellowed after his companion.

Much to rhino’s annoyance, he did stop. After a minute of silence, he turned his neck to behold Bogo, genuine tears in the buffalo’s eyes. “Chief?” He asked uncertainly.

“Damn it Rhinowitz…” He moaned, holding his head, wanting the pounding to go away. “Even I don’t know what the truth is anymore. As far I know, I’ve been stringing all of you along on a fool’s mission based on the sole word of a rabbit we barely even know.”

“Jack has been with us for close to five years now.” He reminded Bogo.

“That’s not what I mean.” He groaned, gripping his barstool and sitting back down on it. “When Jack came back all bloody and dazed, he was raving how he knew Hopps and was the last person to have been with her.”

Rhinowitz crossed his arms in remembrance, “I will admit it did seem a bit suspicious.”

“We had nothing to go on but the lone hope that Hopps was the last person who knew the code we needed.” He kept his eyes on the broken remains of the glass he had destroyed. “I can’t help but think I’ve done nothing but damn us all waiting on something that may never come to pass. If what Jack said was a lie and her trip to old Zootopia where we found her was nothing but a waste, then what left do we have to go on?”

“Nothing.” He replied monotonously, unable to think of any other alternative.
“I let this drag on way too long and now we’re in a position where either course of action is disagreeable.” Bogo noted the brief bowing of the rhino’s head to continue, completely in tune with his line of thought. “We stay and pray she remembers the code but then have her confront the lie all over again or…”

“…leave with Hopps and have her rebel because of us leaving Nick behind and abandoning Zootopia to its fate.” Rhinowitz finished. “Either one will result in Judy walking out on us yet again.”

“I want to make it right again. I want to do right by her.” Bogo rapped the counter another time. “I just can’t get the image of her face out of my head the moment she realized we had betrayed her. It was the last face Arriane gave me the night she died.”

Rhinowitz’s countenance softened as his tone grew warm, “All the more reason we should come clean and explain the situation to her. Maybe things will be different this time around if we are upfront and honest with her about the nature of Zootopia.”

His exhale was long and low. After a moment, he looked back over at Rhinowitz. “Maybe you’re right.” He made a wheeze as he pushed back the barstool and stood up tall. “Let’s go and break it to Hopps, Madge’s diagnosis of her memory be damned!”

“Bogo! Bogo!” An exasperated Clawhauser collapsed in on the doorframe, clearly winded from the short run down the hallway. Even with many pounds shed off his frame, his overall endurance never really improved. In his shaking paw was a crumpled note, its folds still present in its structure. “I found this…out in the hall outside Hopp’s room!”

Bogo snatched the paper from the panting cheetah’s paws and looked it over.

*Nala, what we talked about last night got me to thinking and you are right. We should be doing more to get Dad back. Tonight I am taking matters into my own hands and trusting my instincts. I am going to travel with Jack Savage back to a place where I can last recall anything that might help us bring Dad back. Please stay here and stay safe with Mai and the others, they’ll take good care of you, they apparently have been for a while. I’m sorry that I can’t be that mother you need right now but I can promise you that I’ll find Dad and we can leave Zootopia together as a family. Much love, Mom.*

“She’s gone?” Bogo demanded, looking up at Clawhauser from the note.

“Yes sir.” He huffed. “Mai and Nala are gone too. None of the rabbits are here!”

“Do we know where they are headed?” Rhinowitz inquired.

Refolding the paper up and slipping it into his shirt pocket, Bogo steadied himself and directed his attention to the hallway beyond, the gears in his head moving fast. “I have a strong feeling where they might end up. Hurry and gather a small team, we must work fast to meet them there. I have to head back to my room first and pick up something. I have a hunch she will need it when we get there.”

What prompted her arousal was the slavering, sucking noises just inches from her ears. The next thing she became aware of was the slight, undulating twinge of pain, originating from two distinct objects piercing into her neck. Finally, she consciously felt all the blood in her body surge upwards through her arteries and veins up into the two focal points of discomfort with each suck before
rushing back out through her system down to her extremities. The pulsing ebb and flow of her blood felt unnatural, yet she couldn’t move to do anything about it or open her eyes to see what was draining her of her life essence.

This intimate embrace went on for an interminable amount of time. She could feel the current of her blood flow getting weaker and weaker with each passing minute. Each time the pricks demanded more from her, the less her body provided. It seemed that only a weak push of blood, like soft waves on a beach, greeted the one who was violating her, giving nothing back in return. She could feel the beating of her heart began to slow, the sluggish fluid flowing into it not enough to keep it pumping any longer.

Presently, she felt a cold rush of air suck into the two holes in her neck. She would have gasped at the sudden shock of it had she not been completely paralyzed. Her heart jumpstarted with vigor and began pounding again. She felt the heavy weight on her chest release and heard it flop to the ground beside her. As far as she could tell, she was in a bed. Where she was and who was with her was unknown, she had nothing but her hearing to go off of.

“Good evening Judy.” A raspy voice intoned, taking two clawed fingers and raising her eyelids open. “I must say, I’ve grown quite fond of your blood. I don’t think I’d be able to tolerate anyone else’s after yours. Promise you’ll only give it to me?” She chuckled.

Before her was a stale hospital room. She was correct in assuming she was in a bed, wrapped snugly underneath white sheets. She couldn’t move her eyes yet and could only stare straight forward, a blank expression on her face. Hunched alongside the rails of her bed, lapping up the dribbling blood from her disgusting mouth was Rouge. She stalked on all fours, looking quite uncomfortable with her wings bunched up and attempting to move around the cramped room.

“It’s time for your daily meal Judy.” Rouge hummed ear-rapingly.

She crossed the base of the bed to a rolling tray table, clattering a few utensils to the ground. The bat cursed her clumsiness and picked up the knife and fork before attending to the brownish cubes on the plate. Slicing up a few minute chunks, small enough for a rabbit to feed on, she turned to the bed and popped a few of them into her mouth. She relished sucking the fresh juices off of them before chewing them into manageable pieces of mush. Satisfied with her work, she spit them back into her hand before resting onto her haunches next to the head of the bed.

“You’ll need to keep up your strength if you want to survive this drought of food.” She cooed softly, forcing Judy’s mouth open before popping in a munched piece of meat. The taste immediately soured her palate however she could do nothing but endure. “You like it?” Rouge looked at the rabbit with unabated excitement. “I brought you a present today, the last pieces of Bellwether. I was saving them for a special occasion! Happy anniversary Judy! I figured you’d want to celebrate the annual date of our first meeting. I even brought the last of this meat because I’m of a mind you should finish what you start!”

Purring to herself, Rouge proceeded to finish putting each piece of the ewe in Judy’s mouth. Making sure she tilted her head up into the pillow before gently rubbing down on her neck to stimulate the swallowing reaction. Finally content with helping Judy eat after clearing over half the plate, she set it aside and clambered up onto the bed, placing her fetid bulk atop the rabbit again.

“You never cease to amaze me Judy.” Rouge crooned inches from her face, tenderly petting the fur on the bunny’s head repetitively. “I can’t believe you can be so adaptable. Most prey wouldn’t even think of eating meat, but you are quite open-minded, you know that?”

Rouge lifted her head to gaze out the open window, the soft moonlight streaming in. “Can you
believe it has been three years since our last fight? I can hardly believe it myself. I honestly didn’t
think you’d forgive me so easily, but here we are, friends again.” She turned her head to look back
down at Judy. “I know we didn’t always see eye to eye and I don’t hold it against you that you tried
to hurt me. Sure, I was angry at you at the time but I’ve since made peace with that and now that
we’ve made amends, nothing can come between us!”

She moved forward to nuzzle her wrinkly nose into Judy’s cheek, feeling the soft fur tickle the bare
skin of her face. “Nobody truly understands me like you do Judy. All my pups want this or that but
you…no, you don’t ask for anything. That was proven to me when you first showed me kindness
back at that silly, little restaurant. Do you even remember it Judy? I still do. We are two of a kind, the
diamonds in the rough.”

Taking a single claw and caressing the side of Judy’s cheek, Rouge contemplated, “It won’t be much
longer though Judy. Our time of peace and solitude together will come to an end.” She laid her head
down onto the pillow next to Judy’s, staring at those beautiful, purple eyes. “Unfortunately, I will
have to ask you to come with me. I’d rather not leave a dear friend behind but I’m hoping that you’ll
make the right choice and come with us.”

Judy’s heart was pounding fast. She could barely comprehend all the crazed nonsense Rouge was
spouting. Just how many times had Rouge come in these past three years and had these one-sided
talks? How many times was she fed things that should never be a part of a rabbit’s diet? Why could
she not remember anything but the name of the bat in front of her? Flickers of memory twirling
around the edges of her brain, teasing her with flashes of a fox named Nick. She wanted nothing
more than to escape this hell and run far, far away.

Rouge perked up as she noticed Judy’s eyes slowly move toward her. “Ah, the pain is coming back
again Judy. I have just the thing for that.”

Slithering off the bed, she dragged another rolling tray table with several vials of crushed herbs
together with a mortar and pestle. Judy couldn’t make out all the labels but she could pick out a few:
Damiana, Skullcap, Oatstraw and Valerian. Recognizing what some were capable of, she began to
panic inwardly but still couldn’t move. Whatever she had been drugged with had induced a complete
paralysis on her that was just now wearing off.

“This isn’t what I’d normally like to use, but I don’t have the proper equipment here to generate
something more soothing for you.” She began grinding the herbs together in the pestle, ensuring they
were a fine powder. The bat stared at the small clump of green for a moment, “This will actually
make a bit of a mess of you, but I’ll be sure to clean you up afterwards. After all, that’s what friends
are for, right?”

She raised the pestle to her maw and extended her fangs outwards to dip them into the herb pile. Her
gummy saliva caused them to stick to her teeth, giving them a very rotted look. She set the pestle
down and climbed over Judy once more, taking one hand and pushing her head to the side to reveal
her open neck. “This’ll be over in a minute Judy.” She consoled.

Judy wanted to cry out in misery, the bat’s teeth punctured her skin like two daggers of liquid fire.
The flames radiated out from the wounds and assaulted her head and chest. She could feel
unbearable throbbing behind her very eyes as the blood pummeled its way through her system at the
unnatural intrusion. She could already feel the familiar shift in direction as the fluid moved against
the flow and up into Rouge’s teeth, through small tubing in the enamel which fed it into her mouth
where she could slurp it down.

As quick as she had sliced into her skin, the pain was gone. It was replaced with a euphoric haze that
tingled throughout her body. Rippling sensations of pleasure began spreading out from her neck,
filling her chest with a warm glow that calmed her spirits and made her feel like she was bundled up in thick blankets on a cold, winter day.

The rapturous feeling kept traveling lower, causing her limbs to heat up as the blood flow began to surge faster through her arteries. It culminated around her loins and traveled through her womanhood until at last she felt an exploding release of tension, sending her lower half to shake from the intensity of it. She could feel a damp wetness below her waist as Rouge finally raised herself off. The second her teeth left Judy’s neck, she became instantly tired, wanting nothing more than to sleep into oblivion.

Rouge giggled horridly, bopping Judy on the nose with a claw. “Consider that my little treat to you.” She sighed as she got off once more. “Guess I’ll have to change you and the bed sheets once again. You really need to stop giving into the pain and bear through it.”

She was in the process of pulling the sheets off the bed and undressing Judy, a clean hospital gown already set aside on a chair, when a smaller bat slapped up against the window, gripping the sides of the frame to hold itself in place. It began chittering in a high-pitched language that was unintelligible. Judy barely cared at this point and just wanted Rouge to shut her eyes so she could drift off into her dreams.

“He’s back again?” Rouge asked skeptically, more clicking from the small bat. “That fox is sure persistent.” She commented. “Thank you my love.” She thanked and waved off her young pup who flew away into the night.

She lifted Judy with one arm behind her back so she could drape the new gown awkwardly over her head and ears. At length she finally got it on properly and began spreading new sheets under the rabbit, moving her as necessary. “I best hurry before your loved one comes to visit. He sure is quite the catch. You did good in selecting him for a mate.”

Pulling the new top sheet over Judy and snuggling her back in, she rested back onto her rump, admiring her friend. “Nick, was it? He has been most helpful in weeding out the remainder of the defectors in the city. I was just as surprised at you that he’d do this, but to have a chance to be with the one he loves every week, who wouldn’t do anything for that?”

Judy could do nothing but stare straight ahead. She was so far gone she was simply going to sleep with her eyes open. She didn’t even care anymore. Rouge leaned forward and pressing two fingers onto Judy’s eyelids and closed them lightly.

“Shhh, you just get some rest Judy. You need it. I’ll attend to Nick and make sure he gets here in one piece. I may just ask him for an offering since he is almost as delicious as you.” Judy could hear a loud, longing exhale from Rouge. “Ah, what I wouldn’t give to be in love again. Something about two lovers joins them in more ways than one.” She licked her lips. “Enough of that, sleep now. We’ll be leaving this city together soon enough.” She patted the rabbit’s head one more time before plodding out the door on all fours.

The unified look of terror on both Mai and Jack’s face gave Nala pause. Did they not want her to be here to help out? She wanted to prove how useful she could be to the group and the moment she woke up, read the letter and saw them leave the compound, she knew they were going to a place they may not return from. Did they think she was incapable of defending herself and being an asset to the team? Was all her training just for show? Did they just teach her combat with no real intention of having her actually utilize her skills? She began to get angry.
“Nala!” Mai sputtered again, eyes darting back to Ramon, still smug over having swallowed Judy whole. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“But I can help!” She retorted defiantly. She stabbed a shaky finger in the direction of the dead badger on the ground, knife lodged in its neck and crimson staining the filthy carpet. “What do you call that if not helping?”

“Not a single bit of remorse.” Jack marveled. His admiration was short-lived as a rather abrupt movement from the side redirected all their attention back onto the gluttonous polar bear.

“Now that I’m thinking about it,” Ramon growled, impressively flipped over onto his stomach and pushing himself up onto his forepaws, “I have three perfectly good merchandise right here that several of my clients would love to pay hand over fist for!”

“Not today!” Jack shouted, bringing his gun back up to put a single bullet in the bear’s head.

The bear roared as it swiped with alarming agility not befitting its size. Its claws lashed out at Jack’s gun, nicking his paw drawing two gashes across his skin. Jack yelped before leaping away, watching helpless as the gun was flung out his grip, slamming against the wall before shattering the silencer attached to its barrel. Jack alighted stylishly on the nearby nightstand, nursing his injured paw.

“Nala stay back!” Mai warned, unsheathing her blade and springing up high into the air. Landing gracefully onto the bear’s back, just beneath the neck muscle, she plunged the full length of her sword into Ramon’s flesh.

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“Mai!” Nala bawled, seeing her hit the side of the table square in the back, hearing an audible crack as both halves of her body jerked back from the point of impact before flopping forward in a heap on the floor.

“Save yourself!” Jack managed to wheeze from between Ramon’s greasy claws.

“Not until I find mom!” Nala proclaimed.

Struggling vainly against the increasing weight of the bear’s paw pressing upon his small frame, Jack inched his head further along the floor to gasp out, “She’s inside the bear! In the bear!”

Her heart thumping out of her chest, Nala rapidly scoured the floor to find a pile of crumpled clothes where Mai had originally stood when she entered the room. Realization hit her stomach like a lode stone. Fury began to bubble up within her, overriding her innate fear of the polar bear. She gave the beast a scathing glare. Her mother was in there and she was the last link left to her dad. She was not going to lose them both. Taking the remaining knife in her hand, she flipped it above her head and
took careful aim.

Content that there would be no more distractions, Ramon plunged his head forward to bite Jack’s head off. A swift rush of air and he was forced to collapse on one side from the excruciating pain erupting in his snout. He lifted his paw just enough for Jack to scrabble to safety, leaping up on the table just above Mai’s prone form.

“Well down sweetheart!” He complimented Nala, her arm still poised outward from the throw.

Lodged into the upper muzzle was her knife, jutting out the other side from the velocity of the blow. Ramon was backing up instinctually, his front paws slapping his nose, trying to push the horrid knife out of his upper jaw. Recognizing the opening, Jack hopped down and began to kindly slap Mai’s face. Her eyes fluttered open at his touch before popping wide upon realizing where she was and what was happening.

“You feel you can walk?” Jack inquired concerned.

Rising up to a knee, she doubled over at the intense pain in her back. “No…not really.”

Jack cursed their luck before observing the raging polar bear beside them. It wouldn’t be long before Ramon either got the knife out or the pain lessened to a point where he’d stop caring and come after them again. He picked up the sword resting on the ground and hefted it to feel its weight. It certainly felt light enough to wield, let alone throw.

Hoisting it over his head with both arms, he squinted one eye before sailing it through the air. It sunk into the quivering mass of chest fur, no doubt slicing through a lung as evidenced by the whining breaths from Ramon as he clutched the hilt protruding from his breast. Using the extra leverage it provided, Jack took a running start before bounding onto the sword before propelling himself off of it up into the bear’s face feet first. Use the raw muscle within his hind legs, Jack kicked off viciously just under the chin, snapping the beast’s head backwards from the blow causing him to tumble backwards onto the broken bed with a crash.

As much pain as he was in, Ramon chortled vilely, “You silly rabbits. Even with your stupid weapons, you can’t really kill me. What did you think was going to happen? Three pipsqueaks taking on a—”

His speech was cut short as a loud crack echoed through the room. A single hole of cerise directly between his eyes formed, a rivulet of blood slowly trickling down his cheek. He gave out his last breath before crashing onto his back, lower body draping over the side of the bed and neck settling at a twisted angle against the wall. Stunned, Jack turned his head to spy Nala with his gun still smoking from the shot. A look of determined, yet petrified fear splayed across her face.

Jack whistled, “Nice shot darling, but I think I’ll take the gun now.”

Carefully prying it from her white-knuckled paws, he placed his other on hers to stop the uncontrollable shaking. She was immensely brave, he knew this, but even with all the combat training he and Mai had invested into her, she was still a child that had just had her first taste of combat and what it was like to kill another mammal.

Trembling with fury, she asked him, “Is he dead? Is it over?”

“Tremble with fury, she asked him, “Is he dead? Is it over?”

“I believe so.” He laughed, running a hand between her ears to soothe her nerves. “You did good kid.”

“Is it over?” Mai repeated weakly from the floor. “No, no it is not. Many mammals probably heard
that gunshot.”

Jack noted one of her ears pointed towards the door, his own ears finally picking up distant shouting and crashing of furniture. Beside them, they could hear the faint screeching of Judy inside Ramon, most likely in a state of hysterical delirium by now. He immediately pointed to several chairs, “Quick, we need to block the door to buy us some time to cut Judy out!”

Nala helping Jack drag Mai off to the side by the arms before shuffling several chairs across the floor gratingly. Jack kicked the door closed from the backside before assisting the kit with arranging the chairs in a formation underneath the door knob that would prevent several attempts at entry. It wouldn’t last too long but he hoped it would be enough. Taking the sword and tearing it out of Ramon’s corpse, he began futilely carving up the bear’s stomach.

“It’s no use.” Mai whimpered, using the table leg to assist in getting back onto her feet. “He’s too freaking tubby to even make a dent in that mass of fat. We’ll never get her out in time before the rest of his men get here.”

The ravenous cries of predators could be heard down the hall. Jack scrutinized the dead carcass quickly before making a decision. “Mai, are you strong enough to hold Nala down Big Ray’s throat?”

Her ears shot up as she looked at him like he was insane. “You want me to what?”

“Can you or can’t you?” He repeated firmly.

She gazed up the rolling mass of white, matted fur. “I can try, but I’m going to need help to get up there to his mouth.”

“We can both do that, right Nala?” He inclined his head to the kit with a grin on his face to help keep their overall fear at bay.

“Yes Jack.” She nodded vigorously.

“Good girl, come over and give me a hand, one under each arm. That’s it.” He instructed.

Wrapping each of Mai’s arms around their necks, they vaulted upwards onto the bear’s belly and then another leap to his neck, where his tongue had lolled disgusting out the side through his teeth. The opening looked really tight and dangerous to be fitting three bunnies inside. Ignoring the trilling scream from the depths of the bear’s abdomen, Jack pounced down and picked up Mai’s sword before rejoining them at the nose.

“You might want to look away.” He warned Nala, readying the sword.

Swinging the blade in a horizontal arc, he slit the connecting tendons attaching the top and bottom jaw bones. With a few more precise cuts, he had dislodged the entire lower half of Ramon’s chin and with a heaving push with his legs, and a disgusting breaking sound, he kicked it off the face and watched it fall to the floor. He finished by cutting the tongue at its base, letting it flop disturbingly down the folds of the bear’s chest.

“That should be big enough.” He guesstimated Nala’s arm strength hastily before turning to Mai. “Nala will go in first with you holding onto her leg. I’ll be at the opening of the throat holding yours as we dangle Nala down to reach Judy.”

“Do you think we’ll be long enough to reach her?” Mai asked skeptically.
The three of them jumped as several loud banging paws assaulted the door, the knob twisting frantically this way and that. Jack’s nose was twitching, “Now is not the time to question the absurdity of this. We don’t have time to come up with anything else!” He lifted Nala from beneath her arms. “You ready for this? Trust me, I have you.”

“I’ll be fine.” She replied bravely, her lower lip quavering.

With a nod, he helped her up into the throat before lowering her down into the darkness, keeping a tight grip onto her ankle. He glanced back, “Mai, please take ahold of Nala for me while I grab your leg!”

They heard more thudding on the door, now accompanied by snarls and growls. He laboriously lowered both Mai and Nala into the inky black, digging his hind paws into the bottom portion of the cut chin, blood soaking his feet.

“Can you hear her?” Jack called out to his two charges.

“Momma!” Nala shouted at the top of her lungs. The awful shrieking had stopped. Nala called out again to her mother. “Momma, are you there?!”

It was a few moments before a shaky voice could be heard below. “Baby, is that you?”

“Yes mom, I’m here!” She called back, nearly crying with happiness.

“What in the world are you doing here?” Judy asked, terror evident in her voice.

“I’m here with Jack and Mai. We’re here to save you!” She explained.

Sweat already dripping down his face, Jack yelled into Ramon’s gullet. “Can you reach up Judy and find Nala’s hand?”

They could hear a small grunt before an indistinct splashing sound was heard. A yelp went up from Judy. “Are you okay?” Mai probed, straining hard at the weight of Nala, pulling her lower spine to its breaking point.

“I’m okay, my feet are stinging really badly though!” Judy informed agitatedly, hopping back and forth on each foot to prevent them from staying in the acidic juices any longer than they needed to be.

Mai panted, trying to maintain her grip on Nala, “We need to extend lower. She can’t reach Nala!”

“Freaking banana peppers!” Jack swore, gritting his teeth as he took one knee over the precipice of oozing flesh and then the other. Digging his hind claws into the tip of the exposed chin, he laid on his stomach and let the two does drop further into the stinking tunnel. “Please tell me you can reach her now!” He howled, muscles in his arms burning. A sudden bang and splintering of wood prompted him to lose his grip slightly but he expeditiously dug his small nails into Mai’s flesh. Both girls cried out at the sudden drop. “It’s okay! I got you!” Jack mollified.

“Please, try again mommy!” Nala pleaded, stretching out her paw as far as it could go. After several failed attempts, each time their paws just barely touching, Judy finally grappled onto Nala’s wrist. All three dangling rabbits howled at the sudden weight yanking them down. “I have her! Pull up! Pull up!” The kit begged desperately.

Spraining a few choice limbs from the exertion, Jack howled as he pulled the three rabbits out of the bear, step by excruciating step. Mai was the first to slip out, collapsing onto the crimson fur beneath
her as Nala followed suit with a very soiled Judy, who plummeted out of the maw, shivering and promptly retching up the contents of her stomach. She was a complete mess, covered in various pieces of unrecognizable viscera and yellowish fluid.

“Someone please slap me if I ever consider doing this again.” Judy bemoaned.

Another thump directed their attention to the door. Already several holes had been created with various furred arms and claws scrambling through them to extricate the chairs holding the door shut. “Judy!” Jack snapped his fingers to orient her dazed attention onto him. “Can you stand up and walk? We need you to help Mai get out of here. Her lower back is injured and she can’t move well.” Judy affirmed she could. “Great! Nala, start gathering our weapons and meet me by the chairs.”

“What about her clothes?” Mai grilled faintly, still watching Judy quake at the sudden chill of the air.

“No time!” Jack snapped. “Just grab her gun and go! Judy, help me get Mai to the floor and then onto my back!” His ears turned to the sound of more wood cracking. “Fine, grab her shirt and pants. We can use those to fasten a cradle for Mai!”

All four bunnies, now situated onto the floorboards facing the shuddering chairs, rocking back and forth from the pressure placed upon them from the other side of the door, Nala and Judy helped Mai onto Jack’s back before tying the clothes in a makeshift chair for her to sit in. Wrapping her arms and legs around Jack, she dropped her head onto his shoulder blades and closed her eyes.

“Everyone stand ready!” He tossed Judy her gun before eyeing Nala. “Do you have anything to fight with?”

Sensing the need for urgency, Nala’s eyes locked onto the dead badger at their feet. She paced over and took the knife out of the dead body before turning to Jack. “I have about three others in my pocket.”

“Take them all out. We’re going to need them!” He ordered.

Jack surveyed the room one more time and noticed the flickering candles and several tapestries. Reminded of his original thought, he began scurrying around the room grabbing all the candles and placing them before the external orifice just beneath the bear’s tail. He ignored Judy’s demanding questions as to what the heck he was doing. Taking two of the tapestries, he unfurled them out just before the small conflagration of candles. To complete his plan, he climbed up onto the nearby dressers and kicked over many bottles of wine and rum onto the floor, ensuring a bunch got onto the fabric.

Clapping his hands to dust them off, he admired his handiwork. “If you’ll notice, most of Wild Times’ structure is made of wood. If we’re going to leave this place, I figured it’d be best we leave it in tattered pieces!” He pointed up to the bear’s stomach. “Do me a favor, can you and Nala jump up and down hard on his belly? I’d help you but I’d rather not risk any more damage to Mai’s spine.” At an odd look from the two does, “Look, I’ve killed enough mammals to…you know what, don’t ask, just do it please!”

Seeing he wouldn’t be fording any more questions, they got up onto the bulky mass and began slapping their feet down hard with every jump. After the third hop, a gaseous bellow erupted from Ramon’s bowels, engorging the flames of the candles to coat the tapestries with a hot blaze. The flickering fire sought out the alcohol and began rampaging its way throughout the room. At that moment, the door finally busted open as several badgers, lions, tigers and bears thundered into the room.
Flicking the bottom of his outer coat up, Jack reached into one of the various pouches on his belt to pull out several different kinds of bullets. “Fire!” He commanded Judy before thrusting two blue striped shells into the barrel before raising the gun and taking aim. He plinked off a round at the nearest tiger. Upon impact, the round split and released an arc of electricity that jolted its way through the convulsing cat. The unfortunate badger who was rubbing shoulders with him also crumbled to the ground and joined him in the throes of pain.

“Judy!” Nala cried as an ocelot lunged at her. She cartwheeled to the side, letting the cat’s momentum sail past her straight into the flames consuming the far wall. A pathetic wail rose up from the plumes licking away at its flesh.

Judy picked off several of her own, downing one bear, three cats of various sizes and a dingo. Her gun clicked, signaling the last of her clip. “I’m all out!” She yelled down to Jack.

“That’s enough! We got an opening! Let’s go! Nala, nail that margay!” He pointed at a spotted cat, hissing and snapping as it leaped over the fallen pile of bodies.

Nala threw the knife straight and true, driving it through the mouth and wedging itself out the backside of the cat’s head in mid-air. It soared a few feet more before failing into the tapestry behind them before being enveloped by the raging pyre. Off a signal from Jack, the three of them leaped from predator to predator, evading and pirouetting in the air every grab, swipe and slash of any that tried to kill them.

They hit the ground of the hallway running, Jack reaching one hand back to hold Mai securely. Zigzagging back and forth down the corridor, they tripped up several lions who tried to stop them, forcing them to collide into one another at their clumsiness. He skidded to a halt at the foyer, a huge gathering of predators all staring at them. Popping another, red striped, round this time into the barrel, he took aim at the chandelier above them.

“You might want to stand back for this one.” He warned Judy and Nala.

The bullet hit the supports and detonated, the concussion flinging every mammal to the ground. The chandelier fell, encased in flames, splattering the brains of a hapless coyote beneath it. Using the distraction, Jack surmised the back entrance wasn’t far off the main vestibule. Encouraging them onward, they dashed down the opposite hall before branching off down a side passage leading to a concrete stairwell heading down two floors to the basement.

“You seem to know your way around here Jack.” Judy commented, gripping Nala’s paw tightly as she dragged her along behind them.

Taking the steps down three at a time, he shot back, “And it looks like you knew Ramon before too!”

“I’m sorry!” Judy excused, slightly defensive. “I have amnesia, remember? I didn’t remember who he was until it was too late!”

“Fine, fine, I’m not mad at you.” He thought about it a moment. “Well, I kind of am, but it’s forgivable. But that could have gone a lot smoother had he not been harboring a personal vendetta against you!”

“Remind me not to piss off anymore polar bears in the future then!” She jibbed back.

He snorted at her before hitting the bottom door open, leading to a rather unnerving basement storage room. “Get inside quick. I’ll handle the escape.” He held the door open for the two to pass through
before loading a final explosive round and aiming it up at the top steps. The explosion rocked the stairwell, causing the top flight of steps to collapse onto the bottom, sending both to the base floor beside them. Jack promptly shut the door to ward off any flying debris and overbearing smoke from the demolition.

“Where to now?” Judy queried.

Taking his flashlight out, he shone it across the large room to the far end where a faint outline of a door could be seen. “That exit there should lead us to a tunnel that’ll get us out of Zootopia.”

“What about Mai?” Nala asked anxiously, watching the doe’s eyes flit in and out of consciousness against Jack’s back.

“Nothing we can do until we get a bit further away from this place. Then we’ll stop to rest and figure out what exactly is wrong with her.” Both Judy and Nala seemed agreeable to that plan. He shook his head. That could have definitely gone better, but at least with Wild Times most likely completely on fire by now, no more atrocities like that would be happening anytime soon. “Let’s just hope this was the last hurdle.” He prayed quietly.

Chapter End Notes

The great thing about the present timeline arc is that since it isn't Judy's memories we are dealing with, I can actually hop around to other characters who aren't Judy and explore a bit of the backstory of their narrative arcs. Bogo was one such character who got some much needed backstory with regards to his daughter Arriane and how he applies his feelings for her onto Judy. It also hints at a bigger problem on the horizon regarding a great lie which is the entire cornerstone upon which the story is hinged. The scene with Rouge actually came about through a talk with Berserker88 and I realized we just didn't have enough scenes really diving into the overall psyche of Rouge and who she is as a character. So this little glimpse into her workings helps serve an interesting purpose that won't be revealed until much later. Finally, the action sequence. Since three rabbits against a fully grown and fat polar bear would be horribly one-sided, I didn't want to drag it out for too long and instead gave each bunny a chance to shine while still providing consequence and lasting effects from the battle in the form of Mai’s injury. To further upend the table on expectations, instead of cutting Judy out, I ensured Big Ray was so freaking fat the only solution would be to get her out the same way she came in which provided a nice opportunity of building tension between not falling into Ray themselves while still being alert for the predators to break in at any moment. More will be revealed and explained as to Nala's abilities in later chapters, but just know that her skill at fighting was hinted vaguely in chapters past. Enjoy everyone and look forward to Judy and Nick's date night!
Nick looked out the passenger door window of their borrowed cruiser, his eyes tracking the swiftly moving trees as they zipped past his vision. The car headlights the only source of illumination on the dark forested road they were traveling down. Through the gaps in the tree line out Judy’s window, he could see the neon-lit Zootopia blazing gloriously out over the pristine water of the lake. They had driven far out of town that night and after twenty minutes they were still no closer to whatever destination Judy had planned for them.

Nick's eyes wandered up and down Judy's body before returning to the view outside. "So I guess you're finally whisking me away to kill me quietly." He said with a smirk.

Judy jerked her head in his direction, "What in the heck gave you that idea?"

He gestured to her black, ankle-length trench coat covering her frame, "That is clearly not something you wear casually Carrots. You're either covering up some horrible scar you got recently or you don't want my blood on your good clothes."

She whacked him on the shoulder roughly with a paw, "Oh stop! I'm just trying to surprise you is all. I'd rather not show you what I'm wearing until after we get there."

"Oh, so there is more you're wearing under there?" He snapped his fingers, "Darn, and here I was hoping that's all you had."

She cast him a sidelong glance, a slight grin on her face. "Keep it up and that may not happen!"

He chuckled, resting his arm halfway out the window, letting the cool breeze ruffle his fur. "Calm yourself Carrots. I'm just curious as to why you had me dress semi-casual and then you show up to the apartment with a police cruiser no less and decked out in a rather off putting coat; makes one highly suspicious!"

Judy regarded her fox with interest. Nick indeed dressed up nicely that evening. He was wearing a rather suave, cyan, palm tree printed shirt with accompanying navy striped tie complete with his trademark khaki pants. He looked rather fetching even if was not that much different than his normal attire he typically wore.

She tilted her head to the side, acknowledging his concerns, "I get that Nick. I just feel you've been under a lot of stress lately and I just wanted to give you one night out where we can just relax and be together. It has been almost a week since we've had any time alone since the luau."

He scrutinized her face for a few moments, he knew quite well what had happened the night of the luau and he wondered what exactly she was trying to get at. "Thanks for the concern, I was feeling rather fatigued." He shared an amused look with her. "But truthfully, I haven't had to do that much work since the Academy and before that, several of my hustles. In a way, it feels satisfying to be working like this again, but I'm grateful you thought enough of me to plan a night out. It was nice of your parents to take back the kits for the evening."

Judy shrugged, "Well, it is the last day of their vacation at the Oasis. I figured they could go enjoy it with family." She grinned, she had practically blackmailed Stu into accepting Ami and her brothers back that evening. The last thing she wanted was three inquisitive siblings at the apartment when she
and Nick got home that night.

"You know, that is very dangerous Carrots." Nick remarked as she flipped off the lights quickly to avoid having the surprise spoiled as the sign to turn left into the Oat and Cloister loomed ahead of them.

Judy made a turn into the gravel driveway heading back out to the lake before flipping the lights back on. "I know," she hummed, "I'm just trying to surprise you."

"You've done that plenty already. I don't think I can take much more." He smirked.

"Then you're not going to be able to keep up with me then!" She rejoined with a wicked smile, drawing a stunned look from Nick.

"Well look at you, Ms. Toot-toot!" He laughed.

The trees gave way to a vast expanse of open air, Zootopia dead ahead. The road transitioned into a wooden bridge with slatted railings on either side. It curved to the right leading to a structure perched atop a pier supported by massive beams of wood. One could just barely see in the moonlight various nets draping down into the water to catch the fresh fish and scampi from the lake.

Nick's eyes widened, "The Oat and Cloister. This is some high class place Carrots. You sure our budgets are big enough for this?"

Judy raised an eyebrow, "Don't tell me you haven't tried to hustle a few folks back in your heyday from here Mr. I Know Everyone!"

"I'm still in my heyday Carrots!" He defended, looking indignant. He casually glossed over the question, taking in the sight once more. "Besides, there were far more lucrative and safer marks elsewhere in the city and much easier to get to than this place. This is more of a sunk-cost hustle not worth the effort; after a few attempts here and I'd probably be too well known to try again."

"It still amazes me that you can still think like a con man even while on the force. That's one of the reasons I felt you were right for the job, you had this criminal mentality that could benefit the ZPD." Judy marveled.

"I'm not really sure if that was a back-handed compliment." Nick asserted.

"It's whatever you wish it to be." Judy beamed, stepping on the brake in her seat as she slowly pulled into the parking lot.

After parking the cruiser towards the edge of the wooden enclosure, she turned the engine off and hopped out of the car. With a flourish she doffed the trench coat and flung it into the driver's seat. Beneath it was a shimmering dress of ivory and gold. It had medium straps over both shoulders and it crossed with ruffling folds across her breast to a waistline sash that ended in a cute bow just above her cottontail. There was a split in the seam on her left leg that traveled outward revealing the luscious, grey fur.

Nick gulped, "Now I'm suddenly feeling underdressed."

She placed a paw on her hip, "Oh, come on Nick. You look fine; a dashing compliment to my presence."

He shook his head amicably, "Someone's full of themselves tonight…"
Judy rolled her eyes, "I'm just excited, okay? I've never done something like this before. I'm actually kind of nervous."

Nick stepped out of the car before straightening his tie. "Not to worry madam." He said with rehearsed grace, "I've courted plenty of vixens in my day. I promise you'll have nothing to fear from me." He held out his arm so that she could loop hers around his elbow.

"I'm sure…courted them right out of their fortunes." She jested, accepting his courteous arm, reaching up to lightly grip the ginger fur of his forearm. "I should honestly watch out for you."

"You do me an injustice!" He derided merrily, "I would never think of doing that to a lovely, ravishing beauty such as you!"

Her fur covered the flush to her cheeks at his accolade. "Then prove it good sir! Show me the night of my life!"

"With pleasure!" He said, swishing his tail with eager anticipation for the evening. Nick had to admit he was really excited for this night as well. Judy had already surprised him several times this evening and he was intensely curious as to what else she had planned. He sniffed the air a few times before turning his head to her, "Are you feeling well?"

Quickening the pace, forcing him to keep up, she brushed the question off, "Never better!"

They paced forward hand in arm to the double doored entrance; each frame encapsulating a see-thru crescent window, when closed together formed a full circle. Through the glass, they could see a grand, lodge-built dining area full of tables, chairs and patrons. Two coyote greeters in tuxedos opened the doors before them in grand fashion, keeping their eyes straight ahead and their expressions neutral.

Walking past them, they entered the small foyer with various wooden benches bolted into the walls. Multitudes of animals were sitting and waiting for their tables to open up. Nick had intended to find a seat for Judy before signing them in but she tugged at his arm to go straight up to the Maître' D at the podium. The rather burly looking leopard looked down from his perch at the two of them as they strode up confidently.

His expression was a bit disdainful, having cued in to the various reactions and stares from the waiting customers around them, each whispering to each other at how odd that a rabbit and a fox would be going out to dinner together. "Yes?" He said flatly. "Do you have a reservation?"

Judy had noticed the attention they were getting and her heart faltered a bit before a reassuring squeeze from Nick centered her nerve. "Yes, we have a reservation for two. It should be under Hopps."

The leopard's expression did a complete overhaul as recognition settled into his brain, "Ms. Judy Hopps!" He exclaimed, slightly flustered. "I did not realize who you were. Of course," he extended an arm behind him, indicating that they follow him directly, "we have a table all set aside for you."

"Thank you kindly." She bowed slightly.

Nick gave her a startled look, "It takes months to get a reservation here Carrots! How the heck did you manage to get one? You couldn't have been planning this night for that long!" He whispered.

She didn't look at him while they trailed after the Maître' D but he could see the enjoyment on her face. "You're not the only one who knows everyone." She teased.
The log stacked hallway opened out into a vast dining area complete with vaulted ceiling made of redwood and timber, various struts and support beams lined the roof at intervals creating a very cozy atmosphere. Several hanging candelabra chandeliers provided the light in the room with various tiny catwalks leading to and from each where the worker mice could continually light and replace each candle.

The floor depression encompassed several levels of seating with the larger animals at the bottom and the smaller animals up near the top with a few balcony arrangements along the side at eye level for the smallest patrons of the establishment. It was impressive how the Oat and Cloister catered to all manners of mammals. There was even a small section cut away where aquatic customers could swim in and situate themselves alongside the tables carved nicely to fit their bulks, with slanted tops where food could be placed to slide right into their mouths.

The Maître’ D seated them cordially by moving Judy's seat out first to allow her in before giving way to let Nick sit across from her. He bowed once and snapped his fingers to a nearby waiter to assist the couple before heading back to the entrance. Their table was perched at the middle tier on the edge of the main dining area overlooking the bottom level with the larger elephants, rhinos, tigers and other similarly large mammals. Over their heads they could hear the clinking of glasses and silverware from the tiny rodent population that frequented this place.

Seeing as Judy's face was halfway below the level of the table, the charming elk waiter who came to call kneeled before unfastening the bolt beneath and lowering the top so that both Nick and Judy could comfortably reach any object placed on its surface. He stood up and flipped open his notepad before whipping out a pencil to take their drink orders. After jotting down their preferences, he bowed before excusing himself to go fetch them.

"If you don't mind, I need to wash up first in the bathroom." Nick apologized before slipping off the chair to the wooden floor. "I didn't properly freshen up my hands before getting dressed and hopping in the car."

"Shameful." She rebuked, clicking her tongue with mirth. He winked at her before meandering off to the opposite end of the room where the bathrooms were clearly marked.

The elk came back and set down their expensive mixed drinks. She had just plucked the delightful umbrella out of the drink when the waiter cleared his throat. "What will the miss be having?"

Ruffled, Judy quickly scanned the menu which she had barely any time to review. She spotted a rather interesting salad she had always wanted to try. She pointed to it, "I'd like this please."

The elk cocked an eyebrow at her choice but said nothing. "And for the fox?"

She noticed his reference to Nick's species rather than his title. "He'll be having the same."

"What does the fox say?" The waiter persisted; not buying that Nick would be interested in her salad choice. "We have plenty of good synthetic meat choices including our famous pulled cricket burger. I'm sure those would be much more agreeable."

"You know, I hadn't really asked." Judy said, slightly irked at his attitude. "If you don't mind, I think I know what he likes. Order him the salad."

"Ma'am," he began with a slightly denigrating tone, "I sincerely think the fox would rather have something more fitting to-"

"He'll have the salad!" Judy snapped, wincing as she did so. She hadn't meant to get so aggravated at
such a simple thing but it seemed appalling that the elk would be so insistent on ordering for Nick when she could handle his order just fine.

Judy stared at the waiter a few more seconds before he broke eye contact. With an unmistakable grunt of disapproval, he reluctantly scribbled down the two salads for them and flipped his notepad closed before nodding his head and taking leave from their table. She shook her head at the audacity of their server. She'd have to talk to the manager about him after this was all over. What was he going on about that the salad wasn't good enough for Nick?

"So what'd I miss?" Nick asked, flapping his hands together to dislodge any remaining droplets from washing before deftly leaping back into the seat.

Judy shook her head and dismissed her concerns, "Nothing. Just a bit irritated."

"What?" He gazed over at the retreating form of the waiter, "Did he look at you wrong?"

"No, it's nothing." Switching topics quickly, she undid the wrapping around the straw and stuck it into her drink. "I ordered us two blueberry shrimp salads."

Nick's eyes lit up with anticipation, "Blueberries? Shrimp? This is going to be good!" A curious look crossed his face as he realized what she had said, "Wait, you ordered one for yourself too? You do know shrimp is a type of meat."

She smiled, "Not exactly. Predators and most prey don't consider fish and crustaceans standard meat so I see no harm in eating them." Her eyes flicked downward as she held both paws in her lap, a bit self-conscious for what she was going to say next. "Besides, I kind of...have a bit of a secret." Nick leaned forward, ears facing forward, rapt with attention. "When I was young, I had the chance to try shrimp at the Fish and Tackle fair, where none of my siblings were brave enough to. I actually...kind of liked it. I never told anyone about this since it was this big taboo thing in the Burrows."

Nick leaned back impressed and somewhat turned on at this revelation, "Kinky..." He simpered.

Judy flushed harder, "It's not funny! I'm being serious!"

Without missing a beat, he grinned at her, "I know you are. I just love that I'm finding out more about you with each passing day." He gave a small nod, "Thank you for ordering the salad, I appreciate the choice. It's been a while myself since I had shrimp and you know how I feel about blueberries."

They had just started to talk about Nick's mother and where they lived during the time Nick was growing up in Zootopia when the server brought out the two salads. Setting them down without another word, he walked back into the kitchen. Judy nearly salivated at the forbidden fruit placed before her. It was a succulent mix of leafy greens topped with several grilled shrimp, a smattering of blueberries mixed in and a tantalizing drizzle of berry vinaigrette.

"Ah-ha!" Nick admonished, picking up his fork and sticking it into one of Judy's shrimp in her bowl. She looked like she was going to kill him across the table with her glare. "I always want the lady to have the first bite but I personally want to see you try one right now." He explained mischievously as he held the fork out to her.

"What are you doing? Trying to feed me?" She inquired incredulously.

"Just the first bite." He clarified.

"That's weird." She commented.
"It's romantic." He asserted, giving it another wave in front of her. "Come on, people are starting to stare."

"Probably at you." She giggled. After a few more seconds of keeping his gaze, she opened her mouth and allowed Nick to place the plump shrimp onto her tongue. She closed upon the fork as he slowly drew it out. She practically moaned as the familiar flavors of the sea came rushing back to her from all those years ago.

Nick watched fascinated as she continued to chew her food. "That…was probably hotter than it should ever have a right to be." He jested, but in reality he truly meant it as a wave of aroma wafted towards him from Judy. He hadn't smelled that uniquely beguiling, floral musk for several days now.

"Shut up!" She mumbled, putting a paw to her lips to avoid having any spittle out.

"Don't take it negatively Carrots, I just think it's cut." He stuttered as she flipped a threatening finger at him. "-adorable that you like shrimp. I figured you'd be a strictly vegetarian type of bunny. Most bunnies are."

"I am still vegetarian!" She objected, swallowing her bite. "Besides, I already said they aren't exactly meat. It's not like they're another mammal and…you know, I'd rather not go down this line of talk right now. It's actually creeping me out from actually eating my meal!"

Nick raised a hand to appease her charming wrath and picked up his own fork before diving into his own salad. "Very well, I can agree with that."

His primary source of meat had been synthetic proteins mixed in with products he had bought from the local grocery store as well as various bug centric foods. Seafood was a rarity in his diet and one that he was quite happy to partake in. This dinner was quite truly a delight to him and the last thing he wanted was to ruin it for Judy.

Getting back to the topic of his mother, she gestured the fork at him to continue, "So you've been helping your mom all this time with your paychecks? Even after all the taxes have been taken out each month? What do you even have left to go on?"

Nick picked at his food a few times before responding, "Nothing really, maybe fifty bucks for the whole month…if I'm lucky."

"Can't your mom spare the money you give her each month and let you take it so you can pay the bills and just maybe find a place of your own?" She suggested.

He leered, "I thought you wanted me to stay at your place?"

"You know what I meant! Up until bunking with me, why haven't you spared that money for yourself?" She corrected brusquely.

His expression fell once more, "My mom has a disability check from the city every month that barely makes the rent, let alone bills. It's not much to live on. So I come and help out when I can. She took care of me growing up in Zootopia, did her best to help achieve my dreams, even if they ended up being failures. The least I could do was continue to provide a roof over her head and food on the table, even if it means," he sighed deeply, "that I'm out on the streets."

"Can't she take you in?" She offered.

He shook his head roughly, "No, I don't want to impose on her."
Judy’s expression melted, "I don't believe she thinks that way." After a moment's thought, her ears perked up. "Where's your father? Isn't he around to help?"

Nick's ears flattened, a passing air of anger crossing his face. "Not even in the area. Like he'd bother to even come visit after what he did to us."

Sensing this was a volatile topic with him, she pondered other options. "What about Chief Bogo? Have you told him your situation? He might have resources that could-"

"I don't believe he'd do anything." Nick cut her off, giving her a stern look. "I'm so low on the totem pole, not to mention that I'm a fox, he'd just assume I would lie, steal and cheat to get more income."

Judy dropped the fork into the bowl as she placed both paws on the table, "Nick, you're a cop now, just like me. You swore an oath to integrity and honor. Regardless of what you did in the past, you are a police officer now and a detective no less! Despite how he feels about you, he should still be taking care of his own. Why do you doubt he'd do anything for you?"

"Because he doesn't approve of my relationship with you." Nick said flatly. After a blank stare from Judy, he continued, "It's no secret of his prejudices against foxes. The fact one is dating his star officer, face of the ZPD, probably has him pretty riled up. He's just good at hiding it, but I see right through him."

She put her own paw up, "Now wait a minute Nick Wilde…"

"Uh oh, I'm in trouble now." Nick quipped.

"You were always the one who kept telling me to not give a damn about what anyone else thought about our relationship. It took the help of Gazelle herself to get me to come around to being comfortable with this and now you're getting cold feet because of Chief Bogo? Why aren't you following your own advice?" She accused.

"You know, you're right." He admitted. "Maybe it's just stress that's getting to me. I've been micromanaged by Detective Oates and I have Chief Bogo breathing over my shoulder asking how the case is going all week long. It's just this weird attack pattern that is happening in Precinct 1 that isn't making sense to previous data and I'm just exhausted trying to figure it out."

Judy studied him a bit before wiping her mouth with a cloth napkin and tossing it crudely onto the table. "All right Slick, I'm done with my meal. Let's head on out. I got somewhere else to take you!" She decided abruptly.

His eyes bulged, his black nose picking up on a headier smell emanating from her, "What, you mean like now? You haven't even finished your dinner!" He indicated her salad, not quite fully eaten but definitely halfway there.

"That's fine. I'm full anyway. Come on. Take a few more bites before we leave." She smiled as she waved down the server.

Nick scarfed down several more mouthfuls as she requested the bill herself. He felt slightly guilty that he was allowing Judy to pay for their meal but given their previous conversation, it was unlikely she would agree to having him offer to pay. Her irises expanded marginally at what was most likely an outrageous bill, but she remained silent at the cost and placed her credit card into the pay folder.

"You're making me feel a bit guilty for not taking care of the dinner." Nick admitted as they were heading out of the dining area back out into the front foyer, inclining his head toward entrance to allow her to go ahead of him.
She waved a paw at him as she walked out into the parking lot, "Don't worry about it. I'm not holding it against you, especially with how I'm trying to help you out."

He chuckled, "Yeah, but I feel awkward since it's traditional for the male to take the female out to dinner."

She beeped the cruiser with her keychain to undo the alarm, "We're a rabbit and a fox Nick. We're far from traditional."

Nick beamed at her as she opened the door and hopped into the car. "I'm really glad that you're finally onboard with this. For the longest time, I felt I might not ever get to express how much I appreciate what you did for me."

"You can appreciate me all you want tonight." She slipped casually as she watched him sidle into the car and shut his door.

He jolted, his eyes turning to her, "What now?"

"Nothing!" She lied coyly before starting the engine and backing out to head onto the bridge towards the tree line. Nick's nostrils flared, he could detect a strong gathering of intoxicating odor coming from Judy.

They traced their route back through the forest, the majestic city glimmering off to their right through the trunks. Having mapped this out beforehand, she turned left to travel on a more scenic if not longer route back to the main road leading into Zootopia. Nick noticed the sudden detour in their routing but remained silent. He was a bit apprehensive about what Judy had planned next but it was more leaning toward excitement than anything fearful. Unpredictable Judy could very well be dangerously fun Judy.

A sudden light flickered on the dash indicating low oil. "No, no, no, no, no!" Judy repeated, feeling the cruiser struggle up the remaining uphill portion to the overlook.

"What's wrong?" Nick asked, ears alert.

She slapped the gauge with the back of her paw, "It's the oil. It's completely dry! I just checked this afternoon and it was full!"

"You sure you just weren't reading it wrong?" He suggested.

"No!" She gave him a biting look.

"Just saying…" He retreated, unlocking the door and getting out as the car sputtered to a stop at the top of the hill. Judy was already underneath the car with her phone flashlight on, getting her fancy dress soiled from the dirt road. "Isn't that a new outfit?" He pointed out.

"It'll wash out." She hollered back from beneath the undercarriage. She traced the tubing channels from the front engine down to the sump. "Dang it!" She exclaimed as she noticed the thin gouge in the line that had the oil travel down from the engine.

"What's wrong?" He probed.

She withdrew from beneath the cruiser and got back up before dusting her paws off. "There is a small cut in the line where oil had been leaking out all night. There isn't enough lubrication to help grease the gears and components. They've all simply locked up." She shook her head at the vehicle. "I checked the oil but I never bothered to check the entire system."
Nick shrugged, "You can't blame yourself for this. You couldn't have accounted for everything."

"Yeah, but now I have to explain to Chief Bogo why one of his police cruisers is stranded outside of town in a secluded spot in the woods!" She grumbled, crossing her arms and tapping her foot. She was not looking forward to that conversation. "I'm in enough trouble as it is. I'd rather not test him any further."

Stuffing his paws into his pockets, Nick walked over to the metal railing edging the hillside and appreciated the view before him. "Well you couldn't have picked a better place to breakdown Carrots. The view is magnificent."

Her stormy musings broken, she glanced over at Nick who was simply watching the twinkling lights of the city. She walked up beside him and enjoyed the sight with him. "It really is an amazing city." She noted fondly. Nick made a sound of agreement. "I remember seeing pictures of this place when I was young and heard about how both predators and prey lived together in peace and harmony. It was like a dream come true. All my life I wanted to continue that dream and make the world a better place."

"And you're doing a fine job." He assured, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, an act she did little to refuse. She rested her head on his side, ears down and relaxed.

"Yeah, but real life isn't always so perfect. It's messy and there are a lot of problems in the city." She reminded him.

"That's why we need good cops like you…like us." He amended softly.

Judy turned to face him, allowing him to wrap two arms around her, paws gently on her waist as she looked up into his emerald eyes. "Why did you help me all that time ago? When Bogo was calling for my badge to fire me? You stepped in when all you had done to that point was delay my investigation and sabotage me at every turn. Why step in then?"

His countenance melted, "Because Judy, I saw a lot of myself in you. It was at that moment that I realized you were an idealist like me when I was young and now your dream had been shattered. I had no one there to help me fight back against the prey rangers who muzzled me. I figured the least I could do was step in and give you a fighting chance to prove yourself."

"The least you could do?" Judy singled out, giving him an impish smile.

"Well," he made an obvious cough, looking out over the water, "I could have done more but I was a bit strapped for time and I don't think I could have roundhouse kicked Bonebutt off the catwalk. Probably wouldn't have done wonders for my future career as a police officer."

Judy practically cackled at his false bravado. "Now that would surely have been a sight to see!" She thumped her head onto his chest, reveling in the cadenced beating of his heart.

At length, Nick finally spoke again, still keeping his arms around Judy. "So, what did you have planned when we got back to your apartment?" His nose was twitching incessantly, that fragrant scent was getting stronger.

Judy blushed as she excused herself to open the back caged compartment of the cruiser. On the floor, stuffed between the seat and the front, was a gym bag. Unzipping it, she pulled out a rather large tubing of lubricant and a blue towel big enough for even Nick to possibly use. Hefting the tube onto her shoulder, she draped the towel over her arm and walked back to him to show her what she had brought.
"On one hand, the apartment was a place I thought we could try again…but I was kind of hoping it would be here." She confessed shyly.

He waggled a finger at her, "You were planning this the whole time!"

"Yes…well, no. Not all of it. I didn't plan to have a leak in the oil pipe." She looked back to the vehicle.

He crossed his arms and leaned back, eyeing her with interest, "You do remember that this didn't turn out well last time, right? I'm a bit concerned that I may end up hurting you again like before." He rubbed the base of his tail in remembrance. "Or hurting myself…"

With a slight crouch before throwing it his way, she tossed the tube to Nick who caught it gracelessly, nearly letting it slip out of his paws and over the railing. "Well we didn't have this!" She pointed out the lubricant before spreading the towel out on the receding grass at the edge of the overlook.

Nick looked the tube up and down before retorting, "I highly doubt this alone will be the deciding factor if this will work tonight." Even if he was expressing his concerns, every fiber in his being wanted to scream out and devour this gorgeous bunny. Judy's scent was beyond powerful now and he could smell little else but her.

"Well that and…" She paused, twirling the tip of one of her feet in the dirt. "I stopped taking the pill earlier this week, just after we tried the first time."

A lump caught in his throat as he struggled to form words, "Wait, does that mean…?"

"I've been wanting you all week and it's been torture waiting this long!" She yearned, her hips swaying at the thought of being close to Nick in that capacity again. "Please, get me out of this dress."

His arousal was getting extremely hard to hide beneath his khaki pants. "You're completely hopped up on bunny pheromones right now…" Nick gaped, watching Judy trying in vain to unzip her dress. If that was the case, Judy would probably be unwilling to give up tonight for any reason, not by choice but because her body was in heat and basically compelled her to do so. Realizing just what was being offered here, he swiftly dashed to her side and moved around to clutch the trailing zipper down her back. "Who the heck put you into this dress anyway?" He asked baffled.

"My dad did, right before they left to head back to the Oasis." She informed, holding her ears to the side as he undid the strappings.

"Wow, he seems really supportive now of us. Both of them are." Nick said with something akin to awe.

"Well, that's my parents. They are 100% in everything they do. Once they get an idea in their head, there is no stopping them. That's why I love them." She displayed a faint smile.

He let her slip her shoulders out as she assisted him in pulling it down the rest of the way to her ankles. "Then I really have to thank your dad for loaning his daughter out to-" He stopped as he came snout to rump, the tip of his nostrils plunging unexpectedly into the fluff of her cottontail.

"Nick, what are you…?" Judy started, beginning to look around to see what he was doing.

He took one deep whiff, his brain suddenly addled with everything that was Judy. In an instant, all sense of where they were was gone. He gripped her by the waist and rolled her onto the ground, his
bulk atop her. She squeaked at this impulsive action but began clawing at his clothes as the inner beast within him began roving his mouth over her naked body, licking at her neck, arms and breast. His paws ruffled through the fur, gripping slightly at points but continuing to rove the extent of her body, delicately caressing her ears before shifting back down.

She arched her back, her hips bumping against his own. "Please Nick, help me!" She pleaded with a whimper. It wasn't until that very morning that her primal need to mate came back in earnest since being off the pill. It only grew stronger throughout the day until she was ready to burst. She would accept nothing less than the full entirety of Nick inside of her.

Clawing at his shirt, he ripped it apart, shredding a few of the buttons in the process as he did so. His phallus sprung free as his pants were kicked off to the side, Nick not caring where they went. His knot was an angry shade of red, bulging painfully as his inner urges took ahold of him. His singular goal was to ravage this innocent bunny and claim her as his own.

He whipped himself back over her, his knees on the ground and his arms on either side of her head, ready to plunge in when she placed an arm on his chest. The sexual haze dissipated just enough for him to realize she was talking, "Nick, please…let me try first. I feel I need to go slow to get used to you."

He growled in protest but he obliged her, "Sure thing Carrots…"

He let her guide him onto his back, situating his tail on the towel as comfortably as he could as Judy went over to open the tube of lube and squeeze a bit into her palm. She came over and spanned his legs before taking him into her paws. With a slight shiver, she began rubbing it all over, making sure she got from the base to the very tip. Nick whined in agony, begging for some sweet release from this teasing.

Looking at her paws and their slick nature, she rubbed them off on his stomach. He barked laughing at her, "Oh sure, just wipe the rest on me!"

"It's better than getting them dirty on the ground!" She fired back, causing him to chuckle. She took another deep breath before looking at what she was about to do. "I can do this…" She said again, more to calm herself than to assuage any concerns of Nick.

Her diminutive form clambered up his waist a bit higher until her hind legs straddled his waist. She rose up and held him erect beneath her. With a few, deep breaths, her eyes locked onto the object that would be penetrating her, she began to lower herself. The tip was warm like before but it felt like a searing iron, galvanizing the senses between her legs. She pressed down further, forcing it through the inner folds to the enveloping hole.

With a small cry, she shook violently over Nick as the head finally broke through the first barrier. Nick was making all sorts of incomprehensible sounds, his hind paws flexing and un-flexing with the torment of it. He tried to raise his hips upward to feel deeper into Judy but she pushed him back down.

"Nick don't, it's really big. Give me some time…” She implored, her breath coming heavy and sweat visible through her mouth. This unnatural violation and her forcing through it was exhausting, her entire body was visibly shaking at the exertion of moving him in just an inch.

After a minute of puffing, she began her downward descent onto Nick. She moaned and gripped his chest fur in her paws, no doubt leaving small claw marks in his skin. It seemed like an eternity to both of them, but she finally settled herself just above his knot, feeling like she could go no further. Her entire lower abdomen felt swollen and full, the pulse of his heart pumping blood through his
foxhood, causing it to throb rhythmically inside of her. She sat there atop of him enjoying the well-
earned moment. She had done it; she finally managed to fit Nick inside.

Nick held Judy's hips tightly with his paws, speaking through clenched teeth, "Oh sweet, lovely
mulberry! You are so tight Judy!"

Judy groaned sensually as she began to rise back up off of him. She reached the edge before working
her way back down to the knot. It was slow going at first but as the lube and Nick's size continued to
open her up, she began to increase the pace. Her paws meandered over his chest, flowing up to his
snout where he took a finger in and began swirling his tongue around it. He licked it longingly as she
withdrew the finger from between his teeth and continued to stroke his fur.

Nick's paws rumbled around her butt, clenching it tight before grabbing her fuzzy cottontail and
pulling it roughly at the base causing Judy to gasp and slam down harder than she had intended. This
was enough to send shockwaves through her nether regions up into her arms and her whole body
convulsed several times as lightning bolts slammed into her nerves. Nick yipped in shock as her left
leg thumped the ground overwhelmingly. She collapsed onto him, ears drooping off to the side as
she lay spent atop of him.

Her eyes weren't really focused on anything in particular but she could feel the small licks of his
tongue on her forehead and small little grunts and whines from his chest. "Yes Nick?" She asked
lazily.

"I need to…I need to…" He could barely get it out but she understood what he meant.

"Do what you need to Nick. I'm ready now." She said dreamily.

Without asking for permission anymore, he sat up rapidly and held her up onto him, unwilling to
allow her to disengage. He walked over to the cruiser and opened the back cage compartment door.
Before she could ask what he was doing, he finessed them both into the door frame and firmly set
her down onto the cool, leather seat. Steading himself by her hips, he spread his legs wide within the
frame and began thrusting into her, his standing form filling the entire opening.

Moans escaped out of Judy unbidden as this frantic movement assailed her insides, threatening to
rend her apart. She regarded Nick lovingly, watching him grimace, his eyes closed, teeth bared as he
pounded into her again and again. Her initial lust slaked, she began to enjoy the ride he was giving
her; her entire body shifting up and down the short length of the seat with each ram of his hips.

It took several dozen taps for Nick to realize something was off. He never let up on the pumping
motion, but it did slow down some. "Judy what are you doing?" He was looking down at her with a
mix of confusion and sexual frenzy.

"Look, I'm bulging!" She said happily. His eye line met what she was pointing at and he could see
his length protruding from beneath her skin. His girth was large enough to displace it to the point he
was visible. "Boop…boop." She cooed as she poked his tip from the outside as he completed each
thrust.

It was a strange blend of both arousal and irritation that she was doing that. "I know you find that
fascinating Judy and I do too, but please don't do that right now."

Comprehending that this was preventing him from completing, she apologized hastily. However a
sudden spark of an idea popped into her mind. She pressed into her skin and began to stroke his
member. "Is this any better?" She asked knowingly.
The feeling of her velvety inner canal combined with the undulating pressure from outside was enough to send him back into the throes of pleasure. "Oh yes, it is!"

His renewed vigor forced Judy to lose all sense of speech as he snarled and roared into the cruiser, her entire body flopping back and forth with his bestial lunges. She was consumed by his animalistic passion. She bucked her hips, shoving more of him deep inside which forced him to increase the rate beyond what he thought he was capable of. There was nothing else in the world but to release every last bit of himself into Judy. The scents and sounds of the woods around them faded away to nothing as he felt his seed bubble and broil deep within his loins.

Judy screeched at the top of her lungs as she came once again, her left foot repeatedly slapping harshly against his thigh. A sudden flush of wet warmth coated his member, squirting out with each of his movements, sending him over the edge. She wrapped her legs and arms around him tightly as she shuddered uncontrollably once more. "Put a litter in me Nick!" She yelled.

"What?" His eyes burst open as the final pound slammed his knot past her opening into the depths of her sheath, causing Judy to flinch. The surprise of her request was lost to him as he exploded violently within her. She squirmed and writhed lustfully under him, feeling the permeating warmth filling her insides. His phallus jerked multiple times, his knot tightening. He collapsed atop Judy, one knee up on the seat with her and the other leg hanging off the edge.

"That was wonderful." She sighed, giving him multiple licks on the ears, holding his head to her breast. "I never expected it to be…so exhilarating." She stared at the starry sky above them through the door, relishing the feeling of his seed spreading its heat deeper into her, filling out all the nooks.

After his mind managed to come down from the high, he turned his neck to look at her, "What did you say at the end there?" He grilling.

"Hmmm? Oh, nothing really." She crooned, petting his fur softly, enjoying the moment.

"You liar." He pricked her belly with a nail, causing her to playfully yip. "You wanted a litter."

"So what if I did? It was in the heat of the moment." She said, not denying the fact.

He thought about it for a moment, "Maybe we should have brought those fox condoms along. What about your job? Wouldn't having a bunch of kits cause complications?"

"Most definitely." She agreed; her eyes still on the stars. "However, I feel like I can handle anything as long as I'm with you." At this she looked down her belly to meet his gaze.

"That…actually makes me feel really good Judy. Thank you." He rested his head back onto her breast. "Although I must say that it is absolutely adorable that you can't control your foot when you come."

She bopped him on the head. "That's not funny! How was I supposed to know that was going to happen?! I've never had sex before!"

He hooted some more at her bodily quirk before calming down. "I just think it's endearing. That's all."

"Whatever." She said, feigning anger.

He could still feel the slow pulse of her enveloping his member. "I'm going to have to say sorry after the fact. I didn't mean to push in that far."
“Push what in?” Judy was a bit confused.

“My knot.” He clarified. “I was just surprised about what you said that I wasn’t paying attention to how hard I was going and I got it all in.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Judy pushed him up to get a better look at their connection. “What knot? You mean this?” She pointed at the slightly larger bulge just above the vaginal opening. “What’s wrong about that?”

“You don’t know?” His jaw dropped.

She cropped herself up on her arms glaring at him, “Of course I don’t! I didn’t study the anatomy of foxes all that well. It wasn’t like there was really a need to back in the Burrows. Care to enlighten me?”

Nick put a paw to his face, dragging it down, “Then I’m not entirely sure you’re going to like this. You see…well…we’re kind of stuck together.”

Her eyes dilated as she glanced back down, “You mean forever?” At this he began chortling loudly enough that it vibrated her body through his phallus. “This isn’t funny! I don’t really know what’s going on!” She crossed her arms crossly.

“Oh, Carrots!” Nick had to fight to keep control of his mirth. “How to explain…well, when a fox mates with a female, the knot gets bigger and locks them together for a short time.”

“Every time?” She asked inquisitively to which he only bowed his head to affirm her question. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That only happens with vixens right? That doesn’t apply to rabbits I should think. Maybe if I…”

She yelped painfully as she tried to pull away from him, only to feel like her innards were being yanked back onto him. “Careful!” He warned. “Now this very well might hurt you!”

“You serious?” She cried disbelievingly. “It works on rabbits too?!”

She squeaked and squealed multiple times trying to break free, firmly imagining that the furious knot was getting larger and threatening to rip her apart from the inside. She quivered all over, her fingers twerking in paroxysmal spasms as she gave herself another orgasm trying to escape his entrenched appendage. Prepared, Nick caught her left foot and held it for the duration of its flapping. She flopped back onto her back, her chest heaving.

“Please simmer down Carrots. This isn’t the end of the world. It’ll go down eventually and we can separate and get dressed.” Nick attempted to placate.

“Yeah, but now we have to call in someone to come get us and,” she sniffed her arms a few times, “I think I’m completely drenched in your scent. They’re going to know we did something for sure!”

“Depends on who we call.” Nick mused.

“You think Carla would come pick us up?” Judy asked.

Nick’s face twisted something fierce, “I’d rather not have her come.”

“Maybe Jimmy?” She tried another.

After some thought, he nodded. “I think Jimmy would be okay with it. He’s not the type to be telling
other people our personal matters."

"Okay, I'll call after we…um…separate and get dressed." She finished.

Resigned to being connected to Nick, she sat up and reached around his neck with both arms. She embraced him fully as he held her to him, rolling onto his back in the seat with her on top. They lay there, sticky with their own fluids, happy and content that they were finally able to express this secret part of themselves to each other. Judy was ecstatic that she had found the mammal of her dreams, him being a fox be damned. She wondered if he felt the same way about her.

A sharp snap of a twig caused her ears to shoot up. Her attention ratcheted toward the tree line encompassing the open overlook which they parked. She saw a dark figure toss something onto the ground with a squish before falling to all fours and clopping away hurriedly down the hill. She slapped Nick's shoulder roughly several times to wake him back up, he had fallen asleep.

"Nick! Someone was out there! Watching us!" She hissed.

"You serious?" He mumbled, still groggy.

"Yes! Just over there!" She pointed in the direction of the tangled mess the shadow had thrown to the ground.

He tried to lift her off but he was still engorged inside, "Excuse me Carrots, if you don't mind coming with me?"

"Not at all, just get me over there!" She persisted.

Slowly slithering down the side of the chair and out the door, he held on snuggly to Judy's rump as he carried her over to where she had spotted the figure. Nick had to turn away quickly to avoid looking any further at the bloodied mess that lay at their feet. It was a young ocelot, its organs completely missing from its innards, leaving a gaping hole from mouth to anus, a gruesome husk.

"He struck again…" Judy whispered.

"What the hell? Who?" Nick nearly gagged.

"This isn't the first time I've seen this." She spied some white substance splattered on the nose and cheeks of the dead cat. "Nick, quick to the cruiser. I have a swabbing kit in the glove compartment."

Grudgingly, Nick hauled her over to the passenger side where she undid the door clasp and pulled out a small kit with cotton tips and a vial. She patted him softly to take her back to the mangled corpse. He inhaled sharply as she leaned backwards, still firmly connected to him by the knot, trusting he would hold her steady by the hips. Her ears dusting the earth, she hung upside down and dabbed the tip of the cotton into the spatter before depositing it into the vial.

Rearing herself back up to his eye level, she took a quick whiff of the contents before capping it securely, "This almost smells like…semen."

Nick raised an eyebrow, "That's actually kind of gross."

"Why is that?" Judy wasn't exactly making the connection.

"Someone followed us here to watch us have sex Judy and was getting off on it." Nick asserted, more confident than ever in his theory.
"With another animal's body?" She blenched, her tongue sticking out in disgust.

Nick eyed the underside of the vehicle, the pool of oil still visible in the moonlight. "I don't think this was a coincidence that our car got stuck here. We would have never made it back to Zootopia on the amount of oil left in the tub no matter which route we took."

Judy's blood ran cold as a stark realization came to her. She recalled the words Rouge had said to her, she was being stalked. Although not wanting to look at the ghastly carcass below, her eyes were inexplicably drawn back to it. Even with only two victims encountered to her knowledge, she already saw a pattern to the attacks: the perpetrator only killed small mammals. Was this what was intended for her too? A cold wind brought a chill to her bones.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of the few chapters where it does not time skip at all. I felt this was supremely important because up to this point, we've spent only a third of the time with Nick and Judy and building their relationship up. It was high time to do justice to their characters by devoting an entire chapter to them and having them connect in a supremely unique way. Realizing that the build up is just as important as the climax, a good chunk had to be set aside for their date proper. Despite having everything focus on their budding relationship, I still needed to drop hints and foreshadowing for future plot points and twists. I thought it was a good idea to expand on certain aspects of both Nick and Judy's characters to include her liking seafood and Nick helping out his mom all these years. I figure for chapters such as these that don't progress the overall narrative flow, you need to instead have it at least delve deeper into who these characters are with some of that information being important later. As for the extended lemon scene, I treated it just like a good action scene. You don't need to have a whole lot of repetition and you need to plan out beat for beat what each of the individual events and actions are going to be. In that way, you describe just enough to get your point across for each sequence and move onto the next, in this way the sex remains a flowing entity and nothing feels stale or rote and merely evolves as an extension of Nick and Judy who are experiencing it. Finally, to continue my buzzkill streak, I dropped the serial stalker/murderer at the end to press the past arc narrative forward with Judy. All in all, a very satisfying chapter to write and a great breather from the time hopping shenanigans of previous chapters.
Sweat poured down Jack's lips, his glands slavering from the toil of carrying Mai upon his back. He had lost count of the hours they had trudged along this featureless corridor of rock and stone. He was no stranger to these routes in and out of Zootopia but for some inexplicable reason, it seemed this particular path was longer in practice than in memory. His legs quivering, he let out a grunt before gently falling to a knee and laying Mai onto her back, ensuring he placed his jacket under her head for a pillow.

"Are we taking a break yet?" Nala whined, slumping to the ground beside Mai, relieved to finally be able to rest after all that walking.

"Yes we are…" Jack wheezed. "I can't go any further."

"I could carry Mai a bit more today if you'd like." Judy offered, stepping up beside him.

He raised a paw to ward her off and shook his head, "No, we traveled the equivalent of seven hours' worth of distance in about," he checked his watch, miraculously still working on the battery left in it, "ten hours. This is not good time. We need to rest." He wiped his mouth before surveying the path ahead. "We probably got another day, maybe two before we reach the exit leading to the railway into old Zootopia."

"I'm sorry to be a burden." Mai apologized, struggling to get up to a seated position.

"Shhh, don't try to strain yourself. You took quite a blow to your spine. It might take weeks before that heals well enough for you to walk." Jack helped Mai lay back onto the cold rock, resituating his coat beneath her head.

"It wasn't your fault." Judy assuaged. "We couldn't have known it'd end up like that."

"No we couldn't have." Jack assessed, giving Judy a curious look. Something had been bothering him since they left the Nocturnal District. "Judy, you knew that polar bear at one time didn't you?"

"Please, let's not do this now." She expressed solemnly. She hated the fact that she might have been at fault for their current situation. If she had only remembered sooner who Big Ray really was, they could have escaped before Mai was injured.

"Well why not now?" Jack asked ruffled. "I'm almost positive he would have let us pass without objection until he saw you."

"It's not her fault. She has amnesia." Mai defended softly.

"Convenient for all things, isn't it?" Jack snarked.

Judy thumped a foot down before putting her fists on her waist, "Hey, I'm the one that went up into that bear's mouth! I'm the one that suffered being digested! You think I'd have done that willingly if I had known who he was before hand? I kicked his butt long ago and apparently he had harbored this resentment toward me this entire time! If I could have remembered who he was before it got to that point, believe me I would have put a stop to it!"
"Why are we fighting?" Nala exclaimed, trying to put a paw on either one of them.

"And now my daughter is involved in this mess." Judy added curtly.

"Only because it was your idea to leave Zootopia. Why are we bothering to even head back to the old city?" Jack huffed, arms crossed and foot tapping. "Let me guess, can't fully remember because of your amnesia?"

"Shut up!" Judy snapped, wrapping an arm around Nala. "Look, I got this flash of…something…that seemed important. I can't really say how I know, but there is something that I must see in the sixth failed Zootopia. Something that'll help me jog my memory. I'm hoping it has something to do with…whatever everyone wants me to remember so we can finally win against these bats." She completed with a sigh.

"A combination." Jack informed flatly.

"What?" She blinked.

"Nothing, it's just a fool's errand." He muttered, turning away to sit down beside Mai. The light from his cell phone was getting dim; the battery was going to die. All they would have left for light in this tunnel was Mai's phone and that would be the end of their precious vision.

"Look, if you're that upset with me, then why did you bother coming here?" Judy grilled, angry but wanting to know the truth. It was so frustrating not knowing everything yet still expected to.

Jack's eyes darted to Nala briefly before returning to Judy's, "As we've discussed, part of it is because of blood. Part of it is because I made a promise to work for you and I've still not finished my contract with you."

"That's a load of compost and you know it!" Judy countered.

"Can we just rest?" Nala suggested, giving her mother's shirt a small tug.

"Good idea darling!" Jack snapped his fingers, giving the kit a friendly gesture with his finger. "It's been a long walk today and we need to recoup before we begin again tomorrow."

"Feels like always night time here." Nala commented, fatigue evident in her voice. "How can you even tell it's daytime?"

Jack tapped his watch as well as shook his phone a bit, "If it weren't for these two gadgets, I probably couldn't tell either."

Judy stared at Jack a few seconds longer before turning to Nala, "How about we sleep near Mai tonight? Come curl up next to me."

"I could use the company." Mai joked, patting the ground beside her with a smile.

Judy and Nala lay beside the prone form of Mai, placing the kit between them both. Knowing that unnecessary movement might not be beneficial to Mai, Nala made sure she cuddled up next to her mother instead. Jack was off at a distance by a few meters, trying to find a comfortable spot himself, switching from side to side displeased with the piece of rock he had chosen.

"I'm glad you're all here with me." Nala murmured, nuzzling her button nose into her mom's chest, trying to stave off the lingering chill of the tunnel.
"We are too baby." Judy said distantly, petting the top of Nala's head with her paw. She spied the long, black stripe of fur running down the ridge of her spine, the visual bringing her focus back on Jack. "You never told me she was adept at throwing weapons."

"I did." Jack refuted. "I tried to say that you weren't giving her much credit."

"It's my fault." Mai intervened weakly. "I didn't want you to worry about your daughter growing up so fast so I told Jack not to tell you how good she is. I wanted you to focus on knowing her for who she is rather than what she's capable of. That was my mistake."

"Jack says I'm the best he's ever seen at throwing knives." Nala mumbled dreamily, sleep coming fast to the little tyke.

He inclined his head toward Nala, "She isn't wrong. She came in one day to the training room and found Mai throwing her shuriken. From my understanding, she begged and pleaded to have Mai teach her how to throw them."

"It didn't exactly go like that." Mai rebuked.

"Close enough." Jack smirked. "Regardless, she was a natural and I started coming in to watch the sessions. Every day we would challenge her to harder and harder obstacles but she would surpass them all. I even tried to get her to learn how to fire guns."

"Jack!" Judy said shocked.

"Look, Judy, if you want your daughter to have a chance in the world we live in right now, she's going to have to learn how to defend herself from an early age. A horrible fact of life, I get it, but it's reality. I wanted to see how well she would do with a deadly weapon that I was comfortable with."

Intrigued but still disturbed that this young kit, this daughter of hers born of her blood, was already adept at killing. What type of emotional or mental baggage had she already gone through to get to the point where she found them in Wild Times? Nala was roughly five years of age, seven years away from being considered an adult in the Burrows, yet still more versed than Judy ever was at this age. Her heart ached for the childhood that Nala would never be able to experience.

"How did she do?" Judy probed tentatively.

"She's a natural!" Jack marveled. "A crack-shot really. You saw the results yourself back at Wild Times. One shot and she took down Big Ray!" His ears drooped. "However, she didn't really like using firearms; didn't care for the sound or recoil much, not that I blame her."

A soft snoring could be heard, nestled into her breast. "Looks like she's gone." Judy observed, squeezing her young one tight. One day, she promised, she was going to make up for the lost time with Nala.

"You feel like you could have done more for her." Mai presumed, gauging the look on Judy's face.

She shifted uncomfortably before responding, "There is a lot more I feel like I could have done or I should be doing now, but for the life of me I can't even figure out what it is. On one hand, I know I shouldn't blame myself for being gone five years of her life but on the other, I feel like I could have avoided this situation somehow. Avoided placing myself in a position to be put in a coma; I feel like there was something rash that I did that put me in that hospital. I missed out on so much."

"Nick never stopped caring about you or for Nala." Mai comforted. "He did the best he could raising her, as did all of us. We made sure we kept your memory alive for her."
"That's why she was so excited to finally see you." Jack finished.

Judy let her gaze drop to the sleeping, grey bundle in her arms. "Sometimes I feel like this isn't real, that this is all a dream. I wake up crying, berating myself that I could ever think that about Nala when she is right here in my arms." Crystalline tears began to form at the edges of her eyes.

"What was Nick like?" Jack asked suddenly, intensely fixated on her.

She fumbled a bit, trying to switch gears. "Why do you want to know?"

Jack shrugged. "Partly out of curiosity and because I feel that if you can recall anything about Nick then maybe it'll be more proof to yourself that this all isn't some insane dream."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful." Mai laughed before devolving into several coughing fits.

Jack looked up at the roof of the passage. "The air here is stale, the sooner we get out, the better." He turned back to Judy. "Continue, please."

Judy squinted, even though she didn't have a reason to, trying to remember any memories of her husband. "I remember us making love…"

"Well that escalated quickly." Jack's eyes widened, he clearly wasn't expecting this type of personal response. Mai just looked on inquisitively, her head turned to see Judy more directly.

Judy shot Jack a peeved look. "It's the last thing I remembered just this morning, okay? It is where I visualize him most clearly. The shape of his muzzle and the tip of his wet nose pressing into my neck to the gorgeous red fur of his, I remember it strongly in that memory. I can recall the way he used to swish his tail or the way he'd give me this roguish smirk promising me something exciting that night."

"Shall I…leave you alone with your thoughts?" Jack ribbed, propping his head up onto a paw.

"Har har." Judy rejoined sardonically. Getting back to following the fading path of her memories, she pushed past their passionate nights and moved onward to their daily routines. "I remember how he'd always wait for me after my early morning runs with coffee and freshly cooked potato pancakes. I remember him holding doors open for me and pulling chairs back so that I may sit first at the table. I remember him working out in the fields at my birth home and meeting him out there with some freshly pressed lemonade. I remember him…" She paused as her paw moved to her stomach, images flashed through her mind of Nick smiling, excited over rubbing her growing belly. "I…remember him being happy to be a father."

After a long moment, Jack broke the oppressive silence, "For the longest time I could never figure you two out." Judy broke off from her internal ruminations and regarded him. "I'll admit that I was very much against a predator-prey pairing. I thought you and Nick were an odd couple. Now I see you are no different than any other couple, just two different species is all."

"Is that truly surprising?" Judy asked amused.

"From my experience, yes…very much so." Jack confessed.

"I'm honestly amazed you're taking it so well." Mai remarked from the sidelines.

"How do you figure?" Jack cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Up until recently, I always thought it was creepy that you'd always be hovering around Nick and
Nala. Always doting on her and helping her in learning how to be self-sufficient." She took a deep breath, wincing as it delivered a spasm down her lower back. "Now we know it was because she's your daughter."

"Nala is actually Nick's daughter." Jack tried to correct.

"Technically she is yours by blood though." Judy finally admitted. Deep down, something about this revelation seemed to ring true. She had a hard time believing it herself when Jack first told her and she struggled with it over the past day but when it came right down to it, short of an actual DNA test, the evidence seemed convincing. Her eyes softened, "I can't imagine what it's been like for you. Knowing day in and day out that she was yours all along but letting Nick be the one to raise her."

She could almost visibly see a wall fly up between them. The glint in his eyes seemed to grow cold. "As long as I was nearby, I could tolerate it." He hesitated before continuing, "Some days I wondered why I bothered to stay around and then Nala would come and want something trivial of me or just to play."

"And she reminded you of your purpose?" Mai suggested; her expression jovial.

"I wouldn't call it purpose, more like resolve." Jack amended.

Judy thought on it a bit, "Have you ever wanted to tell her who you really are?"

Jack shook his head aggressively, "What good would it do? I don't want to confuse her when she already has enough on her plate as it is. She's dealt with a single parent who, for the longest time, didn't know the first thing about caring for a kit and having to learn to grow up in a world that could kill her at any moment. She has no need of me strutting into her life and mucking it up by telling her Nick's not her real dad."

"I think she already knows Nick isn't." Mai revealed. "She accepts him anyway because that's all she's known."

"You afraid of being a father?" Judy inquired.

"What? No!" He looked from one doe to the other. "Since when did this conversation become about me being a father figure to Nala?"

"It isn't." Judy answered forlornly. "I'm just wondering why you're so against getting close to someone that you'd swear off blood relations, even family ties."

"We're not a family!" Jack grimaced, regretting immediately at how harsh it came out. "I'm sorry." He gazed uneasily at Nala who stirred a bit at his outburst but remained asleep.

"Judy does bring up a good point." Mai piled on. "The entire time I've known you, you've always preferred to keep your distance. The only mammal I ever saw where you let your guard down with was Nala. You can't tell me you're not close to her."

Jack plopped his head into the crook of his arm, hiding his face. "Now I know why I remained single all these years. All you females gang up on us males." He lifted his head. "I just like my privacy okay?"

Judy snorted at this. "Jack, I may not know you as well as Mai does, but I've seen enough to know that you are more kind-hearted than that." She flashed him a devious grin, "If I were to put on my investigative cap, I'd say you had some sort of traumatic childhood that affected your ability to open up to others." He opened his mouth to rebut, but she pressed on. "Why else would you come to
Zootopia looking for jobs in the worst of places? No respecting bunny would debase themselves to that level unless they felt they had nothing left to lose. You were escaping from something or someone. Was your heart broken? A girl that got away?"

Jack stabbed a finger at her, "Now don't go pulling that crap on me!" He warned. "Nick did that all the time, trying to wrangle some answers out of me by all sorts of crazy suppositions and theories."

"And Judy has gotten more out of you in several weeks than Nick has in five years!" Mai chuckled.

Judy shared a knowing look with Mai, "I don't know, maybe I just have that effect on him."

He gestured to them crudely, "This is exactly what I mean, ganging up on me. Good night ladies. I'm done." With that, he flopped over onto his other side, facing away from them.

"Oh come on Jack…I'm sorry." Judy beseeched. "We've all been through a lot and I'm just trying to lighten the mood. Besides, I know very little about you and since we're going to be working together," she paused for a second, "again…for the near future, I figured we should get to know each other better."

Jack rolled back over to face them, "Now you sound like a therapist."

"Oh, so you admit to having been to counseling?" Judy said with mock amazement. "So what types of horrible crimes and deeds have you committed that warranted a therapist?"

"Very funny." Jack said unamused, but they could tell his false stonewall exterior was breaking. With an exasperated exhalation, he slumped an arm over and nested his chin onto it, his attention not entirely focused on the two does. "Look, I didn't exactly have the best childhood when I was growing up. My father died shortly after I was born which left only my mother to take care of me and sixty of my brothers and sisters. Being one of the middle bunnies in the litters, I was expected to help take care of them too."

"That's not terrible at all." Mai consoled.

"She's right. I remember having to take over for my mother when things got hectic around the burrow. I was mom to half of my siblings," Judy added, noticing a smile from Mai.

"That wasn't the reason I left for Zootopia, to find work in the Nocturnal District." Jack corrected. "Ever since my father died, my mother grew more and more distant over the years. In time, she barely responded to anything at all. I remember my twelfth birthday that my mom went to bed and never woke back up; died of a broken heart. All of us became orphans that day. Many of the surrounding families took my younger brothers and sisters in to raise them until they became of age. I was left to fend for myself because I was already considered an adult in the community even though in reality I was two years off from that milestone."

"Why would they force that upon you?" Judy was appalled. Surely no one in the Burrows would have turned Jack away as an orphaned, adolescent youth. "Someone should have taken you in, if nothing else but to hire you on as paid labor."

Jack gave her an unreadable expression, "I…wasn't the easiest to get along with when I was younger. I didn't make a lot of friends. The lack of a father and the dwindling presence of a mother left me mostly to my own devices to raise myself. I ruined a lot of good opportunities and things because of my young, stupid, irrational actions. Once mom died and I was left alone, I saw several of my brothers and sisters old enough to marry start families of their own and start successful businesses. I had no such luck or any contacts to draw upon."
"And so you moved to Zootopia." Judy followed his train of thought.

He nodded, "Like you, there was a glass ceiling for rabbits and the jobs they could perform. It was when I was wasted away drunk at a bar that I overheard someone talking about the Nocturnal District. The rest, as you know, is history."

Mai and Judy lay in silence for a time digesting this. "Jack I'm so sorry for you. I didn't really understand why you are the way you are." Mai finally broke the hush.

"I made mistakes and I've had to pay for them." He threw out casually, his stoic, suave demeanor coming back. "But that is neither here nor there. What matters now is that I'm here with the few remaining mammals in this world that remotely mean anything to me."

Judy pressed a paw to her heart, "Aww, Jack…that's actually really sweet."

"And I just pegged you for an asshole." Mai blurted.

"I still am to you." He quipped, drawing a laugh from all of them.

Nala stirred again and opened her eyes sleepily, "Why you guys still up?"

"We were just going to bed darling." Jack cooed.

As if on cue, the remaining battery in Jack's phone died as the flashlight flickered and went out. "I guess we should turn in now too." Judy stated. "Jack, you got Mai's phone for tomorrow?"

"In my back pocket." He confirmed. "Good night ladies." He said into the darkness.

"Good night Jack." They all caroled back.

"Thank you…for opening up," Judy whispered quietly to herself before sleep claimed her.

"You stink horribly." Carla Hyenandez sneered, her lip curling. "You should know better than to hang out with los delincuentes y canallas."

"First off, I have no idea what you're talking about." Judy explained briskly. "Secondly, Nick and I were stuck out in the woods for several hours. We probably just got a bit of nature rubbed off on us while we were waiting for you two to come pick us up."

"More like quite a bit of Wilde rubbed off on you." Carla retorted, crossing her spotted arms gruffly, causing her leather jacket to squeak. If anyone but Carla had said this, it would have been construed as a joke, but she was not the joking type of mammal despite the stereotype placed on those of her species.

Judy flashed her a scowl but said nothing as she hitched up her dress so that she could walk faster through the police station. She tried her best to walk normal but after the pounding Nick had just given her, it was excruciating not to walk bowlegged. Although they had called Jimmy Frost to come pick them up, Carla had tagged along for the ride. It seemed those two were inseparable these days. It wasn't exactly unexpected though, they were work partners after all, much like her and Nick on the force.

"You're a mess Judy." Carla noted, eyeing the rabbit's disheveled coat and matted patches of fur, most likely due to fluids of unknown origin that she dare not hazard a guess. Even the zipper on the back of her dress was halfway undone. "You should go clean up. I have a spare set of clothes my
younger cousin left behind after her visit. I could offer those if you need something to change into. You shouldn't have to suffer this any longer."

"Thanks for the offer Carla, but this is something that kind of needs to be done right now." Judy thanked, keeping the pace she had set. She hoped Raina would still be there this late.

Jimmy already had taken Nick to the showers to get cleaned up, which irked Carla something fierce when he didn't bother to extend the opportunity to Judy before claiming first dibs on the limited hot water that they had this month. It was just like that selfish fox to be so uncaring to his fellow colleagues and his own partner. She bared her teeth just thinking about kicking his butt from here all the way to New Mexico.

Carla was a spotted hyena who, along with Jimmy, an arctic fox, was in the same academy class together right after Nick's class graduated. They all trained together and endured the hardship as a collective group. At the time, Carla was curious about Nick and pondered intensely why a criminal would ever want to be a cop. This conjecture and interest all evaporated the moment she was forced to work alongside him in Precinct 1. His unnerving wit and sass as well as his complete disregard for respect and authority did not sit well with her. The fact Jimmy idolized him almost like a father figure vexed her more than she cared to admit. As far as she was concerned, he was still a crook in her eyes.

Judy waggled the vial of white liquid in her paw, "I believe I may have a murderer stalker who has been tailing me for the past few weeks."

All instances of Nick bashing left Carla's face as she became all business. She dropped her arms and paced alongside Judy, following her along the route to the lab. "Do you have any idea of who it is?" She pressed eagerly, wanting some potential lead that could propel her into the case. They had called the dead body on the overlook in but neither Carla nor Jimmy was assigned to it directly.

"No clue." Judy lamented. She had been within meters of the killer twice but still was no closer to figuring out who it was. The only lead she had to go off from was the tip Rouge had given her about a serial killer potentially within their own unit. She dared not assume anyone just yet but if what Rouge said was true, the danger was far closer to home than she'd care to admit. "I only encountered him once in an alley and again with Nick in the forest, but I didn't get a good look at him both times."

"Hmm, that's unfortunate." She assented. "If I was there, I would have pummeled his face into the ground." She cracked her knuckles severely. Carla's method of combat was more or less hands on. She was issued shock tasers and guns, but she far preferred the method of fist to face when it came to taking down perpetrators.

"If we can catch him with this evidence, I don't think that'll be necessary." Judy moved ahead to prevent them from slamming into each other trying to get through the door frame at the same time. "Raina!" Judy called out to the white coated lab technician, still here at this late hour.

The brown furred sloth languidly raised her head to behold Judy. A smile leisurely made its way onto her face before uttering words nearly a minute later. "Judy…how…lovely…to…see…you!"

Judy held up the vial to hand it over to the seated Raina. "Can you run some tests on this to see who the identity of the mammal who created it?"

Raina peered at the viscous fluid at the bottom of the tube with intense concentration. It took several minutes more before she realized just what exactly it was and what Judy was asking her to do. Her
eyes sluggishly lit up with surprise. "Oh, I…can…certainly…handle…this…No…problem…Judy."

"You are an absolute doll Raina!" She pointed a finger at one before stepping back a few paces towards the door. "I owe you one! Drinks on me at Snarlbucks, cool?" She clicked her tongue amicably before skirting back out into the hallway with Carla in tow.

"I…would…like…a…white…mocha…with…" Raina's voice faded off into the distance.

"Guess I'm not the only one that can't stand her." Carla smirked.

"It's not that." Judy fussed, charting a path through the station back to her cubicle. "Raina is a wonderful mammal, but sometimes I just don't have the time to stand around waiting for her next sentence."

"Nobody has that time." Carla agreed stone-faced.

Presently, they rounded the final divider that fed right into her cubicle that she shared with Nick. The desk was a mess of stacked papers, folders and paperclips. If she hadn't known Nick as well as she did, she would have assumed there was no organization whatsoever. Despite its outward appearance, there was logic to the chaos and she could only assume that Nick knew exactly where everything was and where to find it at a moment's notice.

Carla scoffed, "Filthy haragan."

"I'm sure he knows what he's doing." Judy assured. She pulled the rolling chair up to the desk before moving aside some papers so she could reach the keyboard and login.

"We're back!" A bubbling voice bounded across the tops of the dividers.

Carla groaned as she saw the familiar, ginger pelt of Nick swagger around the corner with the pure white of Jimmy trailing after. As expected, adoration was evident in Jimmy's eyes, following Nick around like a love-sick pup. It was clear they had been yakking it up this entire time and she'd have to endure the hours of babble that would erupt from Jimmy's mouth over what he and Nick talked about. Her mind surged trying to come up with a plausible plan to circumvent this inevitability.

"I see you spruce up horribly." Carla nipped coldly.

"You would know." Nick adjusted the pale blue shirt around his waist. It was a bit tighter than he was used to. "It is your partner's clothes after all."

"Hey, what's going on guys?" Jimmy asked innocently, the backhanded slight from Nick going completely over his head. Carla had snarled at the flippant remark from Nick.

"Nothing Frost." She dismissed him blatantly. "Come on, we have to go. They can get home from here on their own." She turned her head slightly to Judy, doing everything within her power not to look at Nick. "Don't stay too long Judy. It's getting late and we report to the bullpen tomorrow morning at 0730. You should be back on the case tomorrow. Perhaps Officer Wilde can take your place as meter maid for a change."

"Excellent!" Nick exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "I'll be sure to find your wandering sense of humor out there and bring it back for you."

Carla narrowed her eyes, clenching her fists. She looked about ready to slug him. Judy noticed the motion and pressed a paw on her forearm. "Thanks for the concern Carla. We'll be leaving here
shortly. I'll text you when we get home, okay?"

Her seething anger abated just a hair. She grunted and tapped her partner's shoulder roughly. "Come on Frost. We have to go." She stormed down the row of cubicles and rounded the bend, firmly believing Jimmy was right behind her.

With little regard for his partner's wishes, Frost put an arm on the divider and leaned into the space, his eyes eager on Judy. "So Nick tells me you had a creeper watching you two make out in the car?"

"Sweet cheese and crackers Nick!" Judy barked, swiveling her chair from the computer monitor to glare at him. "You spouting off all our personal affairs to everyone in the building?!" Nick threw his paws up to placate her fury. "Look Carrots, I tried my best to dance around the issue with Frost but he's got the tenacity of a honey badger!" He shifted his paws toward the arctic fox. "I mean look at those eyes! Can you seriously say you would deny those adorable round eyes?"

As if to accentuate the accusation, Jimmy gave her one of his most sincere looks, complete with quivering lower lip. Unimpressed, she rotated back to Nick, "That still doesn't excuse you for caving under the pressure. You know how I feel about our privacy."

Ignorant of the turmoil between the two, Jimmy forged onward with his line of thought. "You know, if it was me being stalked, I think I'd be rather flattered." He put a paw to his chin to ponder a second before adjusting, "On second thought, that's probably not the right word. I think honored…no, that's not it…weirded out maybe?"

"Frost!" Carla yelled out from the foyer, her voice carrying far. "Getting warmer to her wrath." Nick goaded, seeing the irritated look on Judy and the stomping pawfalls of Carla rampaging back.

Jimmy fidgeted with his white wallabeanie attached to the keychain at the belt of his jeans. Knowing he probably had only a few more seconds, he began spewing the words out at a rate faster than Judy could understand. "So what was it like knowing someone was watching you? Did you feel fear? Was it exciting? Would you do it again?"

"Okay, now you're just getting a bit zealous," Nick raised an eyebrow and began patting Jimmy on the shoulder with a gentle nudge to make him get the point he should hurry along before Carla put her paws on him.

"But this is all vital information!" Jimmy protested, maintaining his grip on the cubicle wall as Nick edged him away from their workspace. "We need to get the witness's testimony so we can make a proper report!"

"Frost, let's go!" Carla growled, gripping his collar and literally dragging him down the row.

"Let me know how it goes!" Frost shouted back. "Nick, call me buddy! We still need to go out for lunch one of these days! You promised!" Hearing him suddenly stifled and the scuffle of claws on the marbled floor drifting into silence, they could only presume they had left the building. Nick chuckled to himself, "Those two are quite the pair. Now I see why Chief Bogo put those two as partners, they work well together."

"As should we." Judy said crossly. "We are a team and last I checked, we agreed to keep our
personal lives out of our professional lives, did we not?"

"Well, kind of hard to extricate ourselves from this crime when we were on a date during the time it happened." He reasoned.

"Nick…" She rumbled, her ire rising.

"Fine, fine. How about I go to Snarlbucks, they should still be open this late, and bring you back something? Your usual?" He offered.

A finger shot up, "Don't forget to buy a white mocha for Raina too. She's staying late to help me with this."

"Just a white mocha?" Nick confirmed.

"That's all I heard her say." She established, trying not to look too guilty that she hadn't stayed around to hear the rest of her order. She spun back to the keyboard and began typing in a few search queries into the database. "You also need to keep your promise to Frost and have lunch with him one of these days. You do know he looks up to you still. A fact that is beyond me."

"Hey now!" Nick looked at her offended. "I, too, can have my admirers." Seeing that she wasn't going to give up, he relented. "Fine, I'll see if I can plan a date where we can have lunch together."

"He'll be so overjoyed." She chirped.

"Joy." Nick said morosely. He couldn't say he didn't like Jimmy; he was a very loveable fellow. However, his idol worship of Nick had caused a bit of a rift between them even if Jimmy wasn't even aware of it. Conversations tended to be one sided with Nick doing most of the talking and Jimmy listening with absolute awe. Seriously, one of these days, that fox needed to wake up and see that Nick wasn't all that and a bag of chips.

He made a move to leave but remembered something, "Hey Carrots, want me to stop by the apartment and get a pair of clothes for you to change into?"

"That would be much appreciated." She intoned; eyes still on the screen. He bowed his head and filtered on out into the foyer to complete his errands.

As he left, she finally unclenched her thighs and split her legs open to allow her nether regions to breath. She was sore all up in her groin and thighs. Trying to act casual by sitting normally was torture. She shifted in the chair only to find there was a wet spot where she had been sitting, Nick's semen slowly dripping out of her. She cursed the messy nature of sex and vowed to clean the chair before leaving the office that night.

Ignoring the dull ache between her legs, she took a gander at the clock, noting that it was five minutes to eleven. Nick would be cutting it close if he wanted to catch Snarlbucks before it closed. Getting down to business, she typed up serial murder cases in Zootopia and brought up ten entries. Scanning down the list she spied two that could potentially fit her stalker. The first killer's method of murder didn't match the profile she was expecting, so she moved onto the second remaining entry.

Her ears perked up at the sound of a door opening. "Nick?" She called out. No one answered back. That was odd. She thought that other than Raina, there was no one else in the station.

As the file loaded, she forced herself not to vomit in her mouth as various images of small mammals were displayed, each impaled through with organs removed; husks of their former selves. This was definitely her killer. She scrolled up to the top of the entry, to where the case was officially opened.
The first murder happened roughly twenty-five years ago. Judy paused a moment, amused that this was roughly the time Bogo entered the police force. He was probably a cadet just like she was. She could almost imagine him being a meter maid during his first month on the job.

The first victim was a weasel living near the Downtown high rises. Judy ignored the picture thumbnails, knowing full well what she'd see. Instead she looked at the weasel's information directly. She was a single female living in a studio apartment making her way through college. Nothing really significant stood out to her about the description.

She scrolled down to the evidence surrounding the case. They didn't find anything of note regarding her manner of death. There were no traces of bodily fluids or pawprints. Any signs of struggle were minimal to none. Her organs were haphazardly lying beside her body, similar to how Judy discovered her first victim in that alley.

Unsatisfied, she moved onto the next victim which was a female skunk also in Downtown but in the Happytown section bordering Savannah Central and the Rainforest District. The data was quite similar to what she read previously. No identifying marks or DNA to draw from to identify the killer. She progressed quickly through the rest, most were of the smaller mammal variety and all were female, so there was that connection at least.

Judy leaned back in the chair and thought for a bit. Her ears caught some more steps off in the distance. Maybe a co-worker had stepped in for some late night work like her? Shaking her head to get back to business, she leaned forward and decided to tackle the data from a different angle. She searched if there were any arrests made.

She made a sound of relief but it caught in her throat as she scanned the remainder of the report. There were two arrests made in relation to the serial murder case. One was two years after the initial killings and another three years after that. Since then, there had been no arrests and those apprehended for these crimes were found guilty and put to life imprisonment. Something didn't add up though, if two arrests were made and then later convicted, why was this case still persisting for twenty-five years?

Judy looked up the interval dates in-between each murder. It seemed it was a consistent death per year. It only increased to two per year from the fifth year onward. She fast-forwarded to the most recent reports. It only escalated past two deaths per year to a whopping five in the past two years. She tapped a paw to her chin. What happened recently that could have spurred this sudden shift in killings?

Maybe she wasn't seeing the bigger picture, she thought. What was it that Rouge said? That there were crooked cops in her Precinct 1? She shift selected all case files and had them load onto a map of Zootopia. After a few minutes, it finally spit out the overlay. All were done in close proximity to Downtown; that much she could see. What she found odd was that there were no murders found in Tundra Town, Meadow Lands and Sahara Square. Why would that be?

Except for the most recent one, the ocelot out in the woods; it was the only instance that didn't make sense. Then it clicked as she realized what all the locations had in common, paved roads that could be used to hide tracks! She picked up her cell phone and dialed Delgato which she knew was already there at the scene, cordoning it off and getting information for the report. After a few seconds, he clicked on. "Officer Delgato, what is it Hopps?"

"Hey buddy. Can you check the ground around the edge of the clearing near where we found the body? Are there any prints there?" She asked; tension in her voice.

After a few minutes and some rustling, he came back, "Yeah, looks like some hooves. What's going
"Nothing yet, I'll let you know. Thanks so much. Talk to you later!" She hung up.

If it was a hoofed animal, it'd be harder to get a print but still, shouldn't there already have been DNA tests conducted or swabs collected from each scene? She tapped a few keys to bring up the lab reports but sat there stunned at what came back. There were none! A quick query of jam cam data didn't turn up anything either. She checked the murder locations again and discovered that all had occurred just outside of any camera coverage. The assailant definitely had insider knowledge of all known cameras scattered throughout Zootopia.

Her bunny senses tingling, she looked up who the investigator of the case was and her eyes locked onto the name: Detective Oates. Either Oates wasn't doing his job thoroughly as detective or these files were being deleted! He was lead detective on the case but surely Bogo checked up on him now and then. He should have noticed this! With renewed purpose, she skimmed the reports and found Oates had signed onto the case just after the first killing following the second arrest, five years into the serial murders, replacing the original detective assigned to the case. That was the first time the death count increased per year.

Maybe she was wrong, just hallucinating things. Her star idol in the force couldn't be covering up for the killer. What if he was the killer? Nauseated, she took another look at some of the images of the victims, each one a husk, their organs pushed out from up through the mouth by some huge amount of force or pressure. Linking the hoof prints Delgato confirmed to the unusual nature of Oates' assignment to the case, initial suspicion did seem to land on him. She prayed that the semen sample she turned in came back negative for horse. If it didn't, she could only assume they were dealing with a sexual predator here. She belched a little bile into her mouth at the thought. She would know what the murder weapon was then and it sickened her.

One thing didn't make sense, if it was Oates, why did he suddenly get sloppy tonight and mess up by killing someone out in the woods? The rate of murder only increased once Oates became lead detective over the case. At the ZPD, he'd have access to multiple ways of hiding the evidence for years. Why drop his diligence now? It wasn't until...Judy felt an icy draft flow through the room at the same time she realized what made the frequency of murders increase.

Her eyes scanned over all the different mammals and spied that a bunny was not yet one of them. To top it off, the increase happened at exactly the same time she joined the force. Her mind began spouting hundreds of torrid theories. She couldn't help but wonder that if it was him, the allure of a fellow cop and now colleague detective probably excited Oates regardless of the fact that she was also yet another small female mammal like all the other victims. Was she a harder conquest to tackle? A challenge he was eager to master? Was that why he grew sloppy by being too deeply focused on having her?

She yelped as a large shape slouched onto the divider just beside her. The hulking form of Detective Oates loomed over her, his eyes wandering the screen she was looking at. "You certainly look cute tonight Hopps. What brings you here to the station this late? Weren't you supposed to be at dinner with Wilde?" She could do nothing but stare at Oates, her nose twitching uncontrollably. "Hopps? What's wrong? You seem to have seen a ghost." He asked with a glint in his eye.

Chapter End Notes
The first half of this chapter came together rather quickly. I knew it was about time to start exploring Jack Savage's backstory and it was the perfect opportunity right after a extremely traumatic event that all four bunnies experience to help bond them together in a way they hadn't been previously. My goal with Jack's story was to upend traditional stereotypical expectations of assassins for hire. Jack is a bunny, his roots should be mundane and not fantastical, thus continuing the trend Zootopia set to never judge a book by its cover. I explored a bit into Nala's upbringing and the skills she recently demonstrated but unfortunately, she didn't have much to do in this chapter so she went to sleep! I promise we'll get to her soon and have a spot in the limelight for her in the near future! The second half took more careful planning and it involved my beta reader, Berserker88, to really help me fix the structure of the sequence. It was crafted specifically to finally lead up to the reveal that Detective Oates had been onto Judy this entire time and continue Zootopia's trend of defying expectations and that even star idols one looks up to can be heartless killers. Much thanks to Berserker88 for allowing me to use his two Original Characters: Carla Hyenandez and Jimmy Frost from Born to be Wilde. Check it out! I know they show up late in the story but they already have a integral role to play much later in the narrative. So be ready to learn a lot more about them in the coming chapters!
"Hopps? Is everything all right?" Detective Oates murmured; never taking his eyes off of hers, his nostrils flaring with intensity.

Judy was like a deer caught in headlights. She hadn't heard Oates creep up on her until it was too late. She was totally absorbed in investigating the case that she was completely unaware of her surroundings. Her twitching nose detected a strong whiff of fragranced air spray emanating from him. Her eyes flicked downward to his loose fitting pants, held up by suspenders to see a slightly damp spot between his loins. She couldn't outright accuse him of murder without more proof, but she had little doubt in her mind that it was him now.

Finally finding her voice, she managed to stutter, "D-D-Detective Oates!" She put a paw to her breast to steady her nerves and breathing. Maybe it wasn't a good idea just yet to bring up her theory on the killer to him. As capable as she was, she didn't think she could take down a horse without weapons, especially one who might be well versed in subduing small mammals. She learned her lesson long ago when she confronted Mr. Big that jumping in headfirst isn't the smartest solution. To ward off his penetrating gaze, she continued, "I didn't realize you were still here! I thought it was just me and Raina."

Oates insouciantly shrugged a shoulder before leaning more into the cubicle, denying her precious space. "I realized I had forgotten some papers here at the office that I needed to bring home for work and I saw a light on in here. So I came to investigate." He gestured with a hoof to the open case file quite visible on the screen. "Why are you here Hopps? I see you're poking around the murder investigation that I'm in charge of without authorization."

Circling the conversation back around to Oates's initial questioning, she darted a glance at the screen before looking back up at his imposing figure, her ears down and quivering. "Well I was on my date with Nick and we were having a great time, but then we found this body which matched the method of death of another mammal I had seen killed before my eyes earlier this week. You know, the one where you drove me home from?" Probably best not to immediately tell him she suspected, just go with the story she knew.

Oates raised an eyebrow before dropping to a knee so that he was more on her eye level. He inclined his head at the data glowing before them, "And you think it was the same killer who did all these?" Judy nodded her head forcefully. "Mind if I drive?" He indicated the mouse. After a moment of silence, he reached uncomfortably past her to grip it and began looking through the cases. "What have you found so far on your own investigation? Anything that I probably don't already know?"

Judy edged closer to the far side of her chair, the scent of his musk this close was overwhelming. "I believe there is a pattern to the location of the killings." Oates grunted for her to continue, still scrolling through the report summaries.

What was he playing at? If he was worried about this damning evidence that planted him as a suspect, why continue to keep up this charade and lead her on to divulging what she knew? What would he do if she knew too much? She shook her head to dismiss her thoughts. She still wasn't 100% positive the killer was Oates and it would look bad on her if she falsely accused such a venerated member of the ZPD. She fidgeted with her paws, hoping that Nick would come back soon so she could leave and tackle this dilemma from a safer distance.
Realizing he was still waiting on her to respond, she cleared her throat before pointing out the jam cam footage on the screen. "You probably already know since no arrests have been made for twenty years that the killer is well versed in all the security cameras in Zootopia. Each death has occurred off any known coverage." Oates gave her a sidelong glance and held it as she finished her thought, "Only someone in the ZPD or in city hall would have the knowledge of every known jam cam location."

"That's quite the allegation there Hopps." He whistled impressed. "What other anecdotal evidence have you discovered?"

Her ears popped up at the dismissal of her findings. "Detective Oates," she put an elbow on the desk and brushed his hoof aside to work the mouse, "this isn't some crazy theory. Look, there are no DNA tests or collections gathered from any of the crime scenes. Now I know Wolford, Delgato, and Pennington are no slouches when it comes to working the crime scene and bringing back evidence. So either there is a huge conspiracy in the ZPD covering up for this serial killer, which is extremely unlikely, or there is someone here removing all traces of what they bring back."

"This is all highly irregular Hopps." He said with a firm tone. He turned to face her direction, causing the sudden shift of his snout to be right in front of her nose. She leaned back hard, causing the chair to butt up against the cabinet behind her with a thud. "If you are correct, you would be prompting a full blown investigation of the entire ZPD. That'll ruin Chief Bogo, especially with his tenuous relationship with Mayor Lionheart. Is that what you want?"

Her pride finally getting the better of her judgment, she sat up a bit straighter, facing Oates head on. "What I want is justice served. It doesn't matter if the criminal is a civilian or an officer. They need to be held accountable for their crimes!" She knew she was playing a dangerous game here, goaded the aged stallion on, but she was hoping for some sort of slip up or confirmation that it was him all along.

Assessing her resolve, he switched his attention back to the monitor. "Well as I'm sure you've already gathered, there is literally nothing to link any suspect to these crimes. No prints, no DNA, no witnesses and no camera footage." He finished confidently.

"We discovered some hoof prints and a sample of semen on the body at the crime scene tonight." Judy blurted out, immediately covered her mouth as she did so. She was so caught up in proving Oates that she was onto him that she fell right into his plan in revealing all she knew.

Oates's ears flapped with agitation, his pupils locking onto Judy's. "You found what? Where is it now?" As if on cue, her phone buzzed vociferously on the cool wood of the desk, causing Judy to visibly jerk from the sudden sound of it. Unfazed by the loud interruption, he coolly ordered her, "It's for you Hopps. You should answer it."

Her paws shaking, she reached over to her clutch just past his bicep. He made no attempt to move out of the way or be courteous, his eyes following her as she put a knee on the desk so she could have the extra distance for her arms to extend and grab the small purse. She immediately drew back onto the chair with it and unclipped the top and pulled the phone out, keeping a wary vigil on Oates who regarded her with an unreadable expression.

"H-H-Hopps here." She answered with a wavering tone.

"It's...me...Raina...I...told...you...I...would...have...it...for...you...in...no...time!" The protracted speech of the sloth was interminable to Judy, sitting inches away from what she now positively believed was the killer. His actions were too creepy to ignore.

"Oh, hi!" She said with mock enthusiasm. "What did you find?"
"Where...did...you...say...you...found...this...sample...again?" Raina inquired, actual interest reflected in her voice. "Because...it...matches...the...DNA...profile...of...Detective...Oates."

Judy scrunched her eyes shut as she knew beyond a doubt that Oates has just heard Raina through the phone. She opened them again to see that his demeanor had changed drastically, growing cold and distant. "Thank you so much Raina. You've been a great help." She took another peek at Oates before redirecting her gaze back to the monitor. "Look, you should probably head home right now. You've had a long night." She wanted Raina out of here as fast as possible, because if she didn't escape Oates, Raina would definitely be next.

"You're...welcome...Thanks...for...the...white...mocha...Wilde...is-" Raina began. Judy jolted as Oates calmly took the phone from her paw and tapped it with a hoof finger to end the call. He set it down beside her on the desk and rose back up to his full height, his scrutiny boring holes into her. She could smell a very strong, pungent odor and perceived a noticeable increase in his breathing.

Her eyes roved wildly around the cubicle, looking for potential avenues for escape. With nothing but her strong legs to fight back with and a dress that did nothing to enable freedom of movement, she was in a horrible position to flee. She could try to overpower Oates but she wasn't exactly sure how she'd surprise him enough to do any noticeable damage without him crushing her with his strength. She had to assume that as a career serial killer he studied his victims thoroughly before attempting the murder. He probably knew how to handle a rabbit, especially if he had been stalking her for over a year.

"You're not going to get away with this." Judy stalled, trying to buy herself some time. If what Raina said was true and she had received her white mocha, Nick was back in the building.

"I believe I will Officer Hopps." He intoned softly, menace in his tone.

"You got sloppy!" She pointed out, standing up on her chair to help close the difference in their height. "You got too excited over me tonight and messed up and left a part of your DNA at the crime scene." She was probably giving herself too much credit but she needed to keep him talking.

"Nothing that can't be swept under the rug." He leered, flashing his teeth.

"It's too late. We already have your sample. Chief Bogo is going to hear about this as soon as I leave!" She threatened.

He moved closer to her, his massive bulk now completely in the cubicle with her. The buckle of his pants inches from her petite form, bulging with nauseating desire. "You will do no such thing Hopps. You do anything to implicate me and your career is over."

Unable to take a step back, she could do nothing but stare up into his face. "What are you talking about?"

Oates reached into his large pocket and pulled out his phone. He flipped through a few menus and then turned it around to show her. "There was reports earlier this evening of several more recent bat attacks in Savannah Central to which this bat," he tapped on the screen a few times, "was apprehended in the very act of committing the assaults."

"Rouge..." Judy whispered, recognizing her.

Oates swiped to the next couple images, each of them depicting her outside the Flora and Fauna
talking with Rouge with the ZNN reporter Stinkman beside them. "We have a report by this skunk that you are on friendly terms with this bat and I submitted a tip earlier this morning of you co-conspiring with her in staging more attacks throughout the city with these pictures as proof. Stinkman was more than willing to run the story for tomorrow's papers alongside his interview with you. I told him to hold off unless he hadn't heard from me in the next twelve hours."

"This won't hold. There isn't enough pinning me for collaborating with her for these attacks. You'll still be found out no matter what happens with this news story." Judy reasoned, jabbing a finger up toward his muzzle.

"It may not. Even I'll admit this is a flimsy plan but it will be enough." At a quizzical look from Judy, he expounded, "You see, I know Chief Bogo quite well. You're already on thin ice with him and this will be the last straw in a series of incidents with you that'll force his hand to stand you down for forced migration until they can resolve your publicity issues with the Zootopian public. You'll be off the force for however long it takes for the ZPD to reclaim their public image. In the meantime, I will come find you and you will be mine."

"That's ridiculous!" She decried indignantly, her fury getting the better of her. "I'd arrest you right now if I could. I don't care about my reputation. I care about putting you behind bars!"

A deep guttural laugh erupted from Oates as he placed a heavy hoof on her shoulder, "I'd like to see you try little bunny."

"Get your hooves off me!" She tried to slap it away but he only pressed down upon her harder.

"Hey Carrots? You still here?" Nick called out from the entrance to the large work room.

"Yes, yes I am!" She hollered back.

Oates immediately let go of her and stepped back out, away from the dividers. She collapsed onto the chair, her entire body wracked with shivers. She was so relieved she could cry. Her breath caught in her throat as she noted his hoof hovering near the holstered firearm on his hip. Even if she warned Nick and they tried to take him on, Oates might hurt him to hurt her. This was not a good time to retaliate. They could possibly get wounded and injured far beyond anything they could do to him at this juncture. That was a risk she wasn't willing to take. She would need to bide her time and wait for an opening.

"Oh…Detective Oates, I wasn't aware you were there." Nick said monotonously, beholding the horse as he rounded the bend with two, warm coffee cups in his paws.

His countenance doing a complete reversal, he smiled at Nick before gesticulating to Judy on the chair, "Detective Hopps was just informing me of all the research she's done already on this case. Her skills are quite remarkable."

"Yes." Nick agreed through lidded eyes. He just wanted the horse to go away. "She is my partner after all, valedictorian from the Academy and star jewel of Zootopia now. Remember?" He listed off the praise primarily as a way to remind Oates of who he was dealing with.

The horse bristled at this flippant rib at his memory. "Yes, I'm quite aware of her accomplishments Wilde." Realizing his place, he brought the phone to his ear, dialing the number for Chief Bogo. "I also learned that this happened right near you? The actual killer was within meters of you two?" He asked casually.

Nick made a face as he finished walking up to him, "Yeah, very creepy."
"Judy believes she may have a stalker, do you agree?" Oates pressed.

"Yeah…" Nick hesitated, trying to hand Judy her coffee. He wasn't exactly sure why she was subtly shaking her head no. "That's what she told me." He made a face that meant she needed to clarify why she did not want him to answer.

"That's what I thought." Oates confirmed, before pressing dial on the phone. Judy smacked her forehead with a paw as she brought Nick in close to stand beside her. After a few rings, Bogo picked up, clearly angry at having been awoken. "Yes sir, this is Detective Oates. I have reason to believe the serial killer I have been tracking for years, the Impaler, has picked Detective Hopps as his next target." After some lively words later, Oates nodded his head to no one in particular. "Got it sir, I understand. I'll see to it personally that she has a bodyguard wherever she goes until we can catch this guy. I'll lead the shifts and rotate folks in throughout the week. Thank you sir. Sorry for the trouble. I'll give you the full report in the morning."

He tapped the phone off and dropped it in his pocket before turning to the two of them. "Chief Bogo and I have agreed that until we capture this criminal, you are to be under surveillance 24/7 for your safety. I offered to take the first watch until tomorrow where he and I will go over a shift schedule to keep you safe."

Judy practically sputtered, unable to form words at this new development. Nick stepped forward, placing a paw to his chest. "Well, I'm a cop too and her best friend. I can just as easily watch over her tonight to make sure she's protected."

Oates shook his head, "Negative Wilde. Our killer is a large mammal that can take down smaller prey with ease." At Nick's open mouth to rebut, Oates surged ahead, talking over him. "I do not doubt your prowess in combat, but I'm afraid it won't be enough. If anything affects one of our own, it affects us all. We need to band together to protect Hopps."

"I'm pretty sure she can take care of herself." Nick defended, wrapping an arm around Judy, who proceeded to dig herself into his side with fervor.

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Oates raised an objecting hoof, "You can take that argument up with the chief tomorrow. Until that time, I am driving you two home." He gave Judy a knowing stare.

Nick shot a curious look at Oates. The horse was never the one to be so hospitable like that. True, it was no secret that he thought fondly of Judy but to extend the same caliber of friendship to him was rather unsettling. "I guess." He finally consented.

"Splendid!" Oates boomed, slapping a hoof to his thigh. "Grab your coffee and affects and let's go. Looks like you could need some cleaning up Hopps. The sooner we get you home, the better." He motioned to the monitor on their desk, "That can wait until tomorrow. We'll get this all sorted out then. Follow me."

"Nick," Judy hissed under her breath as Oates stepped aside to allow them through. "Please don't leave me alone tonight!" She gripped his shirt violently.

"Why would I do that?" Nick said nonplussed. "We sleep together, it's not like I hold that much favoritism for my usual bridge that I'd want to sleep back under the stars this evening." He stole a glance at the waiting Oates before speaking in a hush, "Besides, I'd love to try again what we did tonight." He practically licked his lips.

"That is probably inappropriate Wilde." Oates intervened, his hearing quite keen. "I don't think you'd want a voyeur in your room."
"I…um…what?" Nick tried to recoup from the startle Oates just gave them. "I'm not exactly sure what you are talking about."

The horse smirked at the fox, "Please Wilde, I can smell you all over her. It is no secret that you two are dating. With a scent like that, one can only imagine how the night went." He exhaled loudly, as if remembering fond days of yore, "But that's beside the point, as part of her protection, I am to remain with her at all times even while she sleeps to ensure she stays safe."

Judy's breath began to quicken. "You're…staying in my room?" Her mind frantically bubbled, trying in vain to figure out a way she could slip to Nick the true danger of Oates. The horse was unwilling now to give her a moment's peace, even right in front of her partner.

He nickered, laughing as if that fact was completely obvious. "Of course! I would be beside myself if I let any harm come to you…or Wilde tonight under my watch!"

Nick scratched the back of his head; this night was getting increasingly weird. "Okay, scratch that idea Carrots. Lead the way then."

"Don't worry about a thing Hopps." Oates consoled, "We'll make sure nothing happens to you. Right Wilde?"

"Of course!" He grinned, with a swish of his tail.

Judy wanted to bang her head on the desk. Why was Nick being so dense right now? She didn't know how, but she needed to stick to him all night. Maybe find an opening to let him know about Oates. If she even let Nick fall asleep tonight under the 'watchful' care of Oates, they may not have a tomorrow to wake up to.

"So was it like this when you last were here?" Judy asked apprehensively.

"I'm not really sure. I was rather young when my father moved us from here to the current Zootopia." Dawn answered, smoothing down her plaid shirt complete with jeans that they had managed to procure for her prior to them leaving the city.

"Great, we follow a lead that ends up with no significant returns." Nick snarked, crossing his arms and glaring at the diminutive sheep. "How old were you again when you lived here?"

"I didn't say." She rebutted, stepping forward beside Judy to look up. Nick snapped his teeth but held his tongue.

Before them was a huge, smooth, concrete wall that extended for miles to the left and right; they could only assume that it curved and extended around the entirety of the city. They could just barely see the rising spires of the twisting skyscrapers peeking out beyond. Perched high up were several guards of varying predatory species, each equipped with an automatic weapon. They hadn't yet spotted them since they were at the edge of the tree line, but the moment they step out into the open field, they'd be seen for sure.

They had to stop the train a good distance back when the tracks literally ended with a rockslide that had occurred across the rails. They had hoofed it the rest of the way for the past few days to the city limits. Like the Zootopia they knew, this one was also built beside a lake, probably the watering hole in ages past. The tracks curved out over the water and into a tunnel built in the wall, but it was too exposed and neither Judy nor Nick liked the prospect. So instead they skirted the water to the far side where there were indeed several fortified entrances accessible by land.
"You think they're friendly?" Judy pointed up at the patrolling guards hopefully, knowing in her heart it probably wasn't the case.

"Highly doubtful Carrots." Nick commented. "In fact, I think they'd just as soon as shoot us than give us the benefit of the doubt."

Dawn gave a look of disgust before conceding, "I do have to agree with him here." She let her gaze follow the upper rampart down the long distance. "This seems to be the only opening available on foot. I don't think we have much of a choice but there is simply no cover at all between us and the entrance!"

Judy narrowed her eyes as she surveyed the scene some more. After a moment's decision, she began walking out into the high grass of the open field. Nick susurrated harshly, "Carrots! What do you think you're doing?"

She plopped her paws onto her hips before turning around to scowl at him, "I'm going up there to see if they'll let us in!"

In a heartbeat, both Dawn and Nick were dragging Judy back into the cover of the trees by her arms. "Are you insane?" Dawn squealed. "If they find you, they're going to want to know who else is out here and they'll find us for sure!"

Judy yanked her limbs away from their grip, "Fine then. What do you suggest we do?"

Nick scrunched his nose and clipped it firmly between his thumb and forefinger. "For one, this has gone on long enough. What are we even doing out here again Carrots? Why did we need to come here at all?"

Judy flapped a paw in Dawn's direction, "You heard Bellwether. This place...this failed Zootopia was the last known location of the bats before they immigrated to our Zootopia. Here, they were contained for a time before escaping."

"Or set free." Nick growled, shifting his eyes to the ewe.

She put her hooves up to ward off his ire, "Don't look at me! I was busy plotting to take over as Mayor and bring all the predators under control for my master plan, remember?" Nick's upper lip curled at her facetious attitude.

Judy placed a paw on his muzzle and brought his focus back on her, "Where were the bats this entire time? They could have migrated to our city long before now and taken over, if what Dawn says is true. Yet they didn't. Now they're suddenly appearing out of nowhere, settling into our Zootopia, attacking civilians and they just now bombed the market towers. I was a blind fool to have ignored the warning signs for this long, but I can't stand by and let them ruin our city further. We need to know why they suddenly started migrating, what happened here and how were they contained so that they couldn't hurt anybody." She turned her head to look at the wall once more. "I have no other leads Nick. If this is where Dawn says she has heard of the bats living last, then I have to take whatever trail I can and follow it."

"I just find it astonishing that she, of all people, would have knowledge of this." Nick returned his gaze back onto the traitorous sheep.

Dawn placed a hoof to her breast in exaggerated shock, "Well I'm not the only one who knows of this place. There are plenty others in high positions of authority who came from here at one point or another." Her expression turned vile as she gave a pointed look to Judy.
Judy rubbed a paw along Nick's arm, "You going to be okay coming back here?" She was concerned for him. His mother divulged that she had conceived and bore Nick while still living in this forgotten Zootopia.

Nick shrugged his shoulders before casually dismissing the concern, "I'll be fine Carrots. I don't really have many memories of this place anyway. If anything, it'll be an entirely new experience to me."

Dawn's eyes flitted back and forth between the two a few moments before piping up, "So, what do you propose we do about getting in?"

"Well, do we have a plan of where to go and what to do to find said information on these bats?" Nick queried, knowing full well what the answer was.

Picking up on the conversation prior, Dawn gestured to Nick, "Like you, I also migrated to our Zootopia when I was at a young age. I only know as much as I gleaned from my father before he passed as well as from the Museum of Natural History."

Nick practically face-palmed, "So we know next to nothing about what the situation is on the other side of that wall."

"We're both police officers. That should account for something, right?" Judy offered.

"No, I'm a police officer right now." Nick stated, indicating his uniform, now slightly muddy from the trek through the woods. He then pointed at Judy, "You are a civilian for all intents and purposes based on your clothes. If they have any sort of internet here and an accompanying police department with access to the new Zootopia ZPD files, they'd discover that you are suspended by Chief Bogo and that Bellwether here is a known criminal. We're already on a slippery slope."

With a self-satisfied smirk, Dawn pushed up on her angled glasses with a hoof, "Weren't you a criminal yourself before all of this?" She inclined her head toward the uniform.

"I was a hustler and there is a difference." Nick barked.

"Only a criminal would justify a difference." She retorted.

"Except I didn't put others into situations where they would be killed!" He snarled, his claws suddenly popping out of his paws.

Judy was immediately upon him, pressing him away from the sheep, who looked a bit startled she got that severe a reaction out of him. "Nick! Calm down! Fighting amongst each other isn't going to help us solve anything!"

Talking over Judy with a small jitter in her voice, Dawn rejoined, "Well, at least I own my misdeeds. I don't claim to be anything other than what I am!"

"Urgh! Both of you stop it right now before I kick you both in the face!" Judy was frustrated, tired, angry and hungry all at once. She was also beginning to feel the first glimmers of a migraine coming on and their bickering was dragging on her nerves. Her threat managed to quell the situation with the two of them not looking at each other. "Okay, unless someone has a better idea, I'm going to go right up there and asked to be let in. I don't think they'd deny visitors into the city right? Maybe we can say we're tourists?"

"Not sure that's plausible." He stalked over to the last few trees before the bare plain. He pointed up at the guards. "Our ZPD consists of both predator and prey alike, mainly large mammals but still a
good mix of the two. Do you see any prey up there at all?" He didn't even turn to see a shake of their heads. "No, because there aren't any. So without knowing a single thing about the situation inside the city, I can only assume that predators are in power here." He turned around to them, his tail rustling, "Which means you two may very well be in danger just by being what you are."

"So do we send you in alone?" Judy suggested, not really liking the idea.

"No, I wouldn't have the faintest clue what to do on the other side. I need you to watch my back Carrots and I need her," stabbing a finger in the ewe's direction, "to guide me where to go next."

"I can't say exactly where to go just yet but if I see the layout of the city, I may know where we could possibly find the information we seek." Dawn clarified.

Nick exhaled loudly before pulling out two pairs of cuffs. "The best idea I got is to bring you in as prisoners."

Judy stood aghast, "How does that make any sense?"

Much to his chagrin, Nick had to admit Dawn had a point, "Bellwether said it herself. Each failed Zootopia had a method of control to placate the predator population within the city. We can only assume that was true here." He paused, thinking of his mother and the permanent marking around her neck. "Since we see nobody but free roaming predators up there, it could be safe to assume that prey do not have it so nice anymore. A bit of a long stretch of reasoning, I'll admit, but it might be safer to bring you two in as prisoners, especially with my uniform selling the idea so we can get to their local ZPD station and do the research we need."

"That actually isn't half bad." Dawn remarked with what almost seemed like respect.

"Once we get in, I can un-cuff you both and we do what we need to do." Nick finished.

Judy was still uneasy about the whole plan. She really didn't like lying. "Fine Nick. I trust you." She said at last, presenting her paws.

"Great! Now let me get these on you ladies." He ribbed, snapping the links shut around Judy's wrists. He turned to Dawn and began applying them to her outstretched hooves. "I have honestly wanted to do this for a while now."

"Ha ha, get your gloating in while you can." Dawn muttered with vitriol.

Nick took a deep breath before taking an arm in each paw, "Just let me do all the talking. You try to speak out of turn and it'll ruin the whole con."

"Just like one of your hustles?" Judy probed.

Nick rolled his eyes, "More like the biggest hustle of my life right now."

She smiled at him. "You'll do great Nick."

Steadying his nerves, with each female in hand, he pushed them forward out into the open. Within seconds he could see movement up above and multiple shouts being carried on the wind. A smattering of bullets was fired, kicking up the dirt just meters ahead of them. They immediately stopped walking as a white fox slinked up to the edge of the parapet. Looking down upon them, she began shouting in an unknown, silvery language.

"Whoa there!" Nick hollered. "I'm a police officer! I found these two sneaking around trying to find
a way into the city! I'm needing to be let in so I can deliver them straight to prison!"

Switching tongues, the fox shouted back down at him, "Where is the rest of your unit?"

Nick's mind raced as he decided that adding more names to the mix would not bolster his case much and might make his story that much harder to keep straight. "They're all dead." He said finally. "I managed to stop these two before they could get away!"

"That seems a bit drastic." Judy whispered from the corner of her mouth.

"Quiet!" He hissed. "They don't suspect anything yet!"

The fox regarded the trio before signaling one of her colleagues, "Let them in. I shall meet you down there posthaste. Do not attempt to leave."

Proceeding forward, the three waited for several minutes before the inner steel doors creaked open. Several wolves and a tiger could be seen pressing hard against the metal to propel them into position. With a few flicks of their gun barrels, they herded Nick, Judy and Dawn into the dim tunnel before ushering them off into a side room. Inside the barren antechamber was a wooden table and two chairs larger than they could comfortable reach. Picking them up off the ground, the nearest tiger slammed Judy and Dawn a bit harder than intended onto the seat. He pressed a strong hand on Nick's back to stand to the side by the wall.

The lone, caged light above casted webbed shadows across the room as they waited for the white fox to finally greet them; at length, she entered the room with a flourish. Several of the wolves bowed their head in acknowledgment of her position. Even Nick was curious of this vixen who commanded such power where in the Zootopia he knew, foxes were no better than the dirt on the ground.

Her commanding, cobalt eyes locked onto Nick's as he gulped. He seriously underestimated the entire situation. She wore a brown tactical uniform with a matching belt. A strap crossed diagonally across the chest and held a rather imposing firearm on her back. He could only guess the caliber but it looked large enough to rip through several small mammals with a single shot. Her ease of posture dictated a sense of familiarity with the weapon, a notion he did not want to test.

With a small flutter of her tail, she motioned to the oversized chairs, "Shall we conduct negotiations for the prisoners Officer…" She led the question.

Nick skimmed through his options. On one hand, using his real name might incriminate him if for some insane reason they knew of his record, a complete city removed. On the other, he was semi-positive that he was an unknown, a nobody, in their Zootopia and so thus revealing his name may not blow their cover. The only issue is that if he did use a false name, he'd have to keep track of what he used for the duration of their stay here and he had no idea how long that would be.

Recognizing his delay might cost them, he decided it would do little harm to use his name, "Wilde." He answered at last. "Nick Wilde."

The vixen gave a quick glance to several of her men standing ready. Most wouldn't have caught the subtle movement but Nick latched onto it swiftly. She smiled warmly at him, "Officer Wilde…please do seat yourself. You may call me Skye."

He bowed his head at her salutation before leaping up onto the chair alongside Dawn and Judy, each looking inquisitively at the sultry vixen. She effortlessly pranced onto her seat and stood up to look at Nick from across the table. It was a rather awkward distance and seemed highly inconvenient for the discussion they would be having. Skye seemed unfazed at the arrangement and simply leaned
forward to clasp her paws together.

"You seem a long way from home cowboy." She soothed, setting Nick a bit on edge. She seemed a bit too inviting. By all other visual stimuli, they were clearly not welcome and were highly distrusted. The fox continued as if nothing was wrong, "So what precinct are you from? I don't recognize that specific uniform. It's familiar yet different than what we have here."

Nick almost winced. Skye blew through his entire plan of pretending they were part of an unknown, newly formed sect of ZPD. Her last sentence basically implied that she was aware they weren't from the city at all, but he couldn't be absolutely positive on this. He drifted his gaze around to the daunting collection of wolves, tigers and even a brown bear shifting restlessly along the perimeter of the room. None looked even remotely like police officers, let alone the law enforcement for this city. If anything, they appeared to be more like insurgent commandos.

"Oh this?" He nipped at a piece of his blouse with two fingers before letting go, casually trying to play it cool. "This is the new uniform for all Precinct 1 officers."

She raised an eyebrow at his statement. "Precinct 1, huh?" She flexed her fingers but kept them interlocked. "Granted, I am not a part of the police department myself so I'm a bit sketchy on all their divisions and sectors, but I must say I have not heard of this precinct before."

"Well, it's relatively new. It just got instated not even a few weeks ago." Nick lied blatantly, hoping he looked calm and suave despite his heart racing a marathon.

She gestured with her chin at Judy and Dawn, "Your precinct do covert ops outside the city walls?"

He followed her scrutiny to the two females behind him, "Why yes, yes we do. You know, keeping the whole perimeter of the city safe from low-life brigands such as these stupid villains."

"Now wait just a minute…" Judy began, offended at the insult.

"Silence!" Nick backpawed her, taking care not to hit her anywhere but on the cheek, it looked convincing at least. "You will not speak unless spoken to wretch!" He swiftly turned to Dawn and this time cupped a paw and gave her a good slap across the face, a far cry harder than the hit he delivered to Judy. He felt extremely warm and fuzzy at doing that.

The ewe put a hoof to her cheek, glowering at him. "What was that for? I didn't say anything!"

"You just did!" He stuck a claw at her, hovering inches from her nostrils. Satisfied that they would talk no more, he pressed down his shirt and straightened the tie. "My apologies Skye, sometimes they just need to know who the law is around here."

None of them looked the least bit concerned over what had transpired. If anything, Skye looked even less engrossed than before. "None taken, Officer Wilde. We in Zootopia know when to employ lethal force and when to use a firm hand when dealing with trouble makers." She waved a paw off in their direction. "Do you have a plan or need any assistance regarding these two prisoners? After all, they did manage to kill all of your squad with seemingly not a scratch on them, right?"

She was good, Nick had to admit. She was inconspicuously poking holes through his story with the greatest of ease. He had completely forgotten that he had mentioned his 'unit' was all deceased. It did seem to stretch the imagination that he alone could have apprehended Dawn and Judy, unassuming in presence or not.

"Er…yeah, only because they got the jump on us. One of my buddies triggered a tripwire which set off several mines they had laid down. I was lucky to even be alive to catch these two." He boasted,
thinking it sounded genuine.

"Sounds like a thrilling story, but I do worry about your comrades." She leaned forward, "It must have been heartbreaking to leave their mangled corpses behind while you, alone, trudged here with these two. Do you have a rough location of where they died so we may procure them and give them a proper burial?"

He put a paw to his neck, his eyes darting to the tabletop, scratching a sudden itch on his skin. "Yeah, it was pretty rough." He snapped his fingers suddenly. "Tell you what, let me get these two down to the station and then I'll come back and show you where they are. We can go get them together."

Skye assessed him before finally relenting, "Very well. We will send you an escort to the city center." She beckoned her bear to lumber over. "Can you see to it Officer Wilde and his two charges get safely to the ZPD?"

"Yes Ma'am!" He saluted, with his paw in a fist across his chest.

This wasn't exactly the outcome he had been hoping for, but once inside the city they might find a chance of ditching the large beast and disappear into the crowd. He flashed a toothy grin at her, "That is most gracious of you. Thanks for all your help."

She bowed her head, "Don't mention it. I expect to see you soon, we can't tarry that long. Your squadmates are still out there."

Nick waved before hopping down off the chair, assisting both Dawn and Judy down. "Understood. I'll be back!"

Giving a showy shove to the two of them, he began marshaling them toward the exit. Judy glanced back to see Skye flick her wrist at the three of them, her attention solely on one of her wolf guards. "Nick, watch out!" Judy screamed before one of the wolves slammed the butt of his rifle into the back of his head.

Nick fell forward in a heap, completely comatose. Dawn screamed as she began scrambling toward the door but was batted off to the side like a ragdoll. The bear was upon her in an instant, snarling in her face, pressing his paw into her chest. Galvanized into action, Judy bounded in a backwards somersault over a tiger who had pounced onto her previous location. She landed onto his head before kicking off of his skull, ramming his chin into the concrete floor, drawing blood.

Even with her paws cuffed, Judy was a seasoned fighter and began bounding around the room, thrashing her hind legs out at her attackers. She succeeded in knocking several of their weapons out of their hands, one ricocheting a bullet as it fired around the room. It glanced off a wolf's snout, causing him to sink to his knees clutching his bleeding nose. These predators were clearly not as highly trained as their appearance would suggest.

She methodically worked her way around the room, breaking jaws with her feet and tripping larger predators up by scooting between their legs. Her pattern looked almost haphazard in nature to an outsider, but she was gunning straight for Skye. The vixen was well prepared and saw through her feint. Judy switched direction in mid-jump to launch herself at the white fox.

Her eyes dilated as she saw a gun aimed straight at her face. She was committed and could not divert her momentum. A flash of the barrel and a sharp sting of pain lanced through the side of her neck. The impact stalled her velocity and she crumbled to the ground just inches away from Skye's feet. She could immediately feel the effects of the tranquilizer that she had been grazed by.
Without remorse, Skye ordered her men, "Bag and tag these two. Take them directly to James. He'll want to question them."

"What about him? Officer Wilde?" The wolf with the bleeding nose growled. He wanted nothing more than to rip into one of them, he didn't care which.

She thought on it for a moment, "I'm not sure yet. I probably would hold off on him. Let's see how this plays out with the other two."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a long time to write, not necessarily for the first half but for the second. For one, I personally find a hard time trying to write for Dawn Bellwether, something about her character tends to send me into a writer's block. Furthermore, the flow of events went through many iterations and it ultimately ended up that I needed to have Skye actually make her appearance here rather than in chapter 19 like originally planned. It would have been far less exciting and interesting for the reader if I just had two random guards interrogate Nick, I needed someone who was a canon-scrapped character with some fan base familiarity to make the scene work. The first half was written in a evening, it was quite easy and planned out in advance how it would flow, beat for beat. With the help of my second beta reader, Maxmar, I adjusted the ending to make better sense in the context of Oates's motives. Knowing that Judy realizing he's the murderer, he wouldn't let her out of his sight for a moment. All sexual predatory tactics that he exudes were researched and true to life to how he interacted with Judy here. Sometimes the truth is more frightening than fiction. So off of one cliffhanger and onto another!
Chapter 19: Thicker Than Water

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Judy was so tense she could barely keep still. Locked in her seatbelt, Detective Oates driving a police cruiser back to her apartment, she felt trapped in a cage; even though Nick fit that description better. He had offered to hop in the back of the vehicle behind the mesh bars where suspects would sit when being transported. She knew Nick suspected something might be amiss but she was positive he wasn't quite connecting the dots that the source of her agitation was the murderous horse beside her.

"So Judy," Oates began calmly, casually resting a hoof on the butt of the gun on his hip holster as he drove with the other on the wheel. "I know this is going to be a hard time for you in the coming weeks, but I promise nothing will happen to you while I'm on watch." He sighed. "Bogo and I will have to go over the shifts tomorrow and see who will cover when I have to hit the hay."

"I am still here." Nick reminded from the back. "As creepy as it is, you are more than welcome to stand guard over our sleep during the nights while I watch over Carrots during the day. Although I'd prefer you do so from outside the door." He added with emphasis.

Oates snorted, "Carrots? How many times must I tell you that you will call Detective Hopps by her proper title?!"

"It's okay Oates. I'm used to it." Judy reassured, trying to keep the old stallion distracted.

"I for one wouldn't tolerate such fragrant disregard for my position. It's a wonder you do Hopps." He neighed crossly.

Judy bit her lower lip with her two front teeth. Both of them knew he was putting up an act for Nick. All Oates needed was to get them to her apartment, have Nick either fall asleep or forcefully knocked out and he'd kill them both. Her neighbors, Bucky and Pronk, would probably not bat an eye over the unusual noises coming from her room and would be no help. If they wanted to survive this night or at the least come out unscathed, they would need to escape prior to Oates reaching the Grand Pangolin Arms and hopefully find an opportunity to arrest him in the process.

As if to rub it in further, Nick egged the horse on, "Well of course she puts up with it. It's called a term of endearment. Maybe you've heard of it? Like calling your wife 'dear' or me calling you 'best ride of my life.'"

Oates slammed the brakes hard at the oncoming red light just ahead. Ignoring the intersection, he jerked his head around to glare at Nick through the mesh. "I have had just about enough of your heckling Wilde! I could have you suspended without pay if not arrested if I report this to Bogo!"

"On what grounds, hurting your feelings?" He said open-mouthed in mock surprise.

"On conduct unbecoming an officer and harassment!" A malevolent grin creased his features. "That's right. I, too, was a valedictorian like Detective Hopps here. I know the law inside and out to get you put away for good if I so chose."

"Alright then apple chucker. Who else is going to take on my role in the bat case?" Nick leaned back, taking a long, slow slurp from his coffee cup, causing Oates's ears to twitch irritably. "Bogo clearly won't assign you since you seem to be knee deep in this serial murder case that you haven't solved in decades and he may just reassign Judy from these bat attacks. We're already spread thin as
it is, even asking other precincts to pick up the slack. There is literally no one else to tap. Oh yeah, that's right…I pay attention too."

A flicker of movement caught Oates's eye as he refocused his attention on Judy, hoof clicking on his gun. She quickly moved back to where she was a few feet away in the seat. She had used the momentary diversion to try and get close enough to snag his weapon. He was too ardently aware of his surroundings. She weighed the option of simply going on an all-out assault against Oates in the front cabin but she'd lack the assistance of Nick and she didn't trust that there would be enough space to oumaneuver him. Now was still not the time to strike.

His hazel eyes locked on Judy's, his suspicions stirred. Flustered yet still astute to his false act, he carried on the existing conversation. "I'm sure I can pull some strings with Bogo and ensure she keeps her position on the case. He and I go way back." He chuckled, pressing down on the gas pedal as the light turned green.

"That won't be necessary." Judy commented, a semblance of a plan forming in her mind. With a grunt from Oates, she clarified, "You see, Nick and I are a team, partners. If he goes, then I go."

"Although I do appreciate the sentiment Carrots, I think I can defend myself." Nick began.

Ignoring him, she pressed with her idea. "In fact, we're a bit more than partners. One could say we're lovers now."

"What now?" Nick sputtered from the back compartment, his calm shaken in mid-sip.

"Hopps, as much as I'm…happy for you two," she could see him flex his hoof fingers around the wheel, "I don't think this is all that—"

"After tonight, I don't think I could be anything but amorous with him." Her heart was thumping fast and she felt her idea was completely nuts, but if Oates was as turned on by her as she suspected he was then her plan could very well work.

"Carrots?" Nick queried from the back. "What are you—"

"I may have to go on the pill after tonight. Otherwise I may not be able to control myself when I'm around him." Judy tried her best to fake a giggle, hoping it sounded less nervous than she felt.

"Okay, Judy…I know you think pretty highly of me but I don't think we need to tell everyone our business with—" Nick was completely baffled now. Of all the mammals he didn't want to gossip about their love life to, it was Detective Oates.

Judy's eyes began tracking the individual street lamp posts as they zipped past the windows. If she was going to do this, she might as well go for broke. All she had to lose was her life. "The smell of his musk all on me, the warmth of his body pressing up against mine," She stretched out her legs alluringly, curling her toes, ensuring that Oates was visibly aware of her movements. "It is something I can't begin to describe."

"You just went from playfully jesting with me to outright crazy Judy." Nick admonished, setting his cup into the holder in the door. "I have heard of the horniness of rabbits before but if laying you out one time was going to turn you into a nympho, I might have thought it through some more."

A bit irked as his speciest comment, her target was Oates and she could see it was getting to him. The fact he hadn't stopped her was one indicator but his body language sealed the deal. He was white knuckled on the wheel, his breath coming in short gasps and his eyes staring straight ahead. It was unclear if he wasn't looking at her because he was embarrassed, which she highly doubted, or
because he didn't want Nick to see his perverse lust as he gawked at her.

She now began to count the intervals in seconds between lamp posts, a paw hovering over the buckle of her seatbelt. Her other paw began to flow up and down her ears, caressing them in a manner she hoped was enticing. "The feeling of his knot deep inside of me, spreading me so wide, it felt more than I could bear. He was just so big!" She tried her best not to lean back in horror as she could see a large tent pole bulging the detective's pants outwardly.

"You know what? You're right hayloft." Nick said sardonically. "She does deserve respect of her station. You can take Detective Heat Season home. Please stop the car, I am walking." Nick requested, genuinely appalled at Judy's actions. "I thought I knew you Carrots." He said with a shake of his head.

Taking his hoof off the gun, Oates twisted his torso to look back at Nick with a hoof finger pointed, "You will let Hopps finish her story Wilde!" His composure breaking down, beads of sweat staining his white collared shirt beneath the armpits, even Nick could see the weird gleam in the stallion's eyes.

"What the heck Oates?!" Nick yelled, beginning to unbuckle his belt.

Judy saw the opening and took it. With a press of her paw, the belt unzipped back into its holder; she quickly scrambled onto all fours within inches from Oates's bulky legs with her stomach facing up. She discerned that he had detected something was awry and was bringing his entire arm down to smother her. Judging the angle of her kick, timing it with the internal count she had kept for the lamp posts, she surged upwards with hind paws first into the wheel.

The sheer force of the impact jerked the steering wheel hard to the right, overriding any course correction Oates tried to employ. The cruiser careened into the nearest lamp post flanking the street, crashing into the thick metal with a cacophonous boom. Judy's body went flying forward toward the dash board as the passenger airbag deployed instantaneously. It clipped her upper torso enough to slow her down but the momentum of her legs pirouetting her body, slapping her head up against the center radio before crumpling to the floor below the level of the seats.

A shout was heard from the back as Nick's seatbelt grew taut from the sudden shift in velocity. The driver's airbag deployed, catching Oates in the neck, his muzzle crunching up against the top of the wheel. He made a rather odd, whinny sound before slouching to the side, unconscious. There was utter silence in the car as the sounds of the neighborhood began to awaken in the early morning hours, residents alerted by the sudden accident.

Nick was the first to wake up and realize what had happened. "Judy? Judy!" He cried, the situation finally dawning on him. He untangled himself from the belt and stood up in the seat, banging on the barrier loudly. "Judy, wake up! Wake up!"

It was several minutes before she roused, looking dazed and unsure of where she was. She gazed down at her arms and noticed several severe bruises beneath the fur and could feel something wet trickling down the side of her face. She looked up at Nick pounding on the barrier, "What happened?" She mumbled.

"What happened?!" He said aghast, "You went completely insane and got us into an accident!"

"Dumb fox." She grumbled, heaving herself back up onto the seat. She cast a wary glance over in the direction of the comatose horse. "I tried many times to signal you that Oates was the serial killer and you weren't picking up on any of it you dense oaf!"
His pupils dilated with surprise, "Oates is…the Impaler?"

Judy limped over to the door and unlocked the car doors, allowing Nick a way out of the back. He hopped out and helped her down to the pavement. She winced as her paws touched the ground, feeling the ache in her ribs from where the airbag hit her. She was going to be feeling that the next time she woke up after a full night's rest.

"Yes and if you weren't so engrossed in your coffee, you would have seen all the obvious signals I was giving you about it!" She chided.

He rolled his eyes, "Well I'm sorry Carrots. I can't really decipher meaningful eye glances, but I am quite good at paw language."

"Yeah, and I can't understand that gibberish." She groaned. She chanced another look back into the cruiser. "We need to get away from the vehicle in case he wakes up. We need to call him in and keep watch to make sure he doesn't…oh crap!" She swore loudly, "He still has his gun!"

"Way ahead of you Carrots!" He said, putting a paw up to stay her initiative. "I'll go grab it for you."

Nick climbed into the cruiser and scampered across the large seat over to Oates's holster. He unclasped the button before lifting the hilt guard and withdrew the rather large gun from its sheath. Oates moved slightly but remained undisturbed. With heart still in throat, he slipped out and sprinted across the street to where Judy was trying in vain to get a phone call out.

"Soggy lettuce leaves!" She cursed, scowling at her phone which had multiple cracks permeating its surface. She stabbed her fingers on the numbers again to place the call. After a few moments of indecision, the device finally decided to ring. "Oh thank goodness!" She exhaled with relief.

"Who are you calling?" Nick asked, resituating the weapon in his arms. It was quite heavy and clearly not made for smaller mammals.

She waved a paw at him as the person on the other end picked up. "Yes, Chief Bogo? It's Judy Hopps." A pause. "Yes, Oates was lying to you all along. He is the Impaler. He's been covering up for himself for decades right under our noses! I will have all the proof for you when you get to the station. Yes, I'll meet you there now if I have to." More excited tones. "Oates? He's currently passed out in one of our ZPD vehicles. No he isn't restrained. Yes, assistance would be much obliged." She smiled warmly at a comment Bogo had made. "Thank you sir, I'm safe. We finally caught him!"

After a few more parting words, she clicked off the phone. Nick went to go ask what the chief said but was diverted when both heard the driver door clatter open, a disheveled Oates sprawling out onto the street. "Oates! Stop right there!" Nick called out, paw instinctively going to his hip, stopping short when he remembered he was in civilian clothes and did not have his personal weapon.

Oates brayed angrily, his nostrils leaking blood with each snort. Swinging his head, tossing his mane, he galloped down the street before swerving into a side alley to lose them. His gait perceptibly hindered by the mangled, front-left hoof that was on the steering wheel at the moment of impact. Nick seethed. He dropped the gun, knowing it was far too unwieldy for him to get a good shot, and began tearing down the road after him.

"Nick stop! I can't…" Judy whimpered.

He skidded to a halt and swiveled around to see Judy hobbling herself, an arm around her midsection to contain the pain brought on by her labored breathing. He expeditiously circled back to pick her up and carry her over to the vehicle before setting her into the passenger seat. They could faintly hear
the sirens off in the distance getting closer by the second.

"We shouldn't go back to your apartment." Nick suggested.

She nodded glumly, "He knows where it is anyway. It's not safe there anymore."

He turned to the red and blue illuminations fanning across the high rise buildings as more and more lights turned on in the windows above them. "So where do you think we can stay? I don't think buffalo butt can spare a bed or two to bunk down in."

She smiled softly, "I think Carla and Jimmy might be able to help."

Nick squeezed his eyes tight in irritation. "How did I know you were going to mention them?"

Smacking his arm softly, she rebuked, "They are our friends and fellow colleagues Nick. I'm pretty sure they'd be willing to hold us up for a time until we capture Oates."

"No doubt. It's Carla I'm concerned about." She tossed him a look. "Hey, we both know she doesn't like me, so it is going to be awkward." Shaking his head, he viewed the looming cop cars racing down the lane. "So what made you go all crazy horny on us in the car? Was it a ploy? I was secretly hoping it was."

Bowing her head in assent, she confirmed it, "Like I'd really find Oates that attractive Nick...did you honestly believe that?"

He raised his shoulders, "I've seen weirder things happen!"

Popping him roughly on the arm, causing him to tenderly massage it, she explained, "Well after reading about how he basically rapes his victims to death, I figured he has some sick fascination with small mammals. I used that to my advantage to distract him enough so I could knock him out with the crash. Knowing you were buckled in, you were safe, so all I had to worry about was my air bag to save me."

"Sly bunny." He enfolded her into an embrace as he kissed the top of her forehead. "I'm just glad you are safe."

He groaned as he collapsed into the bed of the truck, bushed from a full day's work. He rolled over spread eagle save for the diminutive bunny beside him denying him the pleasure of extending out fully. She thoughtfully brought a comforter with her which she happily draped over to protect them from the oncoming chill of the night. His eyes scanned the innumerable blanket of stars surrounding them above and took a deep breath of the fresh scent of the fields.

"I won't lie Carrots," Nick said wearily, "working on the farm is exhausting. I don't think this sort of life is for me." He shook out his right paw of any extraneous beads of dirt that stubbornly clung to his fur. "And digging around in the ground is not my idea of a good time, but I will admit that I feel good after all that work I did today."

Judy nudged him playfully under the cover, "See? I told you that you'd feel better about yourself after spending some honest to goodness time out on the farm!"

"It is certainly a once in a lifetime experience, that's for sure." He grinned. "A complete ten out of ten, would do so again!"

"Oh stop!" She grabbed a fistful of the blanket and smacked his face with it before pulling it back
over herself to keep warm. "I know this is vastly different than any work you're used to but I find it comforting and fulfilling."

"More fulfilling than your job as a police officer?" He ribbed.

Her eyes rolled, "You know what I mean Nick. I was raised doing this sort of work so it is no big deal to me. I can slip right back into it, almost like a second skin."

"Aren't you the talented one?" Nick teased.

"Oh and I'm sure you felt like a natural when you did one of your hustles? I bet you'd feel right at home if you were to pull one off today." She stabbed a finger up from beneath the covers. "Don't even think about trying to do a hustle on my watch though mister! I won't have it!"

"And what would you do if I did Ms. Police Officer?" He mocked in kind.

"I'd have no recourse but to arrest you, even if you are a good friend!" She smiled, a bit of her teeth shining through.

"Don't tempt me." He simpered.

"Har har." She derided lightheartedly. Her expression grew thoughtful suddenly. "Although I do want to say thank you Nick."

"Hmmm?" He whispered. "For what?"

Judy looked away, her lavender eyes soaking in the enormity of the night sky. "For accompanying me to my home; I know you didn't have to but it really means a lot that you did."

"Well after all we've been through I feel it was only right to see how you used to live before coming to the big city." He laughed. "I mean, you already saw what I did on a day to day basis, it's only fair right?"

"Yeah, I get that." She expressed with a hint of bashfulness. "I just felt you wouldn't be remotely interested in my family and where I was raised. I was surprised you accepted my invitation to come visit my family this weekend. So I just wanted to say thank you. That's all."

"My pleasure Carrots, my pleasure." He reassured.

They lay there for what seemed like hours, each enjoying the company of the other. It felt odd to Nick to be close to Judy like this, both cuddled up under the covers. He had yet to express his feelings for her but it messed him up emotionally inside when she did things like this. These constant mixed signals where he didn't even know if she considered him something more than friends or if this was just how bunnies normally express affections gnawed at his insides. The last thing he wanted was to push her away by revealing his deepest, heartfelt emotions to her.

"Say Judy…" He started, a bit hesitant on where to proceed with this line of thought. She didn't look at him but tilted her head ever so slightly and made a sound for him to continue. "What do you feel is most important to you in this life?"

"Wow there Mr. Wilde!" She tittered. "That seems to be quite the deep question this late at night. I don't think I'm fully awake to be answering that one!"

"I'm serious." He said, slightly hurt. "We've been partners for over a year and we have yet to have any real meaningful discussions."
"What are you talking about? We've had plenty!" This time she did turn to face him.

"I'm not talking about politics or the deeper meaning behind our favorite books and movies. I'm asking about the future." He explained; frustration evident in his voice.

A flash of concern, "What's wrong Nick? This isn't like you. Did something happen?"

He shook his head briskly, "No, I just…can you please answer the question?"

The look in her eyes drew inward as she contemplated his query. At length she responded, a wisp of a grin on her lips, "Well, I believe that family is most important. I do agree that my parents can get exasperating at times, but that doesn't change the fact that I love them. I love all my family, annoying siblings included." She turned her head to look at him. "What about you? What's most important in this life?"

He stifled a small snigger, "At the cost of sounding like I'm copying you, I have to say about the same. Family is everything."

She rolled onto her side, propping her cheek onto her paw, "You've never really said much about your family Nick. I'm intrigued!"

"See? This is exactly what I'm talking about! If we really had any deep, meaningful discussions, you'd know a lot more about me!" He finished with an air of satisfaction.

"Well you hardly ever say much about your past." She pointed out.

"You never ask." He retorted impishly.

Sticking her tongue out at him, she urged the conversation onward, "So, you mean family like Finnick? I know you guys have known each other since you were really young."

Nick inclined his head, "Well him, but also my mother too. She was always there for me. She only wanted what was best for me and my future." He let out a long, defeated sigh. "Sometimes I feel like I failed her."

Unknowing of the effect it had on Nick, she reached over and placed a single paw on his chest, "I think that no matter what you've done, she'll always love you." She patted him a few times. "And knowing what you've become, I feel she is more than proud of you."

He returned her beaming demeanor, "Thank you Judy. I really appreciate the sentiment." They grew silent for a time. She did not remove her paw and he let it rest there, enjoying the small bit of warmth that it provided. Presently, another thought came into his head. "Hey Carrots? If you had a choice between saving your family or saving everyone in the world, which would you choose?"

"Now isn't that an extreme case of 'would you rather'?" At a wry grin from Nick, she let out a bothered exhale. "Fine, I'll bite. Just know that if I had a choice to save both, I would."

"That is not one of the choices." He reminded smugly.
"I know that!" She poked him roughly. "I guess...I guess it would have to be family. Without them I
would be nothing. If I save everyone in the world, I would be happy but I would be lonely. I would
feel that I had lost meaning, losing those who meant the most to me in life."

"Interesting." Nick mused.

"Stop, that wasn't really a fair question in the first place!" She excused.

"True, but it really gets down to the heart of the matter huh?" He reasoned.

"And what about you?" Judy moved a bit closer. "It's only fair you answer the same question!"

"Jude! Mr. Wilde!" Stu called out from the porch, startling both out of their ponderings. "It's getting
late! Lock up the truck and get inside! You know how your mother worries!"

"You got off easy this time buster!" She informed, waggling a finger at him. "Next time you will
answer any question I ask."

"That could go so many ways...why do I feel like I just got a reprieve from execution?" Nick
muttered under his breath.

"I heard that!" She said; ears perked up. Tossing her side of the blanket over his face, she bounded
off the truck into the dirt. She twisted to see him fumbling with taking the cover off. She waved a
paw to have him follow her. "You ready for one last night underground?"

He rolled the comforter up under one arm before hopping down beside her. "Would you think any
less of me if I asked if you could stay nearby in the room until I fall asleep again?"

She brought up two fingers an inch apart, "Only a little bit."

"Thanks, that's a real comfort." It was his turn to stick his tongue out.

"Any time Nick!" She piped happily.

"But seriously, it was nice Carrots. I enjoyed myself a lot more than I thought I would out here." He
beamed at her. "Thank you for inviting me."

Her face lit up, "You're welcome." She grabbed him by his paw and began to lead him down the
path between the crops back to the homestead. "Just admit it. You'll miss this place when we're
heading home tomorrow."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." He replied, a twinkle in his eye. "But yes, this was a lovely place to
come to."

Judy's ears were yanked backwards hard as her face came up from the boiling vat of heated water.
Gasping for air, her eyes darted around the dank room filled with musty pipes and disgusting filth.
Before she could gather her bearings, her face was plunged into a second vat of icy water. She tried
to rear back and put all her paws on the container in front of her, utilizing all her strength to push
away from the torment but her assailant was too powerful.

She cried out in pain as the fluid forced its way down into her lungs and seared her chest with a fire
that was unbearable. She was wrenched backwards, sputtering as she hacked up the water from her
innards. She barely had any time to think before her head was plunged back into the freezing water,
assaulting her senses as the chill stung her face like a thousand knives. The pain of breathing in the
water was even worse the second time around.

At long last, jerked upwards and tossed into a shabby, lop-sided chair of questionable craftsmanship, a lone spotlight shone down on her trembling form. Taking a few seconds to assess her situation, she noticed she was almost naked, her clothes having been ripped to shreds and hung in tatters about her bruised and battered frame. The room was dark save for the blinding light but she could make out several bulky silhouettes, shifting and flapping through the inky blackness.

A rather booming voice from beyond the spotlight made her jump in the chair, "Who else is with you?"

Still dazed from the water torture, she struggled to regain control of her senses. "I…don't know what's going on…"

"Do not lie to me little bunny! Who else came here with you from Zootopia?!" The voice bellowed louder, causing her to wince at the volume of it.

Judy began shivering now, the chill of the room finally settling into her bones. All she knew is that she just wanted this to stop. Exhausted, she admitted, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Please let me-

Before she could finish her sentence, a small clawed paw smacked her across the cheek drawing blood, knocking her to the floor. She began to scramble away but was picked up by her hind leg and lifted into the air. All sense of equilibrium was thrown out the window as she was swung in an arcing circle before being smashed into a nearby pipe, the bones in her back seemingly screaming out in terror as she felt several pops. She landed with a heavy thud as her head hit the cold, concrete floor; a few moments of lucidity and then blackness.

She was immediately smacked awake as a red fox got in her face, snarling with fangs bared. His menacing green eyes bored holes into her own. "Any others coming along behind you to reclaim this city for their own? We know how sly you devious prey can be!"

"That's enough!" A voice called out from the shadows.

The ginger fox reared around, his fingers flexing involuntarily, itching to smack the upstart across the face. "Don't tell me what I can do Skye!" He bellowed.

The white fox stepped out into the illuminated area, a look of pity on her face as she regarded Judy. "I highly doubt she is in any capacity to answer you coherently with you barking in her face like that. Give her a moment to breathe."

Wobbling up onto her front paws, Judy began to gather her surroundings, wincing as the pain in her back reached fever pitch. She was in an even grubbier hole in the wall than previously when Skye had interrogated Nick. No doubt they were in another location within that great barrier blockade surrounding this old Zootopia. The last thing Judy could recall was her charging at the vixen when she was nicked by a dart that immediately put her out. Remembrance slamming into her brain, she looked about wildly for her friends. Bellwether and Nick were nowhere to be seen.

The older looking, red fox snapped his fingers alarmingly in front of her. "Focus rabbit." He said callously. Her eyes snapped to his, something about them seemed so familiar. "I'm only going to ask this one more time. Who else came with you to our city?"

"I…I don't understand." She stuttered, still recovering from the overwhelming assault on her senses. "It was just us three."
"Just you three." His eyes narrowed.

"Where's my friends?" She asked, looking to the vixen rather than to the male fox in front of her. She determined that she would get no sympathy from him.

He cuffed her cheek hard. "Focus on me!" He snapped, his teeth clacking together. "I find it hard to believe you are friends with that fox." He flicked her neck, inducing a fleeting, yet painful sting.

"And where are your collars? Without one, the only other explanation is that you are spies from the new Zootopia." He sneered as he spoke the last two words.

She stared at him, she didn't really have much of an answer for him; nothing that would satisfy him at any rate. "We are not spies. We came here to figure out how we could contain the bats." She figured lying any further than what Nick already did wouldn't help matters.

The fox eyed her suspiciously, turning his head to the side to spit on the ground by her paws. She noticed a dull, flattened matting of fur around his neck, where a collar could have been. Nothing left a permanent marking like that unless it had been adorned for years. Her focus shifted to Skye, watching her with an unreadable expression, one elbow held by her opposite paw. Judy could tell Skye had a collar marking as well. What happened in this place? Why were prey supposedly required to wear collars and predators relieved of them?

"So they've found a new roost." He muttered, getting up off his knee before yanking Judy up by the scruff of her neck and slamming her into a wooden chair seemingly made just for a mammal of her size. "Bind her hands." At once, several rough paws emerged from the darkness and grabbed her own before threading rope around her wrists until she was bound to the chair securely. Facing away from her, paws clasped behind his back, he continued. "So you thought that by coming here you'd 'discover' some miraculous way to subdue them so that they could live in harmony with other mammals?"

"I just want peace again in my city." Judy explained.

"Peace!" The Reynard laughed uproariously. He swooped back just inches from her face, spittle flying out of his mouth onto her cheeks with each word. "That's all you prey ever promise is peace and then we get imprisoned with these!"

He whipped out from the pocket of his trench coat a leather collar that was unassuming in all respects except for a singular, silver thread lining the inside of its length and a small attached box with a faded light bulb in the middle. Without warning, he wrapped it around Judy's neck and clicked the harmonized lock together with a sizzle. A slight hum emanated from the box as it turned on and the bulb lit up a dull shade of green.

"What are you doing?" Judy cried out, trying to twist her head this way and that to get a good look at what he had put on her.

The fox leaned back and crossed his arms, apparently satisfied with what he did. "You'll find out soon enough, my cute, little bunny."

"Don't call me cu-" She began, getting very agitated. The light switched from green to yellow to instantly red at her outburst. The words caught in her throat as a thunderous jolt sliced through her neck, sending convulsive blasts of electricity rampaging through her veins. Her whole body wracked with spasms, sending the wooden chair to teeter on a few legs as she flopped in the seat. The pain was excruciating, she had never felt anything like it. Gasping for air, she turned her eyes back to him. "What is this?"
He grinned vilely, "Oh, something you prey claimed would be revolutionary. A way to have predator and prey live together in peace." He balled his paw into a fist. "But it was nothing but a lie, like every other attempt made. There was no equality, there was no peace. It was a false sense of paradise that catered to the majority. Even now, whatever new, precious Zootopia you came from is using a method of control that was devised and developed here!"

"That's not true! There are no collars like these!" She protested.

"There doesn't have to be!" He roared. "If it isn't one thing, it is always another with you prey. Trying to upend the natural law and order of this world to claim some semblance of harmony? More like gain more power to lord over the rest of the mammal kingdom." He gazed off to the exit of the room, "If it's one thing that Rouge understood, it was this singular lie."

Judy's ears perked up, "You knew Rouge?"

"Don't interrupt!" He thundered, backhanding her across the face, sending the chair to topple over onto its side. She yelped as her head connected with the cold concrete flooring. It appeared Skye took a few steps toward her but was restrained by another paw from the shadows. He sighed at her interjection, "Yes, I knew Rouge. We had plenty of talks while she was in captivity. I struck a deal that if I released her and her brood, they would leave this Zootopia."

"I don't think she would have listened to you." Judy interrupted again.

He thought about kicking her but shrugged, "You're right, not without legitimate threat. Fortunately, we had just the leverage we needed to contain them and ensure they left our Zootopia alone. In return, they helped us subjugate all prey in the city." He licked his lips. "It was a great role reversal indeed!" He went to say something further but a small cough from Skye attracted his gaze. He nodded, understanding he might have said a bit too much.

"You set them free? It was your fault! That's why they are attacking our Zootopia!" Judy rallied; her anger increasing. The light changed to a tinted yellow.

He observed the twinkling bulb, "I'd stay my anger if I were you little rabbit." He crooned, "Better they occupy your city than ours." He sniffed once with finality.

"So now what? That's it?" Judy fumed. "You're just going to leave us to die under them?" She managed to finish her sentence before another shock quivered her entire body; her breath now coming out in ragged gasps.

"I frankly don't care." He shot back. "I'm done with her." He motioned to Skye. "Take her away, there's nothing more we can learn from her that we haven't already with the sheep. I wish to interrogate the fox now, he intrigues me the most." He swished his tail agitatedly, in a manner quite familiar to Judy.

His penetrating, green eyes followed her on the way out the door as the white vixen dragged her along the floor after untying her wrists. Roughly handling her under the arm, Skye meandered through multitudes of non-descript hallways, the only décor being the spider-caged bulbs hanging from the ceilings at intervals. Judy had lost all sense of direction but was trying to form a map of the tunnel system in her mind. It couldn't be any more complex than her home at the burrows, with its myriad of dug passages.

Skye nodded to the rhinoceros standing guard at the door before unhooking a jangle of keys from her side belt and inserting one into the lock of a wooden door. It was slightly bigger than her so she had to let go of Judy for a moment to utilize both paws in opening the heavy, oak door. Judy noted that
the guard, who had a collar as well, did little to assist her, a leer playfully flitting past his features.

At length, she got the door ajar and gripped Judy's arm before thrusting her into the cell. Catching herself on her front paws to prevent a full on face planting, Judy looked up to see a cowering figure on the elevated bunk. Dawn looked even worse than she did, with multiple cuts and oozing wounds up and down her face and arms. What did that reynard do to her?

"Are you okay? Did they hurt you badly?" Judy probed anxiously. Dawn did little but nod her head fretfully, her frenzied eyes rapt on the white fox, her form huddling closer to the wall to be away from the predator.

Skye walked over to the far side and detached a set of chain cuffs from the wall, its iron links clinking on the floor as she drug it over to Judy. She knelt low before applying the cuffs on the rabbit's wrists. "If you know what's good for you, you'll be quiet and do as we say." She murmured.

"Why are you doing this to us? We did nothing wrong!" Judy said adamantly. Tears were streaming down her face now, but the look in her eyes was of defiance.

Skye's expression softened a bit as she beheld the stalwart bunny, so full of energy and determination. She recalled a time she was like that. "We're just taking precautions is all."

Judy jutted her chin over in the direction of Bellwether. "You call that precaution?" She raised her shackled arms to look down at her shredded clothes. "You call this valid treatment of innocent mammals who have done no wrong?!"

Skye leaned an arm over her knee as she bent forward to come face to face with Judy. "You'll forgive us if we seem a bit untrusting of prey, but we've had a rather…estranged relationship with them all our lives. Finding you two without a single method of control to contain your murderous ways raised quite a few flags for us, so of course we're on edge around you."

"Murderous?" Judy said incredulously. "Why in the world would prey be homicidal?"

Skye tapped a depression in the side of her neck, the swirl of fur growing in odd patterns around it, "It was prey that devised a new way of predator instinct dissuasion. This here is a device not unlike yours but is far more lethal." Judy's eyes grew wide at the prospect of what it could be. "Instead of a shock collar, we have a pill implanted with a specific frequency that if triggered, will set it off."

"If any of you stepped out of line, they'd use you as an example to deter others." Judy finished; her blood running cold at the barbaric nature of it.

Skye bowed her head in affirmation, "Now you see why we mistrust prey around here. It was from your diabolical minds that spawned this form of tyrannical rule. It only made sense that we at least give you a taste of your own medicine." She gestured to the collar around Judy's neck.

She looked over at the ewe before addressed Skye, perceiving that they put a collar around Dawn too. "And what of Nick?"

"Your fox 'friend'?” She snickered. "Why would we collar him? He's a predator like us. If anything, his circumstances are suspicious and his accompaniment with you does pose some questions but we'd detain him for a while before releasing him back into Zootopia with monitoring."

"A better friend than whoever that fox was with you." Judy scrunched her face in what she hoped look like malice.

The vixen smiled serenely, looking at her with something akin to condescension, "That fox is my
husband, the best friend you could have."

"And you feel it's okay for him to beat up on small, innocent mammals?" Judy smoldered.

She suppressed a chuckle at the rabbit, "You are far from innocent. I've seen what you can do in a fight. You've had legitimate training." She stood up to leave but turned as she reached the door, "Your life of freedom ends here. It's about time you started to show your superiors proper respect little bunny."

"Then at least tell me his name!" She prodded, her eyes flashing. At a raised eyebrow from Skye, she continued with gritted teeth, "So I can give him the proper respect next time."

The fox smirked, "His name is James. James Tiberius Wilde."

Chapter End Notes

The last third of the chapter was written before the other two, since I knew it would be the most delicate part of the entire piece. I'm introducing a new twist into the mix with this chapter with the nature of a in-universe retcon. As some may have guessed, the first part of the scene is a near reiteration of a small memory snippet from chapter 1, but instead, slight lines of dialogue or description are altered just enough to add new information to the reader. For example, in chapter 1, she remembered being in a police uniform during this interrogation but now that she's remembered far more than she had previously, her mind corrected her original memory, realizing she could never have been in that outfit at this time. Thus, you are still limited as the reader to what Judy knows and remembers. Expect other small snippets from earlier to come back with newly remembered changes. The Oates scene was fleshed out with my beta Berserker88 and my good author friend Cimar of Turalis; Berserker88 suggested the crash as a means to escape and Cimar suggested Judy to use Oates's fetish for her against him. So because of their input, we have an interesting mix of humor, tension and suspense in a scene that's altogether satisfying. Finally, the scene in the truck was written last, but was necessary to bring levity to an otherwise dark chapter and provide a nice call forward to Nick's dad later in the chapter and future events.
It seemed like an eternity for Judy. What was hours seemed stretched into days. She knew they couldn't have been tossed into the cell that long ago. Skye had come back just once to deliver a rather generous portion of bread and cheese that she was most grateful for. Dawn merely picked away at the food but did eventually take parts of the bread. Her sobs had ultimately died down, giving way to nothing but uncomfortable fits of moaning and shuffling as the ewe rolled around on the drab bed made for them.

The small candle left on the lone stool was slowly dying down into an unrecognizable mass of wax. It would soon be nothing but darkness in another hour if nobody came back in time to renew it with a fresh one. Judy paced back and forth across the concrete cell, wondering what was going on with Nick. Were they torturing him like when they interrogated her? Was he being maimed, mutilated or worse? Many horrid thoughts swirled through her mind, lingering on all the worst possible outcomes.

Presently, she stopped curtly as a pitiful voice groaned from the cold bunk. "Would you please stop stomping your feet? It's giving me a headache."

She slapped a foot on the floor loudly, crossing her arms as she stared at the bundle of fluff. "It's not like I see you doing anything to help us out of this situation!"

The sheep huffed resentfully, "There's nothing to do!" She waggled a hoof in the air carelessly. "We're surrounding by walls of hard concrete, behind an army of predators. There is no hope for us. Nothing left for us to do but die."

Judy scoffed at Dawn, "And to think, this was the grand mastermind behind the Nighthowler plan; to get prey to fear predators and force an uprising to enforce that they wear these!" She hooked a thumb under the collar around her neck. She quickly withdrew it as she noticed the light turn a pale yellow. She needed to calm down before another jolt fried her nervous system. "What ever happened to that Bellwether that I know?"

Without bothering to turn over to look at her, she responded into the wall, "She died the moment you had her arrested."

"Ha!" Judy could barely contain her laugh. "You got yourself arrested. Thing is, I can't get myself out of this situation because I realize I'm not seeing the entire picture. I think too much in the here and now and I don't plan ahead. I need someone who has done something like that before to help come up with a plan to get out of here!"

This brought Dawn to roll over and sit up to grimace at her, "You talk as if that's something so simple and easy that I can just flip a switch on and I'll suddenly have the solution to breaking us out of here." She folded her arms to match the bunny. "There is no escape from here."

Judy watched as the ewe slumped back against the unfeeling wall, looking utterly defeated. "I just figured..." She began.
"You figured nothing." Dawn cut her off. "I've been such a fool into thinking that coming here was a good idea." She sighed, not wanting to look Judy in the eye. "In all honesty, I was planning on ditching you two the moment we got here." At a surprised look from the hare, she continued. "I figured, being free of my restraints and in a city that barely knows me, I could lose myself in the crowd."

"So what you said about the bats being contained here... was that a lie?" She grilled.

Dawn shook her head. "No, that was true. I knew I had to say something that had the element of truth to it or you would never believe me. My father and I were from this Zootopia, the sixth iteration of an idea sparked from a hopeless ideal."

Her expression eased, "Dawn... wanting predator and prey to live together in harmony is not hopeless and it certainly isn't a worthless endeavor. I feel it was very courageous of our ancestors to want to develop a society where equality existed between the two. We should want to stand and live up to those expectations and strive to make this idea a reality."

A look of indifference met her, "Really Judy? You are truly an idealist and know nothing about the history of our 'dear' city." Her emphasis raised the hair on the back of Judy's neck, causing her ears to flick with irritation. "As I've said before, predators are biologically predisposed to killing prey. It is something that's in their DNA that they can't help. One way or another all will inevitably slip back into their primitive ways and resort to killing prey to survive. It's a forgone conclusion."

"You can't know that." Judy asserted.

"I can. Our ancestors kept building museums of our natural history in every instance of Zootopia in hopes that we can learn from the mistakes of our past but no one seems to care. Every time it has been marred with new and inventive ways of predator control so that the entire city isn't eaten out of citizens." She tapped the collar around her neck. "This used to be the latest and greatest in a long line of behavioral containment methods. Now we have something far more subtle in place."

"I don't understand. You said something about that before. Why doesn't Nick turn on me? We've been partners for well over a year and he hasn't shown any signs of regression." As much as she didn't want to believe Bellwether, she knew that she held the truth about this dystopian Zootopia that they found themselves in. What other things could she be right about?

"That's the brilliant part of it all." She almost seemed to be taking great pleasure in explaining this to her, as if breaking the truth to young children about the reality of no Panda Claws. "It's clear to me now that these more intrusive measures were never going to work." She giggled to herself. "To think that after I established martial law in Zootopia that instating these collars would be anything but successful. All it would do is cause an uprising. You see what happened here, right? When I left with my father, prey were still in charge."

"With a barbaric practice like these collars, of course the predators would rebel. I would too if it was reversed like this. I would not sit down and tolerate this type of injustice." Judy declared.

"Now I understand better what my father was trying to do." She admired. "He knew that mammals would always fight back against methods of control that impedes on their basic rights to live. None of this was meant to last. No wonder every Zootopia has fallen within a decade or two of its inception. That's why the current Zootopia has lasted this long!"

"I'm not sure I follow." Judy admitted, lowering her arms finally.

"You said yourself that you would not stand for the maltreatment of predator or prey with something
such as these collars, yes?” Judy nodded. "So there needed to be a method of control that would still
work, be feasible in execution yet not impede on basic mammal rights to life. If the populace does
not believe they are being controlled, then they will accept just about anything even if it means they
have no real control!”

"That sounds downright diabolical.” Judy raised an eyebrow.

"Doesn't it though?” Dawn agreed, not realizing the implications of Judy's statement. "I feel like I've
been going about it all wrong. Maybe if I had…”

"Whoa, stop right there." She interrupted the calculating sheep. "All I wanted was a second opinion
on options on how to get out of this mess, not to invigorate your conquest for world domination!"

Dawn eyed the bunny a few moments, "I can't really tell if you're joking or not."

"I don't think I am." She fired back coolly.

Waving a hoof of dismissal, Dawn settled back down into the bunk. "Not that it matters much
anymore. We're still stuck here, most likely to be killed after they get done with your friend."

They remained in silence for a few minutes before Judy broke the stillness. "So how was life like
here…in this Zootopia? Do you remember anything?"

Giving her a curious look, she asked, "Why do you care?"

Judy shrugged, looking nonchalant. "Well, if we are going to die in here, I figured I might as well
learn everything I can about the person I'm going to die next to."

"How tragically poetic." She snarked.

"Your choice. I don't have the authority anymore to force you to say anything." Judy reasoned.

After a time, Dawn leaned forward, hooves cradled in her lap. "I remember being with my father. He
often took me to work daily." At a head tilt from Judy, she explained. "I was home schooled and I
would spend the majority of my hours doing homework and such while my father was developing
new technologies for Zootopia. One of which being new methods to help contain predator instincts."

"So would you say your father was a man looking for mutual peace between predator and prey?"
Judy pressed.

"Of course! He wanted Zootopia to be a success!" She defended.

"Well, then I can't understand how you turned out the way you did." Judy smirked.

Dawn shot daggers at her, "Fine, laugh all you want. You'd be angry at predators too if all your life
you were pushed down, never given the opportunity to excel. When you know you are smarter than
90% of the population and yet lose the popular vote to someone who has more charisma than you
ever could! It wasn't fair that I got snubbed when I was the one with all the plans to build, improve
and strengthen our city!"

"Strengthen against what? The bats?" Judy asked.

"Yes!" Dawn resounded. "I knew they'd eventually come and we needed some air defense. I had
developed the schematics for anti-bat artillery cannons to be installed at key points all throughout
Zootopia but would Lionfart listen? No! He was so confident that they were safely contained in this
hell hole of a Zootopia that he wasn't worried about them migrating over!"

Judy recalled what James Wilde had slipped during her interrogation, "He struck a deal with the bats."

"Who?" Dawn asked befuddled.

"James. That male fox." She clarified. "He had struck a bargain with the bats to never come back if they helped deliver the city into the hands of the predators."

"And this is why you can't trust a predator!" Dawn clucked, seemingly vindicated with her position on them.

"Not all predators are like him. He was probably just abused and stifled all his life. Of course he was going to lash out like this." Judy reasoned.

"There you go again, sympathizing with them. That will get you killed!" Dawn warned.

Judy shook her head, "I refuse to believe that it is impossible to work together. There has to have been precedent for such a collaboration to have worked or why try this many times to keep creating Zootopia? It doesn't make any sense. It's insanity."

"I remember my father's friends thinking the same thing of his ideas." Dawn remembered suddenly.

"He had friends working with him on this?" She said; interest piqued.

"Of course." She had to chuckle at the memory. "They created a name for themselves, I thought it was so stupid at the time. 'BOB.'"

"Bob?" Judy puzzled.

"No, B-O-B. It's an acronym; a letter for each of their names." She expounded. "Bellwether, Oates and-"

Bellwether squeaked in fright as the cell door boomed open, the silvery, white fox silhouetted in the doorway. Her gaze traveled from her to Judy. A smile broke out on Skye's face, "It looks like you have been given a reprieve of sentence. You two are free to go."

They both looked at each other in shock and confusion.

She could see his leering stare piercing into her soul, his widespread grin revealing wicked teeth with a tongue anxiously licking the lips. His slimy hooves held her where she couldn't move; as much as she struggled she could not break free from the vice-like grip.

With a sudden rush, she felt herself plunging down before feeling the sharp stab of pain of something large and intrusive penetrating her nether regions. It surged upward through her body. Violently ripping muscle and sinew, shoving every inner organ excruciatingly up through her esophagus and out through the mouth. She tried to scream but felt her entire body go limp upon Oates as the last vestiges of life faded from her eyes.

Judy woke up shrieking, tossing the covers off of her. Her limbs flailed as she collapsed off the couch, knocking a porcelain duck off the coffee table, situated adjacent to her sleeping space. It teetered on the edge before shattering on the wood floor, sending more spasms of dread and panic in Judy. She looked all around her, the environment completely alien to her. This was not her
apartment! She started scrambling across the floor, emitting hyperventilating whimpers.

"Judy! Judy, calm down! You're safe!" Nick, fur disheveled from sleep and in nothing but periwinkle and purple pajama bottoms, rushed out from a side hall and swooped down upon the frightened rabbit. "It's me, Nick!" She began batting away his arms, terror still permeating her pupils. "Calm down!"

He wrapped her struggling form in a firm embrace, squeezing tighter with each involuntary jerk from Judy. At length, her breathing began to slow and lucidity returned to her face. Her focus wandered up to his and she began to shiver uncontrollably before breaking down, "It was awful. I could do nothing. He held me so tight! It felt so real!" She wept into his chest.

Carla and Jimmy barged into the living room, the spotted hyena noting the broken décor smashed across the floor. "Wow, did it happen again?" The arctic fox wondered aloud.

"Another nightmare?" Carla asked soothingly, casually walking around the couch to where Nick was holding Judy. She knelt down beside the sofa and gave Judy her full attention. "It's okay, you are with friends. You are safe here." She reached out to smooth back the fur behind Judy's ears, hoping the comfort of her touch would be enough.

"Was it the horse dream again?" Jimmy asked innocently. He immediately shied away as both Carla and Nick shot him vehement glares. "All right then…I'm just going to start up breakfast then." He said mainly to himself as he scratched an itch just above his tail as he sauntered into the side nook and turned on one of the stove ranges.

"Is there anything we can do for you Judy?" Carla asked serenely, her eyes only for the bunny.

Judy shook her head more forcefully then she had intended. "No, I don't think there is." She clenched her eyes shut. "I just wish this awful dream would go away."

"I think we all wish that Carrots." Nick hugged a little tighter before giving her a kiss on the forehead, which seemed to visibly calm her down.

The hyena raised an eyebrow at his loving gesture, clearly unaccepting of it. Trying her best to ignore Nick, she placed a paw on Judy's arm. "Well, I'm just glad you are here safe with us Judy. You are free to stay as long as you like."

"Even Chief Bogo said this was a good idea!" Jimmy piped up from the kitchen, trying to remain useful in the conversation.

"Well, there's at least that consolation." Nick sniggered, drawing a small laugh from Judy but a scowl from Carla.

Carla huffed before getting off her haunches and sweeping into the refrigerator with purpose, pulling out several food items they would need to build breakfast that morning. "Don't worry about the duck Judy. I'll clean it up later." She mollified, easing her concern about the broken statuette.

Nick asked softly, "You think you can let me go long enough to get dressed Carrots?"

"Mmm," she hummed, rubbing her paw through his chest fur, "I think I could get used to this. Five more minutes?" She asked hopefully.

He rolled his eyes, "This isn't even our apartment. We are guests. I don't think it's appropriate for us to do that."
She stopped her movement, letting it rest on him, "Yeah, I guess you're right." She said morosely. She slipped out of his lap, smoothing down her jade green nightgown that was loaned by Carla, which practically dragged along the ground behind her.

Nick nodded before heading back to his corner of the pad to change. It had been an entire week since their encounter with Detective Oates. Judy had made a full report to Bogo that very morning of their escape. A city wide horse hunt was initiated but even now, there had been no reports or sightings of the renegade cop which further served Judy's anxiety. She was confident enough that she could defend herself if she had to against Oates, but there was always a lingering fear that it would happen right when her guard was down and it would be the end for her.

With her own place at the Grand Pangolin Arms compromised, Carla and Jimmy graciously offered their humble suite for them to bunk down in for the duration of the hunt. It was a place of refuge that was still unknown to Oates and they made extremely sure that when Judy went out to do her job at the ZPD, she was escorted to and from cruisers and stayed indoors while on clock hours. It seemed a bit extreme but she understood it was for her own protection. Despite this, she longed to be back out on the streets and work the beat and engage with the citizens of the city that she so loved.

"Hey," Jimmy said abruptly, breaking Judy out of her thoughts, as he took down a pinned flyer off the refrigerator, "Nick says you're friends with Gazelle right?" He gawked at the advertisement for her next concert. "You think it'll be cool if we go out with you to it? You know, as bodyguards?"

"Of course not!" Carla berated, snatching the paper out of Jimmy's hand, crumpling it up and tossing it in the trash beside the island counter. "Bogo's orders were strictly to keep her under watch until puto asqueroso is apprehended and brought to justice. Until then, it's not safe being anywhere else other than here or the ZPD!"

His ears sagged; tail nearly tucked between his legs as he idly plopped a few drops of oil in the pan for heating. "Oh…sorry, I forgot."

"You always forget! I have to remind you about everything!" She growled exasperatedly, slamming the refrigerator door, placing the bottle of orange juice roughly onto the surface next to Jimmy. "It's amazing you passed the academy at all!"

"Lay off the boy!" Nick rumbled in from the side hall leading to the master bedroom and bathroom. He had just finished putting on his top buttoned blue shirt as he rounded the corner. "He just wants to give Carrots a bit of reprieve and I'd have to agree, sometimes being cooped up in a single space can drive one a bit batty."

Jimmy somehow seemed to think this was hilarious and began snorting from the laughter. Carla merely scowled as Judy gave a weak smile, her thoughts on Rouge. She had later found out the day after her report on Oates that he was indeed telling the truth and the ZPD had captured Rouge in the very act of sucking a small mammal dry of all their blood. She wanted to believe there was a logical explanation for it. It was one thing to drink blood for sustenance which is what her blood bank idea would solve but it was quite another to deliberately pick a small mammal that could be drained completely and die. That wasn’t eating for necessity, it was eating for sport.

"Well, the boss says she is to stay here whenever she's not on duty at the station." Carla finished with decisiveness, as if that settled the matter.

Carla and Jimmy had been one class behind Nick during the academy and graduated together. They were put on the force only a few months after Nick's instatement into Precinct 1 alongside Judy. They were immediately partnered together and despite them being polar opposites, you could barely find the two apart. One would find their relationship a bit odd, the hyena being overbearing, forceful
and violent while the white fox being innocent, naïve yet overly friendly. Bogo couldn't have chosen two unlikely partners if he tried, they seemed perfect in their differences.

"I want to go." Judy whispered softly, causing all ears to perk up in her direction. "Gazelle already sent me the tickets to her concert." She motioned to her small backpack beside the couch. "She's going to sing a song for me." She neglected to mention she had a hand in developing the lyrics for it. She wanted that to be a surprise for Nick.

"A song for you?" Jimmy marveled, using a spatula to flip a malformed pancake that was starting to bubble in the pan. "That's so cool! I wish I had someone famous write a song for me." He gave a sideways glance at Nick, deflated when he didn't pick up on it.

"Well with the three of us around, I don't see how that's a problem." Nick grinned warmly.

Carla slammed a cup of juice on the counter, causing some to spill out and making Jimmy flinch. "No, she will not be going." After seeing the looks of her companions, she toned her speech down. "Look, I'm just concerned about her just as much as any of you, but orders are orders."

Nick clucked his tongue sharply, "She's not a prisoner Chuckles." Her ears flattened at the name but he continued on unfettered. "Yes, there is a murderous psychopathic horse out there with his eye sights for rabbit, but that doesn't mean she has to constantly live in fear for her life. As long as there are friends, colleagues and the entire ZPD looking out for her, I highly doubt Oates will come anywhere near her now that he's lost the element of surprise."

"Need I remind you who is in charge here?" Carla warned, raising a claw up.

Jimmy became suddenly interested in his own cooking, wanting nothing more than to be somewhere else. "Not again…" He mumbled.

"Certainly not you." Nick shot back, crossing his arms. "Hey, I know the law the chief laid down but what he doesn't know won't hurt him. Besides, with a well populated venue like Gazelle's concert, it'll be harder for him to do anything nefarious to Judy."

"She's still in the room…" Jimmy reminded meekly, flipping a now burnt pancake. He could see Judy getting angrier by the second. She hated it when those two fought and abhorred it worse when it was over her.

Flouting the white fox completely, Carla rejoined harshly, "That is complete caballos and you know it Nick Wilde!" She stepped up to him, looking down on his face. "As a criminal, you know full well that a heavily dense area is the perfect place to go unnoticed. It would be easier than ever for him to assault her there!"

If the rebuttal hurt his feelings, he did not show it, "Fine, I was just trying to lighten the mood and make Carrots feel better. Yes, I know that it's a dangerous place because he's out there, but I believe she shouldn't feel like a prisoner among her own friends!"

"Just stop fighting!" Judy fumed, her foot thumping loudly on the couch cushion. She was standing up on the sofa, bristling with unbridled rage at the two of them. She would have looked quite comical in that long nightgown had it not been for her expression. "I'm sick and tired of being treated like a child! I'm a trained cop like any of you! I should be given the benefit of the doubt in being able to make my own decisions!"

Nick's expression softened, "You're right Carrots. We shouldn't have assumed that of you." He backed up from the glowering hyena before turning to her fully. "Let's ditch Jimmy and Spots the
Clown here and get some coffee and donuts instead. I'm sure that'll make Benji happy, eh?"

"But I just finished my first pancake…" Jimmy gloomed.

"I'm still mad at you." Judy reminded as he swept past her to gather their things down the hall in a side room.

"I know you are." He spoke flatly, his expression never wavering.

Her teeth clenched and tail twitching viciously, Carla stormed off after the ginger fox. She roared down the hallway, grappling him by the scruff of the neck before slamming him up against the wall, arm under his chin. "You think this is some sort of game? This is Judy's life we're talking about here!"

"Oh, and here I thought you were ready for round two." He smirked.

She dug her arm further into his neck, "Cut the sass Wilde." She snapped. "You are a dirty scoundrel who has never cared about anyone in their entire life. Just for once would you stop your shiftly, sly fox ways and just think about someone other than yourself for a moment?!"

Managing to raise a paw, "First off, who are you calling dirty? Second, of course I care about her and last I checked she was my friend long before she met you. She means the world to me."

"Ha! I bet you say that to all the females you hustle." She snarked.

"I didn't hear you complaining." Nick retorted.

"That was a complete mistake and both you and I agreed that it was!" She stabbed a claw into his nose, just barely pressing in.

"Kind of hard to tell right now." Nick simmered, keeping the smile on his mug. "Being angry or horny looks about the same to me with you."

Carla just about ripped his head off. She struggled to contain her wrath, realizing Nick was starting to thrash his legs at the pressure. She eased up slightly. "Is that what this is? Some sort of freak fetish to you? Going around trying every type of mammal until one fits? Judy is not a prize to be won. I've seen some wretched hustles in my day but this has got to be the worst!"

"Clearly I did something right." He chuckled, aggravating the hyena further. "Guess you got quite the fancy for some nice fox tail that you had to bed down with a personal attendant of your own!"

"Leave Jimmy out of this!" She snarled. "This isn't about us! Like I would ever mate with another fox again! You all are disgusting to me!"

"It's okay Carla. I totally understand." He soothed. "I would be lonely too if my last partner got squished."

Her eyes turned into slits as instinct took over. She threw him to the ground and both were instantly engulfed in a whirlwind of claws, teeth, tails and ripped fur. Several hanging photos slipped off their hooks, crashing to the ground, as they bumped from wall to wall. They would have continued until only one was left standing but both gruffly stopped as a screeching yell was heard just down the hall. They paused their scuffle to look up to see Judy quivering with uncontainable indignation.

Looking somewhat mortified, Nick apologized, "I'm sorry Carrots. I probably shouldn't have egged her on so much."
"Um…did you hear any of that?" Carla probed sheepishly.

"Every word." She punctuated for emphasis, her eyes boring holes into his. "Is it true?"

"Well…" He disentangled himself from Carla, who for once looked utterly speechless. "If you mean, is it true that Carla and I mated, then…yes. I can't lie to you Carrots."

"She'd just find out the truth anyway!" Jimmy chirped from the kitchen, much to the irritation of all.

Nick raised both paws up to placate her anger, "But this was long before we got together, before I started developing romantic feelings for you. It was a one-time mistake."

This was clearly the wrong thing to say. She held a paw to her breast as it looked like she might cry at any moment. She sniffed once before responding, "Nick, I thought you were better than this."

"It was a stupid blunder. I'll admit it." He confessed, getting up on one knee. "I swear on my life, I'll never do anything like that again. I'm wholly committed to you Judy."

"So, I'm the mistake?" Carla grumbled.

"Nick…I…" She hesitated. What did she want to say?

Part of her heart knew that Nick was remorseful for what he had done and that she should not hold something he had done in the past against him in the present. If she were to do that, she would never have overlooked him being a con man all his life and offer him a position to be her partner on the ZPD. However, on the other hand, knowing that her new found love had already mated with one of her best friends was a complete shock and she didn't exactly know quite how to take it.

Overwhelmed with the situation, unable to think of anything else, she turned quickly and bolted for the apartment door. Carla stumbled trying to climb back up the wall onto her feet. "Jimmy!" She roared. "Stop her!"

"What?" He asked confused, seeing a blur of grey zip past him.

Nick was already on her trail, bursting out of the doorway into the complex hall. He glanced down both ways. Judy had already given them the slip. He sunk down to the ground, his head in his paws. She was out there without any protection in a city far bigger than she was with a killer who was gunning specifically for her and it was all his fault.

"Are we there yet?" Nala complained, dragging her feet along the ground.

"Not yet little one." Jack chortled, one arm around Mai's waist with one of hers over his neck, assisting her walk.

It seemed like days that they had been traveling down this featureless corridor of rock but over the course of time, Mai had begun to heal well enough to the point she was able to carry her own weight with a little support. She was in no way in peak fighting form and would be useless to them if they needed to defend themselves but she could at least not be a huge mobility burden to the group anymore.

Jack had also opened up quite a bit more with the three of them, now freely telling of his exploits, jobs, and past in Zootopia. However, it seemed to Judy there was always a topic he would dance around and it always had to deal with any of his childhood outside of Zootopia prior to the Nocturnal District.
"Do you have any patience?" Judy remarked, walking alongside the tyke.

"I recall you not having any when you were younger." Mai murmured cheerfully.

"What was that?" Judy asked, her ears perking up.

"Oh, nothing." She laughed.

"You certainly seem to be feeling better now Mai. Hey Jack, maybe you should let her walk on her own now. She seems perfectly capable." Judy jested.

"Now that's not nice." Jack commented, sharing a smile with Mai.

Quickening her pace, Judy stepped in line beside the two and turned to her. "I know you and I met once before in the past. Where have I seen you?"

Mai shook her head, "I'm of a mind to let you figure things out on your own and let your memory come back gradually." At a look from Judy, she explained, "I'm with Bogo on this. Giving you too much information might just confuse you further, so like anything else with your memory, give it time."

She looked up to the ceiling of the tunnel in exasperation, "That's the same as hiding things from me. I'm tired of not knowing things!"

"I know you are." Jack pacified. "From my experience, memory can be a fickle thing and if you are told things in direct conflict with what you think you know, you can jump to the wrong conclusions and maybe outright deny anything as the truth." Shifting Mai's arm on his shoulder a bit more, he continued, "I once had a friend, Murana, who was training with me; training to become an assassin in the Nocturnal District. She came to us with little to no memory of herself and she gradually had to remember it all."

"What happened to her?" Nala asked, skipping up alongside him.

"I'm not sure. Someone from above came down to retrieve her and she went crazy. It was a bad scene all around and it ended up burning a lot of bridges, Rosco being one of them." Jack answered.

"Who is Rosco?" Nala pressured, ever curious; thoughts of her tired feet long gone.

Mai frowned, "A rather disagreeable fellow, one of the four crime lords of Zootopia." Judy thought on that a moment, something about the name seemed to click with her but she wasn't sure why. If anything, it made her wonder what had happened to Mr. Big, one of her friends, despite the fact he was a mob boss himself.

Jack smiled, "The same guy who trained Mai and me. Although because of my friend leaving, Rosco and I have not had a good relationship since. You see, I was one of the ones who wanted to bring Murana into the fold and help care for her during the recovery. Rosco wanted to have her killed after their falling out but I, instead, helped her escape. I haven't gone back since and instead took to taking marks and jobs above the surface in Zootopia proper."

"It's amazing you remembered this much about the Nocturnal District after all these years. I wouldn't have found this tunnel even if I tried." Judy complimented.

"Well, when you grow up most of your life down here, you tend to collect a lot of seemingly useless info that others seem to write off." He snickered, which drew several giggles from Mai and Nala.
Noting the dimming light of his cell phone, Mai gestured to it. "Speaking of which, I'd have to agree with Nala. Are we there yet?"

Jack bowed his head forward to indicate a small recess coming up on the right side. "As a matter of fact we are. That's actually remarkably convenient, for some reason it felt like a much shorter trip this time around."

"Probably because you're with good company." Judy asserted, giving him a coy look.

"Well, that's probably true." He agreed, sharing her expression.

"Is it safe up there?" Nala queried; a slight shiver of nervousness in her tone.

All eyes descended upon Judy. Jack spoke up first, "Judy, do you remember anything about what we're getting into? You're the only one of us here that's been up there at all."

She shook her head despondently, "I left during a time of revolt. I don't remember much about it but what I do know is that we shouldn't expect a warm welcome up there. In fact, we may even be considered enemies since predators dominate the city."

"Lovely." Jack sighed. "Well, good thing I have a few more rounds left for my gun."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Judy gazed at the metal rungs leading up the cement enclave built into the rock. The manhole covering looked ominous above them, being several sizes larger than all of them combined. It would take everyone just to move it.

Feeling the aching soreness in her back, Mai grated, "Well, I'm not getting any younger. Let's get this over with."

With the added stress of assisting Mai up the embedded ladder, the four rabbits made their slow ascent to the cover. Jack protected the rear in case any of them lost their footing and took a fall. In time, they were all situated awkwardly just under the manhole. Mai was clinging onto the final upper rung while the others were spread out using both each other and the sides of the circular opening to keep aloft. With painstaking effort, they successfully were able to slide the cover up and over a few inches before they stopped from exhaustion.

"Do you see anyone?" Jack asked from below as Judy poked her head up through the opening.

She turned all around to see streets and buildings that looked quite similar to the ones she remembered of home. A few were in various states of disrepair but the majority seemed intact and functional. Many of them had lights on in several windows. She noted the lit streetlamps as well indicating that this place had a stable source of electricity. What was most remarkable was that it didn't appear much different than the Zootopia she knew and almost wondered if they had just looped back around to their home. The one thing that gave it away however was the tall concrete wall that was just barely visible between the high rise skyscrapers.

"Nobody that I can see." She said at last.

With a bow of the head, Jack helped Mai and Nala get up onto the street level as Judy continued to scan the environs of potential threats, her nose twitching for untoward scents and ears up for suspicious sounds. It was night time but of what hour she did not know. There was no dawning or setting horizon for her to judge the current time.

"Did we even leave?" Nala wondered. Outside of looking a lot better maintained and a complete lack of smoke and destroyed buildings, it seemed eerily familiar.
"This is definitely a new Zootopia." Jack confirmed, pointing to a few spiral antlered buildings just north of them toward the center of the city. "Those are not structures I am familiar with. Unless they just got recently built in the past week, there is no way those would be here if we were in our Zootopia."

"So you said this place was overrun by predators right?" Mai reminded Judy.

She looked around, seeing a few pigs and what she thought might be a deer casually walking down the street. They had yet to notice the four bunnies standing in the middle of the road. Something seemed a bit off about the three prey coming toward them. "That's right." She said absently, cocking her head as she tried to pinpoint what exactly was wrong with their appearance. Her eyes shot open, a paw going to her own neck in remembrance, "They're not wearing any collars!"

"Any what?" Jack swiveled his head to her.

"Shock collars." She revealed. "It was a method of control that prey used on predators to keep their biological instincts under control. When I was last here, it had been reversed. The predators were using them on the prey."

"What happened Mom?" Nala slid up to her, wrapping a paw around her arm.

"I'm not sure." She admitted.

"Shall we introduce ourselves?" Mai suggested, leaning on Jack as a subtle way of telling him to assist her again. "I doubt they'd consider us a threat since we're not predators."

Jack, wary of the situation cautioned, "I really don't think that's a-"

Before he could finish, Judy was already striding forward, confident in her gait. It was obvious now that they had been spotted. The two swine fidgeted suddenly, seemingly a bit alarmed at their sudden appearance while the deer looked interested. "Hello," she began cheerfully, "I'm sorry to intrude but we're pretty new here. Do you know where I could find your local ZPD?" It seemed an innocent enough question.

"Hopps?" The stag stood agape.

Her ears dropped, "Um…yes? Do I know you?"

His eyes bulged, "It's me! Percival Stagford! We thought you weren't ever coming back!" The buck certainly didn't look familiar. He was rather lanky with a tawny sheen to his fur. Most of his white spots were scattered along his back with a condensed concentration around his lower back. His antlers were of a respectable size, arcing outwards before swooping in to barely touch each other.

Recognition galvanized the two pigs, "Judy!? Judy Hopps!" They both cried out together. "You're a hero!"

"Wow!" Percival put a hoof to his head in stunned bewilderment, "I have got to tell the others! This is amazing!"

"You're famous Mom?" Nala looked up at her in admiration.

"And you got a little kit of your own?" The female pig commented, leaning down with her hooves on her thighs. "I'm so happy for you." She turned to Jack. "Is this the father?"

Jack coughed as Judy stepped in to answer for him, "Not exactly."
"No, Nick's my dad!" Nala blurted.

"Oh," Percival reacted, his expression growing rather distant. "Is he here with you now?"

Her countenance fell, "No…he was captured by the bats."

"I'm sorry…" He didn't seem overly empathetic, more relieved than anything else. "I take it they did to your city what they almost did here?"

"It's fine. I've come back for answers." Judy affirmed, mainly to herself.

"Well you'll certainly find them here." He stepped up behind Judy before alarmingly lifting her off the ground and settling him onto his shoulder. "I can take you to the ZPD if you wish. Everyone will be so happy to see you again!"

"Excuse me, but what exactly is she known for? What did she do?" Jack stopped the deer short.

"She hasn't told you?" The male pig sputtered. "She led the rebellion! She helped us fight back and kill all the predators in Zootopia! This is now truly a paradise for prey!"

The four bunnies all shared a horrified look.

Chapter End Notes

The middle section with Carla and Jimmy had to be written first since it was the bulk of my inspired writing phase over the course of this chapter. The rest had to be tediously thought through and deliberated on until you see the final form you're reading today. I knew I needed to get Judy away from her caretakers in a way that not only propelled her into the next story arc but that would launch the arc for Carla and Jimmy, with the focus primarily being on the hyena. So her final action helped serve a dual purpose for later developments and to make good on a promise we discovered earlier from Bogo in the time arc with Nick, Dawn and Judy. Speaking of that arc, I knew we needed to set up some much needed exposition regarding Bellwether's ties to the old Zootopia through her father and to deliberately hint or say other character's connections to the same place. Dawn provided the perfect vehicle to impart that information, even if not much happens to them physically in this chapter other than 'they get released.' Finally, as a way to throw the reader for yet another loop, I come back to the near forgotten group of four bunnies with Jack, Mai and Nala as they also enter old Zootopia. It was a nice twist to have the entire situation reversed onto its head with the sole catalyst for this change being Judy herself, the one person who has been there previously but remembers so precious little of it! Look forward to more interesting developments as two timeline arcs follow our protagonists through old Zootopia as I begin to draw to a close the first initial time arc soon.
Chapter 21: Broken Pedestal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This was a stupid idea, Judy thought to herself. She felt intensely sick to her stomach and wanted nothing more than to turn back around and collapse right into Nick's arms and cry her heart out. She didn't know why she ran away like she did. Her feet had a mind of their own and swept her out the door and down the hall before she even grasped what had happened. She knew deep down that his fling with Carla was a mistake and Nick even admitted such, but she couldn't shake the shock of hearing it from their own lips of the elicit rendezvous.

She stumbled along the street in the oversized nightgown, her eyes not really focusing on where she was going but rather trying her best to avoid the multitude of mammals rumbling along in the early morning rush to work. She was jostled to and fro by the larger prey, ignorant of her presence and talking in urgent tones on their cell phones. Others who were more aware gave her odd looks and some even seemed to recognize her based on the billboards and signs strewn across the city with her mug.

Panic settling in as she felt hundreds of eyes leering and judging her for reasons she couldn't fathom. She dived into a side alley, leaning hard against the sleek façade trying to catch her breath. She knew that Bogo would not allow this to slide and the moment they found her, she'd probably be put down under strict lock and key until this Oates issue got resolved. Not to mention the future of her career; she was already considered by the chief to be somewhat of a loose cannon, despite her star track record of solving dozens of cases. Her reputation alone was probably the only thing saving her from being outright disavowed.

The first thing she noticed was the putrid stench of ammonia. Her nose twitched irritably at the burning nature of the odor. She traced it up the walls of the building to several bulky shapes that protruded off the sides of the structure. She realized she was right beside the Twin Market towers. She cocked her head curiously at the packages perched up high. What sort of animal could have the height to reach and affix those things up there?

Before she had a chance to contemplate it further, she heard a ruckus further down the alley between the tower and the larger office building just beside it. She began to sprint down the grungy area the moment she heard shouting and the sound of something being hit. She rounded the corner to find Tony Fledermaus, the fruit bat that had presided over her last cage match with Raymond. He was being beaten to a pulp by several marmots, their brown fur bristling as they wailed on the defenseless bat with sticks, clubs and other instruments of pain. One was even using his teeth to gouge holes in Tony's skin.

"What do you think you're doing?" Judy shouted furiously.

The three varmints ceased their attack and turned to look at her. "What's it to you? We're just taking care of a no good-for-nothing bat here!" One exclaimed.

"My cousin Louie got drained of all his blood because of these assholes!" Another said, testing the nature of his baseball bat by slapping it on his palm.

"Help…me…" Tony croaked, struggling to even move a few inches away.

The third marmot kicked the bat hard in the ribs. "Shut up! All you bats are the same! Looking to run
at the first sign of danger but ready to stick a knife in our backs when we're not looking!"

"He's a fruit bat!" Judy tried to educate, as if it were completely obvious. "He doesn't drink blood you idiots. That and I wouldn't let you attack a real vampire bat even if you wanted to!"

"Wait a minute," The first one had a curious look in his eye, "I think I recognize you. Yeah…you're that bunny cop…" He began snapping his talons. "What's her name?"

"Hopps?" Another suggested.

He clicked his tongue, "Yeah! Hopps! Officer Judy Hopps!" His scowl turned menacing. "Freaking bat lover! We know you care more about them than you do about your own city!"

"What? No!" She defended.

"Don't lie to us!" The second marmot spat, venom laced in his voice. "You are in cahoots with those bats! I saw that article on ZNN! You were even caught planning with their leader!"

Judy inwardly cursed that silly reporter, Stinkman, and his false interview he had with her. She also knew that without further contact from Oates, he had run that story with the picture Oates supplied which would be pretty damning in this circumstance. "That's not how it is." She tried to explain.

"Enough of your lies bunny!" The first varmint interjected. "You'll get exactly what's coming to you!"

"You will not attack an officer of the law!" Judy warned, crouching slightly in preparation to fight. "You will be arrested and tried."

"Oh no!" He said in mock horror. "Too bad you'll be too dead to tell anyone who killed you! Get her!"

As one, they stepped over the trembling form of Tony and rushed Judy, all standing abreast to prevent her escape. She leaped at the last second, landing squarely on the forehead of the middle marmot, smashing his snout in, drawing blood with the impact. She hopped off before ducking low and sweeping her feet around to trip up the one on the right. Judy was about to rise up until her hind paw got tangled up in the gown and she tripped onto her side.

Within seconds, the third was upon her, slamming the bat onto her ribs and head mercilessly. She scrunched up into a fetal position, her arms and legs brought inward to protect any vital areas. The other two came up beside the third and proceeded to unleash their weapons onto her battered form. A few moments seemed like millennia under the onslaught and she felt her body finally giving away to the punishment.

Before she knew what was going on, she felt the abuse stop and heard anguished chattering noises. Chancing a look up, she saw several spines impaled into each marmot. More spiraled through the air and lodged themselves into the trio. One sliced through the eye socket of the second and he fell backwards onto the cobblestone dead. The remaining two scrambled on all fours out of the alley with their tails tucked behind them, one cradling a shattered nose.

Shakily getting onto her front paws, she gasped in pain at the agonizing throb coursing through her body. She felt the slow trickle of blood flowing through her fur in several places but was unclear as to just where the open wounds were located. A firm hand helped her get onto her feet and she was face to face with a rather surly porcupine. It took a few moments to recognize him from the cage match.
"Quill?" She asked tentatively.

"That's me." He gruffed; staring off behind her where the duo fled, he advised "Knowing their kind, they'll be back and in bigger numbers. You should head on out if you want to live. They won't be happy to see you still here."

"Thank you…for saving me." She bowed slightly, still feeling woozy.

He paced over to Tony, who had fallen unconscious. He knelt down to lift the comatose bat over his shoulders, taking care to press down his quills to avoid injuring his friend. "Don't worry about it. I hate those bastards just as much as you do. Now that Mr. Big is gone, our family is all we got left. We have to take care of each other."

"Mr. Big?" Judy wondered anxiously. "What do you mean gone?"

"You didn't know?" Quill wheezed, the dead weight of Tony getting to him. "A bat found him the other day and sucked him completely dry of all his blood. Last I heard she was being held in the ZPD jail." He gave her a meaningful look.

"No one told me." She murmured. Noticing his expression, she probed, "Do you believe I had something to do with this? Do you think I am with the bats?"

He sighed heavily, "I don't know what to think Hopps. What I do know is that Mr. Big put a lot of faith and trust in you and in honor of his death, I should do the same. However, do not come find me or Tony again. We are going to be disappearing until this whole bat debacle blows over. Good day to you."

With a nod and a little adjustment of Tony, he plodded out of the alley and down the sidewalk bordering the main road, garnering a lot of stares and hushed whispers from the surrounding crowd. Realizing the gravity of what she was just told, she hobbled haphazardly out behind Quill, looking in the opposite direction to find the most expedient route to the station. Meandering her way through the milling crowds going about their daily business, oblivious to the turmoil in her heart, she slowly made progress toward ZPD headquarters.

Trudging through the rotating glass doors of the front foyer, she tried her best to look as casual as she could, despite looking like a complete wreck in a torn nightgown. Clawhauser was the first to spot her as she made her way across the vestibule. "Judy! O-M-Goodness! What happened to you? You look like something the cat dragged in! I mean…I am a cat myself, but you know what I mean! You look awful!" He scanned the empty space around her and remembered something was missing. "Where's Nick, Carla and Jimmy? Why aren't they here with you?"

Wincing at the pain of trying to force herself to walk despite her wounds, she put a paw up to placate the frantic cheetah. "Benjamin, please, just don't ask questions right now." She paused as she added like an afterthought, "And don't let anyone know I'm here."

He stared at her, a donut still enveloped in the folds of his chin, dumbfounded and unsure of what to do. Protocol slamming into his brain like a thunderbolt, he popped onto the mic situated at his chair, words tumbling out, "Bogo! Bogo! Officer Hopps is here in the station and she's alone! I don't know what she's doing or what she wants! She looks awful!"

"What?! Get her in my office now!" A booming voice bellowed through the mic.

"Erm…Yes sir!" He fumbled, dropping the device onto the floor with a clatter as he staggered out from behind the desk podium. He surveyed the atrium, not seeing a single hair of the grey bunny. He
groaned in misery as he began to start asking any colleagues nearby if they had seen which direction she went.

The moment she heard him on the intercom with Bogo, she swore loudly before dashing across the foyer. She made a beeline straight for the autopsy room. More than anything, she had to see if what Quill had said was true. If it was, then why did the Chief and everyone around her, including Nick, hide the fact that it was Mr. Big that had been the one Rouge killed? Was it because of both her ties to Rouge and Mr. Big that they denied this information from her? What were they fearing she'd do if she found out?

Plowing into the room, startling Raina in the process, she walked down the rows of tables until she found one with a miniature cadaver placed atop of it. The sloth was still in the process of turning towards the door where Judy was no longer occupying, a rising screech of alarm. Disregarding the extended reaction, Judy leapt up to the table top and swung the white blanket off the corpse, allowing it to float to the ground. Lying before her was the deceased body of Mr. Big, skinnier than she had last seen him and pale beyond all recollection. Two massive puncture wounds were visible in his chest, from teeth far bigger than he was.

She took a step back, her mind not comprehending what she saw before her. If what Quill said was true and a bat had killed Mr. Big, then Oates was also telling the truth that Rouge was the one that did it. With rising determination, she lowered her eyes to the diminutive crime lord, letting her paw drape across his face to close his eyelids. Saying a small prayer for him, she jumped off the table, crying out in pain upon landing, her injuries sending shockwaves through her limbs.

"What…are…you…doing?" Raina asked laboriously.

"To get answers." She fired back.

Adrenaline assisting in fighting back the tears of moving, she stomped out of the lab and down the hall. She could hear shouts out near the front entrance. Someone had got a call out to Nick and the others for she could hear Carla and Jimmy within the mix of voices. They were gathering a search party and were going to fan out and tackle all sections at once. She knew there wouldn't be much time but she had to confront Rouge personally.

Standing on tiptoes, she put her paw on the print scanner and smiled as the door matched her paw with the one in the database and opened with a satisfying click. She glanced at the clock and realized there was a shift change occurring as the morning crew took over for the evening in the prison. Taking the opportunity, she swiped the ring of keys from the wall hook and stalked past the rows of cells until she got to the one with the bat she was looking for.

"Why'd you do it?" She raged, rattling the bars of the cell.

"Why'd I do what?" Rouge flustered, stretching out her wings as if waking from a peaceful slumber. With lazy eyes, she turned to face Judy, interest evident.

"Kill Mr. Big. You sucked him dry of every bit of blood!" She shouted at her.

"Is that his name?" She simpered.

"You know damn well it was!" Judy jabbed a finger through the bars. "Don't think we haven't noticed you conducting your bats to isolate and attack the four crime lords in Zootopia. We have seen the pattern and you are actively hunting them down. Why?"

"You speak as if I have that much power over my brethren." She aggrieved dolefully. "I was
starving, as usual, and I needed something to eat or I would have died."

"Then pick something bigger!" She shook her head quickly. She couldn't believe she even blurted something like that out. "No, I mean, couldn't you have waited until the blood bank opens in two days?"

"Can you go without eating or drinking for days either?" Rouge shot back, slithering towards her on all fours. After being met with silence, she huffed, "I thought so. As much as your blood bank is a solid idea, the fact remains that it is not open for business and in the meantime my people are starving. We are dying by the dozens unless we take what we can from the mammals here."

"That's considered an assault and in your case with Mr. Big, murder." She crossed her arms. "And you still haven't answered my question why you are targeting the four major crime lords of Zootopia."

"What makes you think I know anything about that?" Rouge began to pace back and forth in the tiny cell. "I was just going after a target of opportunity, going after the easiest meal that I saw."

Judy didn't believe that for one second. If Mr. Big was an easy target, then where was Koslov, Tyron, Raymond and the multitude of other polar bears that were his bodyguards? Something did not add up with her story. Remembering something Olivia Stipe mentioned she faced Rouge, "You're afraid of them." At an unreadable look from her, she clarified, "I think you fear them banding together into a force that you can't beat. So you're picking them off one by one before they can get organized."

Rouge gurgled in response, mirth evident on her face. "What funny notions you get Judy. I knew I liked you for a variety of reasons but I didn't know humor was going to be one of them."

"I'm not being funny." Judy thumped her foot loudly.

"Well if you want me to be more cooperative as an interrogation suspect, I would start with a proper thank you." She demanded.

Her thumping stopped. "Excuse me?" Her ears flicked off in the direction of the jail entrance, she could hear hooves pounding down the hallway. It wouldn't be long now.

"For helping you catch the culprit that was stalking you from within your very own department." She sniggered.

Judy paused, "Detective Oates escaped. We were unable to apprehend him."

"How curious you defer to him by his proper title still, after what he's tried to do to you." Rouge mused, her perpetual leer never leaving her twisted maw.

Judy shook her head to diffuse her thoughts, "This is beside the point." As a quick amendment, she added, "Thank you, though, for tipping us off to him but we would have eventually discovered who it was anyway without your help."

"I'm sure." The bat stopped pacing, her cackles aggravating.

"You seem to know a lot about Oates, about how this city works and more. How is it that you know all these things? Is it because you've been stalking us all from up high?" She asked.

Judy knew she was leading the question a bit, half in hopes that Rouge would vindicate her suspicions and agree with her. With an admission of guilt, she may have a leak in the bat case where
she could try the lot of them as a collective whole and banish them legally from Zootopia. It was a risky and bold move but it's not like there wasn't some precedent for it.

"Because this is so similar to where I lived." Rouge revealed cryptically. "Oates was there but Bellwether was much nicer to me."

Judy's growing attention to the impending footsteps halted abruptly as she turned her full attention to the aged bat. "What do you mean? How do you know of Bellwether?"

Seeing an opening, Rouge rolled back onto her haunches. "Release me and I will tell you everything." She inclined her head toward the ring of keys dangling on Judy's paw.

"No, you tell me everything first." She bargained, slipping the keys behind her back, out of view.

Rouge feigned disinterest, indicating with a wing tip the hall leading to the detective offices. "Suit yourself Judy. Something tells me that whoever is coming for you will probably lock you away in a special prison of your own and then you'll never know the truth of things."

Judy saw the stalemate and she knew she was not going to convince Rouge any other way in the short amount of time that they had left. The booming footsteps resounded down the room; she had seconds left to act. She bit her lower lip hard, for once unsure of what she should do. If she released Rouge, then Chief Bogo would most likely fire her and quite possible arrest her on the spot. If she didn't, then she probably would have no more leads on the case with the bats and how to put an end to their menace. Judy realized now that despite all previous encounters, Rouge was no friend to her.

A loud bang from the hall forced Judy to turn. Rouge saw the opening and reached out for her. With a claw stuck in the gown, the bat dragged the rabbit to the bars and ripped the keys from her paws. "What are you doing?" Judy yelled, trying to shove off from her grip.

Snubbing the question, she pushed Judy to the ground with the key ring in hand. In seconds, she had the proper key into the lock and the door unlocked before Judy could recover. Swinging the door wide, Rouge pounced atop the bunny, the entirety of her fetid bulk pressing heavily on Judy's chest. She was large by common standards and it was quite evident with her covering all of Judy's body. The bat's heated breath wafted over her sensitive nose, causing Judy to almost gag from the smell.

"Thank you muchly." Rouge grinned. "I do want you to understand something; I do consider you a good friend, one of the few in this forsaken city." She opened her mouth revealing her rows of teeth, two extended more prominently than the others. "Do remind me to thank Herbert for me. He was very helpful. I now know the location of what's left of this so-called Night Howler serum."

"The janitor?" Judy mouthed. Her expression turned vile. "You lied to me!" She tried to squirm from underneath the oppressive bat. "You liar! You had no intention of telling me anything!"

Rouge drew back genuinely hurt, "Judy, that stabs me deep in the heart that you would say that. I always keep my promises." Bogo, Nick, Carla and Jimmy led the charge into the cells. Each made eye contact with Rouge, hunkered over Judy with fangs bared. She swiveled her neck back to the rabbit, "But now is not the right time to tell you. Don't worry about me. I'll come find you when I'm ready."

Gasping from the sudden release of pressure, she began coughing as she twisted over onto her side to see Rouge surging down the hallway. She scampered up the walls, skittering along the ceiling before dropping to the floor, evading gun shots the entire way. Rouge swooped low under an aimed punch from Carla before sweeping her up off her feet, flipping the hyena in a somersault before landing hard on the floor.
"Stop that bat!" Bogo roared, stabbing a finger hoof in the direction of Rouge's exit. Nick gave one last, lingering look at Judy, wanting nothing more than to rush to her side and check to see if she was all right. At a glare from the chief, he relented and filed out quickly with Jimmy in tow, guns raised. Carla groaned, using the wall to steady herself before giving a brief nod to Bogo before engaging the pursuit.

"Chief, I can explain." Judy exhaled loudly, grimacing from the pain just now creeping back into her muscles.

"You damn well better Hopps!" He boomed; glaring down at her from above with his beefy arms crossed. "In fact, I think you better explain first just why exactly you are out of the custody of the protection we put you under."

"Custody?" She stood aghast. "I'm not some prisoner, sir. I am a police officer and I should be given the proper amount of respect of one who has done good works for the ZPD and this city."

"No, respect is giving to an officer that follows the law and adheres to the tenants of the force!" Bogo corrected. "Not to someone who blatantly disobeys orders and continually causes a pain in the ass!"

Ignoring the slight, she pressed, "Sir, I have reason to believe that these bats are being masterminded by Rouge and are coordinating attacks across the city to eliminate the four major crime bosses of Zootopia."

"You mean the very bat we saw you release just a few moments before?" He snorted.

"I know how it looks but it wasn't what it was!" Her ears dropped, it really did look pretty incriminating with the circumstantial evidence.

Rubbing his forehead, feeling the onset of a raging migraine coming on, he groaned, "Hopps, I appreciate your fervor in wanting to solve cases but I cannot so easily sweep this under the rug." She opened her mouth to speak but he folded over her protests. "Yes, we knew about the coordinated attacks on the crime bosses which is why we placed Stipe and Longneck under our protection in the first place. Your partner Wilde discovered this out by your own admission if you recall."

"Yet you had reason to deny me the courtesy of letting me know it was Mr. Big that had been attacked last week!" Judy rambled her fits into her hips with anger. She would have looked quite menacing if it weren't for the fact she was so small. "You had Nick, Carla and Jimmy lie to me this entire time that they knew nothing about his death!"

"Due to your previous connection with the criminal, I deemed it prudent to have that information classified." He pointed at her. "It seems you proved me right by doing exactly what we witnessed here today by setting her free. If I didn't know any better, I would wager you had something to gain by having Rouge kill Mr. Big."

"That's not how it was!" Judy held her paws out in supplication. She felt she was sliding down a slope she couldn't climb up. "She had vital information for me about Bellwether-"

"Who is already behind bars."

"But you had reason to deny me the courtesy of letting me know it was Mr. Big that had been attacked last week!"

"Who is already behind bars." Bogo interrupted. "You have deliberately defied my orders time and again Hopps and now you are concocting absurd conspiracy theories to cover up the fact that you purposefully came here, escaping your protective consort, to release a known killer back into the populace. Your job was to stop these attacks from happening and now you're perpetuating it further!"
"Sir, if you were to just let me explain!" She wanted desperately to relate her position but that was destroyed the moment Clawhauser stumbled in, seemingly having run the entire distance to relay his message.

"Chief Bogo!" He cried out, clearly out of breath. "Herbert was just found lying unconscious near the evidence labs! They've been broken into and the Night Howlers were taken!"

Bogo clenched his jaw hard, grinding teeth as he considered his next decision. The moment she heard the awful news, Judy shrunk back from the chief's wrath. She knew it was all over for her. He slowly pivoted his head to face her. "Your badge…now." His tone commanded no resistance and would tolerate no refusal.

"But sir…" She began.

"Badge!" He thrust his hoof out to receive it. "I don't care anymore of your past accomplishments. I don't care about your being the public face of the ZPD. You have proven time and again that you are willing to bend the rules to suit your own personal code of ethics. Now with a murderous bat on the loose with the savage-inducing serum at large, released by your paws, I can no longer turn the other cheek on your account. As of this moment, effective immediately, you are suspended from duty without pay until such time we set a court hearing for your testimony on these incidents. Now hand me your badge."

Clawhauser was riveted to the spot at the entryway, his eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. He couldn't believe his ears and his heart yearned for Judy in that moment. With tail swishing agitatedly, he somehow felt responsible for this turn of events, as if it was his fault that Judy was being suspended. He could see her lower lip quivering from the very thought of losing the one thing that gave her purpose, the singular job that gave meaning to her existence.

At length, she yielded and placed a paw in Bogo's hand. "Yes sir." She was defeated. "I don't have it on me as you can see. Just ask my partner Nick for it when he gets back. He'll retrieve it for you from the apartment you confined me in."

He flapped his ears petulantly at her final, flippant remark. "Don't think I do not care for you Judy. I do. However, do not try my patience with Lionheart."

"Excuse me?" Her ears perking, she looked up at him curiously. Clawhauser placed both paws over his mouth in shock at Bogo's slip of the tongue.

"Enough! Clawhauser! See to it that Hopps is detained and escort her to the garage for transport back to Hyenandez's home. She is to be under house arrest until further notice." After observing her visible injuries further, he changed the order, "On second thought, take her to Mercy Hospital to get treated first. We will hold her there."

"Yes sir!" He jiggled from the sudden movement to rush in and gently grab Judy by the arm. Bending as he walked alongside her, making sure not to make eye contact with the chief, he whispered, "I'm sorry for this Judy."

She met his gaze. "I am too."

"So what did you say to James to get them to release us?" Judy hissed, trying not to attract the attention of Skye who was leading them through the halls that would dump them out of the outer wall and into the city interior.

Before Nick could answer, Skye flicked her ears back and responded for him. "It wasn't a matter of
what he said but more a matter of who he is."

Dawn and Judy both looked at him in confusion, "What is she talking about?" She asked.

"Looks like I suddenly have a son!" Skye lilted, finding great humor in this.

Judy's eyes snapped back to Nick, "Is this true?"

He bowed his head slightly in affirmation, his focus lost on the ground immediately in front of them. "The DNA test proved it. James seemed to recognize me almost at once and ordered it done to prove it."

"But that doesn't explain why he allowed us free." Dawn huffed, raising her bruised arms and torn clothes. "It didn't seem they were the least bit willing to free us earlier!"

"He wasn't going to initially." Skye answered, unlocking a barricaded door, watching as the metal plates slid into the wall.

"I told him he was no father of mine if he did not release the one I loved." Nick stated flatly, without looking at Judy.

She was a bit taken aback at his stance on the matter. Granted, their relationship had been a bit rocky these past few weeks but she never doubted his love for her. She just never realized how far he'd go to defend that love. She moved to put a paw on his arm for comfort. Noticing the motion, he shuffled a bit further away but kept following Skye out into the secured, double-doored room that would deposit them outside.

"It is indeed quite remarkable that a predator would stick up for you." Skye remarked with a hint of wonder in her voice. She turned around to face them, her paw casually rested on the tranquilizer gun on her hip. "After seeing how vehemently Nick fought for your freedom, James was convinced to set you free."

"Yet you are an armed escort and we're still not free of our collars." Judy picked at the device around her neck.

"Well, you are prey after all. We have to keep some precautions in place." She smirked.

"How comforting." Dawn mumbled under her breath.

"Now that you have been given lease to roam about the city, may I welcome you to Zootopia." Skye indicated behind her with a flourish as the second set of metal bay doors slid open.

Ahead of them lay the main street which looked remarkably similar to one they knew back home in Savannah Central. The clouds promenading above covered the sun which cast a slight pall on the entire scene. Tons of tall buildings flanked the streets with multiple predators bustling, going about their business for the day. Huddled in small groups here and there were meek prey, the lights on their collars visible even from this distance as they walked in the shadows of the high risers.

Skye gave a contented sigh as she beheld the city street, "Isn't it a glorious paradise for predator and prey alike? Do you see how much better life is with prey contained like this?"

"I don't see how it is." Judy commented defiantly.

Ignoring the bunny's attitude, the silver fox motioned for them to follow as she led them to the city's heart. "So you said you wanted to see the chief of our ZPD here? Is that still correct?"
Judy nodded, "Yes, if that isn't against some regulations that you have."

Skye glanced back behind her, gauging if the rabbit was being sarcastic. "Not yet." She threatened passively. "It isn't a far walk, just don't lag behind or I will shoot you and drag you myself."

"She's a charming mother." Dawn snarked, relishing the effect it had on Nick.

"It's not something I asked for." Nick shot back, vexed at the ewe. "I was happy enough with my true mother."

"I bet she was a real peach too, just like your father." She mocked, unknowing of the nerve it would strike.

"Nick!" Judy cried, shocked as he backhanded the sheep across the face, knocking her to the ground. Several collared prey shied away from them, quickly making their way across the street to maintain distance from their group. Skye merely looked on with mild interest.

"You know nothing of my mother!" Nick snarled, fangs bared. "She was the most important vixen in my entire life. She raised me to be the fox I am today, something my father failed to do when he ditched my mother and me."

"Something he does regret to this day." Skye informed.

"He could have fooled me!" He rounded on her, green eyes glinting. "I honestly didn't want to come here and I would have been better off not knowing he was still alive. In fact, it was easier to think he was dead because then it saved me from the pain of knowing he still lives without a single, damn care in the world over the pain and grief he caused this family! The only reason I attempted such a crappy hustle to lie to you initially was to get in here on Judy's account!"

"It was rather unconvincing." Skye leaned back, arms crossed, an amused look on her face.

"So why did you come here Nick?" Judy nudged, wanting him to say what she wanted to hear. As much as their relationship was tense recently, she still wanted to know that everything was okay between them.

His expression softened as he turned to face her directly. "Because of you." Even this got a raised eyebrow from Dawn. "I've made many mistakes in my lifetime but the worst mistake I ever made was hurting you." Without asking, he took her paws in his and looked her straight in the eyes, ignoring the stares of everyone around them for he didn't care about them at all. "I knew from the moment you suggested it that it was a horrible idea to release Bellwether and have her guide us here to this Zootopia. I remember what it was like before my mom whisked me away from this awful place to live in the new, better Zootopia. This was a place full of bad memories that I did not want to come back to. I only chose to come to protect you because I did not trust that sheep."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence." Dawn muttered as she picked herself up off the ground, gingerly nursing her sore cheek.

Judy blushed as she became self-aware of the stares they were getting, not just from Skye and Dawn but from every predator and prey who was witnessing this moment. Shyly, she spoke, "Nick, thank you. You don't know how much that means to me. I've been going on what feels like fumes for the last few weeks and I'm simply exhausted. I missed having you as my anchor."

"This is truly fascinating." Skye marveled. "I was at first disbelieving when James said he saw a fire burning in your eyes but now I'm convinced he knew what he was talking about." She clicked her fingers and pointed at them. "Now I know what he meant by letting you go free. He wanted to see
what you'd do and how you two would interact given the current climate within Zootopia."

"Don't patronize us." Nick frowned. "As far as I'm concerned, I should share the same fate as her. I would like a collar as well."

"Nick!" Judy did not wish this horrible fate on him.

"I mean it." He held up a paw to stall the forthcoming objection. He took the collar of his police shirt and lowered it to reveal his neck. "Put one on me right now. I will share in her misery."

Skye regarded them long and hard before uncrossing her arms. "I'm afraid I cannot do that. As moving as your speech was, I am not one to disobey my husband. He gave me strict orders to keep you free from the collars and to keep your friends controlled with them. If you wish to change that, then you're going to have to take it up with him."

"Then let's go back now. Why waste time here?" He put his paws out, gesturing back the way they came.

The vixen shook her head, "He's a bit busy at the moment trying to quell-"

She didn't get to finish as two rams bolted out of a side street, running full speed towards a nearby parked car. "Death to predators!" They both shouted as they slammed into the car, heaving it up off the cement and hurling towards the four of them. Dawn screamed in terror as she hit the ground quivering. Nick leapt atop Judy, pulling her down with him, covering her body with his. It sailed just inches over their heads, clipping the top follicles of fur on Judy's ears in passing.

Skye clucked her tongue as she sidestepped the flung vehicle, letting it crash into another across the street, drawing screams from several bystanders. With the deftness of her species, she rushed over behind an adjacent car that was parked beside the one that was tossed. Clambering up onto the hood, she bounced down and drop kicked the larger ram in the face. The second one made a swing at her which she easily ducked under before sweeping her foot out to trip him onto his rump.

The first recovered quickly and grappled the vixen by the tail before swinging her around above his head before smashing her into a nearby lamp post. Seeing the brutality of it, Judy was incensed that these rams would be attacking like this, regardless of them being prey or predator. Wriggling out from Nick's grip, she bounced up onto her feet before charging headlong into the second ram, just now getting up off the ground. He turned one second too late as she hopped into the air, feet first, and collided both hind paws into his chest.

"What in the heck?" The first ram yelled, his face tracking the movement of his buddy as he flew through the air, smashing into the nearby store front window, shattering it to pieces. "What are you doing attacking us for?" He locked eyes with the hare, gesticulating with his hoof to his own collar. "We're on the same team you dumb rabbit!"

"And I don't care much for this senseless, stupid violence between predator and prey. You don't just go around attacking people because of who they are!" With a short sprint and jump, she soared through the air feet first.

She never got to finish her attack as the light on her collar turned bright red, giving her a petrifying jolt to her nervous system. She flailed in the air before hitting the pavement hard, her body twitching uncontrollably. The ram just shook his head at her ineptitude of being able to circumvent her emotions when being aggressive with the collars on.

He was rumbling over to check on his buddy when Nick vaulted onto the sheep's back, trying in
vain to perform a stranglehold on the brute. The meaty neck was a bit too thick for him to get his entire arm around and only served to make the ram angrier. He swerved around, trying to shake off the fox, his stubby front hooves wobbling fruitlessly to gain purchase on his fur. With a savage cry, he backed up quickly, slamming Nick up against the building and knocking the breath out of him.

"You're going to pay for that fox!" He sneered, watching as Nick slid down the wall gasping. He raised his hoof to punch him square in the snout in hopes to break in his skull but was suddenly writhing on the ground in agony.

"And thank you for ignoring me long enough to get close." Skye spat a wad of blood onto the ground, holding up in plain view a device that looked quite similar to a television remote. Slipping it into her pocket, she whipped out her gun and aimed it at the broken window. The second ram had his hands raised; having just come around from being unconscious. Slowly taking her sweet time, she opened up her flip phone and began dialing a number with her free paw. After a few moments a voice came on the line, "Yes James, we were just attacked by two rams in the middle of broad daylight."

Recovering from the sudden jolt from the collar, Judy wobbled up on all fours. The ram was convulsing right in front of her, his anguished shouts echoing down the still road. Predators stood watch in silence as prey were enraptured with fear but could not find the strength to run or look away. "Skye…please stop hurting him. He doesn't deserve this."

Snubbing her request, the fox turned her back and continued to talk on the phone. "I understand, and they are being punished for it."

Nick began to use the wall to assist in standing; he caught on to the distress this was causing Judy. "Skye, stop this." His nose twitched as he could smell burning wool and flesh.

"Are you sure?" Skye asked urgently, an anxious expression on her face. "There are many witnesses and Nick is with me."

Judy got to her feet and took a step toward the slender fox, "You're killing him! Stop the collar now!" Smoke was emanating from underneath the collar, the ram was gurgling on the frothing blood spilling up into his mouth.

"Yes, they're all here and-" Skye looked around quickly, she did not see Dawn. "Stop right there!" She pointed the gun at Judy who was getting a bit too close. Turning to Nick she queried, "Did any of you see where the ewe went?" They all looked around and realized that Bellwether had taken the opportunity to escape. She was nowhere in sight.

Nick advanced on Skye, claws out, "I don't care who you are and what relation to me, I am still a cop in the ZPD and I will not tolerate you simply murdering a citizen!"

Casually shifting her aim back to Nick, she held the phone in the crook between her shoulder and ear and raised the remote with a waggle. "Don't tempt me on doing the same thing to your one, true love." This elicited a growl from him, but he did indeed stop his forward movement.

Judy ached in her heart that she could do nothing to stop the horrible scene from unfolding before her. You just didn't kill criminals because they did wrong. You arrested them, tried them in court, jailed them and hopefully in time, rehabilitated them. This sort of barbaric torture was beyond her scope of tolerance. No matter what option or avenue she could take right now, it would result in her electrocution. The ram's partner stood horrified as his buddy was croaking and thrashing on the ground, his eyes popping, movements getting weaker and less drastic with every passing second.
Refocusing back on the conversation, Skye resituated her phone back on her ear, "James, the sheep has disappeared. Yes, yes, I will go find her. What do you want me to do with the two rams?" After a moment, she shut her eyes tightly. An expression of regret passed her face, as if she was not agreeable to the decision James had made on the other end. "Yes, I'll do just that. I'll text you when it's done."

With a click, she put the phone in her pocket before turning to the ram still standing in the remains of the window he had flown through. He had his hands raised as she casually walked up to him. She held the remote up to begin the process of electrifying him to death. Before she could start, he blurted, "Please! I don't want to go out like that! Just kill me quickly."

She gave him a pointed look, considering his request. "Very well. You'll at least be unconscious when you go." Both Judy and Nick screamed as she un-holstered her gun, raised it and fired.

Chapter End Notes

So I knew this would be a pretty intense chapter in both arcs but deciding which to give the bigger face time to wasn't exactly a hard decision. I knew a lot had to happen with Judy in the past to get her to the point where we have her start following the breadcrumbs that'll lead her to the sixth (or old) Zootopia. Since she left the apartment with no direction, I knew I needed to get her in a direction where she could come by this vital info drop from Rouge, so making the bat victim be Mr. Big made perfect sense because of her past meetings with the mob boss. Having Fledermaus and Quill return as bearers of that info was icing on the cake for me. The hardest part to write was definitely the scene between Rouge and Judy, I needed to structure it in such a way that the small 'old Zootopia' drop didn't seem forced nor did it give enough away to Judy given what she knows later about the place further down the timeline. Finally, we come to the first key decision Bogo makes that puts him on a clear path to the big mistake he makes that forces Judy away from Zootopia. Him dropping Lionheart's name was a nice bit of tease about his backstory. The second arc was a bit more simple but the primary thing I wanted to establish here was how drastic this old Zootopia was compared to the one we know and what passes as the 'norm' for mammals living in it. A gut wrenching scene but one that clearly shows just how bad it's gotten for all citizens involved and indicates to the reader the tension beneath the surface that is waiting to explode.
Chapter 22: Accidental Hero

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

All four of them were still reeling from the revelation that there simply were no more predators in Zootopia anymore. What had transpired here to have it get so bad that an all-out genocide was necessary to restore peace and order? What made things worse was that both Percival and the two pigs were adamant that Judy was the one who led the charge to eradicate every single predator. They just couldn't fathom the concept.

Percival eventually picked up Mai as well and hefted her onto his right shoulder alongside Judy on the left after seeing how much she was struggling to walk. He turned his head slightly so his left eye made contact with Judy, "So it's been quite a long time since we last saw you. How much do you remember?"

She surveyed the streets around them, searching in hopes that they would be able to spot some predators still left, but was disappointed to see nothing but prey. "Not terribly much. I woke up from a coma not that long ago and I haven't been able to remember much from before it. It comes back in bits and pieces."

The stag nodded his head, "Things have surely changed since you were last here. They've gotten far more peaceful and closer to the utopia that was promised us when this city was first built."

"I don't think that was the point." Nala interposed. "Daddy always told me that Zootopia was the idea of predator and prey working together to make a great city."

A small snort escaped the deer's nostrils, "Well of course he would say that about Zootopia to lure us in, he's a predator."

"And he's my dad." She shot back, getting angry at the stag.

"And my husband." Judy reminded, sharing a look with Jack. They hadn't mentioned Nick at all being a predator, yet somehow this stag knew exactly who and what he was.

"The one you barely remember now?" The male pig walking alongside Jack asked gruffly.

"Excuse me, who are you again?" Jack grilled, just as irritated at the general attitude of these prey. He was still trying to figure out how Judy could have been responsible for this turn of events.

"Pardon my husband." The female pig interceded, getting between the two with an exaggerated smile. "He's just a bit on edge with new visitors. We all are. We've just so recently achieved tranquility here and we're just anxious that we'll lose it just as quick. He's Mr. Ryend and I'm Mrs. Ryend, but you can call us Hans and Fransine. We work underneath Percival Stagford as deputies."

Judy angled her head to get a better look at one of the deer's eyes, "You're chief of police here?" Although he seemed familiar, she didn't quite remember that.

"If you can believe it, yeah!" He chuckled, kicking an extra bounce in his step. "I'm off duty at the moment as are my two colleagues, but it was all thanks to you, Judy. Shortly after the coup, because of your involvement, they wanted to make you the new chief for having led us so valiantly against the predators."
"It was quite the sight, wasn't it Hans?" Fransine cooed, giving her husband a small nudge in the flabby ribs to nod in unison with her.

Percival's expression faded, "Unfortunately, you didn't want the role and decided it best you abandon all of this." He gestured to the entirety of the city around them. "So I was made chief by default, which is fine by me. This place has never been better!"

Mai looked around to see that the roads and buildings, although cracked and crumbling from disrepair, still looked amazingly untouched. "Where are all the bodies?"

"That's kind of an odd question to ask." The stag shifted, adjusting the two bunnies perched on his shoulders.

"How long ago was all this?" Mai pressed, trying to catch Judy's eye. "Maybe three or four years ago?" She gave a quick nod to Judy to let her know something didn't sit well with her. If anything, they didn't say one word about Judy having amnesia and unable to remember a lot of things. The fact Percival brought up Judy's memory loss before they did set her hairs prickling, not to mention knowing already her husband was a predator.

"Oh, not that long actually. Maybe a year ago?" He turned to the two pigs who smiled and bowed their heads together in agreement with his assertion.

"Really?" Mai mused and repeated. "So where are all the bodies? In our Zootopia, there are a ton of predators and if it's anything like here, you'd be hard pressed to clean all of them up even in a year's time." She looked down and finally caught a look from Jack who seemed to be having similar doubts about these three mammals.

Percival brayed, "Look, I don't know why you bunnies are interrogating us! We've done nothing wrong and have shown nothing but hospitality to you." He waved a hoof in front of them. "We had an 85% prey population here in this Zootopia; that was more than enough to help clean up this place in so short a time."

"You ungrateful, little-" Hans started.

"Shush dear!" Fransine placed a hoof on his rising arm. "They don't know any better."

Even Nala was just starting to realize a great inconsistency, "Wait, my mom was in a coma for-"

Jack quickly placed a paw over the kit's mouth before speaking over her, "I do apologize for our behavior. We're just exhausted and maybe even a little bit stressed from the long journey we had getting here. Is the ZPD far from here and are there accommodations available for us to spend the night?"

The deer looked down at Nala for a moment before shifting his gaze to the two pigs who shared a non-verbal cue. At length, he focused ahead of them, "Yes, there are some living quarters inside the station where you can bed down for the evening. It's not far now. It would actually be an honor to have you four share a meal with us tonight."

"With the bats no longer here, you could stay with us and make a new life for yourselves!" Fransine suggested with glee, clapping her hooves together.

"Frankly, we're actually here to gather information to help stop the bats in our city. We didn't come here to stay." Jack informed, walking brusquely alongside the ecstatic pig.

"Pity." Percival remarked. "Well, the least we can do is assist you in finding the information you
seek so you can be on your way. I believe there may be some data in the ZPD archives you can pull. I do hope you find whatever you're looking for." He said with sincerity.

Realizing the conversation had taken a rather sour turn, Judy stepped in, "We do appreciate the offer and we'll graciously accept it. It's been a long day and we'd like to rest first, maybe find a place to charge our phones, and then start first thing in the morning." She gave a brief shake of her head to the other three rabbits before smiling back at the stag.

"Of course." He bounced her slightly on his shoulder. "Speaking of which, we're just about there."

He indicated the grand building before them as they turned the corner. It rested across from them past a central plaza where a few cars were driving through the roundabout. In the center was a majestic fountain that cascaded its flow down seven pools into the bottom basin.

The ZPD here looked more like a glorified bear cave, but constructed out of sleek marble with multiple pillars jutting out at odd angles from the base, giving it a rather imposing look. There were two grand double-doors at what was designed to be the entrance to the cave façade; a rather unique architectural illusion.

Several mingling prey noticed Percival and gawked at the bunnies he was carrying. A few began pointing and whispering to each other as they swept past them alongside the sidewalk. Some began to recognize Judy for who she was and slowly a crowd began to form and started trailing them on their way to the ZPD.

Mai glanced around at the increasing crowd, "Looks like you are well known in multiple cities it seems Judy."

"I don't know why." She said flustered. "I don't feel like a hero in either."

"Come now!" Percival refuted, "You give yourself so little credit. Let me re-introduce you to the rest of the team. They will be happy to see you again."

They had at last made it to the front entrance and with a quick tilt of the head he motioned for the two pigs to open the doors for them as they strode right on through. The foyer spanned several stories much like theirs from home, but was centralized around a single elevator surrounded by a raised pool with palm trees and tropical plants growing out of it, providing a very open and natural atmosphere. The upper levels seemed closed off past the second floor, unlike the tiered layering of what Judy was used to.

The stag waved in greeting to several sheep, ibex, and even a tapir as they worked their way across the atrium. He inclined his head to prompt them to look over along the right wall with a hallway leading around the back side of the entry vestibule. "That's where the bullpen is. If anything, the mammals you may be familiar with will probably be in there at this time of day." He explained.

With both bunnies still perched on his shoulders, Percival pressed the doors open into the bullpen. Several mammals looked up from their case files and phones, but only two had active recognition on their faces. A very tired and weary looking kangaroo in full uniform and a grey koala standing on the table next to her in a dashing buttoned-up shirt and tie with form-fitting slacks.

The koala was the first to greet them as he hopped off the table and walked up to Percival, jovially shaking each rabbit's paw as the stag put them down on the ground. "Moon! Cortis Moon! What a pleasure it is to finally see you back safe and sound, Judy! And I see you've brought along some friends, or is it family? After the bats had dispersed, we feared that you were gone right along with them!" A small grunt from Percival had the koala change direction, "Regardless, now that you're
"They aren't actually here to stay." Fransine said morosely, sidling up next to her husband.

Cortis looked a bit taken aback, but he recovered quickly, "That's all right, just visiting then? Zootopia is a perfectly fantastic and safe place to vacation these days. I believe we all have you to thank for that, Judy!" He finger-gunned in her direction as he clicked his teeth.

"It's good to see you again Judy." The kangaroo tried her best to put on a smile, but only managed a half-hearted grin. After seeing the blank glaze over the bunny's eyes, she looked concerned, "Are you okay?"

Judy shook her head, trying to dispel her déjà vu, "No, it's fine. I just have amnesia and I really don't recall any of this." She gestured to the entire room around her.

"She apparently was in a coma for the last few years and has lost all memory of who we are and what happened." Percival clarified for the kangaroo. Extending a hoof out to her, he introduced, "This here is Libby Waller, our resident detective. She has been on the force far longer than any one of us here in this group. You could say we are the new recruits compared to her!" He laughed at this.

Mai and Jack noticed that Libby did not share the deer's mirth, instead just casted her eyes downward. Jack stepped forward, "This is all a little much, I'd like to get someplace where we can get our bearings and get a rundown of what happened since Judy left. We also need access to the ZPD archives, if that's possible."

"I can grant you access..." Libby began.

"All in due time!" Cortis slapped Jack on the back herding him and the other four bunnies across the bullpen towards the other exit. "For now, I'll show you to the briefing room and we can lay it all out for you there!"

With little recourse for any other alternatives, the four bunnies followed the koala with the two swines and stag in tow. Nala looked back one last time to see a rather defeated look on Libby as they left her behind in the bullpen. With a small shrug, she gingerly hopped back over to the table they originally saw her at and begin sifting through paperwork.

The layout of the ZPD here was a bit more confusing than most. Being circular around the central foyer, it had a lot of switchbacks to accommodate the offices in-between each of the hallways. At length, they emerged into a descending slope auditorium fit for a couple dozen mammals to seat, all facing a large projection screen built into the wall with several slide-away chalk boards that could cover the screen.

"Please, please, take your seats." Cortis gestured towards the front row. The pig couple took up position at the exit while Percival sat right next to Judy. "So, what questions do you have for us? As a dear friend to the city, we're willing and able to do what we can for you, Judy." Cortis beamed with paws clasped in front.

Judy looked from her friends to the deer beside her to the koala up on the podium. "Why does everyone seem to know me?" It seemed to be the most obvious question to ask.

Cortis guffawed merrily, holding his belly in at the robust laughs. "Why? Because you are the one rabbit in all of Zootopia who actually got the bats under your control. You ordered them to slaughter the predators for us! Without your involvement, we could not have achieved victory in our war against them!"
Nala, Mai and Jack exchanged horrified looks as Judy's face flushed with both shame and guilt. Why would she even allow such an abhorrent act to happen under her orders?

Percival didn't give her much time to think as he chimed in, "And you helped figure out the code mechanism that removed all of our collars for us." He said, tapping the side of his neck to indicate the small depression in the fur still evident after all these years. In fact, all four of them had visible imprints where collars once were.

"Then you disappeared." Cortis dropped his paws to his side, looking downcast.

"Shortly after you rejected the position to lead the new ZPD order here, I went to go find you and you left with the bats." Percival finished for the koala.

"That doesn't make any sense." Mai was aghast. "She was being held prisoner for the last five years by the bats. There would be no way she'd agree to go along with them!"

"Unless it was part of the deal…" Judy said softly.

"Mom?" Nala put a paw on her mom's arm.

Judy shrugged, "Maybe what they're saying is true. Maybe I ordered the murder of thousands of predators by the hands of the bats to save the majority. I recall the situation being horrible, absolutely terrible for the prey living here. Maybe as part of the deal I was to be taken by Rouge in exchange for their cooperation."

"Well, whatever you did, it worked!" Cortis whooped, snapping his fingers. Mai's ear flicked irritatingly at the indifferent nature these prey had to this development. "We have all you to thank for making this city the utopia is was supposed to be. Granted, the clean-up job after the bats was a bit unsavory, but it was a small price to pay for freedom! Any other questions?"

"Yeah! When can we get the information Mom needs and get out of here!? I want to go back home!" Nala had her arms crossed and was looking angrily at the koala.

"Nala!" Mai pinched her on the arm.

"All business and no pleasure!" Percival chuckled, drawing some laughs from the pigs in the back too. "I get it, she's young and impatient. I also understand you've been traveling a long distance and need rest. Tell you what, let's situate you down with some cot beds here tonight and in the morning, I will take you to our archives and you can go find whatever it is you're looking for. It's the least we can do for the hero of Zootopia and her family!"

"That sounds like a splendid idea!" Cortis clapped his hands, bounding down from the stage and ushering the four rabbits out the door and down the hall.

Jack did his best to remain inconspicuous as he sidled over to Mai and whispered over to her, "I don't know about you, but something doesn't sit right with me about these guys."

"I agree." Mai looked up at Percival, who had a perpetual smile on his face as he was escorting them to their quarters. "Something isn't adding up. I can't really put my finger on it, but something seems seriously off here."

"Libby was sad." Nala interjected suddenly, popping up between them.

Judy was walking ahead of them, but heard every word. Nala was right, there seemed to be a huge divide between these four ZPD cops, which Percival pointed out earlier and the old guard, which
Libby was a part of. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Was she really that bloodthirsty back then? If she was, maybe she didn't want to remember what happened. She didn't want to face that part of herself.

Her whole body wracked with spasms wrought by her sobbing. She had been cooped up in her apartment for the better part of the day. Judy could do little else but pour her heart out onto her pillow. She had gotten the call early that morning from the doctor as they tested Nick's sperm with her eggs. It was incompatible and futile to think that a bunny could get pregnant by a fox. It seemed like such a silly fantasy now.

She jolted as a soft knock interrupted her misery. "H-hello?" She called out, trying her best not to sound like she had been crying for the past hour.

"It's me, Carrots, Nick." A comforting voice reverberated through the wood.

Sniffling, wiping her nose on her sleeve, she slipped off the bed and padded over to the door. Not caring she was just in a nightgown, she opened it, revealing Nick Wilde, the fox that was her husband. He was gallantly standing there in his trademark khaki pants and green-tinged, palm tree shirt. Even his tie was suited to match. In his paw was a bouquet of flowers, some of her favorite: autumn bluebells.

His expression softened into a loving smile as he regarded her with adoration. "Hey there, honey bunch. I figured you could use some pretty petals to cheer up the mood."

"Oh, Nick!" She cried, leaping into his arms, almost causing him to tip over onto his rump in the hallway. He caught her in time and twirled for a few moments before setting her down.

"May I come in, my lady?" He addressed formally.

She couldn't help but giggle at the way he fawned over her. She could scarcely remember why she had moved to Zootopia in the first place, but she had never expected to have a fox fall for her. It seemed all so confusing at first, but she strangely grew accustomed to having a predator love her unconditionally and she had learned to return that love tenfold.

"Of course you can, Officer Wilde." She imitated a curtsy and showed him in.

He raised a finger, "Uh-huh, I'm off duty. Just Nick will do for now, hun." He gave her a small peck on the forehead to which she blushed at. He was quick to pick up on her condition as he found a vase in her closet to put the flowers in. "Are you feeling any better this morning? You look like you've been crying."

"Uh…I'm fine." Judy lied, trying to re-wipe her eyes again with her sleeve.

Setting the flowered vase down on her nightstand, he turned to look at her, his backside resting comfortably on her table alongside the wall. "Judy, you can tell me what they said. I can guess, but let me be here for you. Please don't shut me out of this." He said a bit softer to himself, barely audible, "Not again."

The pain of this morning was slamming back with a vengeance. His arrival was only a brief reprieve. Sniffling again to hold back the tears, "We…we can't conceive. I know you've been very excited about having kits, but our genes are just not compatible."

If he looked devastated, he did not show it. Instead, he just shrugged. "We gave it our best shot, Carrots. That's all we can do."
Looking a bit offended, she clutched a paw to her chest. "You're not the least bit sad we won't ever be able to have children?"

His eyes locked onto hers, "I didn't say that. I'm saying we gave the natural way of producing kits our best shot." Judy flushed again, but he went on, "Besides, there are other ways we can be parents and have the family you always wanted." He seemed like he had this well-rehearsed as if he expected this outcome.

She raised her ears with interest, "There is?"

Nick nearly facepawed, "You are so innocent sometimes, Judy, it really is ridiculous. That's probably one of the many reasons why I love you." Judy looked like she was about to pout. "Relax, what I'm suggesting is a sperm bank. Don't give me that look. It is a perfectly legitimate way for couples who can't have children to get them. Sure, it won't be of my blood, but I'm more than happy raising a family with you even if they aren't fully mine. As long as one half of them is you, I'll be satisfied."

"You really know how to make a girl feel good, even after horrible news." She smiled, sitting back on her bed.

He plopped down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as she nuzzled into his chest. "So you still wanting to leave Zootopia?" He asked furtively.

She nodded into him, "Mhmm, I can't really find a job here. The market is very cutthroat and it is hard to catch a break in this city."

Nick looked off in some random corner of her room, deep in thought. "I know how that is. I'm well aware of how this city can chew you up and spit you out if you're not careful."

She extended out her paws in disbelief, "I mean, come on! This wolf lady at the bank denied me my application because our past engagements created a conflict of interest in my job! I was like, I don't even know you! We just met! What is up with that?"

Nick placed his muzzle on top of her head, between her ears. "I don't know, Carrots. Some people are just weird." She tittered at this. "I got an idea. Let's not mope around all day long over not having kids and get started on having kids!"

"What?" She pulled away and looked at him strangely. "You know that actually doesn't make any sense."

"To me it does. That's what matters." Nick smirked, causing her to punch him in the arm. "Ow, you are still really good at that!"

"Only because you give me so much practice!" Judy yipped, getting ready for another punch.

"Ay, easy there, killer." He surged back to the end of the bed, putting his paws up to ward off the next blow. "I'm not trying to make light of the situation, but I am serious about having kids. Let's just not think about it anymore and let's just go to a sperm bank and just get pregnant!"

"You seem overly eager for this, Nick." She observed, scratching her chin in mock thought.

"Just as eager as I am for you every day." He pounced, causing her to squeal as he nipped at her neck.

He was definitely helping her mood. As her husband, why would he not make her feel good? In fact, his very bulk on top of hers was causing other reactions as well. She began to breathe a bit faster as a
twinkle in her eye caught his. "Nick…can we? Now?" She bit her lower lip with wanting, her back arching up in response to his heat.

Still holding both her wrists above her head, he regarded her calmly. Presently, he withdrew, causing her to whine a bit, but he soothed her with a lick. "Carrots, I have a better idea that might suit the moment. How about we go now and set up an appointment to get inseminated. That very night, we can have sex and pretend it was that night that caused conception."

"That sounds remarkably sweet, but horrible out of context." Judy put a paw on his cheek, watching him press into it instinctively.

"It's a good thing you think I'm sweet." He grinned, showing his row of teeth.

"I'm starting to question." She raised an eyebrow.

"Come on," He rolled off of her with a grunt, bouncing off the bed and rummaging through her closet. "Let's get you dressed so we can hit the bank before it closes."

"Hey! It's not polite to poke your nose into a lady's wardrobe!" She proceeded to leap off the bed indignantly.

"Carrots, please." He looked back with mirth. "I've see far more than your panties since we've been married. Besides, I have better taste in clothes than you do!" He pulled out a pair of tight-fitting jeans with a frilled pink shirt with orchid print. He tossed them over to her.

"Says the fox who never changes his own style in over how many months?" She pointed out, jabbing a finger in his direction as she doffed the nightgown.

Feigning innocence, he retorted, "When you can buy me clothes to wear, I'll change up my look for you."

"That's not fair!" She shoved her head through the shirt. "I don't have a job yet to make money!"

"Not my problem!" He chortled, dodging a well-aimed swipe. "Them's the rules! I buy your clothes, you buy mine. Until such time you can buy me a new wardrobe, I'm happy with what I got."

"Urgh! Why do I put up with you again? You're horrible!" She jammed a leg through the pants before putting the other in.

"Because you know you love me." He simpered, leaning over to put his snout next to her cute, bunny nose.

Judy's expression fell, "Yeah, I do. You're the only one who will put up with me. It seems like everyone is either upset, mad, or just plain weird towards me. If I had known being a bunny in the city would be this difficult, I wouldn't have come."

"What do you mean, weird to you?" Nick's face grew taut, his arms pulling her close to him as he held her protectively.

Melting into his embrace, she informed him, "Oh, just sometimes I get the oddest calls from people I don't even know. Like some big deep sounding guy named Bogo. Going on about some cop position I should return to. I mean, can you imagine it? Me? A cop! That's ridiculous! I don't think there has ever been a bunny cop before!" She shook her head back and forth into his chest as she tried to contain her laughter.
"Yeah, that does sound pretty absurd." Nick joined in with her, although more subdued. "Let's just head on out. No need to dwell on this."

Judy agreed and grabbed the keys from her coat rack behind the door before walking out into the hallway with him. She was feeling a lot of trepidation about the whole affair. On one hand, she really wanted to raise a family with Nick. He was the sweetest fox, even with his annoying humor and habits. She never did find another bunny that attractive and she figured she could do far worse than Nick. It was a good thing he found her when he did. She had hardly any other people to interact with since returning to Zootopia after the nightmare.

She hadn't realized they were at the sperm bank already until she felt a small squeeze on her arm. "You sure about this, Nick?" Judy stood, looking up at the neon sign above them.

"Absolutely." Nick said with determination. His eyes steeled forward at the glass doors before them.

"Alright then, let's just…go on in there." Judy said uncomfortably, still self-conscious about going to a public space for so intimate an issue.

The bell jingled as they entered into the sterile waiting room of the facility deep in the heart of Savannah Central. Judy was gazing nervously all around. Nick smirked at her reactions. It could only mean one of two things. He was quite comfortable with the overall idea of this place or he had been here before to donate.

As he held the door open for her, another mammal stalked out, briefly bumping past her. She spun around and yelled out to him, "Hey! Watch it!"

"My apologies!" He shouted back. "I am in a hurry, so I must be going!"

"Nick shook his head, "What a dumb-dumb."

"You know that jerk?" Judy scowled at the retreating figure who was crossing the street before diving into the coffee café opposite them.

Nick studied the grey rabbit with the black stripes prominently displayed on his cheeks and backside of his head. "Actually, as a matter of fact, I don't." He lied.

Judy dusted off her shoulder. Just as well that it be a bunny. Further proof that Nick was far better for her than one of her kind. Not that it mattered who it was that ran into her. She had come to a decision that they were going to move back to Bunnyburrow. Her bleak job prospects and the appeal of moving back in with her mom and dad were a bit too much to ignore. The fact they absolutely treasured Nick as a son-in-law only helped her decision. As much as she loved the city, she would feel a lot more comfy going back home.

Judy was furious. If she wasn't honor bound by her code of ethics and Nick wasn't beside her to most likely put a stop to it, she probably would have strangled Skye. That silver fox continued on as if nothing had happened after she brutally killed those two rams in broad daylight in front of dozens of witnesses. With no remorse, she gunned them down and let the collars do the rest by providing a very unpleasant scene, not to mention smell, for those around as an example.

"You all right there, Carrots?" Nick wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

Her ears down and quivering, "No, I'm not all right. I just saw two innocent people get murdered right before my eyes and I could do nothing about it. I'm collared with this shocking device that hurts like the dickens and Bellwether escaped, our only lead in finding information we need to stop the
"Honestly, I don't see too much of a loss on that last one." Nick tried to lighten the mood.

"It is a very big loss!" Judy snapped, cringing as she did so. She didn't mean to yell at Nick for this. Even Skye glanced behind to check to see if everything was alright. In a more hushed whisper, "I don't see many options right now. All I'm concerned about is getting to the ZPD, figuring out who I have to talk to, to get information on how the bats were stored and contained here and any information on BOB."

"Bob? Is that someone I should know?" Nick was being eyed by a sow that looked absolutely confounded at his outward display of affection to Judy.

"No, it's an acronym. Bellwether was talking about it to me right before they released us. Her father was a part of it. They were apparently researchers or scientists here that did experiments on predator taming and more. It stood for Bellwether, Oates and one other." She explained.

"No idea the last name?" Nick pressed.

Judy just shook her head. "No, we were interrupted right before she was going to tell me."

"We're here." Skye announced unceremoniously.

Both Nick and Judy beheld the cave-like façade of the ZPD here in this Zootopia. It was quite an interesting visual illusion, very apt for a population that was predominantly controlled by predators. Entering into the station, it was quite bustling for what appeared to be a tightly controlled city. Various perpetrators were being hauled off in cuffs by officers and some being released. It wasn't until much later that Judy realized all were prey.

Skye sauntered up to a sniggering hyena, mottled spots dotting his hide as he was joking around with a fellow colleague. He wore a tight-fitting tactical vest with a roped automatic strapped to his back. He regarded the fox with some disinterest as she alighted atop the welcoming booth top.

Rolling his eyes, he excused himself from his previous conversation before attending to her more directly. "Morning, Skye. What is the boss having you do now?"

"Actually, what is the boss having you do?" She smirked, folding her arms. She motioned back to her two companions with her head, "This here is Nick Wilde, his son, and his...associate, Judy Hopps." The hyena sighed, but let her prattle on. "You are to keep watch over them and not let them escape. They are free to do as they wish so long as it doesn't disrupt law and order or cause them to remove her collar and run. Understood?"

Craning his neck to pop some satisfying cracks, the hyena turned to the fox and rabbit. "What a miserable looking pair. What will you be doing?"

Skye sniffed, looking off towards the entrance, clearly done with this conversation. "I'm heading back out to look for a wayward sheep. She gave me the slip earlier and I intend to bring her back."

"Losing your touch, Skye." He cackled.

"Mind your tongue, Hena. Know who you work for. Ciao!" She waved him off with a paw before slipping down off the side of the booth and addressing Nick, "Your dad has instructed me to allow you complete freedom here in Zootopia." She began before raising a finger up to emphasize, "However, Hopps here is to be at your side at all times and is not to be left alone. She is prey and a dangerous one at that."
"Only to those who get in her way." Nick growled, baring his teeth.

Undaunted, Skye continued, "To ensure you stay in line, I'll be giving Lieutenant Hena here the remote that will control your lover's violent tendencies." She passed the collar button over to the grinning hyena who took it gleefully.

"We need to do research here and once we're done, we will be leaving this." Judy didn't get the rest of her words out before Skye snapped her fingers and Hena enthusiastically pressed the remote.

Nick was livid, claws coming out almost immediately. "Stop it right now!" His voice was firm, but it did not hide well the panic underneath as his eyes turned to Judy, convulsing and screeching from the electricity lancing through her neck.

At another finger snap, the pain was over. Judy was gasping for air and curling into a fetal position on the floor. Most onlookers didn't bother to stop and continued hurrying along their merry ways.

With calm demeanor, Skye stepped forward to get eye to eye with Nick. "Wilde, the sooner you accept the realization that this is done for our own protection as well as yours, the better off your experience here will be."

"Judy isn't like that! None of you get it!" He reached down and picked her up off the floor, allowing her to collapse onto him for support. "She and I are in love. I thought you could see that back out there."

The fox's expression did soften, but she still remained resolute, "I did, and it was quite the novel thing to see. It touched my heart to see it. However, the mere fact of what she is precedes her. I have languished far too long under their tyrannical rule to simply let one slip by without at least a little precaution."

"Seems like a rather big precaution." Judy croaked, still defiant to the last.

"I swear on my mother if you so much as touch that button, I will slice you to ribbons." Nick warned, seeing as the hyena was about ready to shock Judy again.

"Hena, stand down!" Skye ordered upon seeing as he was getting ready to raise the butt of his gun to deliver a nasty blow to Nick's head. "We do not harm the son of our leader, is that understood?"

After a menacing look, the hyena stood down. Turning back to Nick, "We still are unsure what to do with you two just yet, in all honesty. On one hand, James is overjoyed to have his son back, on the other, he is disheartened that you didn't come back for him."

"Why do you even bother to stay with that lunatic? He's crazy and no less tyrannical than the prey you subjugate!" Nick pointed out, fuming.

Skye turned to the side, looking askance at him, "I stay by my husband because I believe what he is doing is right. Even if I don't agree with all his methods, I do respect and understand where he has been. Where I have been. We've both been through so much hell that it has brought us together as a result. That is why I'm willing to kill for him." She resituated her tranquilizer gun on her hip. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a sheep to corral."

Without another word, they all watched Skye flick her tail and leave promptly out into the sunlight before disappearing beyond into the milling crowds. Grumbling, Hena turned to the two of them, "Come on, I'll show you to your 'chief.'" He motioned with his gun to have them walk ahead of him.

They were directed to enter what appeared to be a bullpen, complete with multiple tables with varying sizes of seats to accommodate a variety of different mammals. The most prominent looking
one was a zebra in full regalia complete with medals adorning his left breast, an odd thing for an officer to sport during a normal work day. He was talking to a female kangaroo who was also wearing the traditional ZPD blues, just a bit more awkwardly due to her lower bulk and tail.

Noticing their arrival, the zebra looked a bit perturbed, but did not let it outwardly influence his attitude towards them. "Yes, Lieutenant Hena? How may I assist you today?" As cordial as the greeting was, Judy picked up on the fact that his undertone was a bit frosty.

Sniggering, "Skye has us watching these two. They're...tourists from out of town with authorization to look into ZPD records to assist in their investigation of the bats." Hena snorted, even the reason for their existence here sounded ridiculous.

Exhaling loudly enough to hear, the zebra resigned himself to nodding his head at the hyena before bending low and offering his hoof to the fox and rabbit. "Welcome to Zootopia. My name is Harold Herdtrotter and I am the chief here at the ZPD." For a chief, he didn't seem like he was at the top of the food chain here, himself wearing a collar with a blinking, green light.

Judy shied away from the hoof, drawing a look of confusion from Harold. Nick had to fill in the gap, thrusting his paw out to shake, "I'm Nick, this is Judy. You'll have to excuse my friend here. She had a bit of a bad run-in with another horse and is a bit cautious around your kind."

"Of the equine persuasion." Nick put up his paws to correct himself. "My apologies, you all are kind of big to rabbits and tend to blend together."

"Nick!" Judy hissed, leaning into him hard. "Let's try not to get off on the wrong foot with the ZPD here! This isn't Bogo!"

"Bogo?" Harold reared back up, looking a bit aloof. "You know Arthur Bogo?"

"Arthur?" Nick looked a bit shocked. "Is that his first name?"

"It isn't." Judy clarified.

"Well, this is all good and fascinating, but I have to get back to my post. You can handle them while I'm gone, I take it?" He simpered at the chief.

"I'm not an imbecile, of course I can." Harold rebutted.

"Good." With a chuckle, he turned to the kangaroo. "Hey, Libby."

"We still on for later?" He clicked his tongue, giving her a wink.

"O-of course. Right after work." She confirmed, wringing her hands behind her back.

"Good girl. I'll see you then." He did an off-handed salute to Harold before faux-marching off back towards the foyer.

Harold flapped his lips irritably, "Officer Waller, how many times must I remind you to maintain professional bearing while in uniform and on duty? I don't care what you have going on with that
hyena, you need to know your place and act accordingly."

"Yes, sir." She shut up immediately, almost disappearing into the background behind him as Harold turned back to Nick and Judy.

"My apologies." He rubbed his temple. "This is my deputy, Officer Libby Waller. She is second in command…or would be if the predators actually bothered following proper protocol."

"Well, with the air of superiority that they all have, I can see why." Nick commented.

Harold grunted, pointed out the lack of a collar around Nick's neck, "And why aren't you just the same right with them? Tell me more about what your business is here. As the supposed chief of the ZPD, I do have a right to know."

"Well…we…?" Nick could explain it, but he probably wasn't the best candidate to. He turned to Judy for assistance.

Brushing down her clothes, she stepped forward to address the zebra, still remaining close to Nick for support. "Several months ago, we were flooded with an influx of immigrant bats under the ruse that they were running from persecution from another city, presumably this one. I had the misfortune of befriending one of these bats, one named Rouge."

Harold's brow furrowed at the name. Judy paused seeing recognition there, but he waved for her to go on. "I'm tracking." He stated plainly.

"Well, without boring you with the details," Judy continued, "I got a very important tip actually from Rouge herself. It appears a sheep named Dawn Bellwether was privy to knowledge of a prior Zootopia where we could learn more about the bats since they were last known to have come from there. So we allowed her to guide us back to this city so we could learn more."

"And you trusted this…Bellwether?" Harold queried, his eyes never leading Judy's.

"Not really…no." She admitted meekly.

"She tried to have me kill her." Nick bluntly informed, causing a glare from Judy. He stared resolutely forward at the zebra with a small grin on his face.

"You look happy at this prospect." The zebra was not amused at the fox's comment.

"Actually, no." Nick had to laugh. "I'm actually fantastically jubilant that she's getting a taste of her own medicine here. You know, being collared and all and truly being crushed by the supposed tyrannical dictatorship of the predators like she so feared in Zootopia."

"You mean…your Zootopia." Harold corrected.

"Yes, ours." Nick nodded his head.

"The fact is, the predators are exactly as you've said. You're an odd sort, that much I can tell, but no less untrustworthy than the others." Harold leaned back on the small desk behind him, causing Libby to shift to the side a bit. "I can see you are about to protest, but let me break it down for you, fox."

Nick's ears splayed down at that remark. "I grew up in this town and things were…different back then."

"We didn't have collars then." Libby offered. At a look from her chief, she stepped back.
"Indeed. In fact, it was the predators who had them affixed to their necks. They were constantly being arrested and found turning savage. The shock collars were literally the only things keeping them in check." The desk groaned as he settled more onto it.

"You mean Night Howlers were being used here to turn predators savage too?" Judy asked.

"Night Howlers? I have no idea what you're talking about. No, they were just going savage naturally on their own. Unlike prey, predators can only get so civilized before natural instinct takes over, even if only for a moment, and they gut someone." He turned his muzzle so an eye rested on Libby. "Which is why I keep telling Officer Waller here to be careful with who she associates with. It would pain me to come in one morning and find out my star deputy was maulled during the night."

"He's not like that, Chief. He's a respectable officer just like you and me."

"An officer who is under the influence of James Wilde!" Harold neighed, silencing her.

Nick cocked his head to the side curiously, for a deputy to a major enterprise such as the ZPD, Waller definitely didn't seem to be the type to match the role required of her. In fact, her entire presence was very timid and non-distinctive. If she was the star deputy of Harold, whatever earned her that position was not being displayed prominently today.

Folding his arms, Harold's expression was pained that he had to do that to his subordinate in front of strangers outside their organization. "Even if Officer Hena is a fellow colleague and were to maintain professional distance on duty, the fact he is a predator and could turn at any moment chills me to the bone. I care too much about my people to not voice my opinion about it."

"I don't understand." Judy was flummoxed.

"About a kangaroo and hyena shacking up or two work colleagues dating?" Nick tried to clarify not just for his benefit.

"Neither." Harold raised a brow, intrigued at her response. Judy didn't acknowledge the reaction as she thumped a hind paw, "I may not have been living in my Zootopia all that long, but none of the predators ever turned savage, at least not without help. That's where a botanical plant called midnicampum holicthias was used to turn predators savage in an instant. So how come everyone around here is saying that predators could go bad without any prompting? Are people drugging them?"

"I'm with Carrots here." Nick was just as confused as Judy. "I've been living almost all my life in Zootopia and I've never once felt any urges to kill anybody. I don't know what you all are smoking out here in the boonies, but this surely isn't my Zootopia." He had to snicker at this.

"And you've not had any rough nights, waking up feeling ravenously hungry and wanting meat?" Libby popped up, a question which Harold allowed, remaining stoically silent.

Nick grimaced, licking his chops in a decidedly disgusting way. "Ugh, no. The thought of that even sounds gross. Never. I prefer things like Buga Burgers or cricket shakes."

"Things we now have here..." Harold confirmed cryptically. Getting off the desk with a creak, the zebra motioned for Libby to follow. "Nick, Judy, if you'll follow me. I think we have something to discuss that'll be of great importance to you."

He clopped out of the bullpen, with Libby covering the rear to make sure both the fox and rabbit followed. Nick slowed his gait a few paces to be alongside the kangaroo. "So...who is this Arthur
Bogo guy?"

"Him?" She rejoined inquisitively. "He was a researcher here in Zootopia. Did all sorts of experiments on the bats while they were here and even invented new methods of predator control. I believe he was the sole cause of the predator uprising when he went to implement a very harsh method of taming."

"Interesting." Nick's mind was moving a mile a minute, trying to make connections. Judy was facing forward, trailing after Harold, but he knew she was listening in by one ear turned backwards. "So, this Arthur Bogo, did he have any kids?"

"Only one." Libby revealed, continuing to hop lightly next to him. "Why do you ask?"

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, this chapter was a doozy. It took almost two years to finally figure out how I was going to dig myself out of the hole I dug when I finished up chapter 21. I knew how the entire story would end, but this entire old Zootopia arc was a complete mystery to me and how I'd get from point A to B. It took this long to finally ruminate on the entire plot and figure out a firm and cohesive way I could connect all the puzzle pieces together into a complete picture. I even had to go back and edit a few existing chapters already published to better align the story and it's upcoming plot twists.

The first section was probably the hardest to write since I knew I needed to set up enough intrigue without giving too much away. The fact I was basically introducing five new characters at once with a dialogue scene heavy with exposition, it was a nightmare. I had two sections to flesh out the old Zootopia and this first one was instrumental in establishing the character of this city's ZPD since we'd be spending some time here. The third section was quite a bit easier to write and had a lot more going for it, with the establishment of two additional characters that add their own dynamics to the story. I actually had two additional characters to write, a meerkat and an anteater, but in the end they ultimately served no purpose and could be rolled into existing characters and function exactly the same. So, although a shame to lose those two, it was for the best I cut them out for sake of time and sanity. The middle section was interesting. Since I finally decided on a final roadmap to the endgame, I realized I needed a fourth story arc set in another specific frame of time in the overall narrative. I knew exactly what was going to occur during this new, fourth timeline and would provide enough questions to hopefully suck readers back in and wonder about the inconsistencies presented in this rather naughty scene.

I know it's been a long time in coming, but I hope my return to Death Becomes You was worth it. Enjoy
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Harold motioned them inside his office as he instructed Libby to gather a couple extra chairs to roll them in beside his desk. He had them each sit beside him to look over his shoulder as he pulled his own seat up to the computer perched dead center of the desktop. Judy elected to share a seat with Nick and huddle next to his side opposite Harold.

The zebra gave her a look of consternation, gauging her response with curiosity. "You must have been really scarred recently. I know I may be a bit rough around the edges, but I'm not all that mean."

"That's how the other horse was." Nick informed, raising a finger.

"I'm a zebra." Harold corrected again.

"Look, I'm just..." Judy gripped an ear, squeezing it a bit with anxiety, "Just nervous around large mammals right now. That's all."

Staring at her a few moments longer, Harold shook his head and redirected his focus back onto the monitor. "Well, seeing as you all have supposed authorization to view this, gather around." He tapped a few keys and searched up some images on Zoogle. He leaned back with arms folded as he waved a hoof at the screen. "Do you recognize these?"

"Yeah, that is the storefront for a Buga Burger. That one is Sally's Shakes. This one is Tundra Termite Treats. All good food chains. What's the big deal?" Nick was clueless. All of these places were fantastic places he usually snagged a meal at almost daily.

Without answering him, Harold leaned forward to look around the fox at Judy. "And you, have you ever eaten at these places before?"

"Not without Nick, no. I actually don't prefer insects in my diet. I find them rather disgusting." She wrinkled her nose.

"There's a reason for that, Libby, explain." Harold continued to relax in his chair as his deputy took over.

"Oh...um, well there is a reason for that." Libby stuttered, not expecting to be called upon so suddenly. Judy assumed that Harold had done it to help bolster her confidence by putting her into the spotlight. "You see, there were some famous researchers here in Zootopia. Some of our brightest minds. All prey, of course. Their names were Arthur Bogo, Menard Oates and Tony Bellwether."

"BOB." Both Nick and Judy said in unison.

Both Harold and Libby gave them inquisitive looks, but the kangaroo continued, "Yeah...well, prior to them, we already had a system in place to control the predators. Whenever they began to revert to their savage, primitive ways, those collars you are wearing now, Judy, would activate and shock them to their senses."

"That seems barbaric." Judy was aghast, but Nick stood beside her on the chair solemn and quiet. Trying to garner some backup, she tapped Nick, "Isn't that awful?"
Without even looking at her, "My mother wore one of these collars. So too, did my dad. I was absconded to the new Zootopia before I became of age to get my own. I was so young, I didn't even remember much about them until recently, since coming here."

"So if you never got one put on your neck, how come you never went savage naturally?" She stole a glance at Harold. "If, that is, what you two are saying is true and predators just 'naturally' regress."

"We're getting to that." Harold nickered, nodding his head at Libby. "Continue."

Libby took the mouse and opened up a few other pictures on screen, many showing multiple predators with blinking lights on their collars. "This is where Arthur, Menard and Tony came in. They were researching other methods to control the predators. Better methods."

"They were the star jewels of Zootopia." Harold put a hoof up at the open mouth of Nick. "I'm getting to the point as to why they were. There was a major difference in opinion among them. Arthur wanted more stringent methods of control. Tony did not and chose to research a more pacifist route to control the predators. He was overruled when Menard sided with Arthur and they proceeded forward with the death pills."

A shiver ran through Judy. She remembered the small depression and unusual swirl of fur Skye showed her earlier. "What are...death pills?"

"Something worse than collars." Libby looked away, her own light on her collar turning a pale yellow as her stress levels were rising.

Harold put a hoof on her arm to calm her as he turned to Nick and Judy, "They're little bombs." He tapped his neck. "They are invasively implanted into the subject's neck and remain dormant there until activated by a radio signal. Then they explode, popping off the head of the unlucky predator while harmlessly leaving anyone near them alone. The fear this generated was a supremely effective method of keeping predators in line."

Judy wanted to vomit. This was too abhorrent to even conceive of, let alone hear it from a chief of the ZPD. "And you all let this happen? This is against basic mammal rights! You should have shut them down the moment they started implanting the first predator!"

"Because they were the stars of Zootopia." At a dumbstruck look from both fox and rabbit, he typed a few key words and opened up an article on the screen, enlarging it for them to read. "The bats came out of nowhere. Basically assaulting anyone they could find, killing most. It was like a plague sweeping through the city. They managed to kill off almost a third of the population here until they were captured in a very clever trap."

"It was Oates who discovered that the bats could sense their prey by the scent of their blood alone. He devised a trap that we at the ZPD helped build that brought all the bats together in one place. It was..." Libby was very hesitant to proceed further with her statement.

"Very unethical, but given the nature of the crisis, we had little alternative. We took the dead bodies of those killed, piled them together in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Zootopia along the northern Canyon District and dumped gallons of our own blood, freely drawn, over all the bodies." Harold finished, a grim look on his face.

At this, Judy finally hacked and had to be held up by Nick. The fox, shaken, but not as fazed as Judy was at the revelation looked up at the zebra. "The bats obviously went for the bait."

"Hook, line and sinker." Harold nodded stoically. "We locked down the building, netted them and
Arthur and Menard went to work. They tranquilized each bat. It took days and there were times the ZPD was called to put down a few bats that got loose during the entire process. Each one was injected with a death pill into their necks while they were comatose.

Libby gripped her arms, trying to control her own quivering. "It was awful. I was one of the officers who had to assist in their containment and control. The operation lasted for weeks. We managed to get all of them tagged with the pills. Then Arthur wanted to have a test run. He put several test subjects into a room and let the bats loose."

"He what?" Judy's eyes bulged.

Harold jumped in, "He was convinced that with a display of force, he could get all the bats to keel over by sheer power of survival instinct." His expression went dark. "Libby here, was one of the test subjects." All eyes went to the kangaroo.

"And you just simply allowed this to happen? To your own officers, no less!" Judy was getting angry right now.

Harold put a hoof on the desk as he rose to standing, towering over them in the big chair. "It was a time of crisis and things were happening too fast and a lot of it went right over my head without consulting me or acknowledging my authority and jurisdiction over my men. Those three were on a roll and there was no stopping them. They were given blanket clearance to do just about whatever they damn well pleased after this bat incident. The mayor ordered us not to interfere with their experiments."

"Still, putting your own men in danger like that. I would have done something." Nick was right alongside Judy with righteous anger.

"Exactly." Harold agreed. "After I had heard Libby and a few others were used in this way, I pulled all of the ZPD out and left them to their own devices. That turned out to be a mistake."

"How so? You were just protecting the lives of your fellow mammals. You did what any sane ZPD Chief would do." Judy reasoned, her ears down and shaking.

"Because if I had kept a closer eye on their operations, I would have put a stop to what they were doing and maybe your own city wouldn't have been besieged by the bats." He sighed wearily, grinding a hoof to his snout as if to relieve a sinus headache there.

Nick looked back to Judy before asking, "So what happened next?"

"The test was a success." Libby looked about ready to cry, having to remember the awful scene. "The bats were surging in to suck my blood and several of my colleagues. However, the scientists sent off their radio signals and not a single bat touched us. All their heads had been blown to pieces. It...it was awful."

"But it proved a point to both everyone there and the bats." Harold's brow furrowed. "We now had a means to control them and remove them as necessary. Any future bats born had to be injected with these death pills or be killed on the spot. To prolong their colony, the bats reluctantly agreed to this."

"So, how did all that lead to us getting landed with the bats?" It seemed to Nick like there was a crucial piece missing from all this.

"Remember that different in opinion I was telling you about?" Harold opened up a few more images on the screen.
Arthur Bogo looked almost like the mirror image of his son. Menard Oates was more or less the same. The only one that even looked any sort of respectable was Tony Bellwether, a small sheep of a male with big, round spectacles, much like his daughter. Judy had to wonder how different their offspring turned out, except Oates, it seemed he followed in his father's footsteps.

"Tony was of a mind to subtlety keep predators under control with these." Another image came up with a Buga Burger on a plate. "Food. Bugs. By purposefully breeding insects with special chemical hormones that would be advertised to predators to eat, these hormones would keep their predator tendencies in check."

"That would explain the waiter…" Judy grew thoughtful, remembering back to their first date at the Oat and Cloister.

"What now?" Nick was confused.

"Nothing." Judy shook her head, her ears springing up with inspiration. "So, Menard and Arthur overruled Tony with this pacifist plan and went to implement death pills at large."

Harold snapped his hoof fingers, "You are correct. Since they no longer had us to enforce their experiments and security, they went to experiment on their own employees. There was one such employee that rebelled after getting his death pill implanted. You might know him as James Wilde."

Nick's ears folded back, "Yes, we've had the unfortunate pleasure of being introduced already."

The zebra gave him a wary stare, "Indeed. You look like the spitting image of him too." At a cough from Nick, Harold redirected his attention back to the screen. "James made a deal with the bats. He would release them from bondage if they would help secure Zootopia for the predators."

"I…I woke up one morning with a bat on my chest, locking a collar around my neck." Libby shivered. "Then it proceeded to suck my blood before escaping out the open window and doing the same thing to someone else."

Harold bowed his head, "It all happened in the span of a night. Somehow, someway, James had discovered the capability to remove their collars and have the bats do the dirty work to subjugate the rest of the prey. To this day I have no idea how they found so many collars for all of us."

"And so the bats left this Zootopia and traveled to ours." Judy was just astounded at how all the events transpired.

"Seems pretty convenient that they just so happened across ours so quick." Nick commented. "They only showed up within the past few months. How long ago did you say this predator coup went down?"

"Only about six months ago." Harold closed out all the images and shut down the computer. "It doesn't matter now. James had all three of the scientists killed alongside all their employees. The entire operation was shut down and locked up. At least James had the common sense to take Tony's research and actually use it. It would do no good to have an entire city and barely any population to speak off since you killed them all off."

"So James did see the merit in the food." Judy noted.

"Not entirely. He was quick to dismiss it at first, but when the first few reports of predatory attacks came flowing in, he was worried about a prey uprising. So he ordered all predators to maintain their sanity and eat the hormone-infused insects. Since the attacks ceased after that, it was much easier to cow the majority of the population under his rule. He keeps even the ZPD in check with these
Harold picked at his. "Other than a small, violent minority, as long as they are not in any danger of being harmed, most citizens just go along with the whole charade that everything is normal."

"But this is not normal. It won't ever be." Nick stamped a foot and made a point that he was serious about his position.

"Says the fox who unknowingly participates in a city wide predator control method." The zebra chortled, finding great humor in the situation.

Placing a paw to calm Nick's nerves as she saw his ears flattened, Judy stepped forward, "You said these…scientists had some sort of radio signal or code or whatever to silence the bats, right?" Both Libby and Harold nodded. "Do you think James Wilde might have this code?"

Libby shook her head, "Highly doubtful. I do not believe he was in any position to be told such a code. He was a janitor for the facility at the time."

Judy thumped her foot a bit as she thought, "You think the code could still be somewhere in the computer systems at the facility itself?"

"What are you suggesting?" This caught Harold's interest.

"I came here specifically to put a stop to the bats attacking my Zootopia. If what you say about the death pills is true, this could be the thing we need to end it." Judy looked determined.

Nick was shocked, "Judy! I can't believe you're even considering killing them all."

She punched him in the arm, "I'm not! At least…not all of them. I want to use it as leverage with Rouge and maybe convince her like James did to have her leave. It would be a great deterrent from them ever returning."

"That's all well and good." Harold patted Judy on the shoulder, causing her to flinch at suddenly touching her. He thankfully backed off after realizing his error. "However, the entire place is locked down with pawprint scanners, keyed specifically to the biometric identities of the three scientists that were killed. The only way in now is demolition which could pose a threat to whatever data you wished to retrieve."

More thumping of her foot, "Do you think one or more of them would have put in the biometrics for their children or family members as failsafe?"

"That would be highly irregular and I doubt they would compromise security that way." Libby gave a little hop closer.

"Unless…you were a father who was snubbed by his peers for his work and wanted to protect your intellectual investment." Judy snapped her fingers.

"Judy, whatever you're thinking, stop thinking it." Nick made a slicing motion with his paws to insist she desist from her train of thought.

"We brought Tony's daughter, Dawn Bellwether here with us. She gave us the slip on our way here with Skye, but if all her stories about her dad are true, then he loved her very much. It would make sense that he would use her as a failsafe against his two peers who overruled him to safeguard his work." Judy finished with finality, happy with her conclusion.

"That is a very far leap of logic." Harold admitted, sitting back down in his chair. "Even if that were
true, we still do not have Dawn here with us to test out your theory."

Without knocking, the door opened up, revealing Skye. She gazed upon the four of them with indifference before locking onto Nick. "We found Dawn Bellwether. Unfortunately she is not exactly in a position for us to reach easily."

Harold groaned, "Where is she being held up?"

"With the violent minority you spoke of." She smoothly answered, slipping past Libby, who backed away from her.

"Thanks for listening into our conversation." Nick muttered, not amused.

"And thank you for some rather interesting information." She rejoined.

"Good morning sleepy head." Judy called out to Nick.

The crimson vulpine mumbled incoherently as he smacked his lips and cracked his neck. He had been sitting in a hospital chair for the entire duration that night and had fallen asleep in a rather awkward position. Rearranging himself so that he sat up more straight in the recliner, which was rather unexpectedly plush for such a hospital, he turned his head to look at Judy.

"Hey Carrots." He said sleepily, trying his best to smooth down his cop uniform which had gotten ruffled during his haphazard sleeping habits.

"They finally let you come to watch over me?" She asked; a pensive look on her face.

It had been nearly two days since Chief Bogo had suspended Judy from the ZPD after the Rouge incident. The blood bank was to open later this afternoon in the very hospital she was kept in, which seemed awfully kind of him to allow her to still be present for its grand opening. To continue the constant vigil over her well-being, Bogo had established new shifts to watch and ensure Oates didn't try to get to her. Judy knew it was not just for her benefit, but for his piece of mind. Having a watch on her 24/7 also meant that there would be less opportunity to do something stupid in his eyes.

He grinned, "Yes, Chief Buffalo Butt finally trusted me enough to watch over you on the last shift."

"Last shift?" She cocked her head to the side.

He gestured to her lying on the bed, "Seeing as you have more or less recovered from your injuries, which by the way we managed to catch those who did this to you, he has seen fit to send you back home."

"Back home?" She felt like a broken record asking nothing but questions, but she had been so cut off from the outside world that it was gnawing at her insides about what was going on outside the hospital.

Nick visibly winced, "Yes, back to Carla and Jimmy's pad. I'm not," he hesitated a moment, "going to be there this time. At least not until this Oates situation blows over." At a look from Judy, he expounded, "Bullhorn thinks I'm a bad influence on you and the events of the past few days proved that to him."

"That's not true!" She exclaimed, her eyes wide. "That's ridiculous! We're together!"

He waved a paw to silence the rebuttal, "Doesn't matter to him. You know that. Once he gets an idea
into his head, he won't stop until he's achieved what he wants or is proven wrong beyond a shadow of a doubt. As it is, I'm not allowed to live with you anymore or be your partner when and if you rejoin the force."

"What!" She bolted upright in bed, her ears flaring. "He can't do that!"

"He can and he did." He lounged back in the chair again, seemingly resigned to defeat. "He feels our relationship is detrimental to both our careers and feels we may perform better separately. He's noticed an uptick in my performance since he put you on meter maid duty and suddenly that's all the evidence he needs to support his theory."

She crossed her arms roughly, glaring off to the side, "He can be so stubborn!"

"Well, that's a bull for you." Nick tried to lighten the mood. It didn't seem to have the intended effect.

After a few moments, she tilted her head slightly, not wanting to look him fully in the eye. "Are we still okay though?"

"I should ask you that." He said, giving her a pointed look. "The last I saw of you other than the ZPD cell block was your little cottontail rushing out the door of the apartment after learning about Carla and me. So are 'you' okay with us still?"

She reflected on his question before responding, "I know I shouldn't have done that. It was a dumb and stupid move and it brought me nothing but trouble."

"Why did you do it?" His eyes were intense, but he was extremely concerned for her. This was not like Judy at all to be so hesitant in expressing her thoughts.

She brought her paws to her chest, clutching it tightly as she recalled memories she had thought were long since buried. "It's silly and stupid." She stalled. She looked over to see that it was his turn to fold his arms. He was not going to accept this answer from her. "Fine…remember that dumb story about my nick name?"

He raised an eyebrow, "Jude the Dude?"

She nodded, "Well, Jaden was the first rabbit I ever had a crush on. I don't think it was love, but at the time it might as well have been." She took a deep breath, "I waited weeks and weeks before I gained the courage to finally stand up and ask him out at the Carrot Days festival. When he laughed at my feelings and rejected me, I felt so hurt. I didn't know what to do, so I lashed out. I was angry and emotional."

"You peed on his volcano science project." Nick reminded; a glimmer of a smile on his muzzle.

She shot him a glare, "I know that!" She calmed herself quickly. "The fact is that I felt unloved. Like no boy was every going to like me again. So I vowed to myself that I'd not get involved with anyone like that ever again."

"So you dedicated yourself to an ideal, a singular goal of being a cop that would drown out everything else." He unfolded his arms and leaned forward. "Judy, you can't let a single event define who you are. When I met you, you were so much more than the self-righteous bunny cop that I mistook you for. You had a dream of what Zootopia could be and through that, what I could be. I'll never forget that. Jaden rejecting you set you on a path that I believe was in the end better than anything you could have achieved in Bunnyburrow."

She smiled at him, "Thank you Nick." She rubbed a paw on her cheek to remove the tear she felt.
"When I saw you there with Carla in the hallway and the guilt that was on her face, I felt betrayed. It felt like that time with Jaden, like I was unloved and you were just another guy who didn't want me."

At this he got up from the chair and knelt down beside the bed, taking her paws in his. "Judy, that couldn't be further from the truth. What happened between Carla and I happened a long time ago, before you and I got together."

She focused on him intently, "So what did all happen between you two?"

He glanced down, peeking up with one eye, "You sure you're not going to be mad at me if I explain?"

She lightly popped him on the shoulder, "I promise I won't go flying off the handle again. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt before. I'm going to do so now."

"Mighty generous." He shared her playful mirth, rubbing the spot she hit. "Well it was one of the first jobs all four of us went out on, remember?"

She bowed her head in recollection, "Yes, it was the stake out for the drug cartel at Outback Island."

He clicked his tongue, "That's the one! Well, you and Jimmy had split off and Carla and I were perched in the warehouse opposite the front entrance of the one we were watching. It was a bad setup to begin with. Having Carla with me, who we both knew hated my guts, didn't help matters. During the long hours of the stake out, we got into a rather nasty fight. One thing led to another and we were at each other's throats, fully bent on killing."

"So how did you stop her from killing you?" Judy mused.

Nick barked a laugh, "Thanks for the vote of confidence that I'd actually win." At a smirk from Judy, he continued, "Anyway, I was atop of her, ready to gouge her eyes out when she reached upward with her mouth and licked mine."

"She kissed you?" She put a paw to her mouth.

He laughed nervously, "Yeah, I was just as surprised as you! I didn't really know what to do...so I did the only thing that made sense. I licked her back."

"You didn't!" Her other paw followed her first.

"Look, if this is getting uncomfortable, I can stop." It seemed he was the one more anxious about the whole story.

"No, go on, this is actually kind of funny." She kept her paws up to hide the smile she was sporting.

Judy knew Carla quite well and the fact she initiated first was hilarious. It was quite unlike her and she wondered just what she saw in Nick that night to prompt such a move. Of course, it could also be Nick making it up to save face but it didn't matter, it took two to tango and Carla certainly didn't deny her involvement in the whole debacle.

"You know, I can stop. I don't have to continue this embarrassing synopsis any further." He began to rise before Judy quickly shot out a paw and gently lowered him back down by the arm.

"I'm sorry, please continue. I'm just laughing at Carla's expense." She tried to pacify.

With a wary look at her, "It devolved into something more akin to a fighting match." He caught the
smug look on Judy's face. "Yes, I know she was a ring fighter once before joining the ZPD, but it was the best way I can describe it. It was more like a brawl with some sex mixed in. I felt she was taking out her aggression on me in two different ways and it was strangely exhilarating and painful at the same time. After it was all over, we both immediately regretted it. By then we had received the call that we had missed our quarry and were ordered to withdraw."

"So that's why that mission failed!" She mused. "Because you two were busy getting it on!" She just about cackled as Nick huffed and rose up.

"Fine, laugh all you want. It ended up being very hard on her several months after that. Remember when she had to leave for a two week vacation the following spring? She became sick and miscarried the babies we created that night." He flopped back down into the chair, looking utterly miserable at revealing this ugly truth to her.

Judy was taken aback. She immediately lamented any humor she found in the situation. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...I'm a horrible mammal" She casted her eyes downward.

"The worst." He placed a paw on his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. "It's fine, you didn't know. I was fully willing to take responsibility for my actions once I had found out she was pregnant. Despite my dislike for her, I was not opposed to marriage just so that the kits would have a proper father figure. You can thank Finnick for finally convincing me to step up. We were going to tell everyone the week after the miscarriage happened. Ever since then, she has wanted very little to do with me."

Judy rubbed her cheek a bit, mulling it over. "You think she blames you for putting her through that pain and heartache?"

He snorted, "She blames me for a lot of things, might as well add this one onto the pile."

"You are a good fox, Nicholas Wilde." He looked up at the calling of his formal name. "Even though I feel biased and hurt about what you did, I understand it was done in error and not during a time where it could have been cheating. So I forgive you for this. I also believe you would have done the right thing and been a great father to those pups. Come here."

He looked at her incredulously as she beckoned him over with a paw. "What?"

"Get over here you big oaf." She opened her arms wide. "Come give your bun a hug!"

Nick got up and hovered over her, gingerly enfolding his arms around her small frame as she gripped him down onto the bed so that his weight was pressed against her. "You'll still have me, Carrots?"

She nearly purred as she brought an ear to her lips, "I still want you. I've wanted to jump you ever since the last time in the cruiser, but there was simply no chance to do so given everything that's happened." She stole a look out of the corner of her eye, seeing his stunned expression. "And seeing as we are alone right now..."

"I suspected you were horny due to the increasingly pungent scent in the room but I wasn't going to say anything." He commented, trying his best not to look like he was interested the entire time.

"Is that a yes?" She crooned.

He excused himself, mind racing with ecstatic delirium that this was even happening right now. He rushed over to the door and shut it, making sure to lock the knob before turning around to behold the beautiful bunny lying prone on the bed. She already had the flimsy sheet off and had her legs spread for him, wearing nothing but the hospital gown they provided her.
"I am so in trouble right now, aren't I?" He asked.

"Very much so. Come over and receive your punishment." She played along.

Within moments he was atop the bed, straddling her as they both struggled to undo the buttons and zippers on his uniform. In a rush she had the belt unbuckled and his pants down, his thick member in her paw. She stroked it teasingly as he threw off his blouse to the floor hearing the badge clink on the tiled floor. He began moving his hips forward eagerly, wanting her to do more than just grope it.

Obliging him, she tilted it to the side and nipped at it lightly, letting her tongue glide along its silky smooth surface. She trailed it up to the tip, mischievously flicking the hole at the tip, tasting some of his pre-cum, before working back down the other side. Nick was whining with need as she continued to swirl her tongue around the head before taking it partially into her mouth. The warmth that surrounded it made him moan in pleasure, his tongue lolling out to the side at the experience.

After a few back and forth motions, Judy could not do it any longer due to her two front teeth getting in the way. She pulled back and shook her head, "I'm unable to do this. I thought I could."

Nick sat back onto the bed past her hind paws, feeling rather deflated. "What do we do now?"

She flashed a wry grin, "I never said I was giving up. Use me like one of those toys you fancy in that Play Vixen magazine."

His jaw dropped, "How did you know about that?"

Given him an alluring gaze, "Don't think I haven't looked through your locker at work and seen what you've circled. I always like to know who I'm working with on the job."

"That's a violation of personal privacy Officer Hopps!" He said in playful aghast. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"I am, very much so!" She dropped her voice to a hush. "But you can violate my personal privacy any time Officer Wilde. Use me."

Not wanting to disappoint his rabbit, he lifted Judy up off the bed and situated himself where she was laying, making sure his back was up against the headboard of the bed. Spreading his legs wide, he helped Judy to face away from him as he lowered her onto his lap. He could sense her quivering as she anticipated him entering her. With a pleasurable groan, her body shuddered as the searing hot phallus was invited in-between her folds. She nestled down to the hilt, still unable herself to initiate taking in his knot.

Nick's paws roved up and down the front of her body under her hospital gown as he felt her firm abs before traveling up to her rounded chest, accentuated by a lush tuft of fur. She panted heavily, as he nipped and played at the back of her neck. Her ears vibrated as she jolted from the sudden coarseness of his tongue exploring up and down their length, gently bringing each ear down with a paw so he could caress every part. The touch was euphoric to Judy and she began slapping down hard onto him, rising up with a squish each time.

"Bite me Nick." She demanded with a husky tone.

"Really?" He wasn't quite sure what she was getting at.

"Devour me like a predator would a prey!" She continued to impale herself onto him with each word, shaking uncontrollably as she was building to her peak.
"You mean like eat you?" Nick was getting more and more unsure of this line of sensuality.

She slammed down hard, completely taking in his knot, causing both to cry out from it. She twisted around to glower at him, "No, you dumb fox. Just light bites. Seriously, sometimes I wonder where your head is."

"Well, obviously inside you." He joked without thinking.

She rolled her eyes. "Humor not helping your situation, buster." She tapped her neck to help guide his thinking.

Realizing what she was asking for, he smiled revealing his sharp teeth, "Sly bunny."

Resuming her movements, she popped herself off of Nick with a slurp, drawing a shiver from the reynard. Gleefully acquiescing her request, he opened his maw before clamping down firmly onto her neck, allowing his teeth to sink in just a bit. Judy yowled from the stinging pain, but combined with the pleasure, she didn't want it to stop. With renewed vigor she kept ramming down onto him, brutally taking in his knot with every stroke and releasing it from her insides with each upward movement.

"Do you hear that?" His ears flicked towards the door. He thought he heard something.

"Please, the other side!" She craned her head into him, offering up the other side of her neck.

Ignoring his suspicion and taking the cue, he released and maneuvered to the left side and clamped down even harder, moving his snout back and forth to wiggle the teeth in more. This caused Judy to flail mercilessly onto his knot, her hind leg thumping onto the sheets as she came over him. Feeling the sudden wetness envelope his member, Nick practically howled into her neck, burrowing his knot deep into the bunny with her final plunge, exploding his seed into the depths of her very being. His claws dug deep into her belly as he gripped her close, feeling the knot swell.

It was at that moment that Jimmy Frost tumbled through the door, having picked the lock on the knob. Following close behind were Carla Hyenandez along with Judy's parents Bonnie and Stu and one other, Ami. Nick released his hold on Judy's neck as both stared in abject terror at the scene unfolding before them.

"What the hell are you doing, you stupid fox?" Carla shouted at Nick.

"Ah, my eyes! What is going on?!" Jimmy wailed, covered his face as well as his wallabeanie, Wallace. He stumbled into the room, tripping over Judy's bag of belongings before crashing headlong into the chair Nick was occupying earlier. "Oh geez, my nose is full of it!"

Ami poked her head out between Bonnie and Stu as she opened her mouth wide, "Is this how I was made, Mom?"

"Oh my heavens!" Stu gasped, quickly positioning himself between Bonnie and the torrid scene before them. "Honey, get Ami out of here now. You should be ashamed of yourself, young lady!"

He waggled a finger at Judy, who was quickly jerking Nick with her as she clambered down the bed knotted to grab the sheets to cover themselves up. "I thought I taught you better than to mate in public places! This is reserved for the bedroom."

"Isn't this a bedroom?" Jimmy bemoaned into the seat cushion.

"Not the point!" Carla snarled. She stomped up right alongside them, hands on her hips. She seemed about ready to pound Nick's face in. "I told the chief having you on a shift was a bad idea. I knew
something like this would happen and you force yourself onto Judy."

"That's not how it is!" Nick futilely defended.

"Oh and I'm sure you're going to tell me that it was Judy who put you up to this!" She roared, arms crossed and foot tapping. She had nothing but venom for the fox.

Lowering the sheet just a little bit from her face so she could look at the hyena, Judy meekly admitted, "It was me Carla. I asked for this."

Her face contorted into odd expressions as slivers of anger, hurt, rage and more flitted across. At length, she settled on a scowl, "You always had poor taste in males, Judy." She snapped her fingers, gesturing back to the door. "Get off of him now. Nick you're coming back with me to the station."

"I can't." Nick whined; trying his best to hunker down beneath the thin sheet Judy was holding up.

"Why not?!" Carla bristled.

"Because we're stuck…together." Judy finished for him.

Carla face palmed. "Oh for the love of…we try to do something nice and bring your parents in who came to visit for the blood bank grand opening and then we find you like this! Jimmy, once they are able to detach, you stay here with Judy until I come back. I'm going to take scoundrel here to Chief Bogo for a reprimand and hopefully worse."

"What did I do?" Nick exhaled. "What Judy and I do in our off time is our business!"

Carla walked over to the other side of the bed and picked up his police blouse with her foot before kicking it over onto the bed. "You were on duty, Officer Wilde. Jimmy, stay here."

She grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as he was tiptoeing out of the room, hoping to join the Hopps family who was waiting outside, unwilling to poke their heads in any further. "No, I can't!" He yelped. His eyes frantically shifted from Carla to Judy and back again. "She's into foxes! What if she comes after me next?!"

Carla bellowed something incomprehensible, "Fine!" She tossed him towards the door. "I'll stay with Judy while you take Nick back to Bogo. Just make yourself useful, damn it!" She collapsed into the chair, seemingly exhausted from just this one outburst. "Judy and I have a lot to discuss."

Judy visibly shied away from her stare, but could do nothing but sit on Nick, feeling the trickling of shame slipping out of her. "We're such horrible mammals." She whispered back to Nick.

"The worst." He agreed.

"I don't trust any of them." Jack said plainly, hunched over on his cot with elbows on his knees.

"I agree. Something just doesn't sit well with me." Mai nodded, wrapping an arm around Nala who was just listening in with interest.

Percival had finished giving them the tour of their ZPD. It was all quite impressive and it was a much larger, labyrinthine complex compared to Judy's back in her Zootopia. The only place they didn't go and was casually mentioned was the holding cells down in the basement. In the end, they cleared out an office of cubicles and set up several cots for the bunnies to sleep in for the night. Judy had wondered if there were any hotels available in the city, but did not press the issue.
They were, however, given an amazing gift of showers that night. Sure, it was communal in the locker rooms, but being able to wash off the stink and grime of Raymond was a beautiful blessing for Judy. Jack graciously waited for the three does to finish before taking his own shower. When they got to their makeshift bedding area, there were four pairs of clothes laid out that were bunny-sized.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I think I believe you two." Judy sighed, looking down at the carpeted floor. "I've experienced enough in these past few weeks that makes even me wary about anyone I don't know. I remember when I first arrived in Zootopia. I was so full of hope, determination and complete naivety. I thought the best in people before I even got to know them. I'm starting to hate being as cynical as you two, but I can't ignore your point of views here."

Jack leaned forward, "Judy, you don't have to lose that spark of innocence."

Judy shot him a look, "I'm far from innocent."

Jack face palmed and waved her comment away, "Not what I meant. I mean that your hope and trust in others to do the right thing is a worthy quality. We should never lose faith that deep down people want to do good. If everyone ends up mistrusting each other, then this world will be a far less welcome place."

"I want more friends." Nala blurted, causing all to stare at her.

Judy maneuvered next to her and Mai and wrapped an arm around the kit, resting her own head on top of hers. "I know, honey. I want nothing more than a normal childhood for you."

"A little late, Judy." Jack remarked, his eyes on Nala with solemn regret.

"Jack!" Mai admonished, shooting him daggers.

Judy sighed, "He is right, though." She ruffled her fingers through the fur of Nala's ears. "This bat… war, invasion, whatever you want to call it, has altered the course of many people's lives. I don't think anyone will ever be the same after all this. I just want it to end so I can enjoy what little life and family I have left."

"Why are we here, Mom?" Nala had a point. No one really had told her why they had traveled so far for what seemed to be so little.

Jack tracked his gaze from Nala to Judy, "Good question. Judy, do you remember anything yet? I know you woke me up all those nights ago saying something about coming here because you thought you remembered some way to stop the bats. Anything coming back to you?"

Feeling all their attention on her, Judy scrunched her face as she looked around, trying to remember. "I do recognize this place. I have been here before. I remember a zebra, but I can't recall his name. He was important and he helped me a lot." She hopped down from her oversized cot and padded out of the cubicle to look up and down the rows. "I don't believe what I'm seeking is found here…in the ZPD." She clarified.

Mai laid back down, resting her back. It was still acting up with twinges of muscles spasms which sometimes caused her to cry out. "No use fretting about it, trying to recall something that just won't come. I'm feeling rather wiped and I just want to sleep."

Jack gave Judy a look of concern, but masked it well. "Mai is right, let's just sleep for now. It's been a really…interesting day. They probably shackled us up here for the night to keep an eye on us, no doubt. Either way, if they had meant us harm, I'm positive they would have done it by now. I'm thinking they're just waiting and watching to see what we do."
"I'm guessing that is your previous hitmammal experience coming into play?" Judy smirked. The truth of his former profession had already been discussed on the journey here and everyone knew just what sort of bunny Jack was before the bats overran Zootopia.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is." He tapped his ears for mock emphasis. "My bunny senses are tingling. Don't trust anyone."

"I guess that includes you." Mai tittered, not even looking at him having already rolled over into a comfortable position.

"Fine, gang up on me as you always do. I think I've done more than my fair share to show my trustworthiness." Jack scowled as he fluffed up his pillow with a few punches.

"Jack…come on, Mai didn't mean it like that. She was teasing you." Both had rolled over onto their cots, each facing away from the other. Judy groaned at the mild animosity still present in their group. "Look, we're just trying to lighten the mood. It's been really weird and depressing lately." After no response from either of them, she rolled her eyes. "Well, for what it's worth, I trust you both." This did get a stir from at least Jack.

"I think we should be working together." Nala snuggled up next to her mother.

"We are, baby." Judy replied.

"Not as good as we should. We are the only bunnies here. Did you notice that?" Nala looked up at Judy.

Now that she thought about it, there seemed to be no rabbits, hares or otherwise when they were being escorted to the ZPD by Percival. She was unsure if those mammals staring at her on their way in were doing so because they recognized her or because she and her kind was simply so rare that they could do little but gawk at them.

"Yeah, I did." She responded at last. "Come on, let's try and get some sleep, we'll try and figure out what to do next in the morning." After days of sleeping on cold, hard rock, Judy was more than eager to just fall asleep in a normal bed, even if it turned out to be a cot.

Grabbing the scratchy, yet heavy blanket, Judy pulled it over them both as they spooned together like they normally did. She wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter as they melded together in a warm embrace. Judy would definitely miss this when Nala grew older and had to move out on her own. She was going to be a fully-fledged adult in just a few years by their standards. She had just barely gotten to know her daughter and if they ever solved this bat issue, it wouldn't be long before she had to see her go.

Judy fell asleep to these troubling thoughts, because Nala could sense a calm fall upon her mother. The breathing grew deeper and softer with a hint of snoring. Even the arm around her midsection had grown limp and heavy. She couldn't sleep. Something didn't sit right with her during their tour of the station. Percival seemed all too open about showing off everything the ZPD had to offer except one place. As Jack discussed, it was hard to trust new people.

Mind made up, Nala smoothly slipped out of her mother's hold and deftly caught her fall from the cot. Her ears up and alert, she checked if she had awoken the others. With a sigh of relief, she padded out of their arranged sleeping area and snuck down the rows out into the hall. Her mind like a steel trap, she worked her way back through the building remembering exactly the route Percival took during the tour.
Turning the corner in the basement, her eyes rested on the doors leading to the holding cells. She flicked her ears forward as she could hear some growling and moaning. Her heart pattering faster, she twitched her nose and smelled something rather pungent. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but it most definitely reminded her of blood.

All senses screaming for her to run, Nala ignored them all and entered. The snarling and whining grew louder as she approached the barred cells. One of them had a light on, casting shadows down the hallway. The caged door was swung wide open, the jailer keys still hanging out of the keyhole which they were turned. The closer she got, the more she heard a small sobbing and soothing melody being hummed.

Tentatively peeking her head around the corner, looking through the bars of the cell in question, Nala almost gasped. Libby was sprawled on the floor with scratches on her arms and legs, holding a hyena with all her limbs. Her muscular tail was wrapped around and locking the predator's legs together so he couldn't move. She was weeping uncontrollably and kissing him on the head between his ears.

"It's okay, Andrew. I'll figure out a way to make you better." She wept, before resuming her song.

She was the source of the soft humming, trying her best to calm down what looked to be a rabid beast. If she let go at any moment, he would most likely maul her. Seeing that frenzied look in the hyena's eyes, Nala let out a small yip. The kangaroo jolted, startled that someone was watching her private moment.

"W-who's there?" She called out with heavy tremor in her voice.

Swiftly acting, Libby loosened the hold on his legs and grasped with it a small vial that could be delivered into a body via injection. Snatching it from her tail, she expeditiously stabbed the hyena in the neck with it, unloading its contents directly into the main artery in the neck. The hyena went flaccid with his tongue lolling out to the side in almost apparent death. Nala was shocked at the sudden brutality of it and began scampering off in a mad dash to get out of here.

She had just heard the kangaroo calling out for her as she rounded the bend and tore straight up the stairs to plunge herself under the blankets and close to her mother again. Judy stirred, but only woke briefly to wrap her arm back around her again, nipping gently her fur to keep Nala calm. The kit was shaking uncontrollably from what she had seen. She couldn't understand or even comprehend what she had just witnessed.

Two things were for certain. That was a predator in a city supposedly devoid of them and there was something seriously wrong with this place.

Chapter End Notes

I knew I needed to explain a lot of things here in this chapter. The first scene was definitely a massive exposition dump, but given what I planned to do with the old Zootopia arc, I needed readers to know up front what exactly part of the history was with this Zootopia and the bats. It can get a bit grim, but readers had been in the dark for so long regarding the exact nature of the crisis with the bats that it was necessary to show a potential hope spot in how Judy and the rest could eliminate them - or at the very least nullify them as a threat. So, although hinted at in earlier chapters, the concept of the death pills was introduced here; something that will become more critical as the story
progresses. The middle scene was a nice breather from all the darkness within this chapter. It was a way for me to reunite Judy and Nick after their brief separation and to explain a bit more about Nick's history and relationship with Carla, revealing more about his moral character which comes into play much later. The last scene didn't really progress the overall present arc plot forward, however it did reveal more of the relationship between Libby and Andrew that was mentioned briefly in the previous chapter in an entirely different arc - in a city supposedly devoid of predators. A great way to drum up more questions!
"You really are an…adorable bun, Judy." Gloria Wilde cooed, as she set her teacup down on her held saucer with a clink. She had taken cues from her son and not called her cute.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilde." Judy blushed.

In any other circumstance, Judy would be more than eager to meet the parents of anyone else, but with Nick it was different. Nick had said they were engaged and were due to be married in Bunnyburrow in a few scant months. He had wanted to bring her to meet his own mother since about the time they had first started dating. However, circumstances always prevented them from making the trip to Happytown to see her. Now, just on the eve of their move back to her hometown, Nick made it a point to come visit her one last time before the trip.

She was an older vixen, with white hairs interlaced throughout her ginger fur. You could really tell the age was in her face, but the rest of her appeared youthful. She even had a small spring in her step when she was rummaging around the kitchen to set up a spot of tea for the three of them. She was wearing an olive drab dress with fern print. She had on sheer leggings that kept her warm during the colder fall months. The most notable thing about this fox was her brilliant, emerald eyes that reminded Judy so much of her son.

"Please, call me Gloria." She raised her cup for another sip before continuing, "Nick has told me a lot about you. We may not get to see each other often, but we do text a lot and sometimes call." She gave her son a bit of a glower. "Although I could stand with a few more calls."

Nick cleared his throat, loosening up his tie, "What Mom is saying is that she knows all about you."

"All? What dirty secrets you've been telling her?" Judy snarked, trying to keep the mood light. It was always tense, she guessed, when you go to meet the parents of your fiancé.

"Only the best kind." Gloria snuck in before Nick could respond.

"Mother!" He exclaimed.

"Oh stop, Nick. I know you wouldn't be bringing a disreputable female into my home until you knew I would approve of her outright." She couldn't help but hide the smirk behind her teacup.

"Well, that makes me feel a lot better, thank you." Nick still didn't look so sure.

He seemed just as nervous as she was. There didn't seem to be fear in his eyes of his mom being angry or anything, but more like a fear that she'd reject her, the one female he had truly fallen in love with.

"I'm just surprised it isn't another fox. Life is full of surprises." Gloria ribbed, making it clear that although she didn't oppose the union, she was still a bit taken aback.

"Mrs. Wilde…uh…Gloria." Judy corrected herself at a look from her. "I never came to Zootopia expecting I'd fall in love with a fox. In fact, I only came here because it was a change of pace and I wanted to get away from home, because I was feeling overburdened by my family. I'm not the type of bunny that goes with the status quo. I felt I needed to do something more with my life. So I came
"And so you did. I think you make an excellent police officer." Gloria beamed.

It was at this point Judy grew confused. Nick had to make a slicing motion across his neck to get his mother to stop. "I'm sorry, Gloria. I'm not a police officer. I don't even have the training for it. Nick…?"

Judy looked bewildered, Nick was worried this might be a problem, "Ah…I think what my Mom means to say is that you'd probably make a good police officer if you put your mind to it. That would definitely be above the status quo for bunnies."

Judy laughed half-heartedly. "Don't think I have the aptitude for that. Besides, we already got one police officer here in our family now, you." She nuzzled up next to him, wrapping an arm around his midsection to give him a warm side-hug. "I feel safer already."

Gloria's face melted, "You two really do look cute together." She raised a finger up at Judy, "Wasn't meaning you specifically, just the two of you as a couple. Nick has warned me all about your hang-ups." She gave her a wink before standing up. "I'm out of tea, would any of you like a refill?"

"No, I'm fine." Nick responded. Judy just shook her head.

With a nod, Gloria swept into the kitchen to go pour herself another cup. Judy leaned closer and whispered, "Now your mom thinks I'm cop material? What exactly have you been telling her?"

"Nothing like that." Nick lied. "I just tell her things such as foods you like, how you are on our dates. Things like that."

"So when am I going to expect some grandbabies?" Gloria interrupted as she sat back down, raising the cup to her lips.

Nick's eyes bulged as a flush tore through his cheeks. Judy took the cue to answer for him, "Actually, I'm pregnant now."

Gloria raised a brow at this, "Oh my, Nick. Children out of wedlock. Not far does the acorn fall from the tree."

"Well technically, we did artificial insemination. I'm not due for kits until after our marriage date, so they won't be illegitimate." Judy clarified, giving a smile and a reassuring squeeze to Nick.

"I'm more concerned that they'll have a happy home." Gloria was earnest, setting down the saucer and crossing her legs as she regarded the pair.

"Did you have a happy home?" Judy asked innocently.

Gloria cast her eyes downward a bit. A small grunt from Nick indicated it wasn't all sunshine and roses. "We were happy once as a family." She began, "We were living in a different city at the time. I was young and carefree despite having a collar around my neck."

Judy put a paw up to her own, still remembering the feel of it against her skin. She shivered uncontrollably, "I still remember waking up with one on. I couldn't imagine you ever living with that."

Gloria shrugged, "It was how it was. When that's all you've known since birth, you get used to it." She turned to Nick and flashed him a grin. "I'm just happy my son never got to experience it."
Nick shifted uneasily as he scratched his neck with agitation. "Well, it was your firm resolve and determination that got us here to this Zootopia in the first place. Without your courage, we would have still been over there."

Nodding, she reminisced, "It was a darker time, but despite all that, we found light wherever we could. I had found James during the years of my youth and we fell madly in love." Judy's ears dropped as her eyes went like saucers at the retelling. "He was such a charmer and knew just what to say to get my heart to flutter. As a fox, he wasn't trusted much and couldn't get good jobs. The best he could manage was a janitor at a highly important facility that he never talked about with me."

Something about that seemed to strike some sort of chord with Judy, but she shook it off. "So, what happened next?"

"What happened next? He happened." She playfully pointed at Nick. "We were young and eager and before we knew it, I was pregnant. We had to quickly figure out a way to get married, but we had so little money to secure a priest to officiate the union. Nick came a bit early and as a result, out of wedlock. We managed to get married a few years later, but our circumstances had changed."

"My Da...James was growing bitter by the day. I don't remember much about him, but I do recall that." Nick said with indifference. The tone in his voice seemed to visibly hurt Gloria. It was clear that she still held feelings for James even though they had separated.

"Before we knew it, he had come home in a fervor about some plan he had concocted with some... well, I really don't want to get into it." Her expression darkened, as if she was going to a place she didn't want to.

"Bats?" Judy probed without thinking. She was a bit leery about the term, especially since the last few things she could remember about them were not pleasant.

Gloria studied Judy for a moment before relenting. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to spoil the mood here. Sometimes being alone and living by oneself for so long can really make you think and gloom on things very easily." She took a sip of tea to settle her own nerves. "I take it you got to see James then, Nick?" She focused her attention on him.

Nick grinded his teeth, he didn't really want to get into this with her. He just wanted to show Judy to her today before they left. To show her that he was truly happy with someone. "Yes, I did. No, it doesn't look like he's coming home, Mom. Probably not ever again."

"Oh..." Was all she said as she studied the contents of her cup for a long time. With a sniff, she beheld Judy once more. "Well, I approve of this union. You have my blessing, Nick. Judy seems like a lovely bun and I couldn't be happier for you."

She did her best to appear cheerful, but Judy could tell she was just putting up a façade for the hurt that she'd never see her husband again. Despite all the bad things he probably did and the things she was most likely aware he had done, there was genuine love there for James. Her ruminations on happier times probably brought back all the regrets for having made the choice to move away from James. It was a hard decision for anyone, but for what he had devolved into, she needed to get her son safe and away from all that.

Nick rose up and embraced her affectionately, rubbing his muzzle against hers. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"And I love you too." She gave a small lick on his cheek. "You take good care of your future wife now, Nick. Make me proud."
They stayed over for another hour or so longer, but never again did they broach the subject with her about James or anything that occurred when Judy was found by Nick that one, horrible day. At length, they said their goodbyes and promised to call more than text and even see if they could video chat one day. Gloria waved to them all the way down the street, never leaving the doorway until they had long disappeared from sight.

Gloria died a day later of a broken heart.

Judy still felt supremely self-conscious as she waddled next to Carla down the hallway. She had only just detached from Nick only an hour earlier and his big girth could still be felt between her legs, even if it was only a phantom. Despite protests for privacy, Carla was dead set on ensuring that Nick was properly escorted back to the station by Jimmy. She sat there resolute as the two of them sat in their shame, waiting for him to deflate so they could get on with the events of their day.

"I still don't understand what you see in that fox." The hyena snorted, not even looking at Judy as she walked her towards the area where they were hosting the blood bank drive.

"I'm still curious what you saw in him when you two…did it." Judy fired back, although with far less venom.

Carla waved a paw to flout the hanging question, "It was a mistake, one that I regret. Let's leave it at that."

Judy took a few steps faster to catch up to the determined hyena and put a paw on her arm. "I heard what happened after. I'm very sorry, Carla."

Carla did not flinch or shy away from the rabbit's touch. She remained silent for a time before a small sniffle belied her true feelings, "I'm over it, mi amiga. There was a time I probably could have been happy with what we created, but not anymore."

"So you're saying Nick did make you happy?" Judy pressed.

This caused Carla to shake her arm out of Judy's grip, "He is zorro y escoria criminal under the guise of a cop! It was my fault in the first place that I let him get that close! I'm not entirely happy that you found each other, but who am I to stop a friend from being with the one she supposedly loves?" The tone in her voice was bitter.

"Look, I'm sorry for your loss. I truly am. Nick told me he was willing to be a father to your-" Judy barely got the words out when Carla swiveled abruptly and snarled at her.

"You know nothing about my loss, Judy!" She stabbed a finger at Judy's chest, poking it rather forcefully. "Until you can say you've experienced the loss of your lover as well as the feeling you won't ever have the children that were growing in your womb, then don't talk to me about how you understand how I feel!"

She growled before pivoting on a paw and stalking down the hallway. It was implied Judy was to either follow or be dragged along behind Carla. As flustered as Judy was at the accusation that she couldn't understand or care, she did feel for Carla. She had been through a lot of heart ache in recent years. The fact she killed her own mate accidently and then to miscarry Nick's children, it was enough to make anyone closed off to the world.

"Oh, Jude!" Stu waved as they spotted them down the hall. "Come here!"
"Hey Dad, Mom...Ami." She turned to each in kind, pausing on the giggling kit who still thought it hilarious they caught Judy in such a compromising position.

"Well, I see you've cleaned up quite nicely." Bonnie remarked, giving her daughter a cursory glance. It was true, Jimmy and Carla had brought a fresh pair of clothes from their apartment to wear, especially since the last time she left it she was in nothing but a nightgown. The outfit wasn't anything different than what she'd wear on the farm. A simple pair of jeans and beige shirt apparently was the highest fashion they could muster from searching through her suitcase. She shook her head, but was thankful nonetheless for their assistance.

"Well, I did have an excellent teacher." Judy blurted, not really thinking of the implications. "Heavens, Judy!" Bonnie stood aghast. "At least your father and I have the decency to do it in the privacy of our home!" She decided to purposefully ignore her elder daughter by not looking at her.

"Mom..." Judy grasped the error of her words, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I mean, you were very supportive of Nick and I not even a few weeks ago."

"We were...are!" She corrected, eyes training back onto Judy. "But there is a sense of propriety every lady needs out in public." She nervously looked around, nose twitching. "With so many eyes watching, I don't want us to make a bad impression on our family."

Following her eyesight, Judy began to realize the multitude of mammals crowding the hallways of the hospital. Many were from news agencies, each with cameramen and reporters ready to record the inaugural opening of her blood bank concept. With the dawning realization that this was actually happening and it was getting citywide coverage, Judy was starting to feel a bit self-conscious about the whole thing.

It was evident that nobody had detected her or her family yet, especially since Carla had the right idea to stand in front of their entire contingent, half shielding them from view. The buzz of the talking was so monotone that it wasn't surprising Judy hadn't noticed it sooner, it blended in with the overall hustle and bustle of all the stuff happening that morning in Mercy Hospital.

"Oh." Judy's mouth formed a perfect circle.

"Oh is right." Carla snorted. "Your idea that got promoted seems to be quite the major event here in Zootopia. The fact that Gazelle is at the head of the line drawing most of the attention right now is to our benefit. I strongly suggest we take this opportunity and leave this nonsense to the bats. I'm just unnerved at the sight of them." She curled her nose.

Now that she pointed them out, Judy did notice that there were a good deal of bats in the crowd. They were given a wide berth by the rest of the mammals, but they were present and being funneled into various rooms which were setup to be makeshift blood centers. It wasn't ideal, but until a more permanent location was built this solution would have to do for the first few weeks of blood draws.

Oblivious to Carla's prejudice and Judy's hesitation, Stu wrapped a thumb around a suspender and motioned towards the gathering throng, "Isn't this fantastic, Judy? All because of you, my daughter, this was able to happen! You should be proud of yourself!" He was beaming with pride.

"I don't know." Judy began, catching the eye of a few bats who were watching her. She did not see Rouge anywhere. "What's wrong, sugar peach?" She came over and wrapped an arm around Judy. "It was because of you we were able to look past our own opinions
and partner with Gideon Grey. It was because of you that we are here now, supporting a cause that you felt was worth fighting for. You are an inspiration to a lot of mammals, Judy, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

Despite the high praise, Judy did not feel like she had earned any of it. Her last visit to Rouge at the ZPD jail did little to calm her doubts. If Rouge was just as malevolent to Zootopia at large, how many of the other bats were? Was her opinion shared by many or was she just a lone wolf among bats? There were simply too many coordinated attacks to be just coincidence. Either there was a rogue faction embedded in the tide of immigrants or they all came here with a purpose. At this point, she wasn't even sure anymore.

Putting a paw on Bonnie's, Judy gave a weak smile to her, "Thanks, mom. I just hope it goes as planned." She took a deep breath, noting that Gazelle had finally seen her.

Raising a hoof in the air towards them, she drew the attention of everyone. Gazelle serenaded out, "Judy! So good of you to come!" She hurried to her side, drawing awestruck stares from the rest of her family. Even Carla seemed a bit uneasy around the pop singer.

Grasping Judy's paws, she bent low and gave a kiss to each of her cheeks, "I was so worried for you when I heard you had been attacked, but I am glad to see you have pulled through. I have seen what some of the papers are saying, but we cannot judge an entire species based on the actions of a few bad apples! Come with me, let us be the first in line to get this show on the road!"

Judy nodded, suddenly feeling the stares of a dozen cameras trained on her. Bulbs flashing and shutters closing as thousands of pictures were being taken of her and Gazelle walking down the hallway towards the rooms setup for the blood drive. As much as she felt the emotion behind the words of Gazelle, Judy could also tell she was appealing to the audience around them to encourage they not give into their prejudice against the bats.

After feeling a gentle squeeze from Gazelle, Judy looked up into her eyes, seeing genuine empathy there. "It'll be okay Judy. I am going to go in with you and give blood together. You have a big heart, Judy, and I would be remiss if I did not stand here beside you showing support." She whispered, giving the rabbit some bit of comfort.

"I appreciate that, Gazelle." She patted her hoof gently, trying to remain cheerful for her superstar friend. Her tiger bodyguards were doing their best to stem the crowd as they parted ways for the two of them to reach the front. "However, I do not believe this is the correct course of action anymore."

The singer looked perplexed. Not breaking stride, she smiled and nodded to her fans, but her attention was solely on Judy. "Judy, be still your reservations about your idea. Wanting to help others out is never a bad thing. You shouldn't ever have to feel guilty when you have the best interests of Zootopia and its citizens at heart."

"I'm not guilty." Judy tried to correct. "I just think helping these bats out is a bad thing."

Gazelle pursed her lips, clearly not satisfied with her answer. Before they could talk about it further, they had reached the front where a cerise ribbon was fastened to the doorway leading into the primary room where they would host the drive. Although it was evident in her expression that Gazelle was not finished discussing the topic with Judy, she smiled and took the offered ceremonial scissors from one of the assistants manning the proceedings.

Addressing the crowd, Gazelle put on her beaming smile, knowing full well she was being transmitted live across the entire city. "Hello, Zootopia! I'm Gazelle! Today is a momentous day for our city, its people and our culture. In true harmonic fashion, we are gathered here today to
demonstrate the true meaning of cooperation and equality among all species! With the opening of this 'Mercy Blood Drive,' an idea spearheaded by my dear friend, Judy Hopps, may this be yet another stepping stone to a bright future together!"

Pictures flashed and applause was heard as she snipped the ribbon in two, letting each end fall to the floor. Judy was swooped into a side hug by Gazelle as they posed for thousands of cameras. She was completely unnerved at the amount of media attention this entire event was getting, something she never expected when she first pitched the idea to Gazelle so many weeks ago at city hall. She looked down at herself. Not to mention how underdressed she was compared to her companion, who was decked out in a ravishing, blue dress.

After a few more pictures, Gazelle ushered her into the room which was set up in a surprisingly orderly fashion given how much time they had to actually construct this entire blood drive in so short a target window for completion. There was about four beds per room laid out in a line. Placed alongside each bed was a rolling tray of empty blood bags and needles with plenty of excess tubing to swap out in-between patients.

In addition to the nurses already present and employed at Mercy Hospital doing the majority of the blood drawing, there were several bats positioned in each room to oversee the proceedings to ensure there would be enough for their communities to thrive on and to verify the quality of the blood. It seemed odd that they'd be here, but they were haphazardly dressed in lab coats to make them somewhat presentable in this sterile environment.

"Where's Mayor Lionheart?" Judy looked around. She hadn't seen him out in the hallway either.

Gazelle tittered, waving a hoof at Judy as she took her place in the raised bed, laying down onto it where the orientation of it had her sitting up. "You know how he is. He's so swamped at city hall that he could not make it to the grand opening. He promised he'd come by later to show support."

"Figures he'd not be here." Judy rolled her eyes, curling her sleeve as a warthog nurse grunted sitting down on a rolling stool in front of her bed, gathering the necessary equipment for the draw.

They both laughed at this. Gazelle grew serious though as she leaned over towards Judy, "I am concerned, however, at your change of heart with regards to this. You were the one who went in with me to Lionheart and convinced both of us of a way to stop the random attacks by having the city willingly provide the blood. You reasoned that if they had a way of accessing their sole source of food without the use of force, the assaults would die down."

Judy glanced over at the bats supervising the operation. Talking in a more hushed tone, she inclined towards Gazelle as she held her arm out for the needle. "Yeah, I did think that. However, the attacks are increasing and I now firmly believe they are premeditated. I do not think this will solve anything other than give them a free meal pass and allowance to continue what they've been doing if not increase the occurrences of assaults."

Gazelle frowned, "Be that as it may, Zootopia is a city about mutual cooperation between predator and prey where anyone can be anything. Did you not purport a similar aspiration when you first came to the city?"

"Ah, sorry, it just stings." Judy apologized to the nurse as the needle went into the artery. Blandly watching the red flow begin to fill the bag, she turned back to the singer. "I did, but I also learned that life is sometimes messy and what is the ideal outcome may not be the most realistic. Given what has happened in the last few weeks, I do not believe Zootopia can integrate well with these bats. There is just…something about them that unsettles me."
"I didn't like the look of anteaters myself when I was younger, but their appearance should be no reason to discriminate against them." Gazelle smiled, trying to keep it light. She also spoke softly, comprehending Judy did not want this conversation overhead by the dual bats lining the wall.

"Has nothing to do with their looks or what they eat. It's more about their attitude and how they carry themselves with relation to the rest of us." Judy tried to explain.

Before Gazelle could question further, Bonnie and Stu were escorted in by a third bat in a lab coat. There was a sudden wailing that caught their attention as Ami was pulled aside and held by the wrist. "Momma! Why can't I go with you? What's going on?"

All ears swiveled to the scene as Bonnie and Stu questioned the bat. "Now see here, this is our grandkit and we're a family. We're going to be doing this together." Stu waggled a finger at the bat.

"It's okay." The warthog handling Judy called out, "There isn't any more room here. We only have four beds and there are other open ones down the hall. That is, if she is giving blood like the rest of you, right?"

Bonnie nodded, feeling concerned. "Well, yes, but we expected she'd be doing it with us."

"Well, the sooner she gets it over with, the sooner you all can be together again." The nurse sighed, motioning to the bat to coordinate with a fellow dik-dik nurse to chaperon them both down the hall.

"It's okay, Señora." Carla soothed, stepping into frame from the hall, giving a comforting nod to Bonnie and Stu. "I'll stick with Ami and make sure she is safe."

"That makes me feel a bit better." Stu replied thankfully. Brightening up now that that little crisis was resolved, he turned to Bonnie, "I'm kind of excited to be honest. I've never done something like this before. I really feel like I'm helping out the community or something!"

"You help our community all the time, hun. You built that porch for the child daycare center the other day right before we made the trip out here. Remember that?" She reminded, exasperated with her husband already. Despite being lively in the conversation, she still kept her eyes on Ami as she was taken out of sight by Carla.

"Well, that's true, but this is different. I'm actually helping predators!" He seemed a bit overly enthusiastic about this.

Judy had to shake her head, there simply was no middle ground for her parents. It was either all or nothing with them. "Yeah, by giving them your blood to feed on." Judy had to point out.

His ears dropped at the reality of what they were here for. "Yeah…but at least it's not in the traditional way. I don't think I'd go for that. Not at all. At least this way, we all can be safe and they don't have to starve!"

Judy knew that the bats wouldn't be starving anytime soon, even without this blood bank being here now to assist in the feeding of these new inhabitants. She summarily ignored her parents banter as they went back and forth as they usually did. Turning back to Gazelle, she perceived that the pop singer was slowly drifting off to sleep, perhaps due to light-headedness. Her blood was still flowing swiftly through the tubing.

"Gazelle?" Judy reached out a paw and began to shake her friend out of her growing stupor. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, of course, Judy." She said dreamily, her head bowing slightly before falling back onto the
"Nurse…what are you…?" The words stuck in Judy's throat.

It was then that the slumped form of the oryx handling Gazelle caught her attention. A small trickle of blood dribbled down her neck. One of the two bats was already swapping out the bags and letting the new one fill up to the brim. Immediately looking over to her warthog attendant, she saw the second bat rise up from having its fangs deep into the nurse's neck. Whatever they used on their teeth had put them out almost immediately as it reached the victim's bloodstream.

"Judy?" Stu asked with terror as both his and Bonnie's eyes grew wide at the sight before them, their noses twitching uncontrollably.

Without hesitation, Judy began to try ripping out the shunt that was placed into her artery. The bat discerned its prey was about to escape, leaped on top of her, viciously impaling its fangs into her neck. It did not last for perhaps an instant, but the searing pain shot through her entire face and upper shoulders as a euphoric feeling surged through her body, prompting her to do little else but sleep.

Squealing at the pain, she bucked the bat off with a powerful kick of her hind legs, somersaulting it over the rolling tray of utensils causing them to clatter everywhere. The first was upon her to finish the job the second had started, but Judy rolled them both off the bed, slapping the bat back first into the ground, winded it completely before delivering a brutal punch to the face. The bat snarled and snapped at her paws, but she deftly avoided each lunge before giving it another blow.

The remaining nurses who had entered to handle Bonnie and Stu both screamed and ran out of the room leaving them all to fend for themselves. Hearing the skittering of claws on tile, Judy bounded off the body of the bat beneath her and backflipped over the other swooping in to grab her, causing it to instead flop on top of its partner on the floor.

Judy yipped as the blood tube still attached to her arm was yanked violently, having wrapped itself around the neck of the bat who had crumpled on top of the other. Recognizing its advantage, it snatched the tube from Judy and was pulling her in closer. Frantically trying to remove the shunt connecting her to the bag which looked full to bursting, she made a split decision to go with the tug. Allowing to be roped into the bat's embrace, she used the momentum to cartwheel off its body and over Gazelle's bed. "I'm sorry!" She apologized to the singer as she hooked the tube in the process around the neck of the bat, slamming its head up against the hard siding of the raised bed opposite Judy, the tubing pressing into the waistline of the drowsy pop star.

"What's going on here? Gazelle?!" One of her bodyguards burst into the room, his stripes bristling with agitation.

The other bat not entangled with Judy was starting to come around and used a paw to clamber up onto the bed she had vacated. "Get him!" Judy shouted, faltering a bit, still woozy from the bite. "Take him out!" Without being told twice, the tiger was on the bat in a flash, his teeth and claws glistening in the fluorescent lighting.

Judy strained hard against the surprising strength of the bat as it played tug of war with her blood tubing. It wouldn't be long before it managed to break free from the hold on its neck and be across Gazelle and onto her. Seeing the opportunity, she jerked the tube to the side hard, cause the bat to falter and slip, knocking its head onto the metal railing beneath the bed, visible only in its lifted position.

Stamping onto the foot switch, Judy relaxed the tension on the tubing so she could uncoil it and
disengage from it finally. The growls and squeaks were slowly dying down on the other bed, but she started to hear some groans from the bat beneath Gazelle's bed. She pushed down harder on the foot pedal, the bed slowly lowering at an interminable rate. She wasn't sure if Gazelle's bodyguard would be done in time to assist or if she would have to scramble to find a new method of negating the current threat.

Gasping at the shock of it, the blood bag broke free from being heaved across Gazelle, its contents splashing on top of the bat below. As if by instinct, its eyes shot open and it began snapping and lapping up the fresh plasma dripping down its snout. Judy looked away, the bat realizing too late as the motors grinded and whirred ferociously, its entire head crushed between the bars and the bed. Its entire lower body fell limp to the floor, having been nearly decapitated.

Depressing the switch, she looked over at the sliced up husk lying on her former bed. Her parents were huddled in the far corner, terrified and looking at the entire scene in abject horror. Judy pointed at the bodyguard, "You, get Gazelle to safety and try to get the others to evacuate as many people as possible. We've been set up!"

With a curt nod, he dislodged the shunt in Gazelle's arm, picked her up in his arms and swiftly left the room. Judy collapsed to the ground, her head woozy and her breathing shallow. Whining slightly, she finally pulled the tube out of her arm. Crimson was flowing freely down her limb as she scooted over to a few of the scattered items on the ground. Taking a cotton ball and some fur-safe band-aids, she applied and kept pressure onto her arm to stem the flow. She had lost a lot of blood.

After a few moments, her ears perked up as she heard a shriek and more din erupting out in the hall and throughout the hospital. Staggering up onto her hind paws, she lumbered over to her parents, falling into their scared arms as they all hugged each other. The tears kept flowing without stop.

"I'm so sorry, Mom, Dad. It's all my fault. I should never have come up with this idea." She sobbed deeply into their shoulders.

It was Bonnie who had the courage to respond first, "It's okay, sweetheart. You were just doing what you felt was best."

Stu finally piped up as if he knew it would happen all along, "Yeah, who could have predicted that these bats would be homicidal maniacs?"

"You did." Judy sniffed, drawing back to wipe her nose.

Stu's expression softened, "Well, I'm not going to be the one saying, 'I told you so.'"

"You just did." Judy laughed as she cried. At length, she looked at them both with determination. "You told me way back when you first learned of them that they were bad news. I should have listened to you then instead of going blindly with my ideals. I should have pushed myself to research more than just giving them the benefit of the doubt."

She could see Bonnie's heart breaking through her eyes. "But Judy, that's not how you are."

"Well, maybe it should be." She looked down, almost ashamed to admit such a thing.

A blood-curdling wail caused all of them to bolt upright. Bonnie exclaimed, "Dear heavens, Stu! That's Ami!"

Resolute, Judy put a firm paw on each of them. "You two get out of here and meet up with me at Carla's apartment. I'm going after Ami. Stay safe and don't take chances!"
"We never do!" Stu reminded as they continued to huddle together after Judy bolted out the door and down the corridor.

It was pandemonium. Mammals of all sorts were tripping over themselves as word was getting out that the bats were attacking those being taken in first to have their blood drawn. One unfortunate pig stumbled out backwards, falling onto her rump as a bat swooped on top of her, fangs plunging into her neck and gorging on her life essence. As much as she wanted to assist the downed sow, she could hear the bone-chilling screams of Ami getting louder.

A nearby ZPD officer she didn't recognize was calling it in, "All units, all units, we have a 10-34Q. I repeat, 10-34Q on floors 10 and 11 of Mercy Hospital. Request mobilization level two ASAP."

"Belay that order!" Judy shouted as she dashed past him, adrenaline finally kicking in at last.

"Are you nuts, Hopps?" The hippo stood mystified.

She yelled back, sidestepping another bat assault. "We have Longneck and Stipe under ZPD watch! This is exactly the type of distraction they need to get to them! Call them off!"

Without waiting for a response, she bounded into the room where she heard Ami cry out. On the floor was a comatose Carla, two pricks in her neck bleeding out and a sullied set of pants. They had removed her from the picture first before advancing on the kit. There was only one bat left alive in the room, but it was already guzzling blood from little Ami. The kit hung slack in its claws as it suckled greedily, intent to drain her completely dry.

Bending low and un-holstering the gun from Carla's sidebelt, she raised it up and pointed it directly at the bat. "Put her down, now." She said with calm fury.

The bat extricated its fangs from Ami and hissed at her, immediately bringing up the little kit's body in front of its face as a living shield. Without warning, Judy shot off the right kneecap, its bone and sinew splintering off into the air at the bullet impact. It roared in misery, lowering Ami just low enough for a perfect shot. Judy fired, the bullet piercing through its face between the eyes, blowing out the back end of its head causing a massive splatter of brains and blood onto the floor and wall beyond.

The bat wilted to the floor, letting Ami slip out of its claws. Judy dropped the gun and rushed forward to lift the small kit into her arms. "Ami! Ami! Talk to me, baby! Please!" She cried out.

Judy was wracked with sobs as she saw the sorry state her little girl was in. Her eyes glazed and her chest barely lifting with each breath. There was a deep, red scar from the bridge of her nose down the left cheek and down into her neck line. It was clear there was a struggle and Ami had fought off the bat valiantly. Her entire clothes were soiled from the waist down with blood. The two of them must have looked like a scene from a horror movie.

Officer McHorn thudded into the room, skidding into the doorframe with a smash as he rounded the corner. "Hopps! Where is Officer Hyenandez? We have been ordered to evacuate you to safety!"

Judy motioned with her chin towards the inert form of Carla, before bulging her eyes at his appearance. "McHorn, weren't you with Stipe?"

"Well yeah, but we got the call to assist in the evacuation and to subdue the bats up here." He explained, taking a step into the room to pick up Carla off the floor.

"No!" Judy barked out.
The entire building shook with concussive force as first one and then two explosions rocked its frame. A massive cry of voices rose as the panic set in. Judy caught movement from the corner of her eye and saw many of the bats flying off above the city buildings, dropping their ruse as lab coats rained onto the city below, bathing it in white and red. Some even had a few smaller mammals in their claws, being carried off to some awful fate.

"Hopps, we have to go. Now!" McHorn commanded with urgency.

Heaving Carla's body over his shoulder, McHorn made a path through the crowd and chaos. Following hot on his heels, Judy held Ami close to her breast, petting her head softly and whispering into her ear that she'd get them out safely. There were no more blasts, but the damage had already been done. The sprinkler system kicked in and was drenching the entire throng as they pushed and shoved their way to freedom.

At long last, they finally made it outside Mercy Hospital. They turned around as they got to the nearest cop car and looked back up at the burning building. They could see two individual rooms completely engulfed in flames. Judy drooped back onto the vehicle, letting it hold her up when her legs wanted to give out.

"They did it…" She murmured. "They finally did it."

McHorn just finished getting off the horn with Chief Bogo to appraise him of Judy's status. "What are you talking about, Hopps?"

"They finally nailed their targets. Stipe and Longneck. And they used my idea as a distraction from their primary goal." Holding Ami up with one paw, she put the other over her face and began crying.

A dull thud jolted her awake. Judy sat up suddenly and looked around the cubicle. She was confused as to why she was here. Only by looking down at the small, sleeping bunny beside her did she recall where she was. She sunk back down onto the cot, taut and unyielding, it was not all that comfortable. Mai was sleeping peacefully on another cot right beside theirs. Jack's was strangely empty, blanket half askew.

"It's alright. I'm alright. Thanks for anyone asking." Jack groaned as he struggled up off the floor, using his bed as balance. "I'm just so used to sleeping on the ground these past few days, I'm not used to height limits on either side of me while I sleep." He tried to laugh it off, but it was clear he had twerked something in his back.

"Stop having those wild, crazy dreams and you wouldn't fidget so much in your sleep." Mai smirked, her eyes stilled closed.

"Har har." Jack shot her a look. "Is it morning yet?" He continued to rub his lower back, just above his cottontail.

Judy raised her head up to look through the dividers making up the entire work space that they were sleeping in and spied the lone window within her field of vision. Little streams of twinkling light was streaming in. "It's getting there. We should probably wake up the little one here before too long."

"I'm awake." Nala said flatly.

Judy was surprised. "Goodness, Nala. You look absolutely terrible. Your eyes are bloodshot. Is something wrong?"
"I couldn't sleep, Mom." She tried to nestle into her chest further, eyes shut. "I am starting to feel tired now though."

Judy sighed, "Unfortunately, we've got a lot to do today. Even if I were to leave you alone here with either Jack or Mai, I don't feel comfortable that anyone wouldn't try something if all four of us weren't together."

"Yeah, I'm curious as to what is going on here. It's like we left that sewer grate and entered a completely different reality." Jack hitched himself back onto his cot, legs dangling over and chin in paw. "It's surreal."

"I honestly think they're covering up what really happened here with Judy. Her amnesia is convenient for them and it seems to me all are aware of the full story." Mai pointed out, rising up onto one arm, regarding the rest of them. "None of us have been to this Zootopia before except Judy. The moment Percival asked Judy what she could remember and discovered that she could recall nothing, I noticed he seemed very relieved."

"We're in a den of bad people and liars." Nala shivered, gripping Judy tighter.

"Why would you say that, darling?" Jack cocked his head at her, yet he was deadly serious in wanting to know the little kit's thoughts.

"I saw one. A predator. Last night when you all went to bed. I couldn't sleep, so I sneaked out and wandered the place." She began, looking from one to the other.

"Nala!" Mai scolded.

"Shush, this could be important to our survival and what is actually happening here. Go on, my dear." Jack motioned for her to continue.

Nodding, Nala held fast to Judy who squeezed her back in return. "Remember those jail cells they never showed us during the tour?" Everyone nodded. "I went back to them and heard some loud growls. I found a hyena, wild and rabid. He was wanting to tear anyone and anything apart. There was something else there with him."

"Good morning, everyone!" A rather glum voice reverberated through the cubicle, causing all four to jump. Jack reached for something, but then frantically began searching. Silhouetted in the divider opening was Libby. She was hunched over, one paw holding her up as she looked in on the rabbits. "I've been ordered to escort you to breakfast and watch over as you pull what you need from the ZPD archives." She gave a meaningful look to Judy, as if willing her to remember something.

Swinging her own legs over the cot and hopping down, Judy beamed up at the kangaroo. "Thank you for this. We'll be along shortly. We just need to freshen up and get ready and we'll meet you there."

"I'll be at the end of the row." Libby weakly began hopping down the cubicles. Judy noticed she had a bunch of angry looking lacerations that looked quite fresh all up and down her arms and legs with even a few on her tail.

"Hey, um...we have a problem" Jack was not happy. He was very concerned.

"What is it?" Judy looked over at him after giving Nala some scratches behind her ears.

"My gun is gone, including all the ammo I had for it!" He susurrated, not wanting Libby or anyone else to overhear.
Mai searched through her belongings and looked up with alarm. "My sword is gone as well."

"Nala," Judy rounded on the kit, "Did you see anyone take our things last night?"

She shook her head vehemently, "No! Maybe they did it while I was wandering around? Nobody came in here when I was with you."

"They want us disarmed." Judy concluded ominously.

"All the more reason to be on our guard." Jack pursed his lips, steeling his demeanor for what he expected to be a fight for their lives. "Everyone is an enemy unless proven otherwise or if Judy remembers something to that effect." They all nodded in agreement at this.

They were just finishing up and were heading out of their small sleeping space when Judy reached out and tapped Mai on her shoulder. "Can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Of course, sure, Judy." She smiled at her.

Giving a small pat on the back to Nala, Judy reassured her daughter, "Go on ahead with Uncle Jack, we won't be long."

Holding Jack's paw in her own, she walked along beside him, giving a few backward glances at the two of them. Judy breathed a small sigh, it still felt odd that she was a parent now. Every interaction with her daughter felt superficial and fake, like she was trying to pretend to be something she was not. She wasn't even sure if Nala truly considered her mom, or if she was just going along with it because she was told that she was and she desperately needed or wanted one?

"Judy? What's wrong?" Mai was leaning over enough to have her head be within view, trying to get Judy's attention.

Judy shook her head, "I'm sorry, just thinking about things." With a ragged breath, she turned to Mai. "I...had a dream last night. Something I couldn't remember up until now. I know who you are now, Mai. I remember you."

It took a few seconds for Mai to process, but tears began to well up in her eyes. "You remember? Truly?" She put a paw to her breast, as if she had been waiting for this moment for so long.

"Yes, Ami." Judy reached out and traced her paw down Mai's scar from the bridge of her nose down her left cheek. "We are family and I'm so glad to be back with you again."

The dam broke as Mai finally let loose all her grief onto Judy, collapsing into her arms and holding her tight. Sobbing and getting Judy's shirt wet as she moaned, "I'm so sorry I wasn't able to protect you! I failed you and I could think of little else these past five years on how to make it up to you. So I trained day in and day out, even traveling to the Nocturnal District to train under Rosco so I could finally protect you like you did me back in that horrid hospital!"

Judy closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek up against Ami, petting down her ears and soothing her, "Well, we are here now and we can protect each other. All right?"

She felt Ami nod into her breast, "Alright. I'm just so happy. I thought you'd never recall who I truly was. For the longest time, I believed you wouldn't. I didn't think you'd accept it. We didn't know the extent of your amnesia and we felt Nala would be the best one to be presented as your only child." She pulled back to look Judy in the eye. "But now you remember me! I love you, Mom!" She fell back into the hug.
Judy stood rigid to the spot. "Wait, what did you call me?"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter came together very quickly for me. The hardest section was actually the last. To give it enough gravitas to stand up to the previous two sections, I knew I needed to unveil something shocking. The setup needed to occur in two stages, the first scene was of course following the course of our newly introduced fourth arc where it is clear something is not quite right with Judy and her memory and now I drop hints as to where this could be happening in the overall timeline of the narrative. The second scene in the hospital was more of a culmination of all previous chapters in that time arc. It has been leading up to this event that Judy spearheaded and I wanted to be sure I nailed it and give it a satisfactory payoff and at the same time sow seeds for the reveal in the third scene. As some may have suspected with Mai, there was one element I didn't make very clear until now and with this reveal, it throws into question the entire story and how Judy remembers it. Hope you're on board with where I'm taking us next!

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